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Response: Reflection and Action



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Response: Reflection and Action

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Foreword

Barry Monahan

Vice Head of College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences (Head of Graduate School), University College Cork

Hannah Arendt claimed: “Action [...] is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act”. One would be forgiven for attributing the quotation to the philosopher’s 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, because that book is fundamentally concerned with how atomised societies of isolated individuals can (perhaps counterintuitively) have a propensity towards a wider, transcendent connection, unification and group identification. In fact, the line comes from Arendt’s later work *The Human Condition* (1958) and has an evident relevance for us today. As we inhabit a milieu that is increasingly fragmented by technologies of the virtual, we might expect that a fragmented society of citizens will seek unification: exactly the kind of integration and connection that provide a breeding ground for totalitarian regimes and ideologies. Could it be that there occurs cyclically throughout history a triangulation of technology, social atomisation and the rise of totalitarian regimes?



The academic vocation creates its own community of researchers who are intimately familiar with the condition of solitude. But this experience does not leave scholars alone as individuals in obscurity, single-mindedly working in isolation. Rather, we focus on thematic specificities with a view to fostering creative connections with the world as active agents participating in it. This is not a solipsistic pursuit but a dedication of personal time to offering ideas to society for its betterment. The loneliness of the researcher is silent, but it is not about voiceless separation. Scholars of the arts and humanities are always facing, Janus-like, into the past as much as they look outwards and towards the future. They investigate evidence and synthesise ideas to compose a portrait of humanity: connecting, collaborating and compiling narratives from canons and archives and cultural forms of expression. The onus is on scholarly researchers not only to bring personal discoveries into the community, but also to challenge and redefine the spaces in which healthy intellectual and

creative cultural points of contact can foster between individuals and the societies in which they participate. We are ultimately defined by the very fora that we create for the circulation and promotion of our discourses.

For over a decade *Aigne* has played an instrumental role in providing exactly this kind of forum for the dissemination of ideas from within our college community. It has included, over eleven issues, contributions from postgraduates, early career researchers and College lecturers. Recently it has offered work presented at the CACSSS Annual Postgraduate Conference: another important forum for doctoral researchers from the college. The journal has been edited and published by an incredibly dedicated team of CACSSS postgraduates, with hours given in service of the critically important ideal of fostering and supporting a communal platform for the sharing of our best research. I hope that the readers of *Aigne* will be intellectually challenged and stimulated by the contributions to this issue and will see themselves as part of the community of discourses generated by some of the exceptional scholars in our college.



Editorial: “Response: Reflection and Action”

 **Natasha Dukelow** and  **Shruti Rajgopal**

School of History, University College Cork

Responses are an innate and constant part of every interaction, reaction, thought and decision. They weave through all aspect of our lives, often without us recognising them, as they happen automatically or unconsciously. The previous volume of [Aigne \(10, 2024\)](#) explored interpretations of the theme “Encounters”. The theme of the present volume, “Response: Reflection and Action”, can be understood as a continuation of this focus: first we encounter something, then we respond to it.

A response is comprised of two connected elements. The first is a moment of reflection, whether conscious or subconscious, reactive or contemplative, and the second is an action, or the decision not to act, that follows. These processes can take many forms. They can agree and reinforce, or they can challenge and pull something apart and they can reshape or extend the ideas that they engage with. Responses operate across all levels of experience, from the personal to the global, and intersect with political, educational, cultural and other spheres.

In the continually evolving landscapes of scholarship, politics and personal and national identity, with geopolitical tensions compounding an ever-increasing sense of urgency, the ability to respond thoughtfully, reflect critically and act decisively is more than a mere intellectual exercise. It is an essential principle (or at least should be) for engaging with knowledge and society. To respond to something, we first need to notice what calls for our attention. It is that moment of noticing that inspires ideas or presents challenges or opportunities. Reflection is a key part of the process, where we pause and examine what we have noticed. Action translates thought into impact, whether through research, teaching, policy or community engagement. It is the bridge between knowledge and change, demonstrating that scholarship is not just about understanding the world but shaping it too. As such the theme of this volume invites us to consider how our work,

individually and collectively, can move beyond observation toward active contribution.

With the theme “Response: Reflection and Action”, the eleventh volume of *Aigne* continues the journal’s tradition of publishing thematic volumes, a practice that began with its inaugural issue. It is not our intention for the theme to be overly restrictive, nor for it to discourage potential authors from submitting their work simply because it may not fit neatly within that theme. Rather, the purpose of selecting a theme is to provide inspiration and direction for potential responses to the call for articles.

The selected theme takes on another layer of meaning, as the creation of this volume exemplifies the very process captured by its title. The calls for submissions invited responses, and in doing so encouraged contributors to reflect on what they might submit and to act to do so. The high number of submissions in this volume represents the strength of the response. The concepts encapsulated by each element of the theme (response, reflection and action) cover a wide range of ideas and perspectives, and this is reflected in the contributions.

In a broader sense, *Aigne* itself is a form of response to a need within the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences (CACSSS) at University College Cork—one that arose from the initiative of CACSSS [postgraduate students](#) who, in reflecting on their needs for a peer-reviewed outlet for their research and professional and scholarly development, took action to establish the journal in 2010. A similar response occurred in 2017, when the journal was revived by [another cohort of postgraduate students](#), leading to the publication of [Aigne volume 7 \(2018\)](#), the first since 2014. By continuing to respond to this ongoing need, the journal provides a platform for open access research dissemination for postgraduate and early career researchers worldwide, while providing its editors with valuable experience in writing, editing and the broader editorial process.

Each cycle of *Aigne* brings together an editorial board drawn from multiple areas of research within the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. This board curates a collection of articles, book reviews, event reports and creative submissions that reflect the variety of research within CACSSS and the wider scholarly community, while aiming to appeal to a wide readership both within and beyond the College. While *Aigne* prides itself

on serving the global postgraduate community, it also plays an important role at the local level.

This volume showcases the active and interconnected community of postgraduate researchers within CACSSS. As demonstrated by the contributions gathered here, *Aigne* editors—who are members of CACSSS—appear in different sections of the volume, either within submissions or as authors. A number of our editors participated in the annual CACSSS Postgraduate Research Conference, as evidenced in the conference event report also published in this volume, which was authored by three members of *Aigne*'s editorial board who shared their research at the conference. Several of those documented in that event report also have work published in this volume, underlining a symbiotic relationship between the conference and the journal that is hoped will continue. Other contributors are familiar as they have published in past volumes and it is hoped that many more will contribute to future ones.

The present volume is a wonderful testament to the vibrant and interdisciplinary community that *Aigne* is fortunate to be a part of and to the role it plays in nurturing that community by bringing together postgraduate researchers from different backgrounds as editors and publishing research from a variety of disciplines.

This volume follows *Aigne*'s conventional sectional structure and contains the usual offering of peer-reviewed articles, book reviews, event reports as well as creative pieces. We are also pleased to (re-)introduce a section dedicated to contributions originating from the Annual CACSSS Postgraduate Research Conference.

ARTICLES

The articles in this volume are contributed by authors from within University College Cork and beyond. Together, they demonstrate the flexibility of the theme “Response: Reflection and Action” through their varied interpretations of, and response to, it. This adaptability has also allowed scholars from various disciplines to engage with the theme, as reflected in the articles published here from education, linguistics, Slavonic and East European studies, French studies, LGBTQ and lesbian studies and archaeology/anthropology. Generally speaking, the articles presented here

can be divided into two categories: response(s) related to and within educational contexts and response(s) related to identity and conflict.

Jessica Hadden (Queen's University Belfast) offers an exploration of young people's experiences of integrated education in Northern Ireland, an educational response to societal division. Hadden examines how integrated schools articulate and enact values of respect and understanding, while identifying challenges, such as multiculturalism and online misogyny.

Aoife Hill (University College Cork) *et al.* examine reflectivity and reflexivity within Irish immersion teacher education through an action research project with in-service teachers. Focusing on the teaching and assessment of Irish grammar, the article highlights the collaborative and evolving nature of reflective practices, as well as the role of the researcher in supporting teacher's professional learning in relation to immersion contexts.

How educators respond and implement research findings in the realm of education is the focus of Eoghan Long's (University College Cork) article, which addresses the gap between educational research and classroom practice. He examines retrieval practices as a reflective and evidence-informed pedagogy. Using cognitive science, the article argues for a more thoughtful engagement with research that supports teachers as active interpreters rather than passive adopters of evidence.

While the first group of articles explore the theme in relation to educational contexts, a number of authors engage with the theme of response in relation to identity, examining how identities are formed and articulated in dialogue with social, cultural and historical forces. Emma Bódig (University of Glasgow and University of Strathclyde) argues that identity is formed relationally, and that being a woman is not an inherent state, but is a response shaped by different factors.

Shifting the focus from individual identity formation to collective organisation, Ava van Aurich (University of Western Australia) looks at the grass roots, organised response of the lesbian community, both historically and contemporarily, with particular attention to Australia.

Returning to individual identity—and, in this case, the identity of a single particular individual—Alesia Mankousaya's article (University College London) considers the confessional identity of Simeon of Polotsk

(1629–1680), a prominent Belarusian intellectual, reevaluating the available evidence.

The focus on collective identity is further developed by Roisín O’Connor (University College Cork), who investigates group identity as a responsive process through an analysis of the *Pieds-Noirs*. O’Connor analyses the factors to which that identity responds and the ways in which it is articulated and interpreted in Yasmina Khadra’s *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* (2008) and Patrick Jusseaume’s *Non-Retour* (2021). Central to this examination is the evacuation and exile from Algeria and its formative role in shaping *Pieds-Noirs* identity. This consideration of the ways in which identity is shaped through histories of conflict and contested memory creates a natural transition to discussions of response in post-conflict contexts, which forms the focus of the following article.

The final article in this section, by Brónagh Murphy (University College Cork), considers the role of forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology in responding to the trauma of violence and in processes of restorative justice, particularly in relation to the exhumation of remains and the return of victims to their families. Focusing on the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the article shows how forensic and archaeological practices can function as responses to historical injustice and collective trauma.

This volume shows just how many ways the theme of response can be approached. Across the pieces, authors consider questions of education, identity and history. Some respond to past injustices, others to current classroom dilemmas and all of them bring attention to processes that shape response, reflection and action. Reading these articles together, the reader gains a sense of the energy and diversity of current postgraduate scholarship.

RESEARCH FROM THE CACSSS POSTGRADUATE CONFERENCE

The annual CACSSS Research Conference, organised and facilitated by the CACSSS Graduate School, provides an important opportunity for postgraduate students across the college to present their research in a collegial and encouraging environment. The connection between *Aigne* and this showcase of postgraduate research is long-standing, evident from as early as [Aigne volume 2 \(2012\)](#), which noted that:

The journal publishes two distinct issues a year. The first issue is an annual release which works in collaboration with the Graduate School's postgraduate conference. All papers presented at the conference are invited to submit for peer review and the opportunity for publication. (p. iii)

This statement remained on the *Aigne* website until 2023, when we began our tenure as Editors-in-Chief, even though the editorial of *Aigne* volume 7 (2018, p. 4) indicated that the revived editorial board had decided to publish a single annual issue that incorporated articles from the CACSSS Conference. Over time, however, and with the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the connection between the journal and the conference became less visible, and recent volumes focused primarily on theme-based calls for papers.

Recognising the importance of this link, we have revived the format outlined in volume 7. Five articles, developed from papers delivered at the 2025 conference and reviewed through *Aigne*'s peer-review process, are included in the present annual volume. They are included here in a dedicated section and were edited by Ella Doran (School of Applied Psychology) Gabrielle Dufrene (Department of English) Guy Gerba (Department of Government & Politics) Richard Keyes McDonnell (School of History) and Matteo Moraschini (Department of Sociology & Criminology). Future editorial boards may return to a two-issue format or continue with the current approach; what is most important is that *Aigne* continues to serve as a means for disseminating research presented at the CACSSSS Postgraduate Research Conference.

The articles developed from papers delivered at the 2025 conference within the current volume shine a light on research being carried out within the College by its postgraduate community and features the research of Michał Biedowicz (Department of Government & Politics), Jessica Cullen (Department of Sociology & Criminology), Graham Gill-Emerson (Department of Sociology & Criminology and School of Nursing and Midwifery), Hanke Kelber (Department of English) and Cornelius David Moynihan (School of Education). A separate editorial for the section, which has been written by the manager of this section, Guy Gerba, that provides more details on these contributions.

It is worth noting here that the 2026 CACSSS Postgraduate Research Conference will be incorporated into a new initiative: Meitheal: the

CACSSS Postgraduate Research Festival, a week-long showcase and celebration of doctoral research within the college. *Aigne* looks forward to further strengthening its collaboration with the conference and festival.

BOOK REVIEWS

The books reviewed in this volume were selected by the book reviews editors—Jordan Carolan (School of Languages, Literatures & Cultures), Darragh Counihan (Department of English), Shannon Freegrove (School of History) and Tobias Heyduk (Department of Politics)—for their relevance to the theme. Additionally, the editors received reviews from contributors who offered to review books not listed in the call, and we were also fortunate to have authors and publishers willing to make works available for review. In keeping with the journal’s broad disciplinary scope, the reviews cover a wide array of topics and subject areas, from literary and cultural studies to history, politics, linguistics, gender studies and migration. The following reviews are included in this volume:

- Shahira A. Hathout (York University, Toronto) reviews Sophie E. Battell *On the Threshold: Hospitality in Shakespeare’s Drama* (2023), published by Edinburgh University Press.
- Chloe Tetrault-Kearney (University College Cork) reviews *Syrian Stylites: Rereadings and Recastings of Late Ancient Superheroes* (2024), edited by Barbara Crostini and Christian Høgel, published by the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul.
- Samavia Zia (Government College University, Lahore) reviews Fintan Drury, *Catastrophe: Nakba II* (2024), published by Irish Academic Press.
- Mariam Olugbodi (Kwara State University) reviews Juliane House and Dániel Z. Kádár, *Language and Politics: A Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Perspective* (2025), published by Cambridge University Press.
- Clay Darcy (Technological University Dublin) reviews Tadashi Ishikawa, *Geographies of Gender: Family and Law in Imperial Japan and Colonial Taiwan* (2025), published by Cambridge University Press.
- Sarah Meghar (University College Cork) reviews Antony Lowenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World* (2023), published by verso.

- Eoghan Fitzgerald (University College Dublin) reviews Chris Moore, *Kincora: Britain's Shame – Mountbatten, MI5, the Belfast Boys' Home Sex Abuse Scandal and the British Cover-Up* (2025), published by Merrion Press.
- Kathleen Coker (University College Cork) reviews Méabh Ní Fhuartháin *Heading to the Fleadh: Festival, Cultural Revival and Irish Traditional Music, 1951–1969* (2024), published by Cork University Press.
- Luke O'Brien (Dundalk Institute of Technology) reviews *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea* (2019), edited by Sunyoung Park, published by University of Michigan Press.
- Brandon Hamilton (Victory College Preparatory Academy) reviews Jan Plamper, *We Are All Migrants: A History of Multicultural Germany* (2023), published by Cambridge University Press.
- Luke Ó Donnchadha (University College Cork) reviews Mícheál Ua Ciarmhaic, *Glór ón Sceilg* (2025), edited by Máirín Nic Eoin and Mary Shine Thompson, published by Cork University Press.
- Lewis Ebert (University of Oxford) reviews Annika Lindberg *Deportation Limbo: State Violence and Contestations in the Nordics* (2023), published by Manchester University Press.

We extend our thanks to the publishers for generously supplying the review copies for this volume.

EVENT REPORTS

The event report section features accounts of different academic and intellectual gatherings. The number of reports in this volume marks a substantial increase from previous years and this likely stems from changes made to the way the journal seeks event reports. For the previous volume, the editorial board published a general call for event reports, that was publicised through our website, social media and relevant email circulation lists. While this approach was also maintained for the current volume, editors also took a more proactive approach, identifying upcoming events and directly inviting organisers (or a recommended co-organiser or postgraduate students) to submit a report on their event to *Aigine*. The

resulting high number of event report submissions is a testament to the successful implementation of this hands-on approach by our event-report editors Wei Chen (Department of Music), Raymond Jarvis (Department of English) and Charlotte Troy (Department of English). The strong representation of University College Cork-based events is also explained by this direct engagement.

In total, twelve event reports are featured in this volume, which, except for that written by Brian de Ruiter (Brock University), were all written by authors affiliated with University College Cork. A separate editorial has been written by Charlotte Troy, who served as manager of this section. The reports included in this volume show only a snapshot of the conferences and other scholarly activities taking place at University College Cork, and further afield, as well as the active role that CACSSS researchers play in organising, presenting and engaging with research dissemination opportunities.

CREATIVE PIECES

Like the event reports, this volume received strong response to the creative section, with an equally high number of submissions published here. When the journal was revived in 2017, the editorial board introduced new sections, including the “in-conversation pieces”, which were interviews with faculty members, and a dedicated section for creative submissions. While the “in-conversation” pieces did not continue beyond the first volume in which they appeared, the creative section has endured and has become a carefully curated space that includes short-stories, poems, flash fiction and images.

The creative team—Aoibhínn Callaghan (Department of Asian Studies) Kathleen Coker (Department of Music) and Gianmarco Balzani (Creative Section Manager)—has gone through a meticulous process of not only editing but considering how well each submission engaged with the volume’s theme. Gianmarco has provided a separate editorial for that section, which reflects details of the editorial approach taken. The creative works included in this volume are:

Photo-Competition Winner

- ‘Looked Down One Day About Three Years Ago’ by Peter Mac Donnachadha (University College Cork), which was selected as the winner of *Aigne*’s photo competition and is featured as the cover image for the present volume.

Poetry

- Peter Mac Donnachadha — ‘The Edge of Saturday Night’
- Cornelius David Moynihan (University College Cork) — ‘Land Untouched’
- Kieran Fionn Murphy (University College Cork) — ‘Parallel War’
- Written by Mairead Kinsella, Zoë Rush, Jeanne Spillane; and facilitated by Emer Fallon (The *Neart na Machairi* project) — ‘Shades of Maharees’
- Athira Sanal (NSS Hindu College Changanassery) — ‘The Art of Letting Go’

Short Stories

- Rajarshree Bhattacharjee (Independent Author) — ‘Birdsong’
- Emma Soye (Queen’s University Belfast) — ‘Pomegranate’

Photography-Based Submissions

- Peter Mac Donnachadha (University College Cork) — ‘The Round Table’
- Peter Mac Donnachadha (University College Cork) — ‘The Service Area’
- Clay Darcy (Technological University Dublin) — ‘The Year of the Piano’
- Natasha Dukelow (University College Cork) — ‘Reflections on the River Lee’
- John Morrow (University College Cork) — ‘Through the Lens of Community: An Annotated Photo Essay of the 2025 Ballydehob Jazz Festival’

These creative contributions show the ways in which response can be creatively expressed. They offer perspectives that complement the scholarly work presented elsewhere in the volume.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume has the highest number of submissions published by *Aigne* to date. Such an achievement is no small feat and thanks and commendations are owed to everyone who has been involved in the process. Firstly, we would like to thank the authors, book reviewers, event reports and those who submitted creative pieces for their work. Our gratitude is owed to our peer reviewers, who gave freely of their time and expertise. We also wish to acknowledge the support of the CACSSS Graduate School, particular Dr Barry Monahan—who has provided a foreword for this issue, for which we are also very grateful—and Karen Coughlan, for their continued support of the journal. *Aigne* is also indebted to the UCC Library and its staff for hosting the journal online and providing technical support. We would particularly like to thank Donna Ó Doibhlin (Research Services) and Hardy Schwamm (Head of Research Services) for their broader support of [journals at UCC](#) and for fostering a collaborative community of journal publishing. We are especially grateful to Donna for her work in organising Open Access Week 2025, where some of our editors presented on *Aigne* to others involved in UCC journals and in turn learned from them. We also owe a great deal of thanks to Paul Davidson (Library Systems & Service Support) for his unfailing assistance, extensive knowledge and readiness to resolve issues and find solutions. Without these institutional supports, *Aigne* could not continue to thrive. Finally, we are very grateful to the members of our editorial board, listed in full on the page following the title page, as well as to those who contributed to the editorial process for a part of the cycle (Laurence Counihan, Melanie Daly, Vassileois Varelas, Megan Wilson) whose enthusiasm, commitment and hard work has led to the fruition of the eleventh volume of *Aigne*.

One of the biggest (and most frequently recurring) challenges faced by any postgraduate-led initiative, such as a postgraduate journal like *Aigne*, is ensuring that momentum and volunteer members are kept up from one year to the next, as postgraduate students transition out of their posts. Such inevitabilities pose perennial challenges. *Aigne* has already been revived once before after a hiatus. Seven years since this revival, we hope that a firm footing has been established for the journal's continued work. After nearly three years in our positions as Editors-in-Chief, it is time for us to

transition out of these roles. We wish our successors every success, and it is our hope that the *Aigne* will continue to grow and serve the UCC CACSSS community and postgraduate and early career scholars worldwide.



Exploring Young People's Experiences of Integrated Education: An Educational Response to Division in Northern Ireland

 **Jessica Hadden**

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Abstract

Integrated education was established in Northern Ireland in 1981 as an educational response to division, with the aim of promoting mutual respect and understanding by encouraging interaction among students from different and conflicting backgrounds. Currently, these schools largely exist in two models: grant-maintained and transformed. In the context of a renewed policy drive to enhance support for integrated education, coupled with an increasingly diverse society, this study explores the unique challenges faced by both models in fulfilling the sector's stated aims. The findings suggest that while students in both types of school shared values of respect, understanding and interaction, these processes were articulated and implemented differently. The study also highlighted the dual challenge now facing integrated schools: addressing intergroup divisions beyond the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy, while also combating online misogyny.

Keywords: intercultural education; integrated education; post-conflict education; Northern Ireland; divided society

Introduction

In societies experiencing or emerging from intergroup conflict, education is generally acknowledged as having the potential to stimulate positive social change. The source of debate, however, lies in how education policies should be structured and implemented within these contexts. Some scholars argue that maintaining separate schools for different groups can help to preserve their respective autonomy and legitimise identities (Parekh, 2006; Grace, 2003; Halstead and McLaughlin, 2004), thus creating the conditions necessary for positive relations at the intergroup level. Conversely, others contend that separate schooling reinforces intergroup divisions (Hand, 2003; Short, 2003; Davies, 2005; Berkeley, 2008) by entrenching 'us and them' mentalities through minimised

opportunities for intergroup interaction, which are crucial for dismantling stereotypes and fostering empathy (Allport, 1954). Therefore, if transformative change is to occur within divided societies, education policy must reflect this ambition by helping children to understand, respect and engage with those from different backgrounds.

While both approaches recognise the importance of education for peacebuilding, the challenge is determining which policy is most effective. This debate has long been central to Northern Ireland's complex education system. Though division between the Catholic and Protestant communities is manifest throughout society, it is most pronounced in schools, where the majority of children attend institutions corresponding to their community background (Roulston and Milliken, 2023). As a result, schooling is often perceived to have maintained, or at least contributed to, the continuing sense of suspicion and distrust between the two main communities.

Several attempts have been made to respond to division in schools since the 1980s. While the success of these educational initiatives has varied (Dunn and Morgan, 1999; Gallagher, 2004), the most radical effort to challenge the divided education system was the integrated education movement. Integrated schools in Northern Ireland are defined as those that:

intentionally support, protect and advance an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities. (Integrated Education Act, 2022, ss. 1–2a)

Against a backdrop of violence and political resistance, Northern Ireland's first integrated school, Lagan College, was opened in 1981 by a group of pioneering parents drawn from both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, with just twenty-eight pupils enrolled. Having almost reached its forty-fifth anniversary, the integrated sector is now comprised of seventy-six schools across Northern Ireland, accounting for just under 8% of the entire school estate (DENI, 2025). Though the expansion of integrated education has been significant, community division within the wider education system remains a defining feature. Recent policy changes under the Integrated Education Act (2022), however, have made the expansion of the integrated sector more achievable. In short, the Act increases the responsibility of educational bodies to assess and address parental demand for integrated

education. Maximising interactions between students from diverse backgrounds is intended to respond to the “broader challenges of a divided society in the future” (IEF, 2022, p. 1).

Notwithstanding this legislative development, questions continue to arise concerning the efficacy of the integrated sector in meeting its objectives, as research suggests that ‘integration’ is interpreted and implemented inconsistently across schools (Montgomery *et al.*, 2003; McGlynn, 2008; 2011). The impact of the sector is further hampered by the weaknesses associated with the transformation process. Currently, there are two routes to establishing integrated schools in Northern Ireland: grant-maintained integrated (GMI) and transformed integrated. The former refers to integrated schools that have been opened by parents, while the latter concerns those that have *transformed* from separate-school status. As of September 2025, almost half of Northern Ireland’s integrated schools have successfully undertaken the transformation process (EA, 2025a), a lengthy and complex legal procedure that has brought with it many challenges (Loader and Hughes, 2025; Topping and Cavanagh, 2016). Further questions are posed when the increasingly multicultural composition of Northern Irish society is considered (NISRA, 2022). Though the integrated sector has committed to celebrating all students from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds (Integrated Education Act, 2022), rhetoric used by supporting bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, often refers to the “two main traditions” (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), and so maintaining focus on traditional intergroup divisions may neglect the complex dynamics between students of different backgrounds in a more diverse, post-Agreement NI.

Deploying intercultural education as a conceptual lens, this study explores young people’s experiences of integrated education within two different school contexts—one grant-maintained and one transformed—to consider the unique challenges that might be posed by these different school types as they seek to fulfil their sector-wide objectives. Consonant with the stated aims of the integrated ethos (NICIE, 2022), findings suggest an experience in both schools largely underpinned by understanding, respect and contact between those of different backgrounds, though students articulated these processes differently depending on the school they attended. These findings illuminate the challenges associated with the

transformation process, as well as those linked to how integration is understood and enacted more generally. Additionally, the findings expose the dual challenge now facing integrated schools: reconciling intergroup divisions beyond the traditional Catholic-Protestant dichotomy in an increasingly multicultural society, while also combating the rise of online misogyny. This article concludes with implications for how integrated education may be understood to better reflect the experiences of young people.

To contextualise the research findings, this article begins with a synopsis of the history of integrated education, which clarifies the different types of integrated school. Then, drawing upon intercultural education literature alongside the sector's stated aims (NICIE, 2022; 2021), the following sections outline a conceptual framework for integrated education, to identify the challenges it currently faces when responding to division.

Types of Integrated School

As already noted, there are two types of integrated school in Northern Ireland: GMI and controlled 'transformed'. The former concerns schools like Lagan College, established by parents and built from the ground-up. These schools are managed by a Board of Governors, who act as both the employer and the employing authority, and are therefore responsible for the employment of all staff within the school. During its foundational years, Lagan College faced a precarious future and was entirely reliant upon charitable donations, as well as parents' own contributions, before achieving grant-aided status in 1984 (Bardon, 2009, pp. 111–127). By 1987, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE, hereafter) was established to coordinate efforts to develop integrated education. The sector was later strengthened under the Education Reform Order in 1989, which not only placed formal responsibility on the government to "support initiatives towards the development of integrated schools" but also created a legal procedure where the "parents of pupils in existing Protestant or Catholic schools could vote to transform their school to integrated status" (Gallagher, 2004, p. 127). The introduction of this transformation process marked the beginning of what would become the Department of Education's preferred, more "financially prudent" route of expansion for integrated education (McGonigle *et al.*, 2003, p. 2). While a

less costly alternative than establishing GMI schools, evidence suggests that separate schools wishing to transform sometimes do not view the process as a genuine ideological commitment to integration, but rather a “cynical manoeuvre” to avoid school closure (Gallagher, 2004, p. 131). Gardner (2016, p. 350) goes a step further, terming transformation due to falling numbers as “faux integration” and suggests that this has undermined the potentially transformative impact of the sector overall. Even for schools who have demonstrated a legitimate commitment to integration in principle and in practice, transformation is no easy task, as staff are challenged with negating existing perceptions that they are of “one tradition” (Abbott and McGuinness, 2020, p. 4): a lengthy process requiring an “incremental widening of a long-established culture” (Topping and Cavanagh, 2016, p. 60).

Among Northern Ireland’s seventy-six integrated schools, thirty-eight were created by parent groups and hold GMI status. A further two schools (All Children’s Integrated Primary School and Forge Integrated Primary School) were also created by parent groups but hold controlled-integrated, rather than GMI status. Like grant-maintained schools, controlled-integrated schools are managed by a Board of Governors. However, the Education Authority—the body responsible for the delivery of education services in Northern Ireland—is the employing authority within these schools, hence the term ‘controlled-integrated’.

The remaining thirty-six schools have transformed from separate-school status to controlled-integrated status through the laborious process of transformation. Schools wishing to transform must formulate a transformation action plan, followed by a parental ballot, before carefully constructing a proposal for development (DENI, 2017). Only then will the school be considered for transformation and, if successful, the process of implementing the new status ensues. Yet for schools that endure the lengthy approval process only to have their proposal rejected, staff, parents and other stakeholders may feel that their efforts have been disregarded. Ultimately, the decision rests solely with the Minister of Education who, against the wishes of his own department, recently vetoed the transformation of Northern Ireland’s largest post-primary school on the basis that it did not have the potential to attract reasonable numbers of Catholic pupils (Meredith, 2025). The Minister’s decision has culminated

with parents and supporters feeling “extremely concerned” that their “democratic wishes” have been rejected (Caskey, 2025, para. 4). Recent research by Rebecca Loader and Joanne Hughes (2025, p. 29) sheds light upon similar experiences, with stakeholders lamenting the “bureaucracy and uncertainty” that accompanies the process. Given that GMI schools and transformed schools have developed distinctively within the integrated sector, both face unique challenges in upholding their stated aims.

Conceptual Framework

While those who support separate schools insist that they are a “hallmark” of a truly diverse society (Commission for Catholic Education, 2014, p. 2), others contend that the “mere fact of separate education allows for prejudice and stereotypes to flourish” (Hewstone and Hughes, 2015, p. 66). Therefore, if transformative social change is to occur within post-conflict societies like Northern Ireland, education policy should reflect this ambition by providing young people with the tools necessary to understand, respect and interact with those who are different from themselves: an assumption that finds its roots in intercultural education theory and is potentially facilitated by integrated schools. According to UNESCO intercultural education posits an educational framework that:

aims to go beyond passive coexistence, to achieve a developing and sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies through the creation of *understanding* of, *respect* for and *dialogue* between the different cultural groups. (UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education, 2006, p. 18)

This definition offers a useful departure point when identifying instances of synergy between the objectives of intercultural education and the stated aims of the integrated ethos. Firstly, integrated schools make a commitment to “empowering [pupils] as individuals to affect positive change in a shared society”, by giving them the opportunity to meet those of different backgrounds, “to live, learn and grow together in understanding, rather than mistrust” (NICIE, 2022, p. 2) and this is consonant with the aims of intercultural education (UNESCO, 2006; Rapanta and Trovão, 2021; Elias and Mansouri, 2023; Conti, 2025). To develop a deep and cooperative understanding between cultures, intercultural education strives to engender reciprocal respect between them; this objective is reflected by the stated

aims of integrated schools, which encourage pupils to “demonstrate mutual respect and understanding” (NICIE, 2022, p. 6). Finally, just as intercultural education seeks to develop a shared society through processes of meaningful dialogue (Gorski, 2008; Rapanta and Trovão, 2021; Conti, 2025), so too does integrated education recognise the importance of “dialogue and negotiation” for transformative change to occur (NICIE, 2022, p. 2). Indeed, NICIE are explicit about “being proactive and seeking out opportunities to express, learn from and value difference”, and that such interaction is what makes integrated education “unique” (2021, p. 12). Taken together, the objectives of intercultural education appear to be closely aligned with the stated aims of integrated education: to intentionally bring together students from different communities and respond to the division between them (NICIE, 2022; 2021).

Challenges Facing Integrated Schools

Though there are several conceptual overlaps between intercultural and integrated education, how these objectives extend beyond rhetoric is less clear. Despite the sector’s unifying commitment to reconciliation (NICIE, 2022; 2021), research suggests that there is no single model of integration in schools across Northern Ireland. Although variation between school environments is to be expected, given that each is uniquely composed, there are more fundamental differences in terms of how integration is understood across the sector, with some educators viewing it as the passive mixing of communities, while others adopt a more proactive approach when responding to division (Montgomery *et al.*, 2003; McGlynn, 2008; 2011; Abbott and McGuinness, 2020; Loader and Hughes, 2025). In other cases, the ‘avoidance culture’ that persists throughout Northern Ireland, where issues provoking controversial discussions are typically avoided, appears to permeate some integrated environments (Donnelly, 2004; 2008), and so opportunities for intercultural dialogue are forfeited. Even beyond the integrated sector, teachers across Northern Ireland often feel ill-equipped to tackle controversial issues due to a lack of adequate training, as well as feelings of discomfort (Donnelly *et al.*, 2021). These feelings, however, may be particularly pronounced within transformed integrated schools, given that teachers are not yet supported by a well-established ethos and

culture in the same way that GMI schools are (Abbott and McGuinness, 2020).

As the uniqueness of integrated education is ostensibly centred around its intentional facilitation of intergroup contact within an otherwise “inherently segregated and contested society” (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), one of the most prominent critiques facing the sector is the community imbalance present in many integrated schools. More than half of Northern Ireland’s twenty-one integrated post-primary schools have a Catholic/Protestant enrolment of less than 30% (DENI, 2024), thereby limiting potential opportunities “to learn with, from, and about each other” (NICIE, 2022, p. 1). Though proponents have long argued that the essence of integrated education is rooted in its ethos and not a mere “numbers game” of community enrolment (Bailey, 2021, p. 78), intercultural theorists assert that learning is only sustainable “when it is done with, rather than to, the cultural other” (McCandless *et al.*, 2020, p. 958). In the absence of diversity, integrated classrooms risk essentialising the identities of the ‘other’ as they cannot appeal directly to the perspectives and experiences of those who are different. To *essentialise* a culture is to attribute “stereotypical characteristics to large swathes of people passed solely on a single identity dimension” (Gorski, 2013, p. 86), the possibility of which is heightened in divided contexts like Northern Ireland where “segregation manifests [...] in various ways” (Roulston and Cook, 2025, p. 453). Hence, the integrated sector’s admissions criteria are “complicated by demographic change and persistent segregation at neighbourhood and community levels” (Loader and Hughes, 2025, p. 66). Consequently, achieving a balanced enrolment becomes challenging in practice, thereby reducing the potential for meaningful intercultural exchange.

The Research

Though the integrated sector has explicitly outlined its aims (NICIE, 2022; 2021), as noted above, interpretations vary across the sector, with each integrated school shaping young people’s educational experiences differently. Such variation is compounded by imbalanced community enrolments, inconsistent approaches to dealing with difficult issues, as well as the challenges associated with the transformation process. Recognising that much data previously analysed is now relatively dated, it is useful to

consider these challenges in a contemporary context and in the light of Northern Ireland's changing demography. Therefore, this research aims to understand the unique challenges facing two schools reflecting GMI and transformed models of integration as they seek to fulfil their sector-wide objectives. From this, several research objectives are posed: to *understand* young people's experiences of integrated education; to *identify* any challenges hindering their experience; to *consider* teachers' responses, and to *suggest* how these potential obstacles may be overcome.

Sample

The data were collected between March and June 2024 in two integrated post-primary schools. To maintain anonymity, these schools have been given the pseudonyms of Hillbank and Forestview. Hillbank has transformed from controlled-secondary to controlled-integrated status, providing a useful site to explore the related challenges. Given that Hillbank had been known locally as a 'Protestant school' prior to its transformation, it had a predominantly Protestant enrolment with a small Catholic minority at the time of study (DENI, 2023/24). Forestview, by contrast, did not transform to integrated status but is instead a long-established GMI school and was selected for this reason. As shown in Table 1, most pupils attending Forestview were from a Catholic background, with a minority of pupils (< 20%) identifying as Protestant (DENI, 2023/24).

	Integrated Status	Catholic Enrolment	Protestant Enrolment	'Other' Enrolment
Hillbank	Transformed	< 10%	> 60%	< 30%
Forestview	Grant-maintained	> 50%	< 20%	< 30%

Table 1: Integrated Status and Community Enrolment during the 2023/2024 Academic Year

As neither school enrolled the aspirational intake of 40% Catholic, 40% Protestant and 20% ‘other’ background (NICIE, 2022, p. 3), both were suitable examples for considering the challenges associated with community imbalance within integrated education. Overall, 136 students took part in the research, all of whom were in Year 11 (aged fourteen–fifteen). Year 11 pupils were selected because the date of Hillbank’s transformation process meant that most students in this range could articulate their integrated experience relative to what the school was like *before* its official transformation. To maintain consistency, participants from Forestview were also in Year 11.

Research Design

The aim of this research reflects the interpretivist principle of understanding: to gain access to people’s experiences and perspectives, to interpret “their social world from their point of view” (Bryman, 2008, p. 17). As integrated schools are intentionally ‘student-centred’, the emphasis placed upon learning from the lived experiences of individuals is especially important. Without their perspectives, it is impossible to fully understand the challenges they face. For this reason, qualitative methods were used to collect the data.

Essay writing was selected as the principal method of data collection because participants are granted a degree of anonymity and confidentiality that cannot be guaranteed during interviews (Elizabeth, 2008). To encourage honest responses, participants were asked to complete their submission anonymously.¹ The unstructured nature of this task meant that a variety of perspectives could be collected from *all* students, rather than a small, interviewed sample. For their task, participants were given the title, ‘What integrated education means to me’; this was completed by pupils during class time and without conferring with their peers, to generate as unstudied a response as possible. The data were then analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022), where submissions were repeatedly reviewed to identify key themes and their corresponding codes. Overall, 136 written responses were collected: seventy-six from Hillbank and sixty

¹ As written tasks were completed anonymously, all data cited will be accompanied by participants’ gender, nationality, community and political background, if known. For focus group participants, any known identity information ascertained from the discussion will be denoted beside quotations.

from Forestview. Several pupils were then invited to take part in focus groups to elucidate the findings identified from the written task. Group discussions were selected rather than one-to-one interviews as group settings help to “promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure” (Williams and Katz, 2001, p. 2) wherein participants feel free to share and even “challenge each other’s views” (Bryman, 2008, p. 475). Due to timetabling constraints, participants were selected by teachers according to the following criteria: there should be no more than six participants per group, a mix of boys and girls and, for Hillbank specifically, involve some pupils who attended the school *prior* to its transformation. To maintain their anonymity, all names have been pseudonymised. In Hillbank, six pupils took part (four boys, two girls), four of whom had attended the school since Year 8 (Emma, Sarah, Callum and Craig), while Shaun joined in Year 10, and Warren in Year 11. In Forestview, four pupils took part (two boys, two girls) all of whom attended the school since Year 8 (Alanna, Katie, Eóin and Ezra). To clarify any concerns raised by the written responses or focus groups, six teachers were interviewed: Claire (Senior Teacher), Philip (History) and Lauren (Religious Education i.e. ‘R.E.’) from Hillbank, and Simon (Principal), Patrick (Pastoral) and Rebecca (R.E.) from Forestview. All interviews, including focus groups, were semi-structured, took place on school premises during school hours and were recorded and transcribed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Queen’s University Belfast in February 2024. As most participants were under the age of sixteen, a participant information sheet was circulated to parents who were free to opt-out on their child’s behalf, though none chose to do so. Formal consent was obtained from all participants who were free to withdraw from the study at any time. However, none chose to do so.

Findings

When asked what integrated education means to them, most written responses relayed an experience that encapsulated both the stated aims of the integrated ethos and intercultural education theory, underpinned by concepts such as ‘*understanding*’ and ‘*respecting*’ each other by ‘*bringing together*’ those of different backgrounds. Yet a core difference between the

two schools was how these processes were articulated. Participants attending Forestview generally conveyed experiences that appeared to value the ‘intentionality’ of integrated education (NICIE, 2022; 2021), while many from Hillbank reflected an apathetic outlook, feeling that ‘*nothing had changed*’ post-transformation, with others expressing some hostility towards their school’s status. Negative experiences, however, were not limited to the transformed environment of Hillbank, as participants from both schools explained how prejudiced attitudes, particularly racism and misogyny, have permeated their respective environments.

To Learn ‘From’ or to Learn ‘About’ Others?

Learning to understand one’s own culture, as well as that of others, is a core objective of intercultural education (Hill, 2006; UNESCO, 2006; McCandless *et al.*, 2020); one that resonates with the integrated ethos as pupils are encouraged to demonstrate “mutual respect and understanding” towards those who are different (NICIE, 2022, p. 6). The salience of this was recognised by pupils attending Forestview, many of whom explained the need to learn ‘*from*’ other perspectives, to better understand “what it’s like for them” (Northern Irish, male). In fact, their understanding of integrated education in general appeared to reflect an openness and curiosity towards the experiences of others, both of which are necessary attitudinal components for developing intercultural understanding (Perry and Southwell, 2011; Chiriac and Panciuc, 2015; Deardorff, 2009). Students explained that they learn from others in school by delivering presentations, having class discussions and taking part in ‘spectrum debates’ where they are:

given a statement like, ‘abortion is wrong’, and there’ll be one side of the room ‘agree’, and the other side ‘disagree’. (Alanna, Irish/Feminist)

They praised having the opportunity to “learn about what other people think about stuff” (Eóin, Irish/Nationalist) and to “debate with [others] without getting into a heated argument or anything” (Alanna, Irish/Feminist). Dialogic activities such as these not only help to develop “skills of discussion and argumentation” (Compass, 2023, p. 337), but so

too do they introduce young people to perspectives and experiences beyond their own, helping to foster respect and understanding in the face of difference. These conversations were not limited to reproductive rights but also extended to critical discussions surrounding “the deeper issues of identity and the politics” (Rebecca, R.E, Forestview) underpinning the Northern Irish conflict. This approach reflects the stated aims of the integrated ethos, as engaging with contested socio-political identities is “the essence of what is different about an integrated school” (NICIE, 2021, p. 12).

If intercultural learning is to have a transformative social impact in post-conflict contexts, this necessitates intentional engagement with the various perspectives that have shaped the past (Hammack and Pilecki, 2015). Students at Forestview seemed to value this as part of their integrated education, claiming that they “wouldn’t really know” about the conflict or “what the terms meant if it wasn’t for that” (Katie, Irish/Nationalist), and so their experiences are worth noting, given that conflict-related issues are typically avoided in Northern Irish schools (Donnelly *et al.*, 2021). In fact, several written responses referred to educating ‘*together*’ those of different backgrounds, to learn from others so that they “don’t go back to the rough times of The Troubles” (Irish, Republican, male), illuminating a marked awareness among Forestview students of the sector’s wider commitment to peace and reconciliation.

In Hillbank, many participants explained that integrated education means to learn ‘*about*’ others yet focus group pupils struggled to give any examples of “practical things” (Callum, Protestant/Loyalist) they had experienced in school. While two written responses mentioned celebrating various cultures by “cooking different foods” (Nigerian, Protestant, Female) and putting up displays “about how each religion celebrates Christmas” (Northern Irish, Protestant, Female), this type of cultural learning does not appear to readily engage with individuals’ perspectives or lived experiences, which risks essentialising identities present in the school (Gorski, 2008), as was recognised by one pupil:

Integration is just a word which declares ‘we accept anyone here’ [...] but, in reality, we just have curry dishes served in the canteen. (Northern Irish, Protestant, Female)

Both the integrated ethos and intercultural education theory share in their encouragement of *mutual* understanding, a process that requires meaningful and sustained learning through interaction, allowing pupils to engage critically with their own experiences and that of others, to encourage more respectful relations between them (McCandless *et al.*, 2020; Rapanta and Trovão, 2021; UNESCO, 2006). The dissonance presented between the stated aims of the integrated ethos and the experiences outlined by students at Hillbank might reasonably be justified by the school's relatively recent integrated status, as it has only officially begun its "journey to integration" (Wardlow, 2013, p. 117). As suggested by McCandless *et al.* (2020), creating an educational environment that is grounded in mutual respect and understanding requires a considerable investment of time, due to lengthy, back-and-forth processes of meaningful dialogue and sustained interaction: an opportunity that is not immediately available within transformed contexts. This may help to explain why participants from Hillbank referred to learning *about* others, while those from Forestview focused primarily on learning *from* one another, given that reciprocal understanding may be more easily achieved when supported by a well-established integrated ethos.

Yet there is also evidence to suggest that Hillbank may have succumbed to the avoidance culture experienced in other integrated contexts (Donnelly, 2004; 2008), through which prejudiced attitudes are not being actively challenged. Given that Hillbank was once known as "a Protestant school" (Claire, Senior Teacher, Hillbank), it is perhaps unsurprising that an 'us and them' mentality was identifiable among students, with staff explaining that some would be more welcoming towards those "from other parts of the world or different faiths than maybe they would someone who was Catholic" (Lauren, R.E., Hillbank). To illustrate, one pupil explained how they did not like attending an integrated school because they chose Hillbank as a "Protestant option", and that they did not "believe that Protestants and Catholics mix well together" (British, Protestant/Loyalist, male). Similar attitudes were also expressed during the focus group, particularly with reference to how the conflict is taught in school:

Like, in history, we learned how the IRA was formed and all of them, but nothing about Protestant paramilitaries. (Callum, Loyalist/Protestant)

When asked to reflect upon the attitudes of his students, Philip (History, Hillbank) admitted that while he would like to encourage “more inclusivity with people’s perspectives” during history class, he had no time to do so because the “course is that long that you have to get through it”. As integrated schools exist within a wider education system that “privileges interschool performativity and competition” (Hughes *et al.*, 2016, p. 11), teachers are subject to the same prevailing neoliberal forces as in other school contexts, which have the potential to constrain “the extent to which they could engage children and young people with reconciliation-related issues” (Magill *et al.*, 2009, p. 96). Therefore, implementing intercultural objectives becomes challenging, as educators find themselves in a “tug-of-war” situation between their desire to foreground experienced-based learning and meeting their performance-based demands (Desmarchelier, 2022, p. 498). In the interim, prejudiced outlooks towards the Catholic community that “run deep” (Lauren, R.E., Hillbank) in some students remain unaddressed, thereby inhibiting Hillbank’s potential to respond to division among students and to meet the sector’s stated peace and reconciliation-based aims. This experience is likely heightened by the lack of Catholic students attending Hillbank (Table 1), coupled with the perception that most are “not comfortable to come out and say they are Catholic” (Claire, Senior Teacher, Hillbank). While Claire (Senior Teacher, Hillbank) felt that their tendency to “sugar coat” Catholic-Protestant relations was one of their shortcomings as a school, they have introduced traditional elements of Irish-Catholic culture, such as GAA, to try and encourage understanding towards the ‘other’. The impact of this, however, may be negligible if Catholic pupils continue to feel uneasy about expressing their identity, as intercultural understanding cannot be expected to thrive unless perspectives are communicated and experiences exchanged (McCandless *et al.*, 2020; Conti, 2025; Gorski, 2008). These findings speak to current discourse surrounding the “delicate balance” of community identities within integrated schools (Leonard, 2025) and pose questions regarding the efficacy of the integrated ethos in developing mutual understanding in transformed environments where achieving a balanced enrolment can be challenging, coupled with neoliberal approaches when addressing ‘the past’.

Such attitudes towards the ‘other’, however, were not limited to those attending Hillbank. While many students at Forestview spoke highly of their experience of integrated education, feeling that it has helped them to better ‘*understand*’ the beliefs and identities of others, this did not necessarily translate into their attitudes. For instance, several pupils attending Forestview stated their republican² identity in their written task, yet when asked to reflect upon this during the focus group, participants were visibly shocked that so many had identified with something they felt was linked to violence:

- Katie: Did people say republican more than they would say nationalist? I’m kind of surprised by that.
 Eóin: I’d say people are getting them confused.
 Ezra: Yeah, because to me a republican is someone who would support a paramilitary.
 Katie: Yeah, it feels more violent.
 Eóin: Yeah, I think people get confused between republican and nationalist. They hear republican more and so they say they are republican, though they mean nationalist.
 Alanna: They mean nationalist.

Despite claiming that their integrated education has made them “more open-minded” (Ezra, English/Irish, Buddhist), their dismissive—or indeed unaccepting—views towards their peers’ self-reported identity seems to refute this. To claim that those who identify with republicanism are simply ‘confused’ is to minimise their beliefs and speaks directly to past findings by Furey *et al.*, where integrated school pupils appear to distance themselves from “those who lack the ‘intelligence’ to move beyond identity-based struggle” (2016, p. 149). These attitudes suggest that Forestview’s previously outlined approach to learning ‘*from*’ others may lack that critical engagement required to fully understand the plurality of complex interests that have long shaped division in Northern Ireland. This response is especially striking when considered against the Catholic majority at Forestview (Table 1), where one might expect the views of the

² Traditionally, in Northern Ireland, republicanism has been associated with the Catholic community. Once defined by political violence, republicanism in the post-Good Friday Agreement (1998) era is generally understood to encapsulate “variants of nationalism, national and ethno-religious identity, liberationist ambitions, socialism and its relationship with national self-determination” (Hoey, 2019, p. 77).

minority community (i.e. Protestant) to be marginalised, rather than those traditionally associated with the majority.

Though perhaps not as obvious an othering process as the traditional 'us and them' mentality expressed by participants at Hillbank, both articulations are nevertheless inconsistent with the stated aims of integrated ethos which encourages pupils to "respect difference" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2). While the NICIE (2021) anti-bias curriculum offers a useful framework for addressing issues relating to sectarianism and the conflict in integrated schools, much of the guidance is concentrated around cultural celebrations and symbolism, which may inadvertently reinforce prejudiced outlooks if divorced from conversations relating to power and inequality. This is especially pertinent as integrated schools operate within a wider education system that foregrounds academic performance, and so teachers may feel ill-prepared to readily engage with such complex issues if it means "sacrificing coverage over material for which both they and their students will later be held accountable" (King, 2009, p. 221). As both schools hold differing integrated status and have developed distinctively within the sector, their seemingly shared struggle to fulfil the sector's aim of developing "mutual respect and understanding" (NICIE, 2022, p. 6) may signal the need for specialist training for teachers, so that they can appropriately identify and respond to both overt and covert 'othering' processes in the classroom, as without genuine acceptance of difference, intercultural objectives cannot be expected to thrive.

Managing Diversity

As Northern Ireland becomes increasingly diverse, integrated schools have a duty to ensure equality "between and within the diverse groups that compose the school community" (NICIE, 2022, p. 3). Though this equality-based aspiration was reflected in the written responses of many participants across both schools, it was not a universal experience. In Hillbank, perceptions of inequality were identifiable, with students referring to what they felt was the preferential treatment of minority background pupils following their school's transformation:

There is definitely a difference in how different races are treated, we are not treated equally. People in hijabs get to skip lunch

queues and would get prioritised by teachers. (Northern Irish, Protestant/Loyalist, Female)

Staff explained that while Muslim students have a separate canteen to access halal alternatives, they still “queue up just like everyone else” (Claire, Senior Teacher). Interestingly, what Claire explained as making necessary accommodations for pupils’ religious identities has been viewed as preferential treatment by some students. These competing narratives not only lend support to the challenges facing transformed schools as they continue the “incremental widening” of their ethos (Topping and Cavanagh, 2016, p. 66), but also demonstrate the practical challenges associated with the delivery of intercultural education: the inherent tension presented between respecting difference and giving recognition to individual identities, while simultaneously encouraging a shared school community. It is also worth noting that all students who referred to unequal treatment belonged to the majority-Protestant community, and so it would appear that “efforts to advance equality between groups have been perceived as threatening” (Shuman *et al.*, 2022, p. 1889), with some pupils viewing integration as a zero-sum process that “just pushes different cultures bar the one that was at Hillbank” (Northern Irish, Protestant/Loyalist, Female). These findings suggest that Hillbank may not have fully communicated the provisions needed to include minority groups into the school community, which may have exacerbated intergroup tensions between majority-culture pupils and those of minority backgrounds, culminating with instances of overt racism where minority pupils reportedly “receive snarky comments from some people that think they can say racial slurs and get away with it” (Black-British, male).

Despite their long-established integrated status, similar experiences of racism were also conveyed in Forestview, with one pupil explaining that “if we are picked on by someone white and from here, nothing will be done” (Arab/White, Female). This was confirmed during the focus group, as students are heard “saying the N-word, and stuff” (Alanna, Irish/Feminist). The occurrence of racist incidences in both contexts, coupled with a shared perception that disciplinary action will not be taken, may bring the responsiveness of staff into question. Indeed, focus group participants from Hillbank felt that staff could be “doing more” by showing pupils “how to start conversations the right way [and] not to be

disrespectful to anyone” (Emma, Loyalist/Protestant), suggesting that the interventions outlined by teachers, including assemblies and class-based learning about diversity, may not platform the dialogic response that students wish for. Though well-intentioned, Hillbank’s approach perhaps mirrors the tokenistic responses seen in other transforming schools when dealing with difference (Loader and Hughes, 2025), demonstrating the potentially limiting effects of intercultural education when delivered as an isolated activity, rather than an embedded process (Conti, 2025; Ermenc, 2005). In other words, engaging with intangible concepts like ‘diversity’ during assembly will provide little opportunity for critical reflection and is, therefore, unlikely to challenge racially prejudiced behaviour in school.

Though focus group participants at Forestview felt that racism is being “actively challenged” (Alanna, Irish/Feminist) by other students, the practices of some staff appear to counteract this:

Last year [pupil name] was told to do a presentation about Zimbabwe and what his life was like there. But then he got too scared to do it and he asked me to do it. (Eóin, Irish/Nationalist)

Eóin’s experience exemplifies how intercultural learning can be hampered when teachers adopt an approach that is too instructive: by *telling* pupils to share their experience, rather than responding to genuine curiosity in the classroom, this makes the learning process feel forced and uncomfortable, especially for minority-background pupils who often have an aversion to “being put on the spot by teachers” (Loader *et al.*, 2023, p. 41). In fact, interculturalists caution against learning activities:

that other or essentialise non-dominant groups or that, absent from a commitment to social justice, require dominated groups to make themselves ever more vulnerable for the educational benefit of the privileged. (Gorski, 2008, p. 522)

If learning processes like these are replicated across the school, students at Forestview may not fully understand the complex power relations underpinning racial prejudice, potentially hindering their commitment to fostering equality between all pupils “regardless of ability, race, gender or sexual orientation” (NICIE, 2022, p. 2).

Though the impetus for racially prejudiced behaviour may differ in each of these contexts, they share in their contradiction of the integrated ethos and are indicative of how intercultural education is often contingent upon the intercultural competence of the teachers and their ability to facilitate “inclusive classrooms that welcome students from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences” (Cushner and Chang, 2015, p. 4). If integrated schools are expected to respond to divisions including and beyond the ‘traditional’ Catholic/Protestant dichotomy in an increasingly multiethnic society (NISRA, 2022), staff may wish to actively engage students in critical dialogue examining how racism manifests itself both in school and in wider society, like that proposed by the intercultural education literature (Elias and Mansouri, 2023; Conti, 2025), to aid the development of mutual understanding and respect. This is especially pertinent given that the recently revised legal definition of integrated education (Integrated Education Act, 2022) does not explicitly include individuals of different races and ethnicities, despite growing racial tensions in Northern Ireland.

Combating Misogyny

As integrated schools aim “to promote the self-worth and self-esteem” of pupils when expressing *all* aspects of their identity, including their gender (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), the prevalence of misogynistic attitudes reported across both schools was unanticipated. Focus group participants at Forestview explained how online ‘manfluencers’ like Andrew Tate have had a “detrimental effect” (Alanna, Irish/Feminist) on their year group, with instances of misogyny ranging from disrespect towards female staff, to more sinister examples of sexualisation, where photos of female students are being added to “porn sites” by their male peers (Ezra, English/Irish, Buddhist). Though not mentioned explicitly by students at Hillbank, Philip (History) explained that male pupils have expressed attitudes towards women that have left him “aghast”, and this was attributed to “this whole idea of Andrew Tate”. As both schools are located in different areas with distinct enrolment profiles, their shared experience of misogyny suggests that this is a cross-cutting issue, as young boys from a variety of social backgrounds are subject to the same online “algorithms [that] are feeding increasingly violent and misogynistic content” (CSJ, 2025, p. 54). These attitudes are especially troubling when considered alongside the rising rate

of femicide in Northern Ireland, with twenty-nine women and girls murdered since 2020 (Harte, 2025).

Acknowledging that sexist norms are “very deeply ingrained” in Northern Ireland (NICIE, 2021, p. 58), integrated schools are expected to actively address and discourage such attitudes, for which both schools have adopted contrasting approaches. According to Philip (History), Hillbank have deployed a curricular focus on women’s issues, specifically relating to suffrage and gender inequality during history class, in the hopes of generating intercultural competences of empathy and understanding. Conversely, Forestview have implemented a school-wide restorative approach:

We’re in a place of learning so it’s about educating [...] they come in here and we talk about [what they’ve seen online]. They can say, ‘I didn’t know that wasn’t okay’ and then we learn why it’s not okay. (Patrick, Pastoral)

Though Forestview’s discursive response reflects the restorative practice demonstrated in other integrated contexts (Payne *et al.*, 2010; 2022), this approach may be insufficient for addressing the “virulent strains of hatred and violence directed towards women” that young boys are exposed to online (Haslop *et al.*, 2024, p. 2), as focus group participants admitted that their peers purposely “hold back” their misogynistic behaviour to ensure that “there’s no teachers to hear them” (Katie, Irish/Nationalist). In Hillbank, Philip’s learning-based attempts also appear to have had little impact, admitting that:

There’s a couple of young bucks now when we’re talking about women, [clicks tongue and shakes head] it’s not good. (Philip, History)

While integrated education aims to empower “all religions, social and cultural backgrounds, regardless of ability, race, gender and sexual orientation” (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), gender was excluded from the recently reformed legal definition of integrated education (Integrated Education Act, 2022). The dissonance presented between the legal articulation and the sector’s stated aims may culminate with the evasion of gender-based divisions in some integrated contexts, potentially hindering the inclusive

environment these schools aim to foster. While addressing the rise of misogyny certainly requires government-level intervention aimed at preventing social media platforms from exploiting their vulnerable and impressionable young audiences (Kumar, 2025), it is nevertheless important to recognise that young people can learn to eschew broader group-based prejudices while leaving harmful attitudes towards women unchanged. Therefore, in the absence of effective system-wide policy, integrated settings may wish to introduce intersectionality-sensitive intercultural education practices in the interim, as both aim at “empowering students as individuals” (Conti, 2025, p. 7; NICIE, 2022, p. 2).

According to the intersectional paradigm, individuals cannot be reduced to a single category (Crenshaw, 1989), and so it is necessary to combine primary categories—for instance, students’ community background—alongside factors like their race and/or gender, to ensure that the complexities underpinning their identity are fully realised. In doing so, young people can cultivate their intercultural competences, specifically their empathy towards the unique experiences of others (Deardorff, 2009; Conti, 2025). Dialogic practices could aid this process, perhaps by enhancing the learning processes that are already valued by students, such as ‘spectrum debates’, to introduce a gendered lens. As both schools are relatively balanced in terms of their gender profile (DENI, 2023/24), this avoids the risk of any individual being spotlighted (Loader *et al.*, 2023) or essentialised (Gorski, 2008), providing the conditions necessary for fruitful dialogue to occur. Such practice could even serve as a precursor for more confrontational intercultural pedagogies, as conversations surrounding gender inequality can broach challenging topics of discrimination and power before the complex intersections associated with intergroup relations come into play, thus creating the micro-foundations for mutual respect and understanding to be engendered.

Conclusion

Amid a renewed policy drive to enhance support for the development of integrated education, NICIE (2024, p. 9) have called for the promotion of a better public understanding of what integrated education entails. Yet the alignment between the challenges identified by this article and those presented by existing research suggests that issues relating to community

balance, avoidance culture and the transformation process persist within these integrated settings. These challenges are further compounded by contemporary issues relating to racism in a more diverse, post-Agreement Northern Ireland, coupled with the rise of online misogyny. Together, these factors pose considerable barriers to the sector's ability to fulfil its stated aims, potentially hampering its overall impact as an educational response to division if left unaddressed.

The question now facing integrated education is how this changing context might impact its mission and delivery. While the reformed legal definition (Integrated Education Act, 2022) now extends beyond Catholic and Protestant relations, its failure to capture race, ethnicity and gender risks leaving public understanding of the sector concentrated at the community level. Intercultural theorists such as Gorski (2008) warn against binary understandings of intercultural education, proposing a more nuanced, intersectional and contextually situated understanding of identity-related issues. Of course, all schools in Northern Ireland have a responsibility to respond to the issues that are affecting and dividing their young people but given the integrated sector's intentional commitment to empowering students "as individuals to affect positive change in a shared society" (NICIE, 2022, p. 2), this duty may be especially pronounced within these educational environments. Therefore, this article aligns with recent calls for a sectoral "review of how 'integration' is understood and communicated" (Loader and Hughes, 2025, p. 76) so that integrated education can respond more effectively to the experiences of young people in a society that is rapidly changing yet remains largely divided along sectarian lines.

However, there are a number of limitations to this study that are important to recognise. As this article considered the responses of only two integrated schools, with a cross-section of Year 11 pupils therein, it cannot be said that the findings will hold throughout both schools, let alone the entirety of the integrated sector. Further, the results presented are contextually situated, and this is important to reflect upon given Northern Ireland's continually changing sociopolitical landscape, bringing with it new challenges and opportunities for integrated education, as well as the schools' respective positions on their 'journey to integration'. Despite these limitations, there are several overlapping experiences detailed by

participants that may resonate with other schools across the sector. More specifically, these findings have helped to illuminate the challenges associated with intercultural education when deployed in divided contexts, as educators grapple with seemingly incompatible aims of respecting difference while also promoting sharedness within a wider education system that prioritises neoliberal objectives of academic performance and interschool competition.

Recognising the challenge placed before educators, the Education Authority have recently worked alongside NICIE to develop a *Framework for Integrated Education* (EA, 2025b). Prompted by the Education and Training Inspectorate’s “enhanced focus on the context, ethos and culture of the school or organisation and its vision and values” (ETI, 2024, p. 1), the framework offers:

a self-evaluation tool designed to help all integrated schools evaluate the nature, extent and quality of their integrated ethos and then set targets for its development. (EA, 2025b, p. 2)

Though the integrated ethos should, in theory, already permeate all aspects of the school (NICIE, 2022; 2021), the ETI’s decision may spur intentional engagement with “contemporary issues” (EA, 2025b, p. 7) in classrooms where it currently lacks, including those outlined in this article. In fact, the framework stresses the need for schools to be receptive to “development through effective self-evaluation, planning, monitoring, and review” (EA, 2025b, p. 3), and so the willingness of Hillbank and Forestview to participate in this study should be recognised, as it is indicative of their openness to critical reflection, to better respond to division in Northern Ireland moving forward.

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Enhancing Reflectivity and Reflexivity Among Irish Immersion Teachers Through Action Research

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Abstract

Reflectivity and reflexivity in teacher education are considered vital processes for cultivating critical self-awareness and continuous pedagogical improvement; however, research examining these processes within immersion teacher education, both initial teacher education and continuing professional development for in-service teachers, remains limited. In the Irish context, immersion programmes aim to foster additive bilingualism through the immersion approach, wherein Irish (Gaeilge), a minority language, serves as the primary medium of instruction in the classroom. This study explores the role of reflectivity and reflexivity within an action research project involving a group of in-service Irish immersion teachers. It focuses on how the teaching and assessment of Irish grammar can be enhanced and gives central importance to the collaborative and evolving nature of the action research process. The study also examines the role of the researcher in influencing participants' development of reflective and reflexive capacities, with particular attention to how their enabling presence shapes professional learning processes.

Keywords: reflectivity, reflexivity, immersion education, action research

Introduction

Reflectivity and reflexivity are central features of effective pedagogy and are seen as crucial for both professional and personal development (Evans *et al.*, 1996; Kirk *et al.*, 2006; Mordal-Moen and Green, 2014). In teacher education, reflexivity is “an internal dialogue that leads to action for transformative practices in the classroom” (Feucht *et al.*, 2017, p. 234). Teachers bring awareness and agency to the assumptions and beliefs that underlie their practice and decision-making. Reflectivity, meanwhile, is an

ongoing learning process consisting of hindsight, insight and foresight to make conscious choices about future actions (Barnett and O'Mahony, 2006). Although reflection occupies a larger space in the research literature, Bernadette Tobin *et al.* (2024, p. 110) argue that both are inherently linked, and that we must focus on reflexivity as a process “that informs the development of reflective practice”. In short, while reflexivity focuses on underlying values and beliefs, reflectivity is more focused on *future actions* based on these values and beliefs.

In many countries, reflection has become a key component of initial teacher education (ITE), with Oliver McGarr and Orla McCormack (2014, p. 267) referring to its “universal application within teacher education”. A critical component of teacher development is the capacity to reflect not only on their practice, but on their own values and experiences, all of which have an impact on their approach to teaching (Wilhelm, 2013, p. 57). Despite the emphasis on reflection in ITE, the research on reflectivity in in-service teachers is much more limited (Cirocki *et al.*, 2014; Lee and Mori, 2021; Rozimela *et al.*, 2024). As outlined in Cosán, The National Framework for Teachers' Learning (The Teaching Council, 2016), current educational policy in Ireland emphasises the centrality of reflection in the professional development of in-service teachers and the present study explores how reflective practice can be effectively supported through the implementation of an action research approach.

In action research, participants examine their educational practice carefully and systematically, using the techniques of research (Ferrance, 2000, p. 1). This is a cyclical process that requires teachers to engage *in* rather than just *with* education research (Elliott, 2001, p. 565) and in such participatory research Jarg Bergold and Stefan Thomas (2012) argue that both the researcher and the participants are reflexive beings. Not only must the participants and the researcher consider their reflexivities on an introspective individual level, but they must also be involved in a reflexive dialogue with one another throughout the lifecycle of the project (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023; Smith, 1994). The researcher must maintain ongoing engagement between participants and themselves as they play a central role in developing the participants'—in this case teachers'—reflective skills (Larrivee, 2008).

The project outlined in this paper is focused on Irish immersion settings—schools where Irish serves as the primary language of instruction in the classroom—and the well-documented ‘líofa lofa’ (“fluent but flawed”) phenomenon in Irish language education (Ní Dhíorbháin and Ó Duibhir, 2016, p. 5), where students in these settings may be communicatively competent but often display poor levels of linguistic accuracy in both written and oral production. In the Irish context, immersion education refers to a form of additive bilingual education in which Irish is used as the primary medium of instruction across the curriculum. Such settings require particular skills and competencies, among them the need for teacher reflectivity (Cammarata and Ó Ceallaigh, 2020; Mac Corraidh, 2021; Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh, 2023). In fact, it could be argued that reflectivity and reflexivity may play an even more significant role in Irish immersion settings, as language ideology and issues of identity come into play (Clark *et al.*, 2014). Despite this, little research on reflection has been conducted in the area.

Considering this gap in the literature and building on the argument that action research is inherently a reflective process, this paper will investigate its impact on the development of reflective and reflexive skills among Irish immersion teachers, with particular attention to the role of the researcher within this process. Consequently, the primary research questions are:

1. How can action research enhance reflectivity and reflexivity among Irish immersion teachers?
2. What is the role of the researcher in enhancing Irish immersion teachers’ reflective and reflexive practice?

As part of the author’s ongoing PhD research on the topic of Irish grammar pedagogy in Immersion settings, teachers in four Irish-immersion primary schools (Gaelscoileanna) were asked to implement a framework for context-based grammar instruction, continually reflecting on all elements of their practice and the beliefs underpinning them. Both the participating teachers and the researcher engaged in continuous self-assessment through structured engagement in interviews, focus groups and workshops alongside the systematic documentation of their reflections in reflective journals.

In this article, the existing literature is reviewed, the role of action research in teacher development is explored and the particular challenges

of the immersion context are considered. The methodology of the project is outlined and the early findings of the ongoing data collection are discussed before their potential implications are examined.

Literature Review

The following section explores a selection of relevant existing literature in the area on reflectivity, reflexivity and action research, as well as reflectivity and reflexivity in pre- and in-service teachers and the specifics of the Irish immersion context.

Reflexivity

Various descriptions of reflexivity have been offered by researchers, with much of the literature focused on researcher reflexivity (Dodgson, 2019; Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023; Watt, 2007). Julie Byrd Clark (2012) understands reflexivity to represent criticality and awareness in action, while Charlotte Aull Davies (2012, p. 4) considers it to be a process of self-reference, a “turning onto oneself”. For Bryony Hoskins and Momodou Sallah (2011, p. 114), honesty and introspection are key elements that require “critical thinking towards your own beliefs and actions towards others”. In teacher education, the importance of reflexivity may lie within its ability to facilitate pre- and in-service teachers as they draw upon internalised attitudes and beliefs to facilitate change in their practice (Lamb and Aldous, 2016).

For the purposes of this article, reflexivity can perhaps be best understood through the simple explanation given by Tobin *et al.* (2024, p. 12) in a reflective diary written by the researcher, as she describes reflexive practice to mean “we question why we do what we do ... to ensure that our actions are consistent with our values”. Throughout the present action research project, teachers are encouraged to consider not just what they are doing, but *why* they are doing it. In this way they may be better able to reflect on their underlying values and consider their impact on practice—both current and future—as reflexivity is harnessed to promote deep professional learning and create sustainable changes in education (Feucht *et al.*, 2017).

Reflectivity

In education, the notion of reflective practice and subsequent action have been cornerstones in both ITE and professional development for decades (Dewey, 2008; Feucht, 2010; Schön, 1987). Despite this, some researchers argue that the nature and concepts of reflective practice remain poorly defined (Bell *et al.*, 2011). In the context of this research, reflection is viewed as “a process focused on positive, purposeful action that improves professional practice” (Day *et al.*, 2022, p. 437).

Many scholars point to different levels of reflectivity, from surface level descriptive reflection to deep, critical reflection. Reynolds (1997, p. 314) suggests that surface-level reflection is “concerned with practical questions about what courses of action can best lead to the achievement of goals or solutions” while deeper, critical reflection:

involves engaging with individual, organisational or social problems with the aim of changing the conditions which give rise to them, as well as providing the basis for personal change. (Reynolds, 1997, p. 314)

Reflection could therefore be viewed as existing on a spectrum, with one end addressing functional issues related to practice, and the other focused on more critical insights into practice and the individual, organisational and social issues surrounding it (McGarr and McCormack, 2014).

Pre- and In-Service Teachers

The centrality of reflection and reflective practice in ITE demonstrate its importance, as it is considered to be ‘worth the effort’ (Grigg and Lewis, 2017; Calderhead, 1996; Griffiths, 2000; Macdonald and Tinning, 2003). However, one of the biggest challenges facing teacher educators appears to be engaging ITE students and in-service teachers in deep, critical reflection, as many point to low-level, descriptive reflection from pre-service and in-service teachers (Boulton and Hramiak, 2012; El-Dib, 2007). When researching the engagement of both groups in reflective practice, Judith Harford and Gerry MacRuairc (2008, p. 508) found “transient form of reflection rather than evidence of critical reflection”. Barbara Larrivee (2008) argues that most teachers, pre- and in-service, are unable to effectively engage in pedagogical or critical reflection to improve their

practice without carefully constructed guidance. This highlights the role of the researcher in enhancing teachers' reflective abilities, as they are responsible for the level and quality of guidance provided. Diarmuid Leonard and Jim Gleeson (1999) in the context of ITE, advocate for:

firm support in the forms of advance preparation, [...] manageable mix of teaching periods and time for reflection, and reflective supervision, all integrated into a coherent programme designed to help create a protected and supportive environment. (Leonard and Gleeson, 1999, p. 62)

Research by Katrin Poom-Valickis and Samuel Mathews (2013) found that this goes beyond merely providing participants with structured lesson reflection templates to complete, as such an approach did not guarantee critical reflection—most accounts were still categorised as descriptive. A significant challenge, therefore, involves facilitating teachers as they develop *critical* reflective skills. The emerging consensus is that interventions must be multifaceted and strategically constructed to create authentic dialogue (Dobbins, 1996; Spalding and Wilson, 2002; Thorpe, 2004; Trotman and Kerr, 2001). For many researchers, the idea of individualistic reflective practice is outdated, with calls for more collaborative approaches to reflection (Lin *et al.*, 2014). Linda Finlay (2008, p. 7) suggests that placing the onus on individual teachers to engage in reflective practice without meaningful collaboration is a significant weakness. It has been suggested that this could take many forms: using web blogs (Xie *et al.*, 2010), online communities of practice (Daniel *et al.*, 2013) and peer review (Lamb *et al.*, 2012).

Some consider the social aspect of reflection essential, as it can be significantly promoted through interaction with others (Christ *et al.*, 2014; Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005). Harrison (2002, p. 257) views talking with others as a “valuable professional activity”, a stance also taken in the Teaching Council of Ireland’s Cosán framework, as they suggest that “all teachers are entitled to dedicated space and time for individual and collaborative learning and reflection” (The Teaching Council, 2016, p. 8). For this reason, it appears that the researcher’s role in enhancing teachers’ reflectivity extends beyond simply providing individualistic activities to creating active, engaging communities of learning, where teachers have the opportunity to reflect collaboratively.

Irish Immersion Context

The Teaching Council of Ireland gives centrality to reflection in Cosán, which states that:

Reflective processes will also facilitate teachers in considering the complex ways in which their learning can benefit their students (not just in terms of student learning outcomes, but more broadly in terms of their levels of motivation, interest, engagement, and enjoyment, etc.), school culture, and the wider school community. (The Teaching Council, 2016, p. 10)

In the Irish immersion context, ‘Core Competencies in Irish-Medium Education’, a recently published framework for learning and professional development for practitioners, again highlights the importance of reflective practice, as the framework is described as a resource to “support professional reflection and improvement of practice in Irish-medium education” (Nig Uidhir and Ó Ceallaigh, 2023, p. 6).

In the present study, the particular area of practice addressed is Irish immersion students’ grammatical accuracy. Longitudinal studies highlight that students’ Irish language production skills often fall short of linguistic norms, particularly in grammatical accuracy, lexical diversity, complexity and sociolinguistic appropriateness (Walsh, 2007; Ó Duibhir, 2018), the previously noted ‘lófa lofa’ phenomenon (Walsh, 2007). A significant challenge in immersion education is balancing content and language instruction, with a growing body of recent studies showing that teachers in immersion settings find it difficult to attend to both content and language simultaneously (Tedick and Lyster, 2019; Tedick and Zilmer, 2018; Ó Ceallaigh *et al.*, 2017; Cammarata and Tedick, 2012). Research by Aisling Ní Dhíorbháin and Pádraig Ó Duibhir (2016; 2022) shows that in the Irish immersion context, teachers’ beliefs about the importance of grammatical accuracy do not always align with their practice, while a study carried out in Finnish immersion settings shows similar conflict between beliefs and practices, with less than half of participating immersion teachers explicitly teaching grammar despite placing a high value on its importance (Nyqvist *et al.*, 2025, p. 182).

Action Research

The term ‘action research’ was first coined by Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) in the 1940s to describe work that did not separate investigations from the actions needed to solve an identified problem, and in the context of education, encourages teachers to become continuous learners within their classrooms and schools as they engage in a cyclical process reflection and action (Elliott, 2001; Mills, 2003). Stephen Kemmis (2009, p. 463) describes it as a way of working that “changes people’s practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice”.

Perhaps the most important aspect of action research is that practitioner research requires participants to engage with knowledge that is both theoretical and practical (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2006). This necessitates critical reflection on theory and practice but also insists upon ongoing and evolving action as a key part of the process (McAteer, 2013). Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead (2002) describe a graphical representation of this process as a spiral increasing in diameter and giving rise to other spirals along the way, recognising the ever-evolving nature of the process.

This cyclical nature of action research aligns neatly with Cosán’s statement that “cycles of planning, evidence gathering, reflection and ongoing learning are career-long processes” (The Teaching Council, 2016, p. 21). Hicks (2005, p. 205) further emphasises the importance of the process as he states that “the point of the journey is not necessarily to arrive, but to make the most of getting there”.

Action research supports the development of reflective practice in many ways, as it requires regular critical reflection and collaboration with the aim of transforming practice. In fact, Mary McAteer (2013, p. 2) posits that “all models of action research are deeply rooted in the notion of reflection”, while Jan Robertson (2000) also suggests that reflexivity is integral to an action research process. Teachers’ reflections, which may relate directly to the practice itself or to the deeper experiences and values they have, are ongoing and guide the next cycle of each project with the aim of continuously fostering learning and improvement.

A significant challenge in such a process is the need for both researcher and participant to remain open to feedback and responsive to emerging

needs that may relate to pedagogy or broader issues. It is arguably the responsibility of the researcher to support participants wherever possible, a role that requires reflection and reflexivity on the researcher's part as their own assumptions and perspectives may be challenged. Providing participants with a platform to air their thoughts, opinions, experiences and concerns is a necessary element of action research (Wellington, 2015) and may also bring to light issues not considered by the researcher, such as challenges related to teacher confidence and knowledge. When engaging in reflective practice it is vital that teachers are given the opportunity to reflect on and share both positive and negative experiences. Michael Thomas and Katrina Liu (2012, p. 305) found that pre-service teachers sometimes use online reflections as an opportunity to showcase or "sunshine" their practice by using particular buzzwords, down-playing negative experiences and shifting the blame for problems and responsibilities to others. Oliver McGarr and Anne Berit Emstad (2022) caution those working with pre- and in-service teachers to be aware of the potential for reflection to become a form of self-monitoring and mitigate this through emphasising authentic reflection as a means for learning.

Informed by the theoretical foundations discussed in this section, the following section details the research design and methods employed in the broader research project.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach adopted to address the research questions formulated in the introduction. It describes the research design, participants and data collection procedures, as well as the analytical framework employed. The methodology was selected to ensure both the rigour and trustworthiness of the study, while also remaining responsive to the study's contextual and pedagogical setting.

An action research approach was chosen to investigate the potential of a context-based framework for teaching and assessing Irish grammar in Irish-medium schools to improve grammatical accuracy. It is an approach that emphasises ongoing collaboration, communication and feedback throughout each cycle of the project, something that requires reflexivity from all those involved as they continually reflect on the values, beliefs and experiences that underpin their engagement with the process.

As action research stresses the centrality of practice, practitioners can feel empowered and hopefully avoid the ‘Moses Effect’—a phenomenon described by Johnson (2008, p. 20) as a one-way flow of information from researcher to teacher, which disregards teachers’ values, their opinions and the problems they face daily. As reflectivity and reflexivity are core elements of action research, it is crucial that teachers’ values, experiences and beliefs are not only included but examined and understood as the basis for practice.

As a result, this research is situated within the socio-constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm assumes that knowledge is co-constructed by all of those involved in the process (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Punch, 2009). Socio-constructivism moves a step beyond this and acknowledges the active role of the researcher in discovering and constructing meaning and understanding (Kim, 2014). The researcher is, in many ways, a “passionate participant” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 112) who uses their own values and assumptions to guide the process.

Project Framework

The framework designed for this project aims to address the earlier discussed issues of grammatical inaccuracy through a focus on the ‘Contextualisation, Awareness, Practice, Autonomy’ (CAPA) model (Tedick and Lyster, 2019) and an explicit-inductive approach (Ní Dhíorbháin and Ó Duibhir, 2016). The CAPA model centres on teaching target language features in-context, providing opportunities for learners to develop their own awareness and understanding of these features, and facilitating output of these features through regular practice. It is broken into four steps: Contextualisation, Awareness, Practice and Autonomy (See Table 1). Initially, participants used a history lesson of their choosing to provide the context for the introduction of the target language feature, with teachers encouraged to choose history lessons and language features that were appropriate for their unique context. These choices were guided by the curricular content and learning objectives set out by The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the state body responsible for curriculum development and assessment in the Republic of Ireland. In this way, students learned grammar in context rather than

isolated grammar lessons and were actively engaged in identifying grammar rules associated with target features.

Contextualisation	Students were introduced to the target grammar feature in the context of another subject (history). Enhanced input (Lyster <i>et al.</i> , 1997) was used to draw learners' attention to the target feature.
Awareness	Students' awareness of the target feature was raised, and they adopted an explicit-inductive approach where associated rules were discussed and identified collaboratively. Students were encouraged to devise a song, rap or rhyme to commit the identified rules to memory and create an effective recall cue (Setia <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Wallace, 1994).
Practice	Students were given opportunities to produce the target feature in context, both in oral and written form.
Autonomy	Students were facilitated in using the target feature more autonomously throughout the school day.

Table 1: Project Framework Utilising Tedick and Lyster's (2019) CAPA Model

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling methods due to the nature of the research study. Teachers were selected from Gaelscoileanna within a certain geographic area. This area was chosen for logistical reasons, as participants were required to travel to attend a series of workshops. Direct contact was made with the schools to invite principals and teachers working in the senior classes (5th/6th class)¹ to take part in the study. Information about the research, including its aims and ethical considerations, was shared and participation was entirely voluntary. As such, the sample was self-selecting; only those who chose to engage with the study following the invitation were included. A mix of urban, rural, DEIS² and non-DEIS schools were sought to ensure the participants reflect the diverse nature of the education system within Ireland. Unfortunately, due to the geographic constraints and the low number of rural Gaelscoileanna in the region, only urban schools participated in the study. The table below (Table 2) outlines the details of those who participated in the study.

¹ Students typically aged 10–12 years.

² DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is an Irish national policy framework that provides additional supports to schools serving communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Participant Codes	Years of Teaching Experience	Years Teaching in 5 th /6 th Class in a Gaelscoil	Class Level	Sex	School Context	Participants' First Language
M1	19	3	5 th class	F	Urban non-DEIS	Irish
M2	15	8	5 th class	M	Urban non-DEIS	Irish
M3	7	3	6 th class	F	Urban non-DEIS	English
M4	5	2	6 th class	F	Urban non-DEIS	English
B1	8	8	5 th class	M	Urban non-DEIS	English
B2	19	2	6 th class	M	Urban non-DEIS	English
R1	8	4	6 th class	M	Urban non-DEIS	English
MN1	13	9	6 th class	F	Urban DEIS	English

Table 2: Overview of Study Participants

Data Collection

The data collection phase of the project was carried out over the course of nine months, from September 2024 to May 2025, and comprised two cycles of intervention and reflection. Data were collected in the form of interviews, focus groups, reflective journals, lesson observations and workshops, and data collection was ongoing at the time of writing this article. A wide range of data collection methods were employed to capture a more complete picture of teachers' progress and to facilitate critical reflection through a multifaceted approach (Dobbins, 1996; Spalding and Wilson, 2002; Thorpe, 2004; Trotman and Kerr, 2001). Employing a diverse range of methods also allowed teachers to engage in both individual and collaborative reflections. Cosán outlines the importance of engaging in

both, with Charlotte Danielson (2015) arguing that the value of collaborative reflection lies in

The role of the other [...] in professional conversations is critical; they supply the mirror, the sounding board, the sympathetic (and indeed sometimes challenging voice). (Danielson, 2015, p. 5)

The data collection process is outlined in Appendix A. Data collection was conducted through the medium of Irish, and all participant quotations presented in this paper have been translated into English by the author.

Analysis

At the time of writing, the final interviews had not been conducted and reflective journals not completed. As a result, the analysis described here relates to data gathered during the initial and middle stages of the project.

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyse the collected data, as it considers the researcher's active role in producing knowledge (Anzul *et al.*, 2003). This aspect of RTA aligns with the socio-constructivist paradigm of this research, and the active role of the researcher. RTA focuses on "the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process" (Braun *et al.*, 2019, p. 594). In a somewhat similar manner to action research itself, RTA is an evolving process, with the coding process considered to be flexible and organic. This contrasts with traditional Thematic Analysis (TA) which relies on the "emergence" of themes. Rubin and Rubin (2011, p. 226) suggest that during analysis, you "discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your interviews" and while it is true that themes became apparent during the course of the analysis, such an outlook implies passivity in the analytical process. Some researchers argue against the notion that:

themes 'reside' in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will 'emerge' like Venus on the half shell. If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (Ely *et al.*, 1997, p. 205)

In carrying out the analysis, the six phases laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) were adhered to. Figure 1 (Vargis, 2023) demonstrates the recursive approach required when carrying out RTA.

Ethical Considerations

Before the commencement of this project, ethical approval was obtained. Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the outset of the project and all data collected were pseudonymised so that neither schools nor participants could be identified.

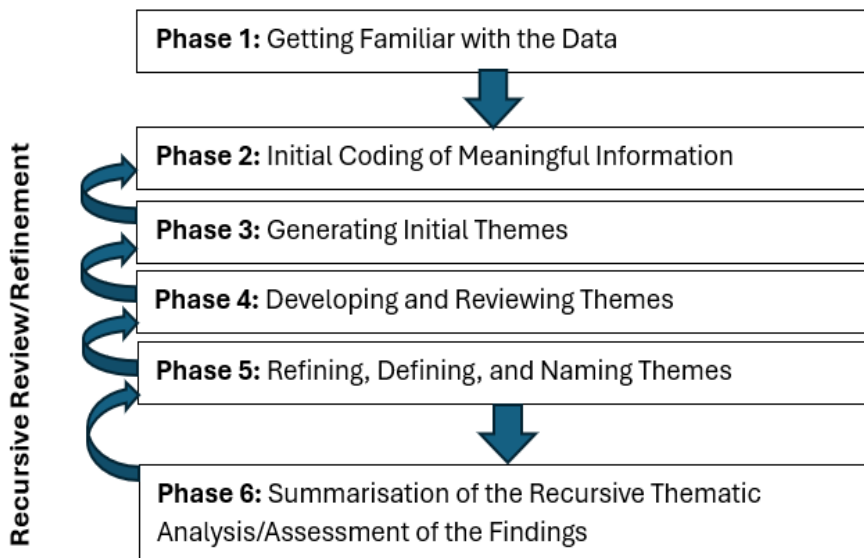


Figure 1: Overview of Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

Researcher Positionality

It is important to note that the researcher of this project has a background as a teacher in an Irish immersion setting. This is unsurprising, especially when one considers, as Uwe Flick (2022, p. 106) notes, that research

questions usually arise from “the researchers’ personal biographies and their social contexts”. The lens through which a researcher views the world typically shapes their study, from the initial question to the research design and final analysis. The importance of researcher reflexivity cannot be understated, as they must constantly challenge their assumptions and values and consider how they impact on decision making at each step of the process. A journal was maintained by the researcher throughout the process to capture their evolving understanding of the project and their own views as the research progressed.

Findings

Evolution of Reflectivity and Reflexivity Over Time

At the outset of the project, teachers’ reflections appeared to be mostly descriptive and surface level, with a focus on the procedural aspects of the intervention. The interview questions and journal prompts at this stage were largely centred on the practicalities of the approach—what lessons they had taught, the challenges teachers had encountered and what success they had experienced. Although these prompts were effective in encouraging teachers to reflect, the focus was on specific practical actions to be taken and rarely facilitated critical reflection. These procedural questions elicited responses that tended to relate more to pragmatic issues such as time management and access to resources, rather than deeper issues related to values and beliefs. However, in many instances, it led to an increased awareness of their practice as teachers began reflecting on the efficacy of their approaches. For example, some participants made the following remarks:

“I’m photocopying pages here and there so it’s very mixed up to be honest. As I’m saying it out loud it’s not great really at all”.
(Participant B2: Interview #1)

“I feel as I’m talking now, I’m throwing things at them, sort of throwing things in front of them, and what’s the right structure?”
(Participant B1: Interview #1)

As teachers became more aware of their particular practices, they also began to reflect on the *why* behind them. For many, they referenced their own perceived weakness in both language and pedagogical knowledge as primary drivers of textbook-reliance and ‘old-fashioned’ teaching methods.

“I suppose I don’t know how to make grammar and learning grammar fun”. (Participant R1: Interview #1)

“Another challenge for me, my own grammar isn’t great at all, like, I have to admit that”. (Participant B2: Interview #1)

“I don’t put the lesson together, I wouldn’t have the confidence to put a lesson like that together myself”. (Participant M3: Interview #1)

Through these reflections teachers began to identify knowledge deficits and although these reflections were not fully reflexive, they did show an emerging awareness of the link between self-knowledge and professional action.

This increased awareness related not only to their own personal practice, but to the Irish immersion context and the unique learning opportunities it affords. While the project was initially centred on history lessons chosen by the teacher as the primary context for integrating grammar instruction, as the study progressed and teachers became familiar with the framework there was a clear evolution in understanding. For some teachers this understanding was demonstrated by overt questioning as they reflected on the approach and considered opportunities in other subject areas:

“Can we move outside of the history lesson? Because there are lots of things like science that would maybe be good for the imperative, following steps [...]”. (Participant M2: Informal check-in)

For others, the shift in understanding was more subconscious as they recognised opportunities to integrate grammar into other subject areas only as they arose:

“I wasn’t planning on doing a lesson on the present tense but in the explanation in the book it said to always use the briathar saor

[autonomous verb] in the present tense, so then it's like, I'll use some of the stuff that you had done. It wasn't my plan but I saw that there was a chance there to do it". (Participant B1: Focus Group B)

These evolving perspectives highlight the value of reflective practice in broadening instructional strategies, as teachers began to recognise the ubiquity of grammar teaching opportunities across the curriculum in Irish immersion settings.

It may be the case that the ongoing, cyclical nature of action research has the capacity to develop reflectivity and reflexivity over time as teachers are engaged in an iterative process rather than isolated activities.

Collaboration as a Catalyst for Reflectivity and Reflexivity

Although much of the reflection that took place during the study was on an individual basis, teachers appeared to place a high value on collaboration. What is notable is that instances of collaboration such as workshops and focus groups often prompted spontaneous reflection. From the outset, teachers cited the importance of collaborating with others and being given opportunities to share resources and knowledge.

"It will be beneficial, even this project, that we'll be able to come together and say well like, what's the goal that we have as teachers in the senior classes, what's the best way to go about it, because we don't usually have the opportunity, so this is brilliant". (Participant M3: Interview #1)

One teacher spoke about the value of this opportunity to collaborate as being a success of the project before it even began:

"Even to be thinking about things like that and to be talking to other people about it as well. That's already worthwhile to begin with". (Participant R1: Interview #1)

The suggestion that authentic dialogue with other teachers prompts active thinking and encourages them to consider their goals and approaches highlights the importance of collaboration, and although they did not explicitly label these discussions as reflective, the accounts of joint

planning, problem-solving and informal debriefs clearly embodied reflective practice. This aligns with Cosán's stance on the importance of collaborative learning and reflection (The Teaching Council, 2016) and further supports Harrison's (2002, p. 257) view of talking with others as a "valuable professional activity". As teachers considered their decisions, challenges, success and alternative approaches through these interactions, they were able to gain an insight into the broader implications of their practice. This, in turn, reinforced reflectivity and in some cases, early-stage reflexivity as teachers considered their own beliefs and values in relation to the teaching of Irish grammar. This finding suggests that collaboration could be a catalyst for the development of reflectivity and reflexivity and may be a powerful inclusion in action research projects.

Role of the Researcher

The previous findings highlight the importance of providing teachers with ample opportunities to reflect and consider the values and beliefs that underpin their practice. It appears then that the role of the researcher in action research projects may be significant, as they are responsible for the provision of both the individual activities for reflection and the creation of opportunities for active collaborative reflection.

At the outset of the project, teachers' reflections were largely focused on the practicalities of their approach with little evidence of reflexivity. Although some critical reflection occurred spontaneously during dialogue, it appears that the focus on procedural aspects of practice could be, in part, attributed to the prompts provided by the researcher. Larrivee (2008) argues that:

without carefully constructed guidance, prospective and novice, as well as more experienced, teachers seem unable to engage in pedagogical and critical reflection to enhance their practice. (Larrivee, 2008, p. 345)

The critical reflection referred to here may be achieved through providing more probing questions, as outlined in the below table (Table 3), where participants are asked to consider not just the 'what' and the 'how', but also the 'why' behind their beliefs and decision making.

<p>Prompts for descriptive reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What kind of approach do you use when teaching Irish grammar? ● In your opinion, what are the primary challenges to effective grammar instruction?
<p>Prompts for critical reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do you think the way you think about Irish grammar and grammar lessons has changed? Why? ● Do you think what and how you are teaching has changed? Why has this change occurred?

Table 3: Sample Prompts for Descriptive and Critical Reflection

As the data from the initial stages of the project was analysed, it became clear that more opportunities for critical reflection were needed by the teachers to enable them to move beyond procedural descriptions. This related not just to the prompts themselves, but to the type of reflective activity. Employing a range of tasks that encompassed both individual and collaborative activities provided opportunities for the teachers to reflect in different ways, thus providing more chances for their reflective and reflexive skills to develop.

As with the participants, the researcher must also engage in constant reflection and continue to question their positionality. Since it appears that the researcher in such a project can play a significant role in teachers' enhancement of reflectivity and reflexivity, they must remain open to adjustments and engage in ongoing analysis. In this study, the continuous engagement with the teachers and the data led to adaptations in Cycle 2 which were able to further enhance the teachers' reflective and reflexive skills. The following extract from the researcher's journal shows the importance of ongoing reflection:

“I don't know if I'm giving them enough opportunities to reflect at the deepest level [...] This is something I have become aware of and something that I need to address. I suspect the fact that I have never really learned how to effectively reflect contributes to

this, but I want my research to be more than just answering simple and mid-level questions. I want the teachers to really think about what they're doing beyond the pragmatics of day-to-day life in the classroom". (Researcher, Journal entry, 6 March 25)

As previously stated, the final interviews and journals have yet to be conducted, however the evidence from the existing data suggests a trajectory toward deeper, more reflexive engagement over time. It could be argued that this is, in part, due to the adaptations made by the researcher as a result of ongoing reflection during the project.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper set out to explore the potential for action research to enhance Irish immersion teachers' reflectivity and reflexivity and examine the role of the researcher in this process. The summary of key findings below is based on the data gathered to date and will be further explored and clarified once the remaining data is collected and analysed. The tentative findings at present can be summarised as follows:

1. Teachers' initial reflections were largely surface-level and descriptive with a focus on the procedural aspects of implementing the framework. Over the course of the project (to date), teachers developed a greater awareness of their practice and the existence of knowledge deficits in relation to the teaching of Irish grammar, as well as exhibiting a deepening understanding of the unique opportunities inherent in Irish immersion settings. Although the final set of interviews is yet to be concluded, the data collected to date appears to show a clear evolution of teachers' reflective and reflexive skills as they began to consider the practical challenges of Irish grammar instruction, their existing practices and the personal values and beliefs underpinning them. At present, it appears the sustained and iterative reflective engagement inherent to an action research approach may play a significant role in facilitating this evolution over time.
2. Collaboration with other teachers was seen as a valuable professional activity and early indications suggest that it may have the potential to act as a catalyst for the development of reflectivity and reflexivity in Irish immersion teachers. Communicating with others (other participating teachers and the researcher) throughout the project

encouraged teachers to consider their decisions, possible alternative approaches and ultimately gain an insight into the broader implications of their practice. Action research is a process that emphasises ongoing collaboration, communication and feedback throughout each cycle of the project, so that any necessary adjustments to the research can be made. This requires reflexivity from all those involved as they continually reflect on their practice, experiences and beliefs, underscoring the capacity of action research to strengthen and sustain teachers' reflective and reflexive engagement with their work.

3. The data gathered to date suggests that the researcher may play an important role in supporting the development of teachers' reflective and reflexive capacities. Preliminary findings appear to show that the type and quality of prompts may influence the depth of engagement, with more probing questions potentially encouraging richer reflection and the emergence of reflexivity. Likewise, the ways in which opportunities for both individual and collaborative reflection are structured seem to shape outcomes, implying that the researcher may hold considerable responsibility in facilitating these processes.

The first research question focused on the ability of action research to enhance reflectivity and reflexivity in Irish immersion teachers, and based on the data gathered to date, it appears that its ongoing, cyclical nature is conducive to the evolution of reflective skills over time. It may be the case, as the early findings of this research suggest, that the development of such skills follows a trajectory from more surface-level, descriptive reflections to deeper, more critical reflections over time. Due to logistical constraints, this study consisted of just two cycles, however it is possible that additional cycles could be beneficial in allowing even more time and opportunity for the skills to develop.

The early findings in this study also highlight the importance of teachers' engagement in both individual and collaborative reflection. Although teachers were engaged in regular individual reflection, it appears that engaging in authentic dialogue with others, both the researcher and other teachers, also provided an opportunity for meaningful reflection. This supports claims that interventions to promote reflection must be multifaceted and strategically constructed (Dobbins, 1996; Spalding and Wilson, 2002; Thorpe, 2004; Trotman and Kerr, 2001), while also

underscoring the importance of the social aspect of reflection (Christ *et al.*, 2014; Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005).

Although enhancing reflectivity and reflexivity may benefit teachers in all settings, this research highlights its potential to address challenging areas of instruction particular to the Irish immersion context. As teachers grapple with the 'lófa lofa' issue, it appears a move away from isolated grammar lessons to grammar-in-context may be beneficial. This move, however, requires a shift in understanding as teachers transition from traditional approaches where grammar is taught in isolation, towards a more integrative approach. Regular reflection on the efficacy of their practices (both existing and new) facilitated a deepening understanding among teachers of the unique opportunities provided by an Irish immersion setting. This is crucial, as it appears a lack of reflection may limit problematising and so affect teachers' ability to change their practice, in this instance in relation to teaching Irish grammar. It was only when they were asked to reflect that teachers appeared to begin questioning their practices and the beliefs underlying them.

The second research question focused on the role of the researcher in enhancing teachers' reflective and reflexive skills, and based on the current data, it appears that the researcher plays a significant role in supporting this development. This tentative finding is important as it would suggest that the evolution of teachers' skills may depend, at least in part, on the researchers' ability to provide adequate prompts and opportunities for reflection. To this end, the provision of specific training for researchers operating in this area may be beneficial. This could include guidance on how to construct effective prompts that support teachers as they reflect on procedures, their practices and their beliefs as well as information on the provision of various individual and collaborative reflective activities. Although action research emphasises the co-construction of knowledge, the current findings suggest that much of the reflection is guided by the researcher. In order to facilitate high-quality, effective reflection among participants, the researcher must maintain an awareness of their own positionality and show a willingness to engage in ongoing reflection themselves.

Considering these findings, future research should aim to expand opportunities for teachers to engage in action research as it may have the

potential to enhance their reflective and reflexive practices through individual and collaborative reflection. This need is particularly pressing within the Irish immersion context, as the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in such settings must be explored. As a core element of this, comprehensive training must be provided for researchers to equip them with the essential skills necessary to effectively facilitate teachers' professional growth through reflective methodologies. By addressing these areas, the educational community can promote a more robust culture of continuous improvement and transformative practice.

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Appendix A

Appendix A provides an overview of the data collected at the time of writing. As the data collection process was still ongoing, the table summarises only the activities conducted to that point.

Month	Data Collection Method	Outline	Reflection Type
<u>Cycle 1</u>			
Sept. 2024	<i>Interview 1</i>	Teachers were individually interviewed to ascertain their current practices and attitudes to grammar instruction .	Collaborative
Sept. 2024	<i>Workshop 1</i>	Teachers attended an in-person workshop where the framework was introduced. Once familiar with it, they worked in groups to design lessons implementing it, reflecting on the perceived possibilities and barriers as well as their own practice.	Collaborative
Sept. 2024	<i>Reflective Journal 1</i>	Following the workshop, teachers were asked to reflect on the possibilities and challenges of the proposed framework.	Individual
Oct. 2024	<i>Lesson Observation</i>	Teachers facilitated a lesson observation by the researcher and a post-lesson discussion on their experiences of it.	Collaborative
Nov. 2024	<i>Reflective Journal 2</i>	Teachers reflected on their experience of implementing the framework.	Individual
Dec. 2024	<i>Reflective Journal 3</i>	Teachers reflected on their experience of implementing the framework.	Individual

<u>Cycle 2</u>			
Jan. 2025	<i>Focus Group</i>	Teachers took part in a focus to discuss their experience of the approach and its perceived impact on their practice and attitudes.	Collaborative
Feb. 2025	<i>Workshop 2 + 3</i>	Teachers attended two on-line workshops. Workshop 2 focused on sharing their experience of implanting the approach and reflecting on the possibilities and challenges. Workshop 3 focused on the implementation of affective assessment within the framework (incl. self- and peer-assessment), reflecting on the perceived possibilities and barriers as well as their own practice. Teachers worked in groups to discuss and design assessment tools.	Collaborative
Feb. 2025	<i>Reflective Journal 4</i>	Following the workshops, teachers reflected on the possibilities and challenges of framework and the integration of assessment strategies.	Individual
Feb. 2025	<i>Lesson Observation</i>	Teachers facilitated a lesson observation by the researcher with a focus on teaching and assessing within the framework and carried out a post-lesson discussion on their experiences.	Collaborative
Mar. 2025	<i>Reflective Journal 5</i>	Teachers reflected on the successes and challenges of the framework and the changes that have occurred over the course of the project.	Individual



From Reflection to Action: The Role of Retrieval Practice in Deepening Learning and Instruction

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Abstract

This article responds to the persistent disconnect between educational research and classroom practice by examining retrieval practice as a reflective and actionable pedagogy. Drawing on cognitive science, it explores how retrieval practice, defined as the act of recalling knowledge from memory, can strengthen learning by activating prior knowledge and promoting long-term retention. The article positions retrieval practice as a timely response to educational systems dominated by summative assessment and superficial engagement, offering an alternative grounded in evidence and cognitive theory. It outlines the theoretical principles underpinning retrieval practice, including cognitive load theory and the concept of desirable difficulties, while critically reflecting on their limitations, particularly in their application to complex learning and real-world settings. Drawing on recent critiques, it argues for a more situated and responsive use of cognitive science in education. The article considers why retrieval practice remains underused despite strong empirical support. Barriers identified include misconceptions about effort and learning, task complexity, student anxiety and a lack of reflective implementation. Policy interventions, such as those in England, can encourage action but risk superficial adoption if divorced from professional reflection. This tension underscores the need for teachers to interpret evidence critically, adapt it thoughtfully and embed it meaningfully into their practice. In response, the article proposes evidence-informed strategies to support reflective action, which includes using feedback to motivate students, teaching learning strategies directly and supporting teachers through dialogue and professional communities. These approaches position both teachers and students as active agents in shaping learning environments that are responsive to research. Retrieval practice exemplifies how educational practice can be transformed when research engagement moves beyond passive awareness to active interpretation and application. This article calls for continued collaboration among researchers, practitioners and policymakers to sustain reflective educational cultures that act on evidence while remaining attentive to context.

Keywords: retrieval practice; education; evidence-informed teaching

Introduction

Learning can be defined as a change in long-term memory, whereby new information is encoded from working memory with the ability to be

retrieved later (Kirschner *et al.*, 2006). Optimising learning and teaching have long been a primary focus for educators, researchers and policymakers. Recently, cognitive science principles such as elaboration, retrieval practice and spaced learning have received attention for their potential to enhance learning outcomes (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013). This represents a broader shift towards reflecting not only on how learning happens but also on how such knowledge can inform more effective instructional design. This shift invites reflection on how learning happens and what to do with that knowledge.

Retrieval practice, which involves actively recalling information to strengthen memory (McDermott, 2021), is increasingly seen as a practical application of cognitive science in classrooms. It addresses challenges like overload, shallow learning and mental fatigue, particularly in systems focused on short-term performance and rote memorisation (Bjork and Bjork, 2020). Retrieval practice helps learners by encouraging effortful recall, which builds links between what they know and new ideas, and supports long-term memory (Carpenter, 2023).

Though retrieval practice dates back to early twentieth-century research (Gates, 1917; Spitzer, 1939), interest has resurged in recent decades, with growing empirical evidence across age groups and contexts (Agarwal and Bain, 2019; Dunlosky and Rawson, 2019). Nonetheless, classroom implementation lags behind research, due to misunderstandings or practical constraints (Rea *et al.*, 2022).

Policy responses have begun to emerge, albeit unevenly. England has formally embedded retrieval practice in teacher development and initial teacher education (Department for Education, 2022). Müller and Cook (2024, p. 1478) found that 90% of teachers in England use it confidently, but this is an exception. Most education systems have not formally adopted retrieval practice widely and it often stays within research circles.

This article explores retrieval and memory theory, the concept of desirable difficulties, applications of retrieval practice and implementation challenges. To affect transformative change in classroom practice, this article moves beyond laboratory findings to address the gap as to how teachers interpret and apply retrieval in varied classroom contexts. Compared to existing reviews, this article addresses the gap of applying retrieval practice in an Irish context and how teachers can develop their

own professional practice. Finally, it offers recommendations for future research and practice, positioning retrieval practice as a reflective and actionable response to the evolving demands of education.

How Learning Happens: Cognitive Architecture and Pedagogical Implications

Cognitive Science in Education and the Policy Landscape

Cognitive science principles, such as student quizzing, have been practised informally for decades but are now being systematically researched. Cognitive psychology studies behaviour and interpretation, while cognitive neuroscience investigates brain responses (Perry *et al.*, 2021). Sweller *et al.* (2011) argue that instructional design is blind without an understanding of human cognition. However, much of the conducted research is laboratory-based, raising concerns about its ecological validity and classroom transferability.

In England, education policy has mandated the use of cognitive science strategies, including retrieval practice, to improve student learning (Müller and Cook, 2024). While this has increased uptake, the absence of detailed implementation guidance has led to challenges. Bates and Shea (2024, p. 252) report that 52.3% of surveyed teachers used strategies solely due to policy pressure, potentially resulting in tokenistic application and limited impact (Burdett and O'Donnell, 2016). This highlights the importance of reflective understanding alongside policy action. Educators must not only adopt evidence-based methods but also understand how they align with established pedagogies and how best to apply them in practice (Perry, 2022).

Despite this policy-level action, English education reforms have also attracted criticism. Scholars argue that these reforms prioritise large-scale empirical studies at the expense of long-standing traditions in philosophy, sociology and curriculum theory (Hordern and Brooks, 2023). These fields have historically aimed to enrich and inform teaching and learning by approaching education from distinct disciplinary perspectives, providing a contrasting vision to the 'New Science' approach currently favoured in English education policy. This new policy focus is viewed as effectively marginalising the rich and diverse insights offered by philosophy, sociology

and curriculum theory that empowers teachers as critically reflective professionals (Tillin, 2023).

The English Early Career Framework, for example, has been criticised for reducing teaching to procedural knowledge, neglecting tacit and situated dimensions of professional expertise (Hordern *et al.*, 2024). Tillin (2023) further suggests that the emphasis on school-led teacher training has marginalised universities, raising concerns about the coherence and depth of research-informed education. These developments risk fragmenting teacher education and reinforce the need for policy to be critically examined to ensure it supports reflective, high-quality professional practice.

While England has formally integrated retrieval practice into policy, Ireland's policy landscape is still evolving in terms of explicit cognitive science recommendations. The Irish Department of Education's current strategy (Department of Education, 2023) emphasises evidence-informed practice in general but does not yet mention specific techniques like retrieval practice. This highlights a gap and an opportunity within the Irish context to bring research on retrieval into policy and practice dialogues.

The Role of Retrieval in Learning and Memory

Retrieval refers to the act of recalling information from memory, often with little to no support, and is one of the most fundamental aspects of human learning and remembering (Perry *et al.*, 2021). It can involve recall (producing information) or recognition (identifying familiarity). It plays a pivotal role in the successful learning and application of information. However, it is not a neutral process, as it influences and also partly changes what is remembered with the accurate retrieval of memories enhancing later retention and inaccurate retrieval cementing errors (Roediger and Abel, 2022). It remains unclear on how retrieval can be integrated in applied settings, such as secondary classrooms, and how to increase its utilisation among students as a learning strategy (Carpenter, 2023).

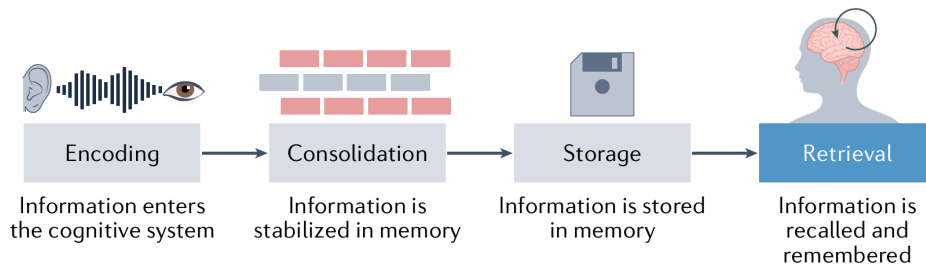


Figure 1: Four Stages of Memory (Roediger and Abel, 2022, p. 709)

Roediger and Abel (2022) describe four stages in the learning and memory process, illustrated in Figure 1, with the process beginning with encoding of information, together with the context in which it was encountered, through direct experience. The new information is then consolidated and stored in memory. Retrieval is the final stage, whereby memories are recalled into conscious awareness either overtly (saying or writing it) or covertly (thoughts only) (Roediger and Abel, 2022). Retrieval theory proposes that the learning benefits of recall arise from the cognitive effort expended during retrieval (Smith-Peirce and Butler, 2025), aligning with Willingham’s (2021, p. 58) view that “memory is the residue of thought”.

Retrieval benefits increase when students receive feedback on their failed retrieval attempts as it can potentiate subsequent learning of correct material (McDaniel *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, if there are errors in memory recall then a retrieval practice effect can also occur for erroneous information and the more the error is repeated then the more it becomes part of the memory (McDermott, 1996).

The forward-testing effect (test-potentiated learning) describes how engaging in a test prior to the learning of new information leads to improved learning of that new information (Pan *et al.*, 2024). Even unsuccessful retrieval attempts (pretesting on unknown material) can enhance subsequent learning (Rea *et al.*, 2022). This process involves activating relevant schema networks and directing attentional resources more efficiently during subsequent learning (Pan and Carpenter, 2023).

However, an issue that has not yet been examined is whether this effect decreases with repeated and maybe routine use in classrooms and other real-life contexts (Roediger and Abel, 2022). One key concept that helps explain its effectiveness is that of desirable difficulties.

Desirable Difficulties

Effortful retrieval is a desirable difficulty that supports learning (Carpenter, 2023). Bjork (1994) argues that the best way for learners to remember what they have learnt and transfer new learning to other contexts is to make the learning experience slightly more difficult in the short term. Desirable difficulties, pedagogical strategies that introduce manageable cognitive challenge, have been shown to enhance long-term learning by fostering deeper cognitive processing (Bjork and Bjork, 2020). This theory calls for a shift from short-term performance to long-term, meaningful learning through strategies like retrieval practice. It offers a response to the widespread issue of surface-level learning in education.

However, Bjork and Bjork (2020) state that not all difficulties are desirable as if the learner is not eventually successful then the task can be ineffective from a learning perspective. They claim that the optimal level of difficulty varies depending on the learner's prior knowledge and the key is that difficulties must be task-relevant, novel and potentially solvable by the learner. This aligns with Perry *et al.*'s (2021) claim that uncertainty remains about how much difficulty is desirable in retrieval practice or whether feedback always provides a solution for unsuccessful retrieval. This requires the need for measured teacher judgement, with reflection on prior knowledge essential to calibrating the level of difficulty.

Although there is much published research regarding the benefits of using desirable difficulties (Bjork and Bjork, 2020; Rovers *et al.*, 2018), its use is limited in practice due to many education systems' traditional focus on short-term performance. This results in superficial learning gains, which deliberate cognitive challenge seeks to counter (Kirschner *et al.*, 2022). However, Wenzel and Reinhard (2019) found that the benefits of desirable difficulties might not extend to lower-ability learners, requiring further research. This again shows that teachers must reflect on students' prior knowledge and abilities when introducing difficulties, to ensure positive results. This reinforces the need for reflective teacher judgement. Retrieval

practice offers a practical method to implement desirable difficulties, which will be explored next.

It is worth positioning retrieval practice within the broader spectrum of educational approaches. While retrieval is grounded in cognitive science and often associated with teacher-guided, knowledge-rich instruction (Kirschner *et al.*, 2006), it need not conflict with constructivist or sociocultural paradigms. Constructivist theories (Bruner, 1961; Dewey, 1938) and sociocultural perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasise meaning-making through interaction and enquiry. However, retrieval practice can be harmonised with these views, for example, through reflective questioning in project-based learning, or collaborative recall tasks that support shared construction of knowledge. Seen this way, retrieval is not rote but reconstructive: an active process through which students make sense of prior learning (Wittrock, 1989).

The Role of Teacher Professional Reflection

Teacher professional reflection is a multifaceted process crucial for educators' ongoing development and their ability to effectively implement new teaching strategies in the classroom (Mathew *et al.*, 2017). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle further highlights this, situating reflection as a critical stage where experience is transformed into knowledge through active conceptualisation (Collin *et al.*, 2013). Reflective practice fosters not only skill acquisition but also the development of professional identity. Rodgers and Scott (2008) argue that the construction of teacher identity is shaped by socio-cultural, relational and emotional contexts.

Despite its widely acknowledged benefits, reflective practice in teacher education faces significant critiques. There is a persistent lack of clarity and consensus on what reflective practice truly means, with authors using various terms like 'reflexivity', 'reflection' and 'reflective analysis' interchangeably or with differing meanings, leading to confusion (Rodgers, 2002). Some conceptualisations propose hierarchical levels of reflection, with broader perspectives (e.g. social, ethical dimensions) being considered superior (Collin *et al.*, 2013). While reflection is a dynamic and essential process in teacher professional development, the field acknowledges the need for more nuanced approaches that account for the diverse developmental stages of teachers.

Having established the cognitive foundations, this article now turns to retrieval practice itself: its forms, effectiveness and why it matters as a reflective pedagogy.

Retrieval Practice as Reflective Pedagogy: Forms, Timing and Effectiveness

What is Retrieval Practice and Why Does It Matter?

Retrieval practice involves actively recalling information from long-term memory, which strengthens retention and reduces forgetting (Willingham, 2021). However, memory comprises two interacting strengths: storage strength (how well an item is learned and integrated) and retrieval strength (ease of access) (Bjork and Bjork, 2011). Crucially, high retrieval strength leads to smaller gains in storage strength from retrieval, while high storage strength facilitates greater improvements in access (Bjork and Bjork, 2020). Therefore, this means that forgetting can actually enable learning when retrieval practice is spaced or varied (De Bruin *et al.*, 2023).

While tests are often seen as assessments of learning, retrieval practice serves as an assessment for learning, encouraging learners to reflect on and consolidate prior knowledge (Wiklund-Hörnqvist *et al.*, 2022). However, this process essentially asks learners to reflect on what they have previously learnt as a means of solidifying knowledge for future application. The benefits of retrieval practice are substantial when compared to no activity (Hedge's effect size, $g = 0.93$) or to restudy ($g = 0.51$), demonstrating it as a powerful action in response to forgetting (Adesope *et al.*, 2017, p. 683). A key finding proposed by Bertilsson *et al.* (2021) for teachers is that retrieval practice can benefit all students regardless of individual differences. It also has the advantage of providing formative feedback to identify gaps and inform future teaching (Roediger *et al.*, 2011).

While more applied studies of retrieval practice's effects are recommended (Roediger and Abel, 2022), certain case studies provide insight into real classroom experiences. McDaniel *et al.* (2011) conducted controlled experiments in middle school science classes, demonstrating that low stakes quizzing with feedback was highly effective in improving performance on summative assessments of core curricular content. Jaeger *et al.*'s (2015) study demonstrated the benefits of retrieval practice for

eight- to ten-year-olds in elementary schools in Brazil, with positive results extended to children across a range of abilities. Evidence increasingly supports that retrieval practice is a broadly applicable learning strategy, effective across a spectrum of cognitive abilities and for learners acquiring new languages, contributing to its high utility in diverse educational settings (Wiklund-Hörnqvist *et al.*, 2022).

Critics argue that its benefits decline with complex learning (Van Gog and Sweller, 2015) and others suggest effects are limited to factual recall (Rohrer *et al.*, 2020). Such critiques highlight that educators must consider what kind of learning outcome they are targeting. This article acknowledges these critiques and proposes that retrieval practice is most powerful for foundational knowledge, whereas deeper learning may require retrieval to be combined with other strategies. In other words, retrieval practice is not a silver bullet for all learning outcomes, but it is a crucial component for securing core knowledge, a stance this article advocates. Despite strong evidence, classroom uptake remains limited, often due to misunderstanding or insufficient support (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Greater support is needed to help teachers and students reflect on its value and use it effectively.

Designing Retrieval Practice: Techniques and Considerations

Retrieval practice can take many forms and educators should choose those that best fit their teaching goals and classroom context. Common retrieval practice techniques include:

- **Free recall:** Students write or say everything they remember without cues.
- **Low-stakes quizzes:** Used at lesson openings or endings to encourage practice without fear (multiple choice questions, matching, short answer questions).
- **Flashcards:** Especially effective for vocabulary, definitions, or formulae.
- **Concept mapping:** Helps students connect and organise ideas.
- **Brain dumps:** Encourage open-ended reflection and schema activation.
- **Any activity** that encourages learners to bring information to mind from memory.

These strategies can be adapted by teachers in response to their students' needs. Quizzes prompt students to think actively about previously learned material, supporting long term retention, but their effectiveness depends on several factors including timing, format and feedback (Adesope *et al.*, 2017). Delayed feedback may promote transfer of knowledge (Agarwal *et al.*, 2021), while the absence of feedback may reduce their usefulness (Moreira *et al.*, 2019).

It is important that both teachers and students understand the purpose of quizzes. Some students may experience anxiety or fear of failure if they cannot recall answers (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2024). Educators must therefore be reflective about how they introduce retrieval tasks, framing them as opportunities for learning and normalising mistakes, so that the act of quizzing does not provoke negative responses. While quizzes can also serve as a form of formative assessment to inform teaching decisions (Moreira *et al.*, 2019), if misused as formal tests, their benefits to strengthening memory may be lost (Bates, 2025).

Free recall, which asks students to remember material without cues, requires the most cognitive effort but can help learners organise and integrate concepts (Carpenter *et al.*, 2022). Dobson and Linderholm (2015) studied 125 undergraduate science students and found those who used free recall outperformed those who relied on note taking or rereading. However, the strategy is demanding and may leave some learners feeling uncertain or demotivated, particularly those with lower prior knowledge (De Lima and Buratto, 2024).

Concept maps involve retrieving information and linking ideas, which can support deeper understanding and memory (Ruiz-Martín *et al.*, 2024). Yet, Perry *et al.* (2021) argue they may cause cognitive overload if students focus more on structure than recall. Therefore, retrieval tasks should be carefully aligned with learning goals and cognitive load (Yang *et al.*, 2021). For example, free recall may suit more experienced learners, while structured quizzes with cues may support novices in building retrieval confidence.

When to Retrieve: The Role of Spacing and Timing in Learning

The timing of retrieval practice connects with the spacing effect, whereby opportunities to revisit material is spread out over time and has been shown

to be more effective than massed practice (Carpenter *et al.*, 2022). When spaced and retrieval practices are combined, they yield durable learning gains (Yang *et al.*, 2021). While weekly retrieval is common, the optimal interval varies. Classroom studies show greater gains from shorter delays; lab studies favour longer ones, suggesting timing must be adapted to authentic settings (Agarwal *et al.*, 2021). Clearly, more research is needed on this aspect to gain more conclusive evidence.

The timing of retrieval practice also questions whether it is improving performance or learning (Bjork and Bjork, 2023). Immediate retrieval may boost short-term performance, while delayed retrieval strengthens long-term memory. These mixed results indicate that educators must be adaptive, reflecting on whether the goal is short-term performance or long-term. Scheduling retrieval practice becomes an intentional action informed by reflective consideration of context, what works in a controlled study may need adjustment in a real classroom.

Despite clear benefits, the mere existence of retrieval practice as a strategy does not guarantee that students and teachers will embrace it. However, even with strong evidence for retrieval practice, it remains underutilised. The barriers that impede its implementation in real classrooms are explored in detail below.

Barriers to Implementation: Why Retrieval Practice Remains Underused

Cognitive Barriers: Misconceptions About Learning

Building on the previous section's design considerations, this section examines real-world challenges affecting the adoption of retrieval practice. Despite strong evidence of its benefits, uptake remains limited. Carpenter (2023) emphasises that although there is substantial research-informed evidence that retrieval practice is beneficial, we know far less about whether learners actually choose to use it when free to do so. Tricio *et al.* (2023) found that very few students report choosing retrieval practice and in a study by Ruiz-Martín *et al.* (2024) of 3,414 Spanish secondary students, retrieval practice was one of the least used strategies despite its strongest positive correlations with academic achievement.

This aligns with Hartwig and Dunlosky's (2012) finding from a study involving 324 undergraduate American students that self-testing was positively and significantly associated with high-grade performance. However, consistent with previous studies, most students reported using self-testing as a metacognitive tool to monitor what they had learnt rather than as a means to enhance learning directly. Even when informed of its benefits, students often avoid retrieval practice unless required (Broeren *et al.*, 2021; Simone *et al.*, 2023).

A key reason is that many teachers and students are often unfamiliar with effective learning strategies, such as retrieval practice, with instruction on them being rare (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2024). This underuse, despite strong evidence, represents a known gap in education and a call to action is needed. Closing this gap is a collective responsibility, whereby researchers must disseminate findings in more accessible ways and institutions must support teachers and students in adopting these strategies. Reflective teachers are attuned to students' misconceptions about learning and can adapt their instruction to explicitly challenge passive strategies, for instance, by modelling retrieval as an effective approach to long-term retention (Brookfield, 1998).

Large-scale adoption also depends on national policy support. However, embedding specific methodologies in policy remains rare and challenging. A balanced approach is needed to avoid oversimplification, evolving evidence suggests that initial guidance reports may offer a more flexible entry point for educators. Improving uptake demands a coordinated response, policy direction from above and teacher-led action from below. These cognitive barriers reveal how both students and teachers can misjudge effective learning, undervaluing the long-term benefits of retrieval practice, despite strong evidence.

Motivational Barriers: Effort, Anxiety and Avoidance

Learners' avoidance of retrieval practice despite its proven benefits over less effective strategies, which may stem from the false perception that effort signals ineffective learning (Kirk-Johnson *et al.*, 2019). Such misperceptions indicate the need for reflective interventions: students and educators must reconsider what effective learning feels like. This is precisely the challenge that desirable difficulties (Bjork and Bjork, 2020)

seek to address: learners must understand that struggle can be beneficial rather than a sign of failure.

In studies by Hui *et al.* (2021; 2022) participants learnt Latin names for images, with one set studied using retrieval practice and another through restudy. After an immediate test, the students were shown that retrieval practice was significantly more effective than restudy, yet participants still only chose it approximately 50% of the time. This suggests a strong preference for comfort over efficacy (Tricio *et al.*, 2023), illustrating that discomfort, even when paired with success, can be a strong deterrent.

Learners may also avoid using retrieval practice because it can involve making errors, which can undermine confidence and motivation (De Bruin *et al.*, 2023). Avoidance persists even when students understand that errors are a productive part of learning (Pan *et al.*, 2020). This again connects to desirable difficulties, where the productive struggle enhances memory, yet students still tend to resist the associated discomfort. Thus, part of the response to this issue is educational: students (and teachers) need opportunities to reflect on the benefits of difficulty, to see that the short-term struggle of retrieval yields long-term mastery.

Tullis *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that perceived effort plays a critical role in students' strategy choices in their study of twenty-three American introductory-level psychology students. They found that when learning word pairs by retrieval practice and restudy, even when the participants received feedback during retrieval practice that allowed them to correct their errors, they still preferred to restudy because of the decreased effort involved. The perceived undesirable side effects of retrieval practice have a considerable impact on students' efficacy in choosing a strategy demonstrating a need for methodologies to overcome this. These studies reveal how deeply ingrained the preference for comfort is and therefore the response must be persistent and multi-faceted in the form of classroom demonstrations, explicit teaching about learning science and continuous feedback.

Technology may help reduce resistance to retrieval practice. Gamified tools such as *Kahoot!* and *Quizizz* can increase engagement and make the process more enjoyable. However, teachers must exercise caution as not all technology incorporates best practice and students remember what they think about, with resulting memories of a game possibly overpowering

intended learning (Willingham, 2021). These motivational barriers indicate that students may avoid retrieval practice despite recognising its value, due to discomfort or perceived effort. Addressing this requires more than information, it demands a reflective shift in learning beliefs.

Institutional Barriers: Transfer from Research to Classroom

A recurring critique of retrieval practice research is its low ecological validity; many studies occur in highly controlled settings rather than actual classrooms. Perry *et al.* (2021) note that most studies were designed and delivered by researchers in scripted laboratory settings. This questions the generalisability of the findings as to whether they can be translated to the more complex classroom setting (Bates and Shea, 2024). Moreover, many studies employ standardised methodologies that do not accommodate the diverse pedagogies and experiences of classroom teachers (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2024). This lack of ecological validity limits the practical guidance available to teachers and contributes to a persistent research-practice gap.

Despite these concerns, there is growing evidence that retrieval practice can be successfully implemented in classrooms. Carpenter *et al.* (2022) report benefits across various education levels and subjects. Notably, a study by Churches *et al.* (2020) involved teachers themselves conducting trials in thirty-one schools, with 2,157 children from early years to Year six included, a rare instance of research fully embedded in practice. The findings showed positive effect sizes for sixteen out of twenty-one retrieval practice studies, with nine of these having statistically significant results. While these results are encouraging, the authors caution that confidence in replicability remains low. Several factors contribute to this implementation gap:

- The artificial nature of many experimental studies
- Limited opportunities for teacher adaptation during research
- Pressure to implement evidence-based strategies without sufficient time or support
- A disconnect between academic discourse and school-level priorities.

English teachers generally hold positive views about retrieval practice and use it regularly, whether mandated or self-initiated (Bates and Shea, 2024). However, much research has yet to influence teacher training or

school practices, partly due to the adaptation required from laboratory to classroom contexts (Perry *et al.*, 2021). Studies from Bates (2025) and Churches *et al.* (2020) show that when teachers embed retrieval into everyday teaching, positive outcomes follow. These findings underline the need for reflective collaboration between researchers and educators. Institutional barriers such as limited training, lack of time and insufficient policy guidance must be addressed through coordinated, classroom-ready support.

Pedagogical Barriers: Task Complexity and Prior Knowledge

Although retrieval practice consistently enhances learning (Yang *et al.*, 2021), its impact may decline with more complex learning tasks. According to Van Gog and Sweller (2015), this complexity is defined by ‘element interactivity’, how much information must be processed simultaneously. Tasks with low element interactivity, where components can be learned independently, typically benefit more from retrieval practice. In contrast, highly interdependent tasks may require different or additional strategies.

Leahy *et al.* (2015) investigated the effect of retrieval practice after a worked example study with thirty-three primary school students from two Sydney schools. They found no improvement on immediate or delayed problem-solving tests. Similarly, Hanham *et al.* (2017) reported that retrieval was less effective with high element interactivity and might even inhibit learning. However, the strategy may become more appropriate as learners gain experience, highlighting the role of prior knowledge. These studies suggest that the benefits of retrieval practice may not be ubiquitous with gains dependent on task complexity and educators should exercise caution when assuming its effectiveness.

On the other hand, Dobson *et al.* (2018, p. 522) found that retrieval enhanced higher-order skills. When students were asked to critically evaluate research articles, those using retrieval outperformed those who restudied (mean score 34.6% vs 20.5%). This suggests that retrieval can support both factual recall and complex reasoning. Fiechter and Benjamin (2018) further argue that retrieval practice is especially effective for higher-order tasks when paired with appropriate scaffolding.

These debates demonstrate how research is responding to its own contradictions in the form of academic ‘reflection and action’. Pedagogical

complexity remains a challenge, especially for teachers aiming to use retrieval practice with higher-order learning. Reflective planning and scaffolding can help ensure its appropriate use depending on learners’ prior knowledge and task difficulty. Table 1 summarises key barriers and recommended responses.

Identified Barrier	Recommended Response
Students prefer passive study strategies	Teach students about retrieval benefits; use motivating feedback; make retrieval engaging (e.g. gamified quizzes, peer challenges) (Carpenter, 2023).
Students experience anxiety or fear of failure	Keep stakes low; frame quizzes as learning tools; normalise mistakes; allow group or anonymous responses to build confidence (Perry <i>et al.</i> , 2021).
Teachers lack time or curricular space	Embed short retrieval tasks into existing lessons; use 5-minute starters; automate via tech tools where feasible (Bates and Shea, 2024).
Teachers uncertain about how to implement retrieval practice	Offer professional development and peer support; present retrieval as an adaptable enhancement to existing routines (Perry <i>et al.</i> , 2021).
Policy or exam pressure prioritises coverage over consolidation	Show that retrieval improves long-term learning; advocate for depth over pace; highlight how retrieval reduces reteaching time (Agarwal and Bain, 2019).

Table 1: Barriers to Retrieval Practice and Corresponding Solutions

In summary, maximising the impact of retrieval practice requires more than awareness of its benefits. It demands thoughtful, context-sensitive implementation and ongoing reflection from all educational stakeholders.

Applying Retrieval Practice in the Classroom

In light of the identified barriers, how can educators and institutions respond to ensure retrieval practice is effectively implemented? This section offers strategies for implementing retrieval practice reflectively: leveraging feedback, building student metacognitive awareness and integrating retrieval into classroom practice. Retrieval practice should be embedded into curriculum planning as a routine element, not treated as an add-on, with regular, spaced activities like weekly quizzes or daily starters aligned to key syllabus content. When integrated thoughtfully, it supports learning consolidation, strengthens retention and reduces the need for re-teaching, all without significantly affecting lesson pacing.

Feedback as a Catalyst for Action

As discussed previously, one of the biggest barriers in retrieval practice implementation is that students tend not to choose it due to the perceived effort costs. However, showing students the desirable outcomes associated with retrieval-based learning and how those benefits apply to them increases the likelihood of adoption (Carpenter, 2023). This was observed in a study that offered students optional practice quizzes that could be used as a study tool in a biology course (Carpenter *et al.*, 2017, p. 5). Less than 50% of students completed at least one quiz before the first two course exams. The instructor then shared a simple graph comparing exam scores of those who completed the quizzes versus those who did not. The result was dramatic: on the next exam, 80% of students chose to use the quizzes. In other words, presenting students with clear feedback served as a catalyst for reflection, which in turn prompted them to take action. This contrasts Hui *et al.* (2021) finding where students were reluctant to change their practice, demonstrating the need for further research and perhaps, the differences between laboratory and classroom studies.

Similarly, Hui *et al.* (2021, p. 1844) found that when students saw proof of their improved performance due to retrieval practice, they became 70% more likely to choose retrieval over other methods. McCabe *et al.* (2021) reported that students who had used retrieval practice later self-reported using it far more frequently than those who had not, once they experienced its benefits firsthand. These examples suggest a key principle: feedback can convert short-term reflection into long-term action. By seeing concrete

evidence that effortful strategies pay off, learners become more motivated to adopt them.

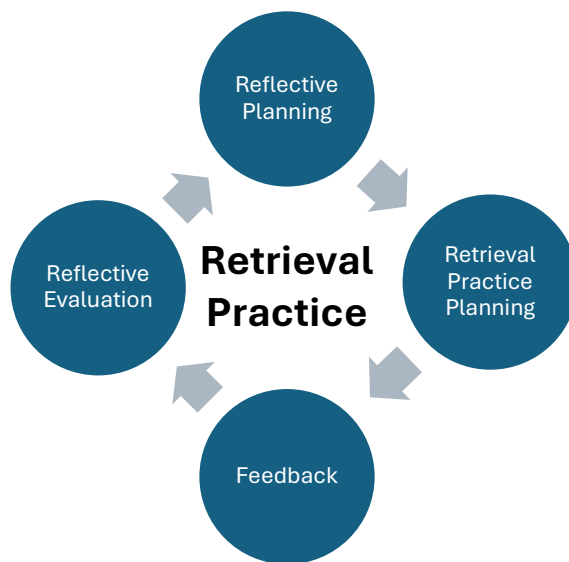


Figure 2: Reflective Retrieval Practice Model

Retrieval practice also has significant formative benefits, whereby it can provide feedback to both students and teachers to inform future learning and teaching. This feedback not only consolidates existing learning but also deepens and extends it, allowing teachers to address misconceptions and provide second learning opportunities for students (Bates and Shea, 2024). Since retrieval practice regularly involves errors, feedback helps students to address these errors and fill knowledge gaps (Moreira *et al.*, 2019).

While retrieval practice is powerful, it is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. Teachers should adapt tasks to suit diverse learners, using prompts or verbal retrieval for younger or less confident students, to ensure that difficulties remain desirable but not overwhelming (Bjork and Bjork, 2020). Figure 2 illustrates this article’s conceptual framework: teachers reflect on learning

goals and student needs, then take action by implementing retrieval practice strategies. This produces evidence (student performance, feedback), which teachers reflect on to refine their practice further. This cyclical model situates retrieval practice not as an isolated technique but as part of an ongoing reflective teaching process.

From these studies it is clear that feedback plays an integral role in maximising benefits. Educators can respond to students' reluctance by incorporating regular low-stakes quizzes followed by reflective feedback sessions, where assessment results (anonymised if needed) are reviewed to show the benefits of retrieval practice. This not only reinforces content but also visibly demonstrates the value of the effort, encouraging continued engagement.

Empowering Students: Teaching for Metacognitive Awareness

While feedback can guide students after retrieval, empowering them before and during the process is equally crucial. Research suggests that many students are unaware of effective learning strategies, often relying on easier or more familiar methods (Ruiz-Martín *et al.*, 2024). Even when students have an understanding of effective methods, this does not always translate to consistent use (Rea *et al.*, 2022). As a result, interventions that aim to educate and promote greater awareness of more effective methods can significantly improve learning.

Research on self-regulated learning shows that students often need guidance to adopt effective strategies. Zimmerman (2002) outlines how self-reflection and monitoring are essential phases in the learning cycle. If students are taught why retrieval practice works (metacognitive knowledge) and how to do it, they are more likely to use it consistently. This aligns with Pintrich's (2000) argument that promoting metacognitive strategies can significantly improve academic performance.

Biwer *et al.* (2020) developed the 'Study Smart' programme, a series of training sessions to teach students about effective strategies, including desirable difficulties, and providing opportunities to practise them. The programme led to students having a more accurate awareness of retrieval practice, increased use of it and even higher exam performance (Biwer *et al.*, 2023). In addition to academic gains, such interventions may foster greater self-regulated learning and academic confidence, outcomes of

interest not just to educators but also to psychologists studying motivation. Notably, such programmes encourage students to reflect on their own study habits and then take informed action to adopt proven techniques like retrieval practice.

Although programmes like these have shown promising results (De Bruin *et al.*, 2023; McDaniel and Einstein, 2020), there is no record of similar programmes in Ireland. This gap in Ireland's educational policies represents an opportunity for a coordinated response: introducing national or regional initiatives to train students in effective learning strategies could significantly level the playing field. By embedding such reflective learning programmes into the education system, policymakers can take action informed by cognitive science to improve student outcomes.

Teacher Agency: Translating Evidence into Practice

Ultimately, teachers are the linchpin in whether retrieval practice becomes a regular part of learning. Without teacher buy-in, students are unlikely to engage in these strategies. Although the primary objective is for the increased use of effective strategies, like retrieval practice, it is unlikely to happen if teachers are not embedding it as a regular part of their classroom practice. Knowing that many students will not adopt retrieval practice independently (Simone *et al.*, 2023), teachers must proactively incorporate it into their teaching. They act as the crucial bridge between research and student behaviour.

To bridge the research-practice gap, teacher education and professional development should integrate training on retrieval practice, as part of wider cognitive science principles, and reflective pedagogy. For pre-service teachers, this might involve coursework on retrieval coupled with assignments to design and trial retrieval-based activities during teaching placements. Targeted professional development can help shift this mindset by demonstrating the learning benefits of retrieval practice, not just its assessment role (Wiklund-Hörnqvist *et al.*, 2022).

Schools or regions could establish professional learning communities to reflectively share experiences of implementation and even conduct action research projects to enhance best practice. When teachers understand *why* it works (the cognitive science behind it), they can implement it more purposefully. Bates and Shea (2024, p. 252) found that 83.6% of surveyed

teachers learnt about retrieval practice from professional conversations with fellow teachers demonstrating the importance of communities of practice for developing pedagogy (Wenger, 1998).

This highlights how collective reflection leads to action and reinforces that schools should encourage more professional learning communities where teachers regularly discuss and reflect on strategies like retrieval practice, share experiences and troubleshoot challenges. Crucially, understanding the “why” behind retrieval increases the likelihood of effective implementation (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2024).

It could be debated that mandating the use of retrieval practice through either national or school policy might lead to tokenism and poor implementation, but Bates and Shea (2024, p. 252) found that 72.5% of teachers reported using it when it was part of school policy compared to 52.1% when it was not. Yet, those forced by policy placed more emphasis on using it as an evaluative tool rather than as a technique to enhance student learning, diminishing the true objective of the strategy. This finding suggests that while policy can prompt action, it is the quality of that action, determined by teachers’ reflective understanding, that matters for achieving the intended learning benefits. Therefore, the most effective response is likely a balanced approach: support and training to encourage action coupled with professional reflection to ensure the action is pedagogically sound.

It is important to note that overemphasis or a misunderstanding of its purpose could result in potential unintended consequences such as an overemphasis on testing culture and increased student stress. To mitigate these effects, this article stresses low-stakes and reflective use of retrieval, emphasising that retrieval practice is a tool for learning, not evaluating. Professional reflection also enables teachers to reframe retrieval practices, distinguishing them from high-stakes assessment and situating them instead as low-stakes, formative opportunities to enhance learning (Mathew *et al.*, 2017).

To understand the potential enactment of retrieval practice in the classroom, this article presents a hypothetical vignette: To illustrate the classroom enactment of retrieval practice, consider a hypothetical example from a secondary history lesson on the 1916 Rising. As part of reflective planning, the teacher anticipates common misconceptions and opens the

unit with a low-stakes quiz on prior learning about Irish nationalism. The retrieval task surfaces gaps in understanding, allowing the teacher to address key schema before introducing new material. A subsequent think–pair–share activity prompts students to reflect on what was difficult to recall and why. This feedback shapes the teacher’s next instructional decisions. In this way, retrieval practice becomes embedded within a reflective cycle of planning, action and evaluation.

Collectively, these strategies of providing feedback, educating learners and empowering teachers, demonstrate how reflecting on the barriers can inform tangible actions that improve learning.

Conclusion: Bridging the Gap Through Reflection and Action

While retrieval practice offers significant benefits, an overemphasis on recall tasks risks reinforcing a performance-driven or test-oriented culture. It is therefore essential that retrieval be balanced with pedagogies that promote deeper enquiry, collaboration and meaning-making.

Despite strong empirical support, retrieval practice remains underutilised, due in part to motivational barriers, misconceptions about effective learning and challenges with classroom implementation. Future research should investigate how retrieval practice can be adapted to varied educational settings, with attention to optimal timing, feedback, individual learner differences and integration into broader pedagogical frameworks. A deeper understanding of these factors will help move the strategy from theory to sustainable practice.

To conclude, this article outlines calls-to-action steps various stakeholders can take to close the persistent research-practice gap in education, using retrieval practice as a model case:

- **Teachers** should start small by incorporating one retrieval activity per week and reflect on its impact on students’ learning and how it connects with other methodologies. They can then share their experiences with colleagues and school leadership to promote bottom-up and top-down engagement.
- **School leaders** can encourage and support evidence-informed learning and teaching methods by providing professional development, relevant literature and celebrate these methods’ impact. Allocating time to

teacher collaboration and reflection would significantly enhance implementation rates.

- **Policymakers** could integrate key principles of learning science into curricula and produce official guidelines of best practice. They could fund and disseminate pilot projects in schools to investigate its impact in applied settings.
- **Researchers** should work closely with schools to conduct action research on implementation and its effect on student learning. This would address barriers such as student motivation, test anxiety and misconceptions. Researchers could also communicate findings in accessible formats, such as infographics, workshops and open access summaries.

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Talking to, Talking Back: Sex/Gender as a Dialogic Process

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Abstract

*Debates have grown regarding the meaning and usage of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in the UK. There is an influential ‘gender-critical’ movement that views sex as immutable biological reality, and advocates for this understanding to guide policymaking and politics. In contrast, this article argues that theories of sex and gender should account for both biological and sociocultural aspects, as well as interactions between the subject and the social world. To highlight interactions between biology, society and culture, this article takes sex/gender as one concept. It outlines how sex/gender can be viewed as a dialogic process of constant engagement with, and response to, the other. It centres Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘dialogic’, which denotes the continuous unfinished dialogue with others that moulds all language and cognition. The article first explores how some feminist theorists have addressed these questions. It builds especially on Butler, Moi and Young’s works, particularly the notion that gender can be viewed not as a set of shared features but a personal experiential response. Likewise, this article argues that subjects are born into prevailing sex/gender structures, shaped by societal norms and expectations, and can only respond to these. However, each response also generates the potential for change. In illustrating these points, the article explores one type of response, ‘embodied texts’, which construct narratives from lived experience. Focusing on trans writing, these texts can create space for trans writers to resist erasure and challenge mainstream discourses. As an effective example of such resistance, the article analyses Harry Josephine Giles’s transfeminist zine, *Wages for Transition* (2019).*

Keywords: sex/gender, subjectivity, dialogic, transfeminism, embodied texts

Introduction¹

In recent years, controversy has grown around the meaning and usage of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in the UK. This is partially in response to advances in trans rights. For example, the Scottish Government’s attempt

¹ I would like to thank the editors for all their help and support during this process. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions, which have helped me refine my thinking and enriched this piece.

to include trans women in their definition of ‘woman’ within the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act (2018) caused legal challenges and culminated in the UK Supreme Court’s ruling that the terms ‘man’, ‘woman’ and ‘sex’ refer to biological sex in the Equality Act (2010) (*For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers*, 2025). Conflicts were also inflamed by failed attempts to simplify the current system of legal sex/gender² change by replacing medical diagnoses with self-declaration of identity (Hines, 2020, p. 700; Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020, p. 678). Various women’s rights groups have formed who oppose such movements to widen understandings of sex, such as *For Women Scotland* and *Woman’s Place UK*. These groups, often called ‘gender-critical’, mobilise around the concept of women’s sex-based rights and distinguish ‘sex’ as immutable biological reality from ‘gender’ as a changeable social category (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, 2020, pp. 679–680). This approach assumes a sex-gender dichotomy separating biological and sociocultural factors. The gender-critical movement—advocating for the essential nature of ‘sex’ and its use in policymaking and politics—has gained momentum (for example, Davy, 2021, pp. 20–23; Shaw, 2022; Hines, 2020). A Council of Europe report (2021, p. 14) criticised such simplistic and dichotomous views of sex and gender, which have created a hostile environment for trans people.

Gender-critical thought reflects ideological issues within feminism,³ including disputes around belonging, language and biology (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020, p. 678). For example, the separation of ‘sex’ as biology and ‘gender’ as social role was a hallmark of second-wave feminist thinking but was later challenged and deconstructed by various feminist theorists (Hines, 2020, pp. 703–704). The concept of ‘woman’ as the central subject of feminism has also been problematic. Debates around what constitutes a woman, who can identify as a feminist, and who belongs in women’s spaces have permeated feminist theories for at least five decades (Hines, 2019, pp. 148–149). Trans-exclusionary feminism has always been challenged within the wider movement, but has never gone

² The Gender Recognition Act (2004: s9) uses ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ interchangeably.

³ Some affiliations can be found between gender-critical and right-wing organisations who share ‘anti-gender’ stances (Hines, 2025, p. 708). Whilst these debates are also fuelled by conservative forces, it is important to acknowledge that there are many forms of feminism, including conservative strains, and that gender-critical feminists campaign against trans-inclusion in the name of women’s rights.

away (Hines, 2019, p. 149). These debates also speak to theoretical tensions between social constructivism (or constructionism) and essentialism.⁴ Constructivism views reality as mediated, or even produced by, sociocultural construction (Sverker, 2020, pp. 22–24). Essentialism argues something has inherent properties and immutable essence, which manifests for feminists in the belief that all women share some attributes or experiences, such as biological characteristics or gendered oppression (Fuss, 1989, p. 2). Gender-critical feminists generally adopt an essentialist view and have expressed worries around blurring the boundaries of womanhood. For example, *For Women Scotland* (2022a; 2022b) have stressed the need to recognise women as a “sex-class” with distinct needs in law.

This article responds to this current moment in the UK, as gender-critical feminists campaign to distinguish ‘sex as biological’ from ‘gender as social’—and to define women by the former—along with a worrying trend of trans-exclusion. Other theorists have already countered the gender-critical position from various perspectives, including legal, biological, political and sociological (see, for example, Zanghellini, 2020; Sharpe, 2020; Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, 2020; Hines, 2020; Thurlow, 2024; Walters, 2024; Amery, 2025). This article argues that gender-critical ideologies are harmful and offer a reductive approach to sex and gender. It aims to explore alternative conceptions that can account for a range of factors—including biological and sociocultural—and widen, rather than narrow, understandings of these concepts. It explores how gendered subjectivity can be viewed as in-process not static, and specifically as a ‘dialogic process’ and a ‘response’. The article begins with a theoretical discussion outlining this approach. It then demonstrates this by focusing on one type of response, exploring how trans people writing about their embodiment can create spaces in which to talk back to, and transform hegemonic norms. An example of such a text will be discussed: Harry Josephine Giles’s transfeminist zine, *Wages for Transition* (2019).

⁴ Although these are not necessarily opposing theories, for example, a social constructivist can hold essentialist views, and vice versa (Fuss, 1989, p. 4).

Sex/Gender as a Dialogic Process

This section outlines the key theorists who have influenced the article's theoretical approach. It begins with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, viewing gender and subjectivity as unstable and in-process. From here, it explores the body as a crucial but unsettled factor in lived experience, using Toril Moi and Iris Marion Young's notion of 'lived body'. This section finishes with Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogic', and its application to sex/gender as a response.

Butler: Acts Constituting Gender

Butler approaches subjectivity as continually in-process. Reading Beauvoir's famous phrase, "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman", (cited in Butler 1988, p. 519), Butler situates this in the phenomenological tradition of "constituting acts". According to this view, gender is unstable and established through "a stylized repetition of acts" and "stylization of the body" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Butler's reading of Beauvoir posits that 'female' as biological fact is meaningless, while 'woman' is a process of becoming where the body repeatedly embodies historical possibilities, becoming a "cultural sign" (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Butler (1988) proposes a performative theory of gender, not as a role the subject adopts but a series of acts constituting the subject's identity, and the illusion of a stable identity. Importantly, both the subject and their acts are produced through social and historical processes, with no conscious doer behind this. Likewise, there is no natural sex or inherent gender, only processes of historical production which construct such ideals (for example, see Butler, 1988, p. 528; 1999, p. viii). Thus, Butler's theoretical focus is on *construction*, not the construct, of gender (Gleeson, 2017). Butler's theories have been highly influential in thinking about both sex and gender as produced through historical pressures. There is no identifiable beginning or end point of this process. For example, the body is both material and "materializing of possibilities" (Butler, 1988, p. 521), whilst bodies are not pre-gender but develop through the process of gendering (Butler, 1999, p. 13). Further, sex itself is not a straightforward attribute but a "regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs" (Butler, 1993, p. 1). In this way, even those things taken as natural or pre-cultural givens—like 'sex',

‘body’, and ‘matter’—are historical processes which produce the appearance of boundedness and fixity (Butler, 1993, pp. 9–10).

This article takes two foundational ideas from Butler. Firstly, there is no subjectivity before society and culture. People are born into and develop within the bounds of power and regulatory norms, which they can expand or alter but never exceed (Butler, 1999, pp. 40–42). Likewise, they are constantly shaped by gender and do not exist before “gendering”, developing constantly within the “matrix of gender relations” (Butler, 1993, p. 7). Nevertheless, this article argues that people retain their own worldviews, desires and agency within these structures. They are both subjects and subjected to the world around them.⁵ Secondly, if gender is constantly repeated and (re)made, it could be made differently. Butler has a strong ethos of change:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relations between such acts, in the possibility for a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler, 1988, p. 520)

Following Butler, this article argues that an approach to sex/gender should centre process and construction, not stasis. This is especially important to feminism as a project for social change. However, Butler has also been critiqued for understating reality and lacking a normative basis for politics. Nussbaum (1999, pp. 37–38)⁶ famously attacks Butler’s anti-normativity and preference for subversion in place of change for ‘real women’, ‘real bodies’ and ‘real struggles’. Likewise, Butler has been criticised for not placing sufficient focus on the specific social structures and inequalities affecting people’s lives (Jackson, 2001).⁷ It should be

⁵ Following Foucault, Butler (1993, p. 15) calls this ‘subjectivation’, but considers it a paradox as someone who would oppose norms is also constituted by those norms. This article argues that people have internal drives and agency but agrees that this is always in interaction with norms and power structures.

⁶ Nussbaum (1999) also critiques Butler on other grounds, including obscurity, not defining or explaining key concepts, and citing contradicting scholars without resolving their differences.

⁷ Jackson (2001, pp. 289–290) states that works like Butler’s should be called “cultural constructionist” not “social constructionist” because they neglect social structures or specific social contexts/practices/hierarchies.

noted that their recent work focuses more on ‘practical’ issues (for example, Butler, 2015; 2022). Stone (2005) also argues that Butler’s denial of objective bodily forces undermines the normative basis of their theory, including how subversion is possible or why it is desirable. This article follows Butler’s focus on *process* but argues that the acts constituting gender should be situated within specific social structures and conditions, with greater emphasis on the interactions between the subject and external world, to elucidate agency and change.

The ‘Lived Body’

The body is key to lived experience, being the site of sensory experiences through which people interact with the world. Focus on corporeality also benefits feminism, as bodies exist at the intersection of private and public, being both personal experience and cultural mirror (Grosz, 1987, p. 9). However, centring the body does not have to lead feminism towards biological essentialism, or trans-exclusionary politics. This article argues that the body fluctuates in meaning and significance within specific cultures and social situations. Emma Heaney (2021) thoughtfully demonstrates this in an essay outlining her gynaecological experiences. Writing around topics like fertility and reproduction generally associated with femaleness, Heaney narrates moments of affinity in shared experiences with friends of various genders:

Some of these friends are women, some are not women. Some have the same organs and structures that I have, others do not. Some are modifying their bodies with the same substances with which I am modifying my body. We’re there together, listening to one another; my body’s experience has been involved in being able to hear about theirs. My love for these people creates a bond that affects how I feel about my body and makes me want to protect theirs. History has created these bonds between and among our bodies and these affinities, for me, are the substance of my sense of sex identity, of what embodiment itself means. (Heaney, 2021)

Bodies are inevitably caught up in social dynamics, as biological and sociocultural factors are in constant encounter. Indeed, all individuals manipulate their bodies, often based on normative standards and feelings of authenticity (Koyama, 2001; Spade, 2006, pp. 318–319). No easy

recourse can be found in appealing to the reality of biological sex. Even in discussing biological facts, “[...] there is nothing in the body that can be said to be permanent and unchanging” (Fausto-Stirling, 2017, p. 63). The somatic—including sex characteristics—is in constant process, affected by changes to internal physiology, as well as environmental factors, whilst none of these are strictly binary or straightforward as divergences exist at each stage of development (for example, Fausto-Stirling, 2005; 2017; 2018). Fausto-Stirling also (2005, pp. 1516–1517; 2017, p. 64) argues that a theoretical approach to sex or gender should be based on process not stasis and account for both biological and cultural influences.

One such feminist approach comes from the works of Moi and Young. Moi (1999, p. 73–74) argues that Butler mis-reads Beauvoir in viewing sex as meaningless without culture and signification. The issue with Butler, alongside other post-structural feminists, is their commitment to the binary of ‘sex as nature’ vs. ‘gender as social role’ and attempt to overcome biological determinism by denying the importance of the body, thus losing touch with lived experience (Moi, 1999). Moi follows Beauvoir’s view of the ‘body as situation’, placing importance on both the type of body someone has, and that body’s significance for the conditions or situation in which they find themselves (Moi, 1999, pp. 80–84). Moi (1999, p. 114) finds it theoretically beneficial to focus on bodies and subjectivity rather than sex or gender. Thus, Moi (1999) proposes using the ‘body as situation’ to account for subjectivity without resorting to essentialism of culture or biology. This approach highlights the importance of people’s bodies for experiencing the world. The body is also the vessel that senses, acts and responds to its social and cultural surroundings. Young (2002, p. 417) takes up the notion of a ‘lived body’, arguing that this improves on gender by encompassing both biological and cultural factors, and the multitude of elements impacting lived experience, for example, race, gender, sexuality, which position people in specific ways and constrain their choices. However, Young highlights that the goals of feminist and queer theory go beyond “theorizing subjectivity”. Young argues that different concepts are needed to describe subjectivity/experience versus social structures, although acknowledges interactions (2002, p. 411). Young partially adopts the ‘lived body’ for subjectivity (2002, p. 415) and retains ‘gender’ for social structures and wider power relations (2002, p. 426). For Young

(2002, p. 426), gender is experienced through bodies not as a set of features shared by individuals, but a “personal experiential response”.

This article was especially inspired by Young’s notion that gendered experience manifests as a ‘response’. It also broadly follows Moi and Young in stressing the interplay between corporeality and sociocultural influences. Nonetheless, the ‘lived body’ is not used as a central theoretical concept here. While the body is the site of sensory and perceptual experiences, it also matters how experiences are interpreted and integrated into higher-level concepts of self and identity. When this article uses terms like ‘cisgender’ or ‘transgender’, what it finds important is how individuals understand their own physiology, and their place in society. Indeed, people do not share bodies or sensory experiences but still feel affinity and belonging to communities, such as womanhood. The ‘lived body’ accounts for this because it does not assume mind-body dualism. However, terms like sex and gender carry deep social significance here, and Young’s attempt to retain gender reinforces this. This author disagrees with Young that separate concepts are needed for subjectivity and social structures. Subjectivity develops within social structures. Instead, this article follows other theorists in using sex/gender as one concept to emphasise that bodies are constantly influenced by factors like culture, habits and meaning (Lancaster *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). Additionally, in the vein of Moi and Young, this article views sex/gender as produced in interaction between lived experience and social structures, and which manifests as a *response* to conditions like biology, culture, power and oppression.

Bakhtin’s Dialogic

To develop the theme of *response*, this article turns to Bakhtin. Bakhtin viewed the self as specular and held that all language and thought are shaped by constant and unfinished interactions with others, what he called the ‘dialogic’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92). Bakhtin focused on the role of language and literature in society, although his ideas can be extended beyond this, as this article hopes to do.⁸ A key tenet of Bakhtin’s is that a

⁸ Bakhtin’s works are many and diverse and have been applied to various fields and political persuasions (Dentith, 1995, pp. x–xi). Additionally, Bakhtin is an expansive and sprawling writer who develops lengthy arguments accumulatively (Dentith, 1995, pp. xi–xii). For the sake of space and clarity, this article discusses one essay, *The Problem of Speech Genres* (1986), which provides an account of how people adopt and use language

communicative act is meaningful only within concrete contexts (Dentith, 1995, p. 3). In appropriating Bakhtin, a ‘feminist dialogic’ approaches identity as contingent and relational, not essential (Bauer and McKinstry, 1991, pp. 2–3). Below, key ideas from Bakhtin’s essay on speech genres are summarised, then related to sex/gender.

Bakhtin emphasises that language is acquired through social interactions. By hearing the words of others, people recognise what is expected and appropriate in various contexts (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60). The consistent types of utterances used in a certain situation form ‘speech genres’, albeit with considerable diversity (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60). Therefore, language becomes inseparable from its social functions, coming to life in concrete utterances (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 63). When people speak, they call upon their available speech genres, which they deem appropriate to the situation. Speech genres effectively demonstrate ‘freedom within limits’, as people may learn more styles and play with genres to a certain extent, but always remain somewhat generic (Holquist, 1986, p. xix). Norms and expectations pre-exist the subject and mould the identities they can acquire. Importantly, Bakhtin views speakers as *respondents*, highlighting that no-one is first to speak, so each utterance becomes a response, to the linguistic system and its rules and norms, and to the utterances of previous speakers. Each utterance forms a link in a chain (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69).

A strength of Bakhtin’s thought is that it accounts for both the individual and the social. Whilst speakers exist in the chain of communication, boundaries remain between them, and each contains individuality in their style (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 76). Furthermore, the word lives in three arenas for each speaker: a ‘neutral’ space belonging to no-one, such as the dictionary word; as used by other people and echoing their styles and intentions; as the speaker’s word used in a particular situation and carrying the speaker’s intentions and expression (1986, p. 88). Whilst there are both generic forms and words carrying the styles of others, people take these for their own purposes to “assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” them (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). Here, Bakhtin centres individuality, agency and transformation

in interaction, and is therefore a useful text for thinking through sex/gender as a response. However, there are other Bakhtinian concepts not mentioned here which have been extended to feminism (for example, see Bauer and McKinstry, 1991).

alongside social influences. His theory has a strong normative basis and ethical imperative, whereby all individuals are seen as unique and irreducible, causing constant fluctuation within the language system.

Appropriating Bakhtin's linguistic theory to sex/gender consolidates the insights from previous sections. Sex/gender is constantly in-process, without beginning or end. The social norms and history of acts far predate any subject. Born into this and in interaction with others, a person learns to act appropriately, becoming gendered. There are constant social and cultural constraints, as different situational contexts will require different forms of behaviour. Additionally, people are socialised within different spaces and will have more or less freedom to move through the world, using the resources they have available. To be understood and accepted, one must be generic. However, people also take the resources and 're-work' them, causing constant fluctuation as norms shift. Bakhtin posits that language comes to life in concrete utterances as a response to the linguistic system and other speakers. Likewise, this article argues that sex/gender comes to life in concrete acts—for example, dress, behaviour, speech—and these acts are a response to social norms and structures, as well as to other individuals. Thus, *response* acknowledges that sex/gender is always directed *to* a specific structure or situation. This is theoretically useful in situating both the subject and their acts within social hierarchies and power relations. This can also align with feminist calls for intersectional analyses, which recognise that individuals experience varying levels of oppression and freedom based on their distinctive situatedness within overlapping systems of power (for example, Crenshaw, 1989; Bilge, 2013). For a response, both the specific situational, and wider structural constraints must be considered. Viewing sex/gender as a *dialogic process* and *response* emphasises that the meaning and significance of sex/gender changes by context, that there are always different constraints present for different people, but also agency as they can choose how to respond within these limits. This approach crucially accounts for the relationship between the agency of the subject and constraints of social structures. Without theorising this relationship, there can be no strategy for social change (Scott and Jackson, 1996, p. 6). This provides a general approach to sex/gender. However, people respond to sex/gender structures in many ways. Different social situations call for different responses, whilst various conditions (for

example, biology, culture, power) fluctuate in importance. To further illustrate this, the rest of this article centres one type of response: narratives about the lived experience of sex/gender, specifically in a written medium and produced by trans people.

Embodied texts

Addressing the importance of trans writing, Jacques recounts:

[...] I discovered a wave of 1990s trans theorists, mostly North American, who encouraged trans people to write openly about their experiences, to counter negative portrayals in mass media and their political repercussions. Sandy Stone told trans people to think of themselves as ‘*a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption ... has yet to be explored*’; Kate Bornstein asked if the creation of a ‘transgendered writing style’ could produce an ‘identification with a transgendered experience’, putting a trans spin on Hélène Cixous’ influential ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975), which implored women to write about their embodiment. (Jacques, 2021) [my italics]

Writing about trans experience is one response to a culture that would erase or stigmatise trans communities. Narratives can allow marginalised individuals to claim a voice in the public sphere and share their experiences widely. This article adopts ‘embodied texts’ to denote writing where an author represents their lived experience. This can include fiction or non-fiction, and this article will explore the example of a political manifesto. Importantly, writing is an act of *construction*, which only presents a version of reality. The messiness of experience is organised into a coherent structure using the language system available. Thus, as a system of signification, language mediates people’s understandings of the world and how they conceptualise reality (Spender, 1980, pp. 2–3). Discourse both refers to and construes reality in a complex interactive relationship. While not arguing against the existence of an objective reality, this article contends that through discourse, people reproduce versions of reality. Likewise, Wittig (1993, p. 108) identifies two social realities of oppression: one material and one conceptual, with language as the tool to move between them. Importantly, linguistic articulation necessarily loses something in the process. It cannot express the whole and becomes an abstraction. Certain

aspects are retained, emphasised, or hidden when telling a story of oppression.

A dissonance is sometimes highlighted between the reality of trans lives and the discourses surrounding these. Shon Faye (2021) remarks that British media and academic institutions reduce the political struggles of trans people to a ‘toxic debate’ or ‘culture war’, to distract from “the material ways we are oppressed”. A recent report into Scottish trans and non-binary experiences highlights precarity around accessing public spaces, housing and employment (Scottish Trans, 2024). However, discourse not only distorts reality but acts upon it too. For example, trans-exclusionary arguments around toilet access put trans and gender nonconforming people at risk of violence and harassment (Jones and Slater, 2020). The ‘real’ and ‘discursive’ cannot be neatly separated. Material trans issues (for example, access to legal documents or single-sex spaces) also become implicated in larger ideological discussions around belonging and legitimacy. As language organises and communicates experience, it can become a tool for social change, impacting how people understand and engage with their social environment.

The study of embodied texts consolidates many insights about sex/gender as a ‘dialogic process’ and response, creating spaces where lived experience, society and culture meet. The writer as subject possesses agency in telling a version of events, utilising shared narratives and lived experiences in either established or novel ways. Simultaneously, they are constrained by genre conventions, expectations, their available resources and skills to deploy them. Their audience, whether real or imagined, creates an additional issue of legitimation. At every stage between the writer’s production and the reader’s interpretation, the real and constructed blur. Just as individuals are constituted through social interaction and discursive practices, stories constitute identities and so, “poststructuralism shades into narratology” (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 46). Importantly, there are power relations involved, so people have varying levels of prestige and authority to make themselves understood. In criticising the “cultural turn” in feminism during the 1990s, from an analysis of ‘things’ to ‘words’, Jackson (2001, pp. 283–284) highlights that linguistic issues must be situated in an analysis of sociohistorical conditions. To adequately understand the impact

of discourse and narratives, theorists must consider its social context, especially the pressures under which it is produced.

Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, texts inscribing the trans experience were primarily written by medical professionals who pathologised gender nonconformity (Beemyn, 2013, p. 114). Christine Jorgensen's autobiography was ground-breaking and invited a wave of similar memoirs by trans women in the 1970s/80s (Beemyn, 2013, p. 115). Autobiographical writing can be empowering. The mere existence of narratives by trans people resists their erasure from public consciousness (Sherif, 2020, p. 312). The issue, however, is not merely representation but deference to people's understanding of their own experiences, allowing authentic expressions without conformity to others' discourses. Some academics tend to distinguish the medical discourses about trans experience from 'genuine' trans narratives (for example, see Heaney 2017). This distinction is used because of real subjugation and gatekeeping by medical professionals. This is examined very effectively by trans theorist Sandy Stone (1992) in response to Janice Raymond's seminal trans-exclusionary feminist book, *The Transsexual Empire*, which argued that trans people feed gender stereotypes, medicalise gender identity and appropriate women's bodies. Stone (1992) traces the origins of mainstream knowledge about trans people, attempting to construct a counter-discourse to Raymond and challenge misconceptions about trans identity. Stone (1992) explores how Western medical institutions have constructed the category of 'transsexual' as something that can be explicated, diagnosed and cured, guided by normative expectations around biology and identity. Importantly, whilst doctors aimed to explain and categorise trans identity, many trans people simply wanted to access medical treatments and understood they needed to repeat established medical narratives to achieve this (Stone, 1992, pp. 161–162). Thus, sex/gender diversity became homogenised to be made coherent under the sex binary, for example, 'born in the wrong body' narratives (Stone, 1992). Stone's text was a hugely influential transfeminist work. Nevertheless, Chu and Harsin Drager (2019, pp. 106–107) outline how Stone inadvertently inscribed a set of binaries into trans studies: inauthentic vs authentic; medical vs vernacular; transsexual vs post-transsexual. They argue that the fixation on going beyond medical narratives restricts understanding of trans identities.

Instead of ‘anti-normativity’, trans studies should seek to understand trans people’s attachment to norms, whether due to aspiration, convention, or survival (Chu and Harsin Drager, 2019, pp. 107–108).

A response always engages with existing norms and systems, responds *to* them. However, the form of this engagement varies, for example, to affirm, subvert, or expand. A response can not only talk ‘to’, but talk ‘back’, signalling the move towards a liberated voice, speaking to authorities as an equal (hooks, 2014). It is a critical question whether trans self-writing can ever break out of cisgender epistemologies (Choi, 2013). This also fits into the larger question of whether the oppressed can speak through the oppressor’s language (Spivak, 1988). The dynamic nature of language opens constant possibilities for change. While the social context limits the expressive possibilities for trans texts, with each new response to this context, texts may unlock new possibilities for the future (Gailey and Brown, 2016; Earles, 2019). Thus, fissures may appear in the hegemony, making positive change possible (Macgilchrist, 2016).

Wages for Transition

This article now turns to an example of an ‘embodied text’ on sex/gender. The purpose of this is to demonstrate how the text functions as a ‘response’. Additionally, this text exemplifies the ‘relative

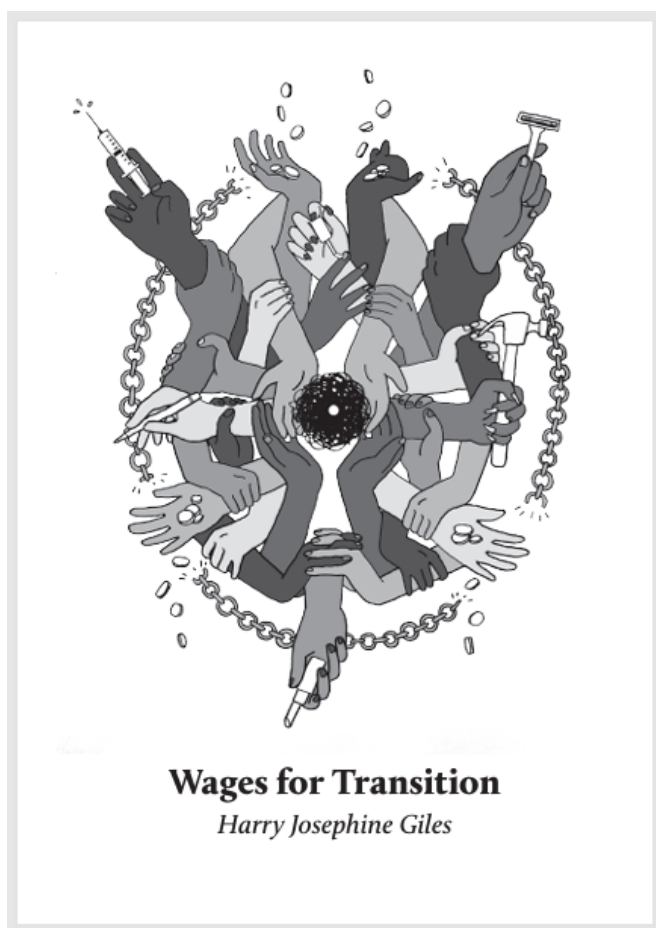


Figure 1: Wages for Transition Cover Page.

Harry Josephine Giles (2019). Available at: <https://harryjosephine.com/portfolio/3553/> (Licenced under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

freedom’ in this process as the writer effectively works with and against various norms to expand the reader’s understanding of sex/gender. *Wages for Transition* was written by Harry Josephine Giles in 2019. It is described as a “[...] manifesto zine about transfeminism, labour and social reproduction” (Giles, 2019). It engages with sex/gender through the extended metaphor of labour. The oppression of trans people is conceptualised as analogous to the oppression of workers under capitalism. Whilst engaging with aspects of embodiment, especially medical transition, it mainly presents sex/gender through the lens of work, not the body. It is divided into four sections: *Transition is work*; *Trans-Workplace Solidarity*; *Wages Against Transition*; *Trans Strike*. The text’s key points and strategies are summarised and then discussed in terms of what they reveal about sex/gender as a ‘dialogic process’ and a response.

The text begins with a metaphor of ‘gender’ as “unwaged work” (Giles, 2019, p. 5). Giles elaborates on this, outlining how transition entails ongoing labour, whilst the “workplace of gender” involves exploitation, exhaustion, alienation and precarity:

Marked by capitalism as those with too much gender and too little, we work a second shift, a third shift, a fourth, to acquire the resources necessary to produce our genders, to produce genders survivable under capitalism, at least for another year. And further, as those whom capitalism has produced through its cisheteropatriarchal division of sex classes and gendered labour, whom capitalism has spat out as the uncoded externality of gender, we labour to produce the very gender on which capitalism depends. You live in our work.

Our care work is unpaid. Our medical expertise is unpaid. Our gender production is unpaid. Our advocacy is unpaid. Our training is unpaid. Our support work is unpaid. Our teaching is unpaid. Our writing is unpaid. We are in poverty. And so now, at the very point at which our genders are beginning to be renaturalised by liberal capitalism, as the state offers a pittance of funding to our healthcare needs, we demand not merely free healthcare, not merely a place at work, not merely a reparation settlement: we demand wages for transition. (Giles, 2019, p. 6)

The use of pronouns (“we” vs “you”) marks the separation between margin and centre. As a marginalised group, trans people elucidate the boundaries of sex/gender; what is acceptable and what lies beyond. In this

way, trans people also produce sex/gender for the cis population (“you live in our work”). The notion of sex/gender here is quite Butlerian, coming to life through a series of acts. However, for Giles, these are specifically acts of *labour*. This brings the analysis into the field of Marxism, with relevant meditations on production and consumerism. Trans people live in poverty and must work to acquire capital to fund their transitions (for example, clothes, binders, hormones), which feeds back into the capitalist system and produces profit for companies (Giles, 2019, pp. 5–6).

In the first section, *Transition is Work*, Giles elaborates on how trans people labour to produce their sex/gender, viewing this experience through the lens of capitalism, power and exploitation:

Liberal capitalism would cast our transitions as products we buy as individual consumers, or as treatments we receive as individual patients, but in fact a transition under capitalism is a commodity we labour with others to produce, a process from which surplus value is extracted to accumulate capital for bosses and in which everyone else is paid but us.

The GP whom we persuade to refer us to the Gender Identity Clinic is paid to be educated by us, but we are not paid as teachers. For two years we sustain our wounded selves and each other as we wait to be seen, but we are not paid as care workers. When we finally meet the GIC psychiatrist, we must rehearse and perform in the theatre of their office a plausible enough history to be deemed worthy of treatment, but we are not paid as actors. When the psychiatrist produces a diagnosis which is exchanged for a prescription, we are not recognised as co-labourers in that production process. As we shape the raw material of our bodies we are not paid as surgeons, but our surgeons will be paid a considerable fee by the state for the effects they jealously guard. (Giles, 2019, p. 7)

Because trans people are not recognised as co-labourers, their work becomes voluntary and unwaged, their expertise and efforts unrecognised. Importantly, they cannot accumulate capital because they do not control the tools of transition—which are largely owned by the medical establishment—and cannot profit from their own labour. Again, this is analogous to the idea of workers’ lack of control over the means of production. Gender communism is presented as the answer to this. As trans people are often excluded from the “white supremacist ableist capitalist

healthcare system”, trans communities form where trans people share resources, educate and care for each other (Giles, 2019, p. 8). Interestingly, Giles blurs the traditional distinction between productive and reproductive labour. Trans people labour to re-make their community *and* create profit for others in this process as institutions capitalise off trans work, consumerism and culture (Giles, 2019, pp. 8–9). Giles crucially positions transition/labour as both the condition for oppression under capitalism, and the site for resistance (Giles, 2019, p. 10). Transition/labour can be painful, exhausting and oppressive, but when collectivised and egalitarian, it can also be joyful and free.

Next, *Trans-Workplace Solidarity* establishes affinities between marginalised groups: racial minorities, disabled people, women, trans people. Whilst hinted at earlier, Giles now explicitly acknowledges hierarchies of privilege and oppression produced under European imperialism and capitalism. This creates stratification amongst the trans community, where some individuals emerge more powerful than others. The function of the labour metaphor is now clear, because viewing transition as labour allows bridges to be formed with other marginalised groups also oppressed under capitalism (Giles, 2019, p. 11). Capital and labour unite various marginalised classes, from the theft of land and resources from indigenous people under *colonialism*, to the injury and exclusion of *disabled people*, to the treatment of *women* (Giles, 2019, pp. 11–13):

[...] all women labour to be women, and that work is also the work of transition. This is not to say that there is a natural pre-gendered state from which women labour to be women, nor that the marked difference between “trans people” and “women” as intersecting classes is immaterial, but simply that all womanhood is alienated labour for another’s purpose, that all gender is always suspect. To transition is not to cross from one fixed point to another, nor to become the gender that one always was, but rather to engage with dubious agency and fraught embodiment the ongoing work of being gendered. Thus we seek not the happy promise of gender euphoria as closure, but rather better working conditions under gender. Thus we call on all women to join us in our struggle for wages for transition and to take their part of the rewards. (Giles: 2019, pp. 12–13)

Giles engages with the normative views of transition (“to cross from one fixed point to another...”) to reject these. Rather than transition as an experience dividing trans and cis women, transition/labour is used to unite all women. The Marxist notion of alienation is utilised here. ‘Alienation’ denotes the divorce of product from its producer through:

[...] being *appropriated* as private property, and secondly by being *transformed* into a social force that operates outside the producers’ control and against their interests. (Øversveen, 2021, p. 447)

Similarly to transition, Giles characterises womanhood as “alienated labour” performed for another’s benefit. Like trans people, women do not control the means of sex/gender production and can only engage with this through “dubious agency and fraught embodiment”. With a conceptual shift that views bodies according to their level of agency and control, not just biological characteristics, Giles can account for the importance of embodiment, whilst shifting the boundaries between “women” and “trans people”, creating solidarity.

In the final sections, *Wages against Transition* and *Trans Strike*, Giles (2019, pp. 13–16) outlines a vision for a new horizon for both trans people and women, characterised by collectivism and communisation of gender, as well as a route to get there through unionisation, strike, seizing and sharing resources:

We will not gift our transitions to the state, but steal from the state our transitions. The work of transition is the work of class struggle, and only the actions of solidarity that form a revolutionary class consciousness can bring about the abolition of that class. (Giles, 2019, p. 14) [...] Wherever trans people are organising together to redistribute resources, they are undertaking the ongoing communisation of gender, and we now demand wages for the work of transition, so that transitions can escalate until work itself is no more. (Giles, 2019, p. 16)

Thus, Giles (2019, p. 13) presents a potential route to fighting sex/gender oppression by attacking and restructuring capital. The text advocates for the “abolition of gender” through transforming labour relations to make them more favourable for the worker. Interestingly, the text campaigns both for stealing from the system and for change using the system. ‘Wages for transition’ could be compared to the demand for policies like a Universal Basic Income for workers. Giles creates a tension here. The state and its institutions are simultaneously sites for exclusion and oppression, as well as justice and equality.

Giles’s analysis is highly effective, although this article does not specifically endorse a Marxist feminist approach to combat the current gender-critical movements. *Wages for Transition* merely exemplifies how sex/gender functions as responsive and dialogic, as well as one-way feminist politics can engage with corporeality without biological essentialism. This text is clearly designed to challenge systems of oppression by offering a new conceptualisation of sex/gender as work. A response is *to* something and comes *from* somewhere. It is necessary to consider factors like the actor, medium and context for any response. Here, the actor/writer is trans but notably chooses the first-person plural (“we”) throughout the text to take up a collective voice on behalf of the wider trans community. This strategy suits the medium of manifesto. It is written within and towards the current UK-context (Giles, 2019, p. 7), although



Figure 2: Last Page of Wages of Transition

Harry Josephine Giles (2019, p. 20).

Available at:

<https://harryjosephine.com/portfolio/3553/> (Licenced under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

some aspects remain generalisable to other capitalist societies. Furthermore, this is an explicitly intertextual work which incorporates Marxist theory whilst re-working earlier, mostly socialist feminist texts, including *Wages for Housework*, *Wages for Advocacy*, and *Radical Transfeminism Zine* (Giles, 2019, p. 17). Giles responds to the other revolutionary texts she draws from, as well as to the existing social structures of capitalism, ableism, white supremacy (etc.). In many ways, the terms of discourse, like those of power, are already set. Social structures impose limitations on subjects, creating real hierarchies in which some are privileged, whilst others suffer exclusion and discrimination. Additionally, Giles cannot produce a Marxist-feminist text without invoking the norms of such an analysis, including its strengths and limitations. For example, despite attempting to discuss various types of discrimination, her text retains the ‘grand theory’ approach of Marxism by viewing capital and labour as the ultimate root of oppression, which can be criticised for being overly essentialist (Jackson, 2001, p. 284). Indeed, Giles (2019, p. 11) admits that not all transition can be viewed through the lens of wage labour, but that this is a strategy to create solidarities. Indeed, the function of metaphor is to illustrate the relationship or likeness between two concepts. It is, by nature, a reductive literary technique, but can also be highly effective.

In summary, viewing sex/gender as a dialogic process is to acknowledge that people are in constant interaction with the social world in which they live. Sex/gender is only ever a response to existing norms and social conditions. To use the metaphor of conversation, no new topic can be started that is not already affected by history, culture and social convention. However, with each new response, comes the opportunity to talk back to norms and power structures, to do something different with them, and shift the terms that have been set. As *Wages for Transition* demonstrates, there is always room for agency, as people can choose how to use the resources available to them. A response engages with social conditions and norms but can do so to repeat, subvert, or transform these. Giles’s response: an embodied text that aims to highlight the ongoing labour involved in both transition and survival under capitalism, and to build solidarity among oppressed groups. Whether such a text can transform social structures is

uncertain, but it can catalyse change and move people. At the very least, it expands understandings of sex/gender, oppression and resistance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, and in response to gender-critical feminism, this article has argued that it is productive to view sex/gender not as static and fixed but a *dialogic process*. This process entails continuous interaction between the subject and the world around them, including biological factors, culture, social systems, structural conditions and other people. This article has assumed that there is no self or identity before social influence. People inherit complex histories of norms that constrain sex/gender in a sociocultural context, and their consciousness evolves within these constraints. They are always in the middle, with no identifiable beginning or end. They can only ever *respond* to the prevailing structures and conditions in which they find themselves. However, a response may manifest in a multitude of ways, and each response brings opportunities for change. This article has focused on how trans people respond to erasure by writing about their lived experiences. It has discussed an example, *Wages for Transition*, a manifesto zine which expands understandings of sex/gender by repositioning this as another form of labour under capitalism. This article argues that the theme of *response* is well-suited to analysing sex/gender in motion. This heterogenous, dynamic view allows space for regeneration. Contrary to prevailing worries that broadening cultural understandings of sex/gender will erase its meaning, it is this constant negotiation that keeps it alive, open to changes and new articulations, that ultimately imbue it with meaning.

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Resilience, Resistance and Relationality: Transformational Politics in Australian Lesbian Grassroots Organising and Community Spaces

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Abstract

This article explores lesbian grassroots organising and community spaces in the past and present within the context of response, reflection, and action. Specifically, it examines how such activist organising efforts and spaces of culture and community in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Australia are responses to the confrontation, violence, alienation and trauma of heterosexist oppression. These responses provide lesbians opportunities to reflect on oppressive systems through the deconstructing of stereotypes and othering, transforming notions of identity and the self toward acceptance. Lesbians are able to act in ways which foster resistance, resilience and healing. In particular, connection with the Australian environment and ecological commitment plays a considerable role in facilitating independence, relationality and psychic healing. However, lesbians in the later twentieth century also experienced internal community fragmentation as reconstructions of the lesbian identity—from broadly negative to celebratory—involved a recognition of intersectional oppressions. Those with privilege grappled with their perpetuation of what were deemed ‘patriarchal values’. This article uses AnaLouise Keating’s post-oppositional consciousness framework to analyse how Australian lesbians historically responded to issues of intersectional marginalisation—including identity markers such as race and class—within grassroots organising and community space efforts. It also explores potential transformative pathways for the present and future. Post-oppositional consciousness involves an understanding and an embrace of difference to challenge status-quo thinking and generate commonalities among people, rather than insisting on unified notions of sameness. It encourages interconnectedness, relationality, complexity and flexibility. Findings from this article can contribute to research in post-oppositional consciousness theory as well as theories of trauma, identity, social organising and community spaces.

Keywords: LGBT, lesbian, activism, social movements, identity, intersectionality, Australia

Grassroots Organising as Response

Lesbian organising in the West can be traced back to at least the sixteenth century (Vicinus, 1993; Traub, 2001, pp. 435–440); however, it flourished

in the twentieth century with the rise of the Women's and Gay Liberation movements (Blasius and Phelan, 1997; Willett, 2000, p. 66; Edsall, 2003, p. 222). These movements fostered open resistance to heteropatriarchal norms and led to the formation of collectives, communes and clubs that advocated for the freedom to live outside traditional societal expectations.

This article explores lesbian grassroots organising and community spaces from the 1960s to the present, focusing on Australian examples, within the context of response, reflection and action. Geographical contexts have significant impacts on not only the culture of organising but also the capacity for success (Jennings, 2018, p. 92). Thus, the emphasis on Australian iterations is to draw attention to a minimally explored subject in both Australian and more broadly women's history, while examining the specific experiences of lesbian activism on colonised lands. It examines how such activist organising efforts and spaces of culture and community in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are responses to the confrontation, violence, alienation and trauma of heterosexist oppression. These responses provide lesbians with opportunities to reflect on oppressive systems through the deconstructing of stereotypes and othering, transforming notions of identity and the self toward acceptance and generating new values (Ponse, 1978, p. 17; Wolf, 1979; Hoagland, 1988, p. 531; Edsall, 2003; Jennings, 2018, p. 92; Beins and Enszer, 2019; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 4). However, lesbians in the later twentieth century also experienced internal community fragmentation, as reconstructions of lesbian identity—from broadly negative to celebratory—involved a recognition of intersectional oppressions (Rudy, 2001; Jennings, 2009; Jennings, 2018; Luis, 2018). Those with privilege, such as race and class, grappled with their perpetuation of what were deemed the patriarchal “values of the fathers” (Hoagland, 1988, p. 531).

Within grassroots organising and community spaces, lesbians can also act in ways that foster resistance, resilience and healing. Notably, connection with the natural environment and ecological commitment plays a considerable role in facilitating independence, relationality and psychic healing (Hall, 2016, pp. 4–5; 2019, p. 15; 2024, p. 209; Jennings, 2018, p. 95; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 5).

This article begins with an explanation of its methodology, followed by an integrated exploration of lesbian feminist and social movement literature

and the research project's findings. The outcomes utilised AnaLouise Keating's (2013) post-oppositional consciousness framework to understand how lesbians historically responded to issues of difference within grassroots organising and community space efforts. Furthermore, it examines potential transformative pathways for the present and future. As the fostering of lesbian grassroots movements is an ongoing practice, this article will utilise various forms of 'to be' such as 'was', 'is', 'were' and 'are'.

Methodology

This article utilises information from an analysis of literature on themes of lesbianism, lesbian-feminism, grassroots organising, lesbian and queer history, lesbian and women's spaces, lesbian involvement in social movements and activism, intersectionality and feminist ethics. These documents were categorised based on themes of resistance, agency, action, reflection, connection, support, conflict, fragmentation and difference.

Information was also drawn from two datasets: a previous qualitative study on Australian lesbian feminists who have been organising since the 1960s (van Aurich, 2021), and my current PhD research on past and present Australian lesbian communities. The former involved in-depth interviews with six lesbians who resided in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales between 1970 and 1989 and engaged in forms of lesbian-feminist activism involving back-to-the-land movements, communes and/or separatism.¹ For the latter ongoing PhD project, follow-up interviews were conducted with some participants of the 2021 study, as well as 40 more individuals. All have been anonymised using pseudonyms.

In line with qualitative research standards (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 215), for the 2021 study interviews were recorded over two sessions each, transcribed, thematically and structurally analysed, and subsequently restructured into a narrative chronology that used pseudonyms. The study examined the ways in which lesbians politically organised in a grassroots capacity, highlighting the contributions marginalised groups can make from

¹ Separatism is a political praxis of physical, emotional and/or psychological separation by an oppressed minority from those they deem to oppress and marginalise them, in addition to centring the minority's needs and experiences. See van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 2.

a local history perspective. Notably, narrative interviews tend to have samples of one or two. Due to the highly private and inaccessible nature of the lesbian population, the study employed purposive sampling, resulting in a slightly larger sample of six lesbians. Recruitment occurred through known members of the target group contacting others who met the desired characteristics (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 266; Savard and Kilpatrick, 2022, p. 972). Of the six women, three identified as having working-class backgrounds, two as having middle-class backgrounds and the remainder did not specify. All participants were white and did not specify a multicultural identity. All six had considerable experience with lesbian grassroots organising in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, some from multiple regions as they travelled across the nation. Their organising addressed issues of lesbian visibility, safety, health, independence, environmental sustainability, peace and lesbian cultural development. Participants reflected positively on their experiences while also recognising their own and the broader movements' limitations.

My doctoral research utilises Grounded Theory data collection methods, in which research begins with minimal to no theory and involves in-depth explorations of participant experiences, perspectives and meaning (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell and Poth, 2018). These methods are employed through collaborative group interviews and in-depth individual interviews to examine the notion of spaces deemed safe in connection with marginalised identities generally and lesbian identities specifically. Furthermore, my PhD explores the limitations and possibilities of safe spaces in achieving meaningful social change. Within this scope, the research examines past and present experiences of grassroots lesbian organising efforts, including the tactics involved and the consequences of their creation, management and, in some cases, cessation. It explores how lesbians navigate issues of difference utilising post-oppositional consciousness as praxis, both as a theoretical lens and as a methodology for conducting research (Keating, 2013). Before delving into post-oppositional consciousness, this article first outlines the concept of oppositional consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

Oppositional consciousness is an “either/or epistemology and praxis” that shapes politics, perceptions, responses—reflections and actions—through a kind of “resistance energy” (Keating, 2013, pp. 2–3). This ‘us vs them’ mindset is based on narrow definitions of identity, both individual and collective, and is informed by limited, highly individualistic and antagonistic conceptions of the self that emphasise divisions and keep individuals embedded in conflict (Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018). Difference is perceived as a threat and therefore denied, suppressed or ignored, rather than perceived as a path for forging commonalities (Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018; Lizzo-Wilson, Mirnajafi and Louis, 2022). This denial of difference allows for oppositional thinking to flourish and in turn inhibits social change by propagating unproductive suspicion, conflict and competition (Keating, 2007; 2013).

Conversely, as developed by Keating (2013), post-oppositional consciousness is both a theory and a practice of personal and cultural transformation. As a theory, it recognises that all humans are inextricably linked through shared commonalities. It embraces difference, including seemingly mutually exclusive forms of difference (e.g. spiritualism and socialism) (Keating, 2007, p. 26; 2013, p. 16). However, Anna Carastathis (2016) and Keating (2013, p. 37) argue that simply applying intersectional labels to individuals and groups is insufficient for achieving social change, as such labelling multiplies the categories while retaining an internal system of rigid sameness. Rather, Keating (2013, p. 37) proposes using the “labelling process to generate new commonalities”. Indeed, she emphasises ‘commonalities’ over ‘sameness’, arguing that the former enables the inclusion of difference and positions such differences beyond oppositional modes within a larger context (Keating, 2013, p. 11).

As a practice of transformation, post-oppositional consciousness is relational, involving the critical examination of previously unquestioned assumptions, beliefs and behaviours (Keating, 2013, p. 13; Currans, 2023, p. 177). Notably, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2020, p. 16) describes relationality from an Australian Indigenous perspective as experiencing the self as part of others and vice versa, learned through reciprocity, shared experiences, obligation, cooperation, coexistence and social memory. Through flexibility, dialogue, friendly disagreement and engaging in

overlapping perspectives, space is given for complexity, contradictions and the multiplicity of identity (Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018; Currans, 2023). At the same time, individuals are accountable for their actions, including misunderstandings and harms caused (Currans, 2023, p. 176; Hall, 2024, p. 3).

Employing self-reflection and patience, individuals can shift their identity from a unitary and splintered self toward a “threshold identity”, which expands to embrace internal contradictions and differences (Keating, 2013, p. 97). A threshold identity is one that involves multiple positions and shifts between the margin and centre, oppressed and oppressor, and self and other, complicating these seemingly black and white divisions (Keating, 2013, p. 10). Developing such an identity requires openness, vulnerability, trust, effort, time, deeply listening to others’ perspectives and experiences, and the willingness to live with contradictions. It is ultimately an active process that *starts* from marginality, rather than treating marginality as an end point (Keating, 2013; Currans, 2023). Having explored the concepts of identity, difference and oppositional and post-oppositional consciousness, this discussion now turns to how these concepts are played out in Australian lesbian feminist praxis.

Discussion: Lesbian Feminist Praxis, Reflection and Action

In response to oppressive experiences, from the 1960s onward lesbians in the West politically organised in reflective and active ways (Abbott and Love, 1972; Wolf, 1979; Bunch, 1987; Hoagland, 1988; Brown, 1995; Willett, 2000, pp. 68–69; Valk, 2010; Burmesister, 2014; Enszer, 2016; Jennings, 2018; Luis, 2018; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 6).

In the mid-twentieth century, the prevailing image of homosexual life was characterised by persecution and vilification. Individuals experienced feelings of loneliness, fear and self-hatred. They were also confronted with abuse and harassment from others (Willett, 2000, p. 3). For example, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) in 1953, 1957 and 1964 advised the Federal Cabinet against homosexual employment in the public service. According to Graham Willett (2000, p. 11) ASIO described homosexuality as a “character defect” involving “instability, willing self-deceit” and “defiance towards society”. Similar attitudes

existed in the United Kingdom and United States during this period (Ponse, 1978; Wolf, 1979; Green, 1997; Edsall, 2003; Lovatt, 2025, pp. 22, 26).

However, new ideas about homosexuality came to the forefront as a result of the efforts of grassroots organisations. For example, in July 1970 a group of Melbourne-based lesbians formed the Australasian Lesbian Movement (ALM). Lucy Chesser (1996, p. 71) highlights that ALM was not only the “first openly homosexual organisation” but also “the first explicitly *political* homosexual organisation formed in Australia”. For founding member Marion Paull, the ALM represented a deliberate political awareness as lesbians, as they aimed for tolerance and understanding by educating heterosexual society, to help “erode the taboos and prejudices against homosexuals” (Chesser, 1996, p. 73). Graham Willett (2000, p. 35) and Nicholas Edsall (2003), in their respective historiographical studies on homosexual culture, assert that the actions of the gay rights and feminist movements were the primary reason for shifts in tolerance in Western society.

Lesbian feminism, in which lesbian activists draw upon feminist principles and goals but with a lesbian focus, emerged in Australia around 1970 in response to the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation movements of the previous decade (Abbott and Love, 1972; Ponse, 1978, p. 78; Wolf, 1979; Tiffin 1993; Wilton, 1995; Dixon, 2010; Valk, 2010; Hall, 2016, p. 14; Robinson, 2016; Arrow and Woollacott, 2019). A research participant in both the 2021 and current projects, Hakia, recalled that:

We started realising that lesbians need to fight for ourselves, and we were supporting heterosexual women, but they weren’t supporting lesbian women’s issues and rights. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 50)

Individual lesbian activists were influenced by numerous social justice movements, from unions and socialist initiatives, the New Left, civil rights and Black Power campaigns, anti-racism, peace, anti-nuclear activism, and environmentalist causes (Pakulski, 1991; Bresnahan, 2004; Thompson, 2010; Valk, 2010; Burmeister, 2014; Enszer, 2016; Jennings, 2018; van Aurich, 2021). Drawing upon these ideologies and movements, lesbians

analysed the specificity of lesbian experiences while exploring alternative ways of living and enacting women-centred politics and values.

Two early examples of Australian lesbian feminist organising occurred in 1973. The first took place at a feminist conference in Sorrento, Victoria, where the Australian Radicalesbians, named after the 1970 New York group, presented a talk advocating for the acceptance of lesbianism within the feminist movement. The presentation emphasised the need for visibility, or to ‘come out’ (Sitka, 1989). The second was organised by the Hobart Women’s Action Group, which presented a catalogue of discriminations by feminists against lesbians (Kaplan, 1996). According to Marilyn Lake (1999, p. 244), the group accused the Women’s Liberation Movement of ignoring lesbians in the hopes that they would disappear into an “inclusive bisexuality”.

Reflecting on the socio-cultural norms around them, often through consciousness-raising and discussion groups, lesbian feminists developed the concept of heterosexism. Charlotte Bunch (1987, p. 185) defines heterosexism as the ideological and institutional domination of heterosexuality that assumes it is the only natural and thus superior sexuality.

This results in the stigmatisation of homosexuality reducing lesbians’ status, safety and control (Calhoun, 2003). Moreover, Bunch (1987, p. 187) asserts that heterosexism involves the supposition that women want to be emotionally and/or economically bonded to men and that is fostered through institutions like the family, organised religion, the media and the workplace. In response, lesbians took action by creating their own spaces, focusing on their specific needs and attempting to develop a culture outside of heterosexist influence and norms (Frye, 1993; Dixon, 2010; Megarry, 2020).

Lesbian spaces are perceived as exclusionary in that they deny access to men from the oppressor classes and often heterosexual women, while also reflecting an ideological shift that places women, and more specifically lesbians, at the centre of commitment (Rudy, 2001, pp. 198–199; Valentine and Skelton, 2003, p. 861; The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1353). This allowed/allows lesbians to move from a powerless position, toward a form of empowerment, in which they reclaimed control over access and

boundaries, asserting agency (Frye, 1993). As one participant from 2021, Yridji, explained:

I think it's a great thing for women to be able to take time away from men, to think. Particularly in groups. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 49)

This denial of access is often articulated by critics as a form of hatred toward the other. Conversely, unlike the antagonism of oppositional consciousness, which directs negative energy outward, the denial of access, or exclusion, is articulated as a kind of protective withdrawal of energy to focus inward for survival and wellbeing (Hoagland, 1988; Keating, 2013; van Aurich, 2021). Notably, many current Australian lesbian spaces advertise themselves as inclusive, in some cases including allies, however, this does not negate their fundamentally exclusionary nature as a way of challenging oppressive systems. Another research participant, Teatree, expressed the purpose of exclusionary spaces for marginalised people:

I think it's probably necessary for lots of women or lots of people at different times ... to build and live their own sub-culture ... to have a supportive– a really wholly supportive environment to rebuild themselves. In order to be able to function in what is such a hostile society. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 45)

Lesbian spaces in the West were/are both urban and rural, encompassing households, squats, dances, bookstores, record labels, publishing companies, theatre and circus groups, educational programs, community centres, workshops, libraries, archives, conferences and festivals (Hoagland, 1988; Brown, 1995; Green, 1997; Ion, 1997; Dixon, 2010; Valk, 2010; Burmeister, 2014; Jennings, 2018; Luis, 2018; van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8). Many of these spaces were/are organised by lesbian feminist grassroots collectives and informal co-operatives (Green, 1997; Hall, 2019, pp. 14, 114; van Aurich, 2021). They also include more generally women-centred spaces predominantly or entirely organised by lesbians, such as lands (where large groups of women live rurally together), schools, cafes, radio programs, shelters and health centres (Hoagland, 1988; van Aurich, 2021). Within these spaces, lesbians explore the multifaceted aspects of their existence, often articulated through

newsletters, magazines, films, chapbooks and other creative and political works that foster connection, document local and national events and discuss ideas (Brown, 1995; Green, 1997 Rudy, 2001; Burmeister, 2014; van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8).

Urban spaces, particularly share houses, provide lesbians with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences as women and homosexuals in a generally supportive, lesbian-centred environment. For example, Teatree said that living in a lesbian share house “provided a safe space ... to experience just being with women without the pressure of pretending to be [heterosexual]” (van Aurich, 2021, p. 44). By examining socio-cultural structures and institutions around them, lesbians were/are able to focus their grassroots organising efforts and more effectively address their needs. Indeed, another participant, Myrtle, emphasised her capacity to reflect and question norms, stating that:

I think we were prepared to question things a lot more than what most of the rest of society were prepared to do ... I think there was a strength in that. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 67)

In Australian rural spaces, connection with the natural environment plays a considerable role in facilitating independence, relationality and psychic healing (Hall, 2016, pp. 4–5; 2019, p. 137; 2024; van Aurich, 2021, p. 66). The purpose of rural lesbian lands or communes is often described as the pursuit of a utopia, free from lesbophobia, the norms imposed on women, racism and classism (Hall, 2016, p. 16). It is a kind of freedom from capitalist modes of living. As Laurene Kelly states, “Time enters another dimension. It is rejuvenating for the spirit and mind” (Hall, 2016, pp. 9–10). Similarly, Mei Ling describes the psychic shift experienced while surrounded by other lesbians on rural land:

I had spent my life wandering aimlessly intent on self-destruction. I had a low sense of my own worth and never felt as if I belonged anywhere. The Mountain and her women gave me a sense of being valued, a sense of belonging. I felt as if I had come home. (Hall, 2016, p. 146)

The wide-open spaces allowed lesbians to freely express their emotions; laughter, jubilant shouts and crying could be heard echoing across the land

(Hall, 2019, p. 143). The healing capacity of nature was also discussed by Hakia:

As a lesbian you were surrounded by this very oppressive world. [...] [Lesbians] would come into the women's land and they would suddenly experience that they were in a world where they were safe. Where they were accepted as who they are. A woman, a lesbian. And they would immediately get sick [*laughs*]. And we called it the healing crisis. It was very obvious; it happened all the time. They'd get there, and they'd get sick. Women would just look after them, we went, "Oh here comes a new woman we have to initiate". Certain women were great at this, and they'd get herbs, and they'd feed them herbal teas and give them massages and kind of look after them while they went through this crisis. And then they'd come through it and they would feel comfortable, they'd feel healthy again and comfortable with themselves. But I just thought it was very interesting seeing that transition from one world to another. It was like the weight of gravity was lifted off women and they would sort of collapse. (van Aurich, 2021)

Connection to the natural environment also reflects lesbian feminist commitment to ecological principles of sustainability, low impact and conservation (Hall, 2016, p. 13; 2019; 2024, p. 57). Caretaking the land—living in harmony with it rather than exploiting it—engaging in environmental safety practices, building basic and complex shelters, which involved learning carpentry, stonework, roofing, tiling and more, and growing food enabled lesbians to develop typically 'masculine' skills and live in 'empowering' and autonomous ways (Valk, 2010; Jennings, 2018, p. 99; Hall, 2016, p. 147; 2019, p. 3; 2024; van Aurich, 2021, p. 9). According to Rebecca Jennings (2018, p. 94), for many lesbians in Australia, the natural environment represented a kind of rural idyll away from the oppressive, corrupt and exhausting urban spaces.

However, the natural environment also significantly impacts lesbians' capacity to enact their politics. For example, the New South Wales lesbian lands experienced extreme temperatures, cycles of drought and flooding. These weather events resulted in food shortages, forest encroachment, relative isolation and generally unfertile land that made rural living a daunting experience (Jennings, 2018; Hall, 2019, p. 116; 2024; Cocoran, 2020). Many of the Australian lands lacked running water and electricity, faced food and financial instability due to many residents relying on

welfare, and were home to dangerous or unpleasant wildlife, like snakes, spiders, ticks and leeches (Cocoran, 2020; Hall, 2016, pp. 129–130; 2019, p. 30; 2024, p. 99). Keely Jobe describes life on rural land as follows:

If you want a cup of coffee you need to collect the firewood, start a fire then wait half an hour for the water to boil. If you want a shower you can have a freezing cold stream dip, complete with overly friendly leeches, or you can pour a kettle of warm water over yourself and scramble to wash the soap off. (Hall, 2016, p. 118)

Land management is a huge part of the experience, and lesbians in the past argued extensively over the difficulty of farming, ecological conservation approaches, the use of machinery and domestication of animals, among other issues (Hall, 2016, p. 38). Lesbians on Australian lands were faced with the complexity of colonisation. As Aquila (Hall, 2016, p. 138) expressed, “We lived on Aboriginal Land yet few Aboriginal women came to the lands. Life was full of contradictions”. Conversely, lesbian lands in the northern hemisphere emphasise an ideal environment, with fertile soil, cheap land and beautiful landscapes (Burmeister, 2014, p. 64). There seemed to be more consensus among lesbians about the use of machines and the consumption of meat and alcohol on European lands; for example, they were considered as “patriarchal evils” in Wales (Hall, 2016, p. 91).

Another form of reflective lesbian grassroots organising was/is the changing of language away from patriarchal norms that position men as the default, toward women—and more specifically lesbian—centred expressions (Ponse, 1978; Jennings, 2009; Jennings 2018; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023). According to Sarah Lucia Hoagland (1988, p. 538), language is both a tool of oppression and integral to “any transformation of consciousness”. It functions as oppression by restricting our perception to the values and categories of the oppressor class, or, as Hoagland (1988, p. 539) states “the language we speak is the language of the fathers”. Whereas regarding the latter, once lesbians become aware of their oppression, language is susceptible to change through participation and consensus (Hoagland, 1988, p. 539). A part of this transformation was/is also redefining what it means to be a lesbian in society and within oneself. Lesbian grassroots organising involved considerable social events that

expressed joy and celebration of lesbianism, including dances, discos, music and cultural festivals (Green, 1997; Hall, 2016; van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8).

Lesbians also responded to oppressive norms through grassroots political action like protests. Whether improvised in the moment or held once, occasionally or annually, lesbian public actions include anti-war and anti-nuclear demonstrations, women's peace camps—for example, Greenham Common, Pine Gap and Cockburn Sound—abortion rallies, International Women's Day rallies, postering political signs and slogans, spray-painting, vandalism to sexist businesses and advertising, public demonstrations of lesbian affection, and Reclaim the Night marches (Green, 1997, p. 135; Bartlett, 2013; van Aurich, 2021, pp. 40, 68; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 8; Eschle and Bartlett, 2023).

Through reflection and action, Australian lesbians brought the specificity of their experiences to the forefront of their organising efforts, challenging oppressive societal norms. They were able to address their needs, support healing and explore the multifaceted aspects of their lives. However, such actions and reflections were not always beneficial or effective, sometimes leading to fragmentation among groups and within the overarching lesbian community.

Community Fragmentation

Although lesbian grassroots organising creates a strong sense of community and challenges oppressive socio-cultural structures, it can also involve tension, conflict and other forms of negative experience. In the late twentieth century, tensions primarily emerged around issues of difference as forms of intersectional analysis emerged, particularly regarding race and economic class identity (Hoagland, 1988; Carillo Rowe, 2008; Carastathis, 2016; Dean, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2020). In addition to race and class, differences of (dis)ability, age and ideological position could be ignored, disavowed or intensely and ultimately ineffectively debated (Alice *et al.*, 1988; Green, 1997; Rudy, 2001; Luis, 2018; Megarry, 2020; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 5). Hoagland (1988, pp. 532–533) asserts that this is due to the perpetuation of patriarchal values of dominance and subordination, including the unquestioned use of language laden with

sexist, heterosexist, racist and ableist values. Sand Hall agrees, reflecting on her time in the New South Wales lesbian lands as follows:

Of course, we brought some baggage with us. Having grown up in a man's world, we had that conditioning in our heads and in our actions. (Hall, 2016, pp. 1–3)

Similarly, Chris Sitka (Hall, 2016, p. 34) stated that:

we brought within us the damage that oppression causes. We acted out our wounds and dysfunctions. We argued and fought. (Hall, 2016, p. 34)

In her study of British lesbian feminists, Sarah Green (1997, pp. 43–44) asserts that tensions emerged due to simultaneous yet conflicting politics of commonality—which placed internal group differences as secondary—and personal experience, that highlighted inter- and intra-group difference. The denial of difference was, in part, due to a perceived need for a united front, an efficient and effective way to address the needs of lesbians as a class, which ultimately asserted a false universal lesbian experience. Because difference can be perceived as threatening to the unity of a group—with fears of dissent, disloyalty and fragmentation—responses can involve a prioritisation and emphasis of a singular identity that all within the group must adhere which downplays, oversimplifies and/or under-explores variation (Keating, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2015; Dean, 2018; Lizzo-Wilson, Mirnajafi and Louis, 2022). However, this universalisation was/is ultimately ineffective as lesbian identity becomes rigid and narrow, with demands of conformity and the questioning of commitment to other identities (Anzaldúa, 1999; Rudy, 2001; Hong, 2006; Keating, 2013; Dean, 2018; Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 32). Indeed, as Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242) asserts, “ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups”.

As a part of this denial of difference over a false sense of unity, Keridwen Luis (2018, pp. 45–46) and Moreton-Robinson (2020, p. 45) argue white racial identity is invisibilised and naturalised, that is, positioned as not a race, and thus is considered the neutral norm to which all else is ‘other’. They argue this silence around whiteness sustains the use of its supremacist power, including within feminist and lesbian feminist organising,

invisibilising white women's racial privilege (Luis, 2018, p. 46; Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 45). Therefore, those with multiple marginalised identities and lived experiences, particularly lesbians of colour, can encounter what Crenshaw (1991, p. 1252) terms "intersectional disempowerment", in which they are required to have an either/or priority in their politics and actions, detrimentally splitting their energies between groups. It demands a kind of fractionalisation of the self, denying one's varying needs as a multiply marginalised individual (The Combahee River Collective, 2014). For example, indigenous feminists in Australia such as Wendy Holland, Jackie Huggins and Moreton-Robinson emphasise the importance of alliances and reciprocity between Indigenous communities, working together to empower themselves while acknowledging their differences (Gays and Lesbians Aboriginal Alliance, 1993; Huggins, 1987, p. 122; Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 151).

Indeed, for many Australian Indigenous women, issues of racial and class oppression can be more pressing than those of sex and sexuality (Huggins, 1987; 2022). Moreover, as Moreton-Robinson (2020, p. 68) argues, feminism is not always the "political home" for all women.

In addition to multiple identities and lived experiences, those with differing political positions can experience lesbian groups as hostile and combative (Green, 1997; Ion, 1997; Hall, 2016, pp. 28, 138; 2019, p. 110). In Australian lesbian feminist grassroots organising, the personal and the political were constantly reflected upon, with many norms around womanhood, sexuality, lifestyle, privacy, work, inclusion of men, including boy children and organising structures questioned and heavily debated (Green, 1997; Ion, 1997; Jennings, 2016; Hall, 2019, pp. 109–112; 2024). According to Myrtle:

I think we were prepared to question things a lot more than what most of the rest of society were prepared to do [...] I think there was a strength in that. (van Aurich, 2021, pp. 66–67)

Although not utilised by every group, consensus decision-making with an emphasis on non-hierarchical structures were/are common. However, some lesbians experience the endless conversations involved in consensus decision-making as exhausting and an ineffective tactic (van Aurich, 2021, p. 62). For example, Lazuli (Hall, 2024, p. 184) recalled that "making

decisions about absolutely anything could take a week, if not a year”. Such discussions risk those with the strongest opinions, loudest voice or who can argue more confidently ‘winning’ (van Aurich, 2021, p. 72). During discussion lesbians may also support their friends or those they are politically aligned with, whether it is the position they themselves believe in (van Aurich, 2021, p. 72).

Consensus and non-hierarchy also do not work in certain organising circumstances, even of a grassroots nature. In health and crisis centres, for example, such structures can be ineffective, particularly when health professionals are involved or employed. Teatree reflected on her experiences at the women’s health centre she helped organise, stating that:

It was a tension between our feminist commitment to equality and the essential authority that doctors have to have in delivering health services ... they’ve all got specific responsibilities that can’t be faded away in a collective. (van Aurich, 2021, p. 54)

Therefore, in examples like these, despite the best of intentions in organising in an ethical manner using feminist principles of democracy and care, a commitment to consensus and non-hierarchy resulted in conflict and strain among the collectives.

Another difference in lived experience and ideological position that can cause tension is men’s inclusion in Australian lesbian spaces. During the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of including male children was heavily debated, particularly in Australia (Ion, 1997; Jennings, 2016; Hall, 2019, pp. 109–112). Some lesbian feminists argued that to ensure they could dedicate as much of their time and energy as possible away from patriarchal influence and commitments, and instead toward their grassroots organising and lesbian liberation, lesbians needed to no longer associate nor live with men (Ion, 1997; Jennings, 2016; van Aurich, 2021; van Aurich and Hearn, 2023, p. 5). One participant from 2021, Sage, reflected that, “it just made a political statement that we had to be strong, as patriarchy had it for so long” (van Aurich, 2021, p. 41). Lesbians who agreed with this position but had male children either left male children at home to attend meetings, events or volunteer or moved out of the home to live in a lesbian feminist house or land, leaving the child with the father or other relative (Green, 1997; Jennings, 2016; van Aurich, 2021). Lesbians who lived together in shared

housing would often have a rule that male relatives were not allowed to visit, sometimes not even go to the front door (van Aurich, 2021, p. 41). However, it could also be a grievous experience, due to separation and feelings of guilt (van Aurich, 2021, p. 34). Mulga, a research participant, recalled saying to a friend at the time, “This is the pain that goes with social change” (van Aurich, 2021, p. 34).

Conversely, lesbians with male children or who wanted to include their relatives and friends in their activism felt alienated by the stances of many lesbian groups, events, houses and lands. Those with male children in particular felt as though they were both insiders and outsiders of organising groups not only because they went against the common political position at the time by loving their boys and seeing them as neither a threat nor a negative influence, but also because they were often forced to choose where they could go and what they could attend (Jennings, 2016, p. 71; van Aurich, 2021, pp. 44–45).

The experiences of lesbian feminists in their grassroots organising exemplifies the limitations of reflection and action, specifically, how the denial of difference ultimately leads to fragmentation of groups. Lesbians who experience ostracisation and alienation, or become frustrated and exhausted with how their concerns, needs and positions are policed and/or lessened, ultimately leave groups and spaces, which results in a loss of community and political power (Hoagland, 1988; Rudy, 2001; Keating, 2013; Jennings, 2016; Luis, 2018; van Aurich, 2021; Lizzo-Wilson, Mirnajafi and Louis, 2022). However, such fragmentation is not inherent to the community, nor to grassroots organising efforts. One potential pathway for responding to issues of difference in the present and future is post-oppositional consciousness.

Transformative Pathways

For lesbian grassroots organising to sustain, and thus address and resist oppression without risking ineffective conflict and fracturing of groups, lesbians must engage in reflective and active processes which foster post-oppositional consciousness (Keating, 2013, p. 8). Indeed, according to Hoagland (1988, p. 532), without changes in values affirmed through one’s interactions, particularly from dominance and subordination toward lesbian agency, ethics, integrity and relationality, there can be no meaningful

transformative social change. By perceiving each other in ways which encompass all aspects, including varied backgrounds and political positions, and deeply listening to one another's experiences, lesbians can generate radical alliances and move forward in their grassroots organising (Hoagland, 1988; Keating, 2013; Carastathis, 2016).

As previously discussed, post-oppositional consciousness can be achieved by embracing difference, bridging commonalities through relational dialogue and self-reflection, which accounts for internal differences and contradictions (Carillo Rowe, 2008, p. 4; Keating, 2013, pp. 16–17; Carastathis, 2016, p. 203). Through reflection, a lesbian can accept their position in the world as both oppressed and oppressor (Moraga, 1983, p. 29; Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 100; Keating, 2013, p. 97). For example, Huggins (2022, p. 38) asserts there can be no “true political alliances between Black and white women” without the latter acknowledging their contributions and collaborations with white men in Indigenous oppression. Huggins (2022, pp. 122–123) argues that although Black women prefer to be separate in their struggles due to differences in agenda, alliances can be made between “Aboriginal, non-English-speaking-background and Anglo-Australian women”, provided white women understand their limitations and what is no longer their business, stepping away so that Indigenous women “do the rest”. In the case of lesbian lands in colonised nations, engaging with local Indigenous communities, recognition of Australian Indigenous custodianship of Country, and treaty making are potential pathways forward (Hall, 2024, pp. 1–2). The preservation and ecological conservation of the land without residing on it—thus protecting them from capitalist environmental destruction—is another path (Hall, 2019, p. 116; 2024, p. 57). As Hall explains:

After 50 years of caring for these Lands as Women's Land, it looks to me like our Lands communities are entering a new phase. Perhaps, like the snakes that love the Lands, we shed one skin, grow into the next. (2024, pp. 2–3)

Importantly, this process does not preclude mistakes. It is a journey of errors and stumbles made by imperfect individuals toward mutual understanding (Keating, 2013, p. 55). Elizabeth Currans (2023, p. 175) argues that political and social alliances can survive by confronting the

failures, misunderstandings and harms of the past, and continuing to “show up when working together becomes difficult”. As Hoagland states:

We make many mistakes, and sometimes we stay in patterns for a long time as we try to understand them. But when we finally understand how a given pattern functions destructively, we act to change. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 543)

Conclusion

Through the praxis of grassroots organising, which generates spaces of culture and community, lesbian activism responds to oppression via reflection and action. Reflections include socio-cultural analysis and criticism, including the coining of the term heterosexism, the changing of language and the sharing of ideas through lesbian networks and creative or political expression. Similarly, actions involve the development of lesbian and women-centred spaces, both urban and rural, as well as protests. These efforts create a positive sense of what it means to be lesbian, provides opportunities to develop skills and knowledge and can generate a sense of connection and belonging.

However, historically within these spaces lesbians carried with them patriarchal values which fostered oppositional consciousness. Over time, and with increasing awareness of difference among the lesbian community, spaces and groups were filled with intense debate and conflict. Lesbians responded to these intersectional issues through denial and silence, resulting in spaces becoming fractured and fragmentary.

Through post-oppositional consciousness the mistakes of the past and present can be acknowledged and actively navigated, allowing for the continuation and survival of lesbian grassroots organising. In turn, through grassroots organising, activists can effectively address lesbians’ multi-faceted needs and create meaningful social change in the future.

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Between Traditions: Religious Identity and Self-Identification in the Case of Simeon of Polotsk

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Abstract

This article re-examines the confessional identity of Simeon of Polotsk (1629–1680), a key Belarusian intellectual and the first professional poet and playwright in Moscow. Building on textual, contextual and intellectual-historical analysis, the study reassesses Simeon’s religious affiliation by examining his sermons, catechisms, didactic poetry and the confessional character of his library. By situating Simeon within the contested religious landscape of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and seventeenth-century Muscovy, the article challenges established interpretations that present him as strictly Orthodox or covertly Uniate. Instead, it argues that Simeon’s identity emerged at the intersection of Catholic, Orthodox and Uniate traditions, shaped by the ideological, political and cultural pressures of his time. Through a multi-method approach, the study offers a more historically grounded understanding of confessional hybridity in early modern Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Simeon of Polotsk, confessional identity, Eastern Christianity, Early Modern Russia, Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, intellectual history, religious hybridity, Jesuits

Introduction

Religious affiliation in the seventeenth century among the educated elites of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was not merely a matter of personal spirituality but was closely intertwined with state and confessional politics.¹ This is particularly evident in the creation of the Uniate Church

¹ The confessional politics of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were marked by pragmatic pluralism: alongside Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and later Uniate (Greek Catholic) communities, Jewish and Muslim populations were also legally recognised. Religious life was governed less by confessional uniformity than by political compromise and noble patronage, creating a framework in which diverse religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions coexisted and interacted.

following the Union of Brest in 1596,² which sought to bridge the divide between Orthodoxy and Catholicism while simultaneously reshaping confessional and political allegiances within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. A key figure in this context is the Belarusian writer Simeon of Polotsk (1629–1680), whose religious identity was contested both during his lifetime and in modern scholarship.

This article offers a new perspective on the debate concerning the confessional identity of the Simeon of Polotsk, the first professional poet and playwright of the Tsardom of Muscovy.³ Drawing on his literary legacy, his sermons and the intellectual currents reflected in his library, the study reconsiders the question of his religious affiliation.

Methodologically, the article adopts a comparative, contextual and textual approach. Textual and rhetorical analysis are used to examine Simeon’s catechisms and didactic poetry, while an intellectual-historical perspective situates his education and worldview within the broader ideological movements that shaped his theology. Because Simeon was educated within an environment shaped by both Catholic and Orthodox traditions, a multi-pronged method is necessary to move beyond binary confessional labels and toward a historically grounded understanding of his identity.

Simeon is usually described as an Orthodox monk, but scholars have long recognised Simeon’s broad familiarity with Western theological literature and his direct references to Catholic and Protestant writings (Korzo, 2007; Zvonareva, 1988; Eremin, 1953; Tatarskii, 1886). Those examining his sermons and catechisms have argued that émigrés from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, including Simeon, introduced elements of Catholic doctrine into Muscovite Orthodoxy, initiating a development influenced by Catholic moral theology (Metropolitan Evgenii, 1827, p. 214; Korzo, 2011). British researcher Anthony Hippisley has described Simeon of Polotsk as “a Trojan Horse of Latin learning in Moscow” (Hippisley and Luk’janova, 2005). As Hippisley (2005, p. 1)

² The Union of Brest (1596) brought part of the Orthodox hierarchy of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth into communion with Rome while preserving the Byzantine rite, giving rise to the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church.

³ Throughout this article, the term “Muscovy” is used to denote the political entity commonly referred to in earlier scholarship as “Russia”, in order to avoid anachronism and reflect contemporary usage in the seventeenth century.

notes, Simeon assembled the largest private library in seventeenth-century Moscow, and its approximately 600 volumes—predominantly works by Catholic authors writing in Latin and Polish—underscore his role in transmitting Western learning into the conservative Orthodox milieu of the city. The catalogue of this library further reveals the breadth of texts in Latin, Polish and Church Slavonic, and confirms that the majority of the volumes bear the *ex libris* “Simeonis Piotrowski Sitnianowicz Hieromonachi Polocensis Ordinis Sancti Basilii Magni” (“From the books of Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil the Great”) (Bylinin’s (1990, p. 7), a designation that reflects both his scholarly identity and his monastic affiliation. The debate concerning Simeon of Polotsk’s religious affiliation centres on three main theories: that Simeon was Orthodox; that he was a Basilian monk (Uniate); or that he maintained a public Orthodox persona in Moscow for political and personal safety. By integrating textual, historical and semantic analysis, this study seeks to clarify these conflicting interpretations and reassess the confessional ambiguity surrounding Simeon of Polotsk.

Simeon of Polotsk: Background

Simeon of Polotsk stands at the crossroads of cultures, confessions and political transformations in seventeenth-century Eastern Europe. Born in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and educated at the Kyiv-Mohyla Collegium and the Jesuit Academy in Wilno (Vilnius), Simeon brought to Muscovy an intellectual and literary formation steeped in Latin learning. At the court of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (r. 1645–1676), Simeon of Polotsk rose to prominence, serving as poet, preacher and educator (Tatarskii, 1886, p. 69). Under the tsar’s patronage, he also opened a school in which the first pupils were young clerks of the Office of Secret Affairs. This institution functioned as the tsar’s personal chancery, which partly explains Simeon’s appointment to the royal court and his early inclusion on the court payroll. Funding for teaching came directly from the tsar’s treasury (Zabelin, 1872, p. 197). As Ierofei Tatarskii (1886, p. 72) later observed, the principal subject of study in the school was Latin language

and grammar ‘according to Alvarus’,⁴ while knowledge of Greek, although expected of Orthodox clergy in addition to Church Slavonic, was not taught there. By introducing the teaching of Latin, rhetoric and poetics according to Western European (especially Jesuit) educational models, Simeon of Polotsk not only reformed the system of learning but also indirectly facilitated the introduction of Catholic-inflected intellectual norms and conceptual frameworks into the traditionally Orthodox cultural milieu of Muscovy.

Simeon can be seen as a figure of religious and cultural accommodation, shaped by the particular circumstances of the borderlands, where competing traditions and worldviews frequently overlapped. This kind of synthesis was crucial for the transmission of Western European culture to Eastern Europe during the period, especially in its literary Baroque form. Simeon’s educational background and confessional stance were not unusual but rather reflected broader patterns of the time. In many ways, Simeon’s position aligns with that of other notable Eastern Slavic writers and intellectuals active in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, who likewise navigated complex ideological and cultural terrains shaped by confessional plurality, educational mobility and political change, such as Meletij Smotryc’kyj (c. 1577–1633) and Theophan Prokopovich (1681–1736) (Robinson *et al.*, 1982, pp. 7–12, 18–25).

The Grand Duchy permitted relatively free movement, enabling young scholars to study at European universities such as Kraków, Prague, Bologna and Padua. This access significantly shaped the intellectual elite of the region. Meletij Smotryc’kyj, for example, rector of the Kyiv school⁵ from 1617 to 1618, studied in Nuremberg, Leipzig and Wittenberg (Frick, 1995, pp. 30–38). Similarly, Petro Mohyla (1594–1647), who later founded the Kyiv-Mohyla Collegium, where Simeon studied, received his education in Western Europe (Sysyn, 1984, p. 155). For figures such as Smotryc’kyj and

⁴ Manuel Álvares (1526–1583) was a pivotal sixteenth-century Portuguese Jesuit grammarian whose masterpiece, *De Institutione Grammatica Libri Tres* (1572), became the standard Latin grammar of the Society of Jesus and circulated globally in numerous editions, translations (including a Japanese version) and adaptations.

⁵ The institution later known as the Kyiv Mohyla Academy originated as the Kyiv Brotherhood School; in 1635 it was reorganised into the Kyiv Mohyla College under the leadership of Petro Mohyla, Metropolitan of Kyiv. The official title of “Academy” was conferred only in 1701 by decree of Tsar Peter I.

Mohyla, study abroad was not merely a matter of prestige but a formative intellectual experience. Smotryc'kyj's encounters with Protestant philological methods shaped his grammatical and polemical writings, while Mohyla's training in Jesuit and humanist institutions informed his later reforms of Orthodox education and his synthesis of Latin scholasticism with local traditions. In this way, access to European universities helped produce an intellectual elite capable of integrating Western intellectual currents into East Slavic ecclesiastical culture.

Confessional and Cultural Contexts

In this context, the emergence of a pragmatic, conformist type within the post-Renaissance religious landscape of the East Slavic territories becomes apparent. From the late sixteenth century onwards, individuals emerged whose temporary conversion to Catholicism or Uniatism functioned not as betrayal, but as a strategic adaptation to gain access to education or clerical advancement. This process of Latinisation paradoxically enabled Orthodox scholars to pursue cultural preservation and national ambition. And quite often, Latin education, rather than undermining Orthodox conviction, offered the intellectual tools necessary for a more coherent articulation of the tradition. Access to Catholic academies, particularly those run by the Jesuits, did not formally require conversion to Catholicism. While their curricula reflected Catholic theological assumptions, they admitted students of diverse confessional backgrounds, a reality acknowledged by both Catholic and Orthodox authorities (Korzo, 2011, p. 130; Pokrovskii, 1897, pp. 427–428).

While the institutional foundations of the Uniate Church were being consolidated, political interest in confessional reconciliation gradually took shape. Władysław IV Vasa (1595–1648), who ruled as King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1632 to 1648, developed a plan for a religious settlement with the Uniates that involved the establishment of a special patriarchate in the Ruthenian lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. This patriarchate was to bring together Uniates and Orthodox Christians who had been reconciled with one another under a

single ecclesiastical authority.⁶ Petro Mohyla, was considered a likely candidate for Patriarch. The central idea of this reconciliation rested on the premise that:

[...] the Uniates would return to the bosom of Orthodoxy, and after such reconciliation, all relations with the Pope would be reduced to an honorary recognition of his primacy (without introducing this primacy into dogma). (Golubev, 1883, pp. 230–231)

In this regard, significant influence was exerted by the rapprochement between representatives of the Orthodox Church who rejected the Union and various currents of the Reformation movement, within which the problem of religious tolerance had long been explored using approaches developed in broader European intellectual life.

The Orthodox Metropolis of the Rus' lands was not a monolithic institution; rather, it was an arena of ongoing disputes and divisions. The struggle centred on the primacy of Kyiv versus Moscow, and in practice there were two metropolises: the Kyivan and the Muscovite. In 1589, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Jeremias II,⁷ visited Moscow and, during negotiations, agreed to establish an independent (autocephalous) Patriarchate, elevating Metropolitan Job to the rank of the first Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'. In this way, the Muscovite Russian Orthodox Church received formal recognition. In the same year (1589), Muscovite metropolitans obtained patriarchal dignity and formal acknowledgment of autocephaly within the borders of the Tsardom of Muscovy from Patriarch Jeremias II of Constantinople and the other Eastern patriarchs.⁸ By contrast, the Kyivan metropolis remained under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople (Pokrovskii, 1897, p. 28).

⁶ By “reconciliation” contemporaries in the first half of the seventeenth century referred to initiatives—most closely associated with Metropolitan Petro Mohyla—aimed at healing the confessional division created by the Union of Brest (1596), whether through the reintegration of the Uniates into Orthodoxy or through the establishment of a unified ecclesiastical hierarchy acceptable to both confessions.

⁷ Jeremias II Tranos, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (r. 1572–1579, 1580–1584, 1587–1595).

⁸ The charter of the Council of Constantinople on the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate is preserved in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts: RGADA, fond 52, opis' 2, unit 5.

In June 1632, the Sejm⁹ convened to discuss the question of the Orthodox hierarchy and the confirmation of episcopal sees (Makarii, 1882, p. 422). The discussion reached an impasse and was postponed until autumn. The Sejm reopened on 27 September 1632 and, faced with tensions concerning the status of the Orthodox population, transferred the matter of dividing the episcopal sees to the royal prince (the heir apparent) and to a council of his choosing, which consisted predominantly of Orthodox and Protestant members. The council resolved:

To equalise the ecclesiastical and civil rights of Uniates and Orthodox, granting both groups freedom of faith and worship.

To leave the Kyivan St Sophia Cathedral to the Orthodox Metropolitan consecrated by the Patriarch of Constantinople. The election of the Metropolitan of Kyiv was to be conducted by Orthodox nobles, clergy, and inhabitants, while the metropolitan would still be required to receive a royal confirmation charter.

To leave the see of Polotsk to the Uniate bishops.

To establish a special commission of two Catholics and two Orthodox, tasked with visiting all towns, settlements, and villages, and allocating churches according to the relative size of the Orthodox and Uniate populations. (Pokrovskii, 1897, p. 428)¹⁰

Most importantly, the Sejm decreed that all persons were granted the full right to move from the Union to Orthodoxy, from a Uniate diocese to a non-Uniate one and vice versa—for example, from the Mstsislaw diocese to the Uniate bishopric of Polotsk, or from the Polotsk diocese to the Orthodox bishopric of Mstsislaw. Both sides were to live in peace and harmony, without encroaching upon each other. This agreement was ratified on 1 November 1632. On 13 November, Władysław was elected King of Poland and swore to uphold all articles. Thus, the Orthodox population of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth regained their rights, and an Orthodox West-Rus' metropolis was restored.¹¹

⁹ The Sejm was the parliament of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the central institution of its legislative authority.

¹⁰ Pokrovskii 1897 is cited from the original Russian; the English translation is by the author.

¹¹ See further: Makarii, *Istoriia Russkoi tserkvi*, pp. 432–441; *Arkhiv Iugo-Zapadnoi Rossii* [Archive of South-Western Rus'], part 2, vol. 1, XVIII, pp. 208–214; *Opisanie Kievo-Sofijskogo Sobraniia* [Description of the Kyivan St Sophia Chapter], pp. 167–170;

It is striking that these events gained renewed resonance in the twenty-first century. On 15 October 2018, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church resolved to break eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in response to the latter's intention to establish a unified autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine, its decision to restore to communion the leaders of two non-canonical Ukrainian Orthodox bodies and its annulment of the 1686 synodal letter transferring the Kyivan metropolis to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Russian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod in Minsk decided to sever full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in response to its actions regarding Orthodox autocephaly for Ukraine (RBC, 2018). The disagreement over jurisdiction, authority and the very meaning of Orthodox order echoes early modern tensions that had already set the Kyivan and Muscovite hierarchies apart:

an anciently formed, distinctive, and more secular character of the higher West-Rus' hierarchy, gravitating toward the West, had very little in common with the indigenous and comparatively uneducated Great-Russian hierarchy; all this, and many other factors, did not unite the Kyivan hierarchy with the Muscovite one, but rather pushed them away from each other. (Pokrovskii, 1897, pp. 451–452)

Polotsk, a seventeenth-century trading city with Magdeburg rights and a multiconfessional landscape, had a Uniate bishop; yet its Orthodox population recognised the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Crucially, the transition from the Union to Orthodoxy had been legally sanctioned. *Uniatism*, or alternatively, *Slavia unita*,¹² emerged as a synthetic form of confessional identity, combining Byzantine-Slavic traditions with Latin influences. The coexistence of two competing tendencies, namely the preservation of the Eastern rite and the gradual adoption of Latin practices, shaped the internal dynamics of Uniate identity.

Vilenskoe arkhograficheskoe sobranie [Vilnius Archaeographic Collection], vol. II, appendix p. ix; *Zapiski igumena Oresta* [Notes of Igumen Orest].)

¹² *Slavia unita* denotes an early modern intellectual, confessional and cultural concept envisioning the unity of the Slavic world—especially the Ruthenian lands—within a shared Christian (most often Catholic or Union-oriented) civilisational framework, frequently contrasted with *Slavia orthodoxa*. The term is used primarily in historiography to describe elite discourse rather than a concrete political project.

In 1596, the Polotsk diocese became Uniate (and remained so until 1833), leaving the Orthodox Community with only the Brotherhood Monastery of the Epiphany. Thus, Simeon of Polotsk born in 1629, was born in a city where the Uniate Church predominated over Orthodoxy.

Categorising the Identity of Simeon of Polotsk

Simeon's move to Moscow in 1663 (Tatarskii, 1886, pp. 64–65) may be interpreted as an attempt to place himself within a more securely Orthodox milieu. Yet this decision should also be viewed in the broader context of the war between the Muscovite Tsardom and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1654–1667) (Brown, 1982, pp. 58–59; Sahanovich, 1995, pp. 7–12). The climate of hostility towards the priests of the Uniate Church at this time was not only political but also theological and ideological. It reflects a wider sentiment in seventeenth-century Eastern Europe, in which the Union was increasingly perceived both as a spiritual danger and as a destabilising force within the confessional landscape. This perception stemmed from its challenge to Orthodox doctrinal legitimacy, its reconfiguration of ecclesiastical hierarchies and its close association with the confessional and political ambitions of Catholic authorities within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In 1696 Heinrich Wilhelm Ludolf (1655–1712) published his *Grammatica Russica*, the first grammar of the Russian language to appear in Western Europe, at Oxford. This Latin work was intended for practical use by diplomats, scholars and travellers. In the preface, Ludolf reflects on the literary activity of a poet and writer he had encountered at the court of Tsar Aleksei: Simeon of Polotsk, a Belarusian-born polymath. Ludolf introduces him simply as a member of a monastic order, without specifying which one:

Fuit alias Monaftici ordinis Quidam Simon Polotski, qui tempore ultimi Tzari Theodor: Alexeovitichi Pfalmos Davidis in rythmos Slavonicos redegit, & alia multa Theologica in Inacem emifit.¹³
(Ludolf, 1696, p. 13)

¹³ “There was once a certain Simon of Polotsk, a member of a monastic order, who, during the reign of the last Tsar, Feodor Alekseevich, rendered the Psalms of David into

This phrase may simply mean ‘a certain Simeon Polotsk of a monastic order’. It is also plausible that Ludolf, addressing a Western European audience accustomed to clearly structured religious orders, employed the term in a more specific institutional sense. In the Eastern Slavic lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, monastic communities were not generally organised as formal ‘orders’ in the Latin understanding of the term. Within this context, the Basilian Order of St Josaphat stands out as the only monastic community that corresponded clearly to a Western institutional model of an order. Ludolf’s formulation in the *Grammatica Russica* likely reflects an effort to describe Simeon of Polotsk in ways accessible to Western readers, rather than to define his exact religious affiliation. Understood this way, the description works as a practical label, not a precise match with Western monastic orders; still, within the confessional setting of the time, the Basilian Order appears the most plausible institutional reference for Ludolf’s audience of scholars and travellers across Europe encountering text in print.

Unlike the Latin Church, where monastic orders such as the Benedictines and Cistercians were formally structured institutions with central governance, Eastern Orthodox monasticism did not produce equivalent ecclesiastical orders. In the Orthodox world, monasteries remained largely autonomous and subject to local episcopal authority rather than to centralised organisational structures. The absence of monastic orders in Eastern Orthodoxy is rooted in fundamental theological and organisational differences that emerged after the Great Schism (1054). While Orthodoxy preserved the structure of local autocephalous churches, emphasising conciliarity and monasticism as a path of salvation within a unified tradition, Western Christianity developed centralised papal authority and a variety of religious orders designed for governance and apostolic activity—structures incompatible with the Byzantine ecclesiological model. From within the contemporary Orthodox tradition, Schiarchimandrite Gabriel argues that Orthodox monasticism is highly diverse but lacks a tendency towards institutionalisation, with its concrete forms shaped by the historical origins of individual monasteries and the

Slavonic verse and published many other theological writings” (All translations appearing in this article are the author’s own, unless otherwise stated).

legacy of their founders. He further notes that, despite this diversity, monastics may move freely between monasteries (Bunge, 2018).

The Basilian Order of St Josaphat, often cited in this context, was not an Orthodox institution but an Eastern Uniate (Greek Catholic) order established after the Union of Brest, which recognised the pope in Rome as the head of the Church while retaining the Byzantine rite. Ludolf's reference to Simeon of Polotsk as a member of a monastic order indicates that he was understood as belonging to an organised order; in the absence of Orthodox monastic orders and considering Simeon's own *ex libris*, this very likely refers to the Basilian Order of St Josaphat.

Jacob Reitenfels (fl. 1670s), a Courland aristocrat who visited Muscovy earlier and met Simeon, also introduced this identification to Western European readers. On his return journey to Italy, he composed a major work, *De rebus Moschoviticis ad serenissimum magnum hetrvriae ducem Cosmum Tertium* (A Description of Muscovite Affairs, Addressed to His Most Serene Highness Cosimo III, Grand Duke of Tuscany).¹⁴ First published in Latin in Padua in 1680, Reitenfels's report includes a description of Simeon: "Alter literatorum est Monachus quidam Basilianus, nomine Simeon, Latinā eruditione non leviter imbutus" ("Another of men of letters is a certain Basilian monk, by name Simeon, imbued not lightly with Latin erudition") (Reitenfels, 1680, p. 206). This suggests that Reitenfels understood Simeon to be affiliated with the Basilian Order. Reutenfels, himself a Catholic and possibly a Jesuit, appears to associate Latin fluency with Basilian monastic identity. This assumption, shaped by direct interaction with Simeon and by shared use of Latin, underscores the exceptional quality of Simeon's education and places him firmly within the intellectual tradition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, where theological flexibility was often necessary to gain access to elite learning. Attachment to the Basilians, however, would have constituted a serious liability in Muscovy, where Uniate affiliation, associated with papal allegiance and Roman influence, was regarded as both religiously and politically suspect and could expose an individual to exile or even death. Simeon's security in this context depended entirely on the protection of

¹⁴ Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici of Tuscany (1642–1723).

Tsars Aleksei Mikhailovich and Fyodor Alekseevich, whose patronage enabled his continued cultural and literary activity.

In 1960, Nikolai Kiselev analysed the ownership inscriptions of Simeon found in books from his library.¹⁵ It was he who discovered them on the title pages of volumes five and nine of *The Complete Works of Saint Jerome* (Basel, 1553).¹⁶ On volume five, on the flyleaf, there is Simeon's autograph: "Ex Libris Simeonis Piotrowski Sitnianowicz Jeromonachi Polocensis Ord(inis) S(ancti) Basillii Mag(ni). A(nno) D(omi)ni 1670 Aug(usti) 26 Moscovie" ("From the books of Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil. 26 August 1670, in Moscow"). In volume nine, there is an almost identical inscription in Simeon's hand, differing from the previous one in its opening words: "Fida Sum Suppellex Simeonis Piotrowsky Sitnianowicz H. Jeromonachi Polocensis Ord(inis) S(ancti) Bas(illii) Mag(ni) A(nn)o 1670 Aug(usti) 26 Moscovie" ("I am the faithful possession of Simeon Piotrowsky Sitnianowicz, Hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil the Great, in the year 1670, August 26, in Moscow"). Kiselev concluded that:

The published autograph inscriptions [of Simeon] constitute indisputable evidence that [in 1670] he was and recognised himself as a Basilian, and therefore a Uniate rather than an Orthodox Christian. (Kiselev, 1964, p. 166)

Recent findings further reinforce the identification of Simeon of Polotsk with the Basilian Order. In 2024, the historian Nikolai Nikolaev (St Petersburg) reported the discovery of a book that once belonged to Simeon of Polotsk. During conservation work, restorers identified ownership inscriptions in Latin and Slavonic indicating that the volume, an Arabic–Latin Gospel printed at the Medici Press in Rome in 1591, belonged to "Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of the Basilian Order". According to Nikolaev, the inscription is in Simeon's own hand, a finding he described as exceptional. Reports of this discovery were published in Russian media in 2024 but were subsequently removed; the information is

¹⁵ Nikolai Petrovich Kiselev (1884–1965) was a Russian and Soviet scholar of book studies, bibliographer, palaeographer, librarian and museum specialist, known for his work in cataloguing incunabula.

¹⁶ Hieronymus, Eusebii Sophronius, *Opera Omnia* (Basileae: Apud Nicolaum Episcopium Iuniorum, 1553), issued in nine folio volumes.

now preserved only in the archives of Belarusian news platforms such as *Nasha Niva* and *Charter97* and Nikolaev's personal page on social media.

The autographed inscriptions constitute strong evidence that Simeon, by his own identification, was a Basilian monk as late as 1670. Taken together, these manuscript and bibliographic traces confirm that the poet and writer operated within a trans-confessional intellectual world. The *ex libris*, “Simeonis Piotrowski Sitnianowicz Hieromonachi Polocensis Ordinis Sancti Basili Magni” (“From the books of Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil the Great”), reflects both his scholarly identity and his monastic affiliation. In *In Simeon Polockij's Library: A Catalogue* (2005), Anthony Hippisley and Evgenija V. Luk'janova document the contents of this library, revealing the breadth of texts that shaped Simeon's intellectual formation—including Latin, Polish and Church Slavonic works—and confirming the authenticity of the *ex libris* signature. Further evidence of Simeon's reading habits and intellectual profile may be found in the assessment offered by the editors of his library catalogue:

Apart from his importance for seventeenth-century Russian literature, Simeon of Polotsk was a learned man who assembled the largest private library in Moscow. His 600 books by mostly Catholic authors writing in Latin and Polish confirm the view that Simeon was a Trojan horse of Western learning in the largely conservative Orthodox milieu of Moscow. His collection is today preserved as part of the Synodal Press Library in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Documents.¹⁷

Simeon of Polotsk was a supporter of the Western Latin intellectual tradition, which was grounded in Aristotelian natural philosophy. Studying the manuscript of *The Crown of the Universal Faith* (*Venets very kafolicheskiiia*) reveals that the learned monk describes different layers of heaven—or, more precisely, different heavens: the empyrean heaven, immobile and the highest; the crystalline heaven, which moves with inexpressible speed; and the firmament, which is divided into two belts, the first consisting of the fixed stars and the second of the planets. In this

¹⁷ Quoted from the back cover of Hippisley and Luk'janova (2005) *Simeon Polockij's Library: A Catalogue*.

theological treatise, Simeon of Polotsk clearly seeks to explain the structure of the universe in a manner that is intelligible and accessible even to the least educated readers. He explicitly emphasises the didactic purpose of his work, stating: “I offer this to readers for the sake of knowledge, not belief” (from the manuscript: Simeon of Polotsk, *The Crown of the Universal Faith*. Manuscript // State Historical Museum, Synodal Collection, no. 396, fol. 27). At the same time, the intellectual environment of Moscow remained markedly different: until the end of the seventeenth century, no books on natural science were printed there, and popular *azbukovniki*¹⁸ continued to explain the movement of the heavenly bodies as the direct work of angels (Zvonareva, 1988, pp. 230–231).

Historiographical Misinterpretation

Large-scale, anti-Protestant polemics had affected Orthodox Christianity throughout the seventeenth century, and questions relating to the sacrament of Communion occupied a central place within these discussions (Krylov, 2014, pp. 7–9). At the same time, the initial emergence of disputes in Muscovy concerning the moment of the transubstantiation of the Holy Gifts was an issue of a strictly internal nature, arising within the context of the seventeenth-century *Raskol*, the major schism in the Russian Orthodox Church following Patriarch Nikon’s reforms.¹⁹ In the aftermath of the *Raskol*, those who refused to accept the liturgical and doctrinal changes introduced by the reforms came to be identified as Old Believers (*staroobriadtsy*). In the first major anti-Old Believer treatise, *The Rod of Governance (Zhezl pravleniia)*,²⁰ considerable attention was devoted to polemics with the Old Believer understanding of transubstantiation. At the same time, as is evident from Simeon of Polotsk’s correspondence,

¹⁸ *Azbukovniki* were elementary primers widely used in seventeenth-century Muscovy for the teaching of literacy. In practice, however, they functioned as multi-purpose instructional and reference books, combining alphabetic exercises with prayers, moral instruction, lexical explanations, calendrical information and rudimentary cosmological notions.

¹⁹ Patriarch Nikon (1605–1681) introduced liturgical reforms in 1653; their active implementation followed in 1653–1656, and the Great Moscow Church Council of 1666–1667 formally condemned the opponents of the reforms, thereby consolidating the *Raskol*.

²⁰ Written and published in 1667 following the decisions of the Moscow Church Council of 1666–1667.

substantial changes were introduced into the original text of the work under pressure from certain “obstinate” figures. In a letter to Lazar Baranovych (c. 1620–1693), Simeon emphasised that for this reason he did not wish to indicate his authorship on the title page of *The Rod*. This episode, unfolding within the broader context of the conciliar processes of 1666–1667, clearly points to significant divergences between Simeon and the Muscovite theological milieu in their understanding of key dogmatic issues, including the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The often-tense relationship between Simeon and official Muscovite Orthodoxy is perhaps most clearly exemplified by his efforts to acquire an independent publishing house. Seeking to publish his works without prior ecclesiastical censorship, Simeon obtained the tsar’s permission to establish a private printing press at court, which became known as the Upper Printing House. Founded around 1667 (Eremin, 1948, p. 344), the press enabled Simeon to issue three works: *The Psalter in Verse*, *The Spiritual Banquet*, and *The Spiritual Supper*.²¹ Yet the instability of his role became clear in the years following Aleksei’s death in 1676. Simeon himself survived his patron by only four years, passing away in 1680.

After the death of Tsar Fyodor in 1682, the Upper Printing House was abolished, Princess Sophia (1657–1704) was sent to a convent in the summer of 1689, and Patriarch Joachim (1620–1690) launched an investigation against Sylvester Medvedev (1641–1691) a student and follower of Simeon of Polotsk; he was arrested and deprived of his monastic rank. Joachim reproached him for having been seduced:

by the newly invented Kyiv books of Latin teaching and by the words uttered by his teacher, that Uniate from Polotsk, Simeon (for they lived together in one and the same cell [...]) (Osten, 1865, p. 131)

and for “spreading and confirming that Latin heresy” (Osten, 1865, p. 131). Simeon himself was posthumously declared a heretic, and his works were banned. The ruling of the Moscow synod stated:

²¹ *Psaltyr’ rifmotvornaya* [*The Psalter in Verse*] (Moscow: Verkhnyaya tipografiya, 1680); *Vecheria dushevnaia* [*The Spiritual Supper / Banquet*], published posthumously c. 1682–1683.

Some of them [i.e. Simeon's books] were found to contain hidden, and others even explicit, speculations foreign to the Greco-Russian Church and more appropriate to Roman and Uniate teachings. The Patriarch, having enumerated them in detail at the Council of Moscow Clergy in 1690, forbade both the published and unpublished dogmatic works of Simeon of Polotsk to be read in public or in churches, under threat of defrocking for the clergy and excommunication. (Metropolitan Evgenii, 1827, p. 214)

These outcomes reflect the tensions inherent in attempting to introduce a more Europeanised model of theology and pedagogy into a confessional culture that resisted ambiguity and innovation.

Revisiting the “Secret Uniatism” Thesis

Attention may now be directed to the argument that the thesis concerning Simeon of Polotsk's “secret Uniatism” is in fact the result of a historiographical misunderstanding (Sazonova, 2018). This argument is grounded in the research of Paul Bushkovitch (1992), who contends that Robinson and Bylinin's (1990, p. 6) interpretation of the term “Basilian” is based on a misunderstanding. According to Bushkovitch, “Basilian” was a common Western designation for Orthodox monks long before the establishment of the Uniate Basilian order. Bushkovitch further cites a contemporary Catholic encyclopaedia, which defines the primary meaning of Basilian as an:

erroneous term for monks of the Greek rite that arose in the Latin Middle Ages from the assumption that they lived under the ‘rule of St Basil’, just as Western monks lived under the rule of St Benedict. (1992, p. 234)

Yet it must be noted that the second edition of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (2003), perhaps one of the most up-to-date major multi-volume Catholic reference works, also observes:

The Ruthenian Basilians of St Josaphat Kuncevyč were established shortly after the Union of Brest-Litovsk (1595), when St Josaphat reformed about thirty Ukrainian monasteries, under the influence of the constitutions of St Ignatius of Loyola, and

instituted an active congregation, which he called Basilian (1617). (2003, p. 143)

It also offers a particularly detailed account of Ukrainians and Belarusians in the early modern period:

Basilian Order of St Josaphat. In 1072 the rule of St Basil was introduced in the monastery of the Pecherska Lavra in Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, by (St) Theodosius (d. 1074). Subsequently the rule became the model for other monasteries in the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. Following the union of the See of Kiev with Rome (1596) some monasteries of the Ukraine and Belarus formed in 1617 the Basilian Congregation of the Holy Trinity (also called the Lithuanian Congregation). Approval was given by Urban VIII in the brief *Exponi nobis*, 20 August 1631. (2003, p. 143)

Thus, while Bushkovitch rightly emphasises the broad medieval use of *Basilian* as a generic Latin designation for Orthodox monks, more recent evidence suggests that by the seventeenth century the term was increasingly understood in a more specific confessional sense, closely associated with the Uniate Basilian Order of St Josaphat.

Conclusion

Considering the available evidence, Simeon of Polotsk did not conceive of confessional identity in rigid or binary terms. His own *ex libris* unequivocally identifies him as a Basilian monk, a self-designation that must be taken seriously as an act of confessional self-definition. In the seventeenth-century intellectual milieu in which Simeon was formed, *Basilian* did not function as a neutral or incidental label but carried recognisable confessional and institutional connotations. To disregard or marginalise this explicit self-identification is therefore not a neutral scholarly choice, but a distortion of the historical record.

In Simeon's lifetime, Eastern Orthodox Christianity did not have a single dominant centre, and several Orthodox and related religious communities coexisted alongside one another. When this diversity is overlooked, Simeon's religious position is often explained using later,

Muscovy-centred perspectives that were only beginning to take shape in his time, which can blur the historical context in which his views were formed. Simeon's intellectual biography situates him above all within the educational and cultural world of Eastern Europe, shaped by the schools, scholarly networks and confessional dynamics of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, rather than within Muscovite religious culture. His example shows that in the early modern Grand Duchy of Lithuania religious identity could remain flexible and closely connected to education and intellectual exchange. Rather than being confined to simplified labels such as Orthodox or Uniate, Simeon is best understood as a figure who moved between traditions and cultural worlds, whose religious self-understanding was shaped by a complex and evolving historical context.

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Writing the *Pieds-Noirs*: The Construction of *Pied-Noir* Identity in Algerian and French Literature

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Abstract

*This article examines representations of pied-noir identity in contemporary French and Algerian literature by situating them at the intersection of memory studies, postcolonial studies and literary criticism. Engaging with the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha and Pierre Nora, it interrogates the ways in which nostalgia, displacement and cultural hybridity are mobilised in Yasmina Khadra's novel *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* (2008) and Patrick Jusseaume's *Non-Retour* (2021). Through a comparative close reading of these texts, this article reflects on the contested construction of memory and the divergent narrative strategies used to portray postcolonial subjectivity.*

*By foregrounding the notion of the third space, the analysis traces how both texts destabilise traditional binary models of coloniser and colonised by placing their protagonists in ambivalent positions of cultural liminality. Khadra's novel advances a reflexive and often critical portrayal of the French pied-noir settler population, while simultaneously acknowledging the emotional complexity of their attachment to Algeria. Jusseaume's *bande dessinée*, by contrast, uses the immediacy of visual storytelling to emphasise the trauma of repatriation, but prefers a depoliticised narrative that omits colonial complicity.*

This article contributes to ongoing debates within Francophone postcolonial studies regarding the narrativisation and contestation of settler memory, and the afterlives of empire in both metropolitan and diasporic contexts.

Keywords: postcolonial memory, literary analysis, *Pied-Noir*, identity, displacement, Franco-Algerian relations, hybridity, settler colonialism

Introduction

The *pied-noir* identity occupies a complex and contested space within both Algerian and French historical narratives, and has been profoundly shaped by colonialism, violence, displacement and postcolonial memory. As European settlers incentivised to immigrate to a recently colonised Algeria from the nineteenth century onwards, the *pieds-noirs* developed a distinct cultural identity that became uprooted—and later rendered ambiguous and controversial—following Algerian independence in 1962. France

positioned itself as the political homeland of *pieds-noirs* of all European backgrounds, offering them legal protections and French citizenship (Savarese, 2016, pp. 173–174). Their “return” to metropolitan France, which was neither desired nor welcomed by native French society, left them in a state of cultural liminality, being neither fully Algerian nor fully French. As a result, they were regarded as outsiders by both communities and were often blamed for acts of violence. As proponents of settler colonialism—a colonial system that displaces native populations to maintain control over a territory—the *pieds-noirs* remain a highly scrutinised group, due to growing opposition to the practice (Day, 2015, pp. 104–105). This article explores how this complex identity has been constructed, contested and reimagined in both Algerian and French literary fiction. Comparing literary portrayals of *pieds-noirs* from both traditions demonstrates how their contrasting representations engage with broader themes of nostalgia, exile, belonging and postcolonial memory within contemporary and historical frameworks. Although *pied-noir* heritage lies not just in France, but in Spain, Italy and Malta (Connolly, 2020, p. 4), this article pays particular attention to *pieds-noirs* of French origin and those who took on French nationality following the exodus from Algeria.

The *pied-noir* identity is emblematic of the tensions inherent to national identity formation and decolonisation, due to its intrinsic hybridity and the group’s history of displacement. For such groups, literature serves as a critical space for negotiating identity, particularly in post- and de-colonial contexts where their narratives are often fractured or challenged (Khan *et al.*, 2024, p. 309). The selected texts—*Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* (2008) by Yasmina Khadra and *Non-Retour* (2021) by Patrick Jusseaume—offer varied and complex depictions of *pieds-noirs* in Algerian and French literary traditions respectively. Through a comparative analysis, this study explores how these texts construct and critique the *pied-noir* identity and what they reveal about postcolonial memory and identity construction through contrasting national narratives. These texts present complementary yet contrasting reflections on the *pied-noir* experience. Khadra’s nuanced prose and Jusseaume’s visual imagery converge on shared themes of trauma, nostalgia, memory and identity. What is illuminating is how the Algerian text tells the story of the *pieds-noirs* from their colonisation to their exile and new lives in France, whereas the French text focuses on the

immediate trauma of exile, omitting the context of an imperial past. As these two works apparently align with their respective national narratives while handling similar themes, *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* and *Non-Retour* are compelling texts to study how Algerian and French authors depict the *pied-noir* identity and experience. This article demonstrates how these two texts are ideal case studies for comparison of depictions of the *pied-noir* identity.

The *Pied-Noirs*

The term *pied-noir* translates as “black-feet” and refers to a community that emerged as a distinct identity during the colonial period in Algeria. The *pieds-noirs* are an ethno-cultural group comprised mainly French-born Algerian citizens and their descendants, and lay claim over both French and Algerian culture, but also possess a culture unique to the community. These men and women began to arrive in Algeria from the 1830s, when French Algeria was seen to be peaceful and prosperous. The settlers usually held both French and Algerian citizenship and were at the top of the colonial hierarchy (Eldridge, 2016, p. 18). As their French identity placed them above native Algerians, the settlers’ “Frenchness”¹ became a key component of *pied-noir* identity. This manifested in a reverence for the French language, Christianity and French cultural traditions, propelled by disdain for the Arabic language, Islam and Arab cultural traditions. By 1954, approximately 10% of Algeria’s population were *pied-noir* (Eldridge, 2016, pp. 18–19).

As pro-independence movements gained traction in Algeria, the *pieds-noirs*’ position within Algerian society became precarious, as tensions mounted and eventually boiled into a war for independence. When it became clear that independence was inevitable, there was a mass exodus of *pieds-noirs* to metropolitan France, as hatred for Europeans in Algeria began to manifest in individual instances of violence, such as the 1956 Milk Bar Bombing, as well as in organised massacres, such as the Oran Massacre (Hubbell, 2015, p. 8). As the French Army began to withdraw from Algeria, it could no longer promise protection for *pieds-noirs*, and so an estimated

¹ The boundaries of this term are contested, and the French identity is highly racialised. For how “Frenchness” is performed and signalled, particularly by North Africans, see Beaman, 2017.

80% of settlers fled. Nearly one million were “repatriated” to France, where the term “*pied-noir*” was used as an insult, reflecting the socio-political climate in France at the time. Many *pieds-noirs* preferred the term “*Français d’Algérie*” (“French of Algeria”), but the term *pied-noir* was later reappropriated to become a symbol of pride (Hubbell, 2015, p. 10).

Though traumatised by being forced from their home country, some *pieds-noirs* were eager upon arrival in France to finally experience the country that they had engaged with through generational relationships. In a series of interviews conducted by Jeannine Verdès-Leroux with *pieds-noirs* at the end of the twentieth century, the historian explains how the interviewees viewed France before their repatriation. They were quoted as saying “On ne vivait que dans l’image de la France [...]. La seule chose qui intéressait, c’était la France [...]”,² and “La France, c’était une sorte d’Olympe, de sanctuaire” (Verdès-Leroux, 2003, p. 324).³ Verdès-Leroux (2003, pp. 324–325) summarises by saying that the *pieds-noirs*’ concept of France was one of splendour, culture and intelligence. This meant that when they came to the motherland, their expectations, shaped by the admiration their parents and grandparents had expressed and fostered across successive generations, clashed with the reality of a country that disappointed many of them. One interviewee said that “Nous voulions, comme Pieds-noirs, la France plus belle qu’elle ne pouvait être” (Verdès-Leroux, 2003, p. 333).⁴ Other interviewees mentioned that upon arrival they felt little affinity with France, considering it a dirty, rigid, backward country, which showed little love for them (Verdès-Leroux, 2003, p. 334).

Because of the racial hierarchy in Algeria, white *pieds-noirs* generally lived more privileged lives than native Algerians before the Algerian War (1954–1962). They were stereotyped by both Algerians and the French alike as “rich and exploitative” and were viewed as white colonists by Algerians at large (Eldridge, 2016, pp. 20–21). The reality, however, was that *pied-noir* stereotypes erased the variety of classes and experiences within the group. Its members, while often wealthy and prejudiced, were also integrated into wider Algerian society and lived more modestly.

² “We lived only in the image of France [...]. The only thing that interested us was France [...]”. Note that all translations from French to English are my own, unless otherwise indicated by a citation.

³ “France was a sort of Olympus, a sanctuary”.

⁴ “As *pieds-noirs*, we wanted France to be more beautiful than it could be”.

Generally, *pieds-noirs* had a lower standard of living than the metropolitan French, and for the wealthier among them, most lacked the liquid funds necessary to start a new life after repatriation, having left their assets behind (Baillet, 1975, p. 304). The essentialist stereotype was described by *piéd-noir* repatriate Jean-Pierre Hollender as follows:

[...] gros, gras, rouges et suants, cigare aux lèvres, jetant nos billets de banque par la portière de notre voiture ou fouettant les glaneurs qui osaient ramasser les blés abandonnés par les grosses moissonneuses batteuses. Les femmes étant couvertes de bijoux et passant leurs journées affalées sur des sofas en mangeant des “loukoum,” pendant que des négriennes au moyen de grands éventails chassaient les mouches en les ventilant [...].⁵
(Hollender, 1997, p. 16, quoted in Hubbell, 2015, p. 12)

Despite living privileged lives in Algeria, the standard of living in France was overall higher, and so upon arrival to France, *piéd-noir* communities found themselves in a new, distinctly lower socio-economic position. This contrasted sharply with the idealised image of France as a revered homeland. A combination of an absence of facilities and resources to support their transition into French society, a lack of familial connections in France and the resentment they faced from the native French resulted in financial struggles and difficulties in integrating into a country that largely did not welcome *pieds-noirs*. As a result, many found a sense of community in their perceived victimhood. The settlers expected to arrive in a France which welcomed them as brothers, but they were instead viewed as outsiders who were distinct from the metropolitan French in how they dressed, spoke and ate (Hubbell, 2015, pp. 10–12). The group, fearing that their identity would be lost after repatriation, consolidated the multiplicitous *piéd-noir* identity into one image, which often conformed to its stereotypes. This was because they understood that their survival as a distinct cultural group was dependent on unity. As such, rather than basing their identity on their European heritage and being “more French than the

⁵ “[...] fat, greasy, red and sweaty, cigar between the lips, throwing our banknotes out the door of our new car or whipping the gleaners who dared to gather the wheat left behind by our great combine harvesters. The women being covered in jewels and spending their days slouched on sofas and eating Turkish Delight, while their black servants fanned them, chasing away flies with large fans [...]”.

French” as they did in Algeria, the main locus of sub-group identity came from the specific city in Algeria from which they fled (Hubbell, 2015, pp. 13–14).

Part of this effort to preserve *pied-noir* identity was chronicling the experience of existing between Algerian and French identities, the trauma of the exodus and the nostalgia for a land that was no longer theirs, as well as disappointment in the idealised motherland. Memoirs and personal accounts were being printed within a year of repatriation and continued to be published into the twenty-first century (Hubbell, 2007, p. 59). The chronicling of *pied-noir* identity is seen in poems, novels, artworks, cookbooks and films, as *pieds-noirs* and their descendants attempt to preserve a culture that fades with each generation’s separation from Algeria.

Theoretical Frameworks and Comparative Literary Analysis

When examining the *pied-noir* experience through a theoretical lens, Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of the third space is essential to the discussion. Bhabha (1994, pp. 35–36) believed that postcolonial identities cannot be defined as fixed or binary, as “cultures are never unitary in themselves, not simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other”. The *pied-noir* community’s experience of in-betweenness, displacement, nostalgia and discrimination all forced them into a liminal space between Algerian and French identities. To Bhabha (1994, p. 28), this is the third space of enunciation, wherein the individual who occupies this space is “neither the One nor the Other but something besides”. This meant that *pieds-noirs*, as postcolonial subjects, are in a state of hybridity characterised by a lack of a sense of home or belonging (particularly after the exodus), being the product of cultural negotiation. Thus, Bhabha provides a framework for understanding how the *pieds-noirs* occupy a space of cultural ambiguity.

Pierre Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, is also useful in an evaluation of *pied-noir* literary depictions. For Nora, collective memory is anchored in tangible places and objects, or intangible concepts and constructed objects, which symbolise collective memory and historical experiences. This can include monuments, flags and immaterial symbols, which act as repositories of memory (Nora, 1989, pp. 18–25). In

the context of *pied-noir* literature, sites of memory in the form of storytelling are a means to preserve, contest and confront historical trauma and collective memory. By memorialising and debating *pied-noir* identity and its associated themes, literature reveals the disputed nature of memory, where nostalgia for a lost past coexists with present realities and ongoing efforts to preserve and come to terms with personal and collective history, from French, Algerian and *pied-noir* perspectives. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* thus provides a way of analysing how literary texts serve as containers for collective and personal memories of colonial and postcolonial experiences.

Nostalgia plays a significant role in *pied-noir* literature. Some scholars argue that nostalgia is a conservative tool that reinforces a selective memory of the past and so undermines efforts to address historical injustices (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2022, p. 1233). Others contend that nostalgia can be a dynamic process that fuels resistance and critical engagement with colonial history through literature and storytelling (Hubbell, 2007, pp. 59–65).

A critical comparative approach highlights the differences in how each cultural context engages with the past and how they use literary techniques to construct or reconstruct collective memory. This analysis therefore examines how the tensions between dominant colonial narratives and subaltern counter-narratives manifest in literature.⁶ Dominant narratives in postcolonial literature often downplay or sanitise the brutal realities of colonialism, while subaltern narratives tend to strive towards the restoration of their suppressed histories. As the colonising force, French literature may tend to romanticise or selectively memorialise *pied-noir* experiences, whereas Algerian literature may prefer a more critical and revisionist perspective that is informed by the lingering outcomes of colonial rule (Ivey, 2022, p. 6).

This analysis exposes the contestation of memory and identity inherent in conflicting depictions of *pied-noir* experiences and history in literature, where attempts to define identity are deeply political acts. The following sections do this by closely examining the selected texts and exploring how

⁶ Subaltern narratives are narratives written from the perspectives of those who are lower ranking in colonial hierarchies. See Spivak, 1988.

they portray nostalgia, identity and memory, and how this contributes to theories of hybridity and postcolonial identity.

The Algerian Perspective: Ce que le jour doit à la nuit

Although primarily known for its powerful historical narrative, Yasmina Khadra's 2008 novel *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*⁷ functions as a critical intervention in the discourse on identity and memory in postcolonial Algeria. As the novel is written by an Algerian author, it has the potential to offer valuable insights into the Algerian perspective on the *pieds-noirs* in the twenty-first century. As will be discussed, the novel employs a range of narrative techniques that both construct and contest the traditional *pied-noir* identity within an Algerian narrative.

The novel, set between 1930 and 1962, with an epilogue set in 2008, tells the story of Younes, a young Algerian boy forced to leave his family's ancestral land for the city of Oran after a fire destroys their crops, just days before the harvest. After struggling for months to provide for his family in the slums of Oran, Younes's father entrusts him to his brother—Younes's uncle—who has found success as a pharmacist and married a *pied-noir* woman. Now living in a wealthy neighbourhood and receiving a French education, Younes is renamed Jonas by his aunt, and the couple considers him to be their son. He is quickly accepted into the wealthy communities in Algeria because of his blue eyes, light skin and good looks, though is still regarded as an outsider by both him and those around him because of his Arab heritage. Jonas watches as the Algerian nationalist movement grows. He also experiences racism from *pieds-noirs* in his community. He befriends a group of boys and is the only native Algerian among them, but tensions develop between the boys as they compete for the love of their friend Émilie and grapple with a society that insists that they should be divided. When the impending war forces him to choose sides, Jonas struggles between his Algerian roots and the community he has found among the French settlers. Jonas gets caught up in the violence of the war, while his *pied-noir* friends are repatriated to France and he remains in his homeland.

Khadra avoids taking sides in his writing, depicting both the brutality of the colonists' treatment of Algerians and the everyday ordinariness of *pied-*

⁷ "What the day owes the night".

noir life. Jonas witnesses French employers mistreating labourers and subjecting them to inhumane working and living conditions, but also sees them as complex individuals who, above all else, want to preserve their homes and way of life. Similarly, Khadra's portrayals of Algerians are well-rounded, showing the full spectrum of humanity, with characters ranging from kind-hearted, family-oriented people to those who engage in violent nationalism against European settlers. The novel is also full of richly developed female characters who support one another and lead fulfilling lives independent of men, countering Western stereotypes that depict Arab women as passive or oppressed by war, society or religion (Tabaza and Mustafa-Awad, 2022, p. 368).

Focusing on the construction of the *pied-noir* identity, Khadra's representations of the French settlers are not monolithic. The protagonist, Jonas, is emblematic of Bhabha's hybrid subject, as his identity is a fusion of the cultures of the colonised (Algeria) and the coloniser (France), creating ambivalence when he is asked to choose between the two, thus placing him in a third space of enunciation (Zuraikat and Sahnoune, 2023, pp. 259–260). On one hand, the novel reaffirms his sense of attachment to Algeria through highly evocative descriptions of the landscape and everyday rituals, but on another, it reveals the dissonance between the celebrated memory of an idealised pre-colonial Algeria of the past and the violent processes of colonisation and subsequent decolonisation. This cultural liminality exemplifies the *pied-noir* experience, in which the group occupies a third space between French and Algerian cultures while celebrating a glorified past. Khadra's treatment of identity and memory is therefore ambivalent. Although the text occasionally indulges in romanticised nostalgia, it also critiques that nostalgia by drawing attention to the contradictions inherent in a memory that is selective and often mythologised. The narrative's fluid boundaries between the self and the other, and between past and present, further underscore Bhabha's concept of the third space, where identities are perpetually in flux and fixed binaries fall away.

Depictions of *pieds-noirs* in *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* all come from Jonas's experiences and interactions with them, which are varied and far from homogenous. As a young man, Jonas admonishes his wealthy *pied-*

noir friend for mistreating his Algerian servant. In response, his friend says that:

Tu n'as pas de valets, toi, et tu sais pas ce que c'est... Les Arabes, c'est comme les poulpes; il faut les battre pour les détendre.⁸ (p. 74)

Later, when discussing a *piéd-noir* opening a bar, Jonas notes that:

On l'imaginait plutôt bien droit dans ses bottes de féodal, la cravache contre la cuisse et le cri sans appel, à botter le derrière aux saisonniers et à vouloir l'Olympe pour lui tout seul.⁹ (p. 102)

Khadra paints a starkly negative image of the *piéd-noir* as the cruel and exploitative coloniser, who uses their position of power to oppress. Throughout the novel, *piéd-noirs* make comments about “lazy Arabs”, calling them dogs and snakes, though they make sure to correct themselves in front of Jonas by calling him the exception to the rule (p. 74), likely because of his European features and affiliation with French culture in Algeria.

The novel strikes a balance by presenting negative portrayal of the *piéd-noirs* in the pre-independence period while also outlining positive characterisations. Throughout the text, Jonas is well-received by European settlers and is generally treated with kindness, though this is likely due again to his European features. His *piéd-noir* friend, Isabelle, for example, becomes angry with him upon learning that he is Arab, not French, and screams at him for “lying” to her about his name and race, saying that it “changes everything” (p. 65) because it would be frowned upon for a white girl to be friends with an Algerian. Though a young Jonas does not understand why this would upset her, she tells him “Nous ne sommes pas du même monde, monsieur Younes. Et le bleu de tes yeux ne suffit pas” (p. 65).¹⁰ Despite this, the novel does call for a more holistic examination of

⁸ “You do not have servants, you do not know what it’s like [...] Arabs are like dogs, you have to beat them to get them to behave” (Zuraikat and Sahnoune, 2023, p. 265).

⁹ “We rather imagined him standing firm in his feudal lord’s boots, the riding crop against his thigh and the merciless scream to kick the behinds of the seasonal workers and to want Olympus all to himself”.

¹⁰ “We are not from the same world, Mr Younes. And the blue of your eyes is not enough”.

the *pieds-noirs*, including their variety of backgrounds and acknowledging their pain for being exiled from their homeland. In the epilogue, Jonas visits an old *pied-noir* friend, Gustave, in Aix-en-Provence in 2008 who was repatriated to France following Algerian independence:

Si seulement on avait quitté le bled de notre propre gré [...]. Mais on nous a forcés à tout abandonner et à partir en catastrophe, nos valises chargées de fantômes et de peines. On nous a dépossédés de tout, y compris de notre âme. On ne nous a rien laissé, rien de rien, pas même les yeux pour pleurer. C'était pas juste, Jonas. Tout le monde n'était pas colon, tout le monde n'avait pas une cravache contre ses bottes de seigneur; on n'avait même pas de bottes tout court, par endroits. Nous avons nos pauvres et nos quartiers pauvres, nos laissés-pour-compte et nos gens de bonne volonté, nos petits artisans plus petits que les vôtres, et nous faisons souvent les mêmes prières. Pourquoi nous a-t-on tous mis dans un même sac? Pourquoi nous a-t-on fait porter le chapeau d'une poignée de féodaux? Pourquoi nous a-t-on fait croire que nous étions étrangers sur la terre qui a vu naître nos pères, nos grands-pères, et nos arrière-arrière-grands-pères, que nous étions les usurpateurs d'un pays que nous avons construit de nos mains et irrigué de notre sueur et de notre sang? [...] Tant qu'on n'aura pas la réponse, la blessure ne cicatrisera pas.¹¹ (p. 203)

Khadra observes the variety of conditions experienced by the *pieds-noirs* in Algeria, ranging from coloniser to outcast, which deviates from the expectation that an Algerian writer would focus solely on their privileged lives (Ivey, 2022, p. 6). Interestingly, Khadra subverts the stereotype of *pieds-noirs* as a homogenous group of brutal colonists, a complaint often made by the *pied-noir* community regarding their reputation in literature.

¹¹ “If only we had left the *bled* of our own will [...]. But we were forced to abandon everything and leave in a hurry, our suitcases filled with ghosts and anguish. We were dispossessed of everything, including our souls. We left with nothing, less than nothing, not even our eyes to cry with. It wasn't fair, Jonas. Not everyone was a coloniser, not everyone had a riding crop against their lord's boots; we didn't even have boots at all, in some places. We had our poor and our poor neighbourhoods, our outcasts and good-willed people, our small tradespeople—smaller than yours, and we often said the same prayers. Why were we all lumped together? Why were we made to wear the same hat as a handful of feudal lords? Why were we made to believe that we were strangers on the land that saw the birth of our fathers, our grand-fathers, and our great-grandfathers, that we were the usurpers of a country that we had made with our hands and irrigated with our sweat and blood? [...] As long as we don't have an answer, the wound will not heal”.

This sympathetic view, which emphasises the victimhood of French Algerians, is, however, somewhat of an outlier in the novel. Gustave, for example, is consistently portrayed negatively. Jonas remembers him as the class dunce, and he only appears in the narrative when drunk, undermining his credibility. When tallied, the numerous remarks and discussions by *pieds-noirs* about Arabs, the expectation that *pieds-noirs* are exploitative colonisers and the continuous portrayal of the group as privileged and racist leave the reader with the distinct impression that although the protagonist is caught between the Arab and French worlds, Khadra portrays the *pieds-noirs* and the French colonial system critically, aligning more closely with the Algerian national narrative concerning settler colonialism rather than the French narrative, which tends to downplay or overlook it (Connolly, 2014, pp. 144–152).

The Franch Perspective: Non-Retour

Non-Retour (2021), a lesser-known *bande-dessinée* (French comic, literally “drawn strips”) by Patrick Jusseume (1951–2017), offers a distinctly French perspective on the *piéd-noir* experience during the Algerian war, foregrounding themes of trauma, displacement and alienation through this particularly French medium. Jusseume is largely credited with the initial storyboarding and artwork, but he died before *Non-Retour* was completed. Guided by Jusseume’s drafts and sketches, Jean-Leurant Truc completed the scriptwriting and Olivier Mangin completed the artwork. All three contributors are French. The graphic novel employs the economy of words and immediacy of visual storytelling to capture the trauma and disorientation of forced repatriation. As *Non-Retour* is both more recent and more obscure than *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*, less emphasis is placed on secondary criticism in the current discussion, reflecting the limited available relevant literature.

The story primarily takes place on a plane departing from the Algerian city of Béchar, destined for Marseille, carrying a group of *pieds-noirs* being repatriated on the eve of Algerian independence. Onboard, the passengers’ anxieties mirror the broader crisis of displacement. As they prepare to board the plane, they express resentment towards Charles De Gaulle (1890–1970) for abandoning the *pieds-noirs*, lament the loss of their homes and businesses and worry about their impending cultural dislocation to an alien

land. When the OAS¹² bombs oil reserves in an attempt to sabotage pro-Algerian forces, tensions mount as passengers watch their homeland ablaze below them while their plane slowly loses fuel. The narrative culminates in a series of violent encounters, including the expulsion of a hijacker, who attempts to ground the plane to prevent the passengers fleeing Algeria, and the gory death of an Algerian spy, and the ultimate repatriation of the *pied-noir* passengers to metropolitan France.



Figure 1:

Example of warmer tones and blurred divisions of past and present. Patrick Jusseume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 20.

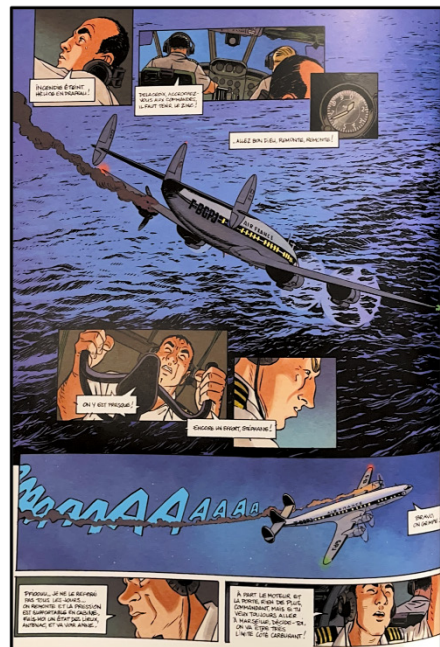


Figure 2:

Example of cooler tones and overlapping panels. Patrick Jusseume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 38.

¹² *Organisation de l'armée secrète*: French paramilitary terrorist organisation opposing Algerian independence (Connolly, 2020, p. 4).

Non-Retour unfolds through a series of episodic sequences that, much like *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*, reflect the chaotic and fragmented experiences of its characters. The narrative interweaves multiple subplots, including the logistical challenges of emergency evacuation and personal tragedies that occur before and during the hijacking of the plane. In this respect, Jusseaume's use of panels that jump without clear division from present to past (See Figure 1) and overlap and blend into one another (See Figure 2) are particularly effective at capturing the fractured nature of the *pied-noir* identity and experience, while emphasising the persistence of past trauma in the present. As the story progresses, these tools of visual fragmentation become more frequent, while the passengers get further from their homeland. In addition, as the plane leaves Algeria behind, the colour palette gradates from warm oranges (Figure 1) to cool blues (Figure 2), reflecting the passengers' fears about leaving the familiar Sahara for the cold uncertainty of France (p. 6).

The graphic medium also allows for a juxtaposition between intimate personal moments and broader socio-political crises. A poignant example is the intercutting between a young boy's quiet act of borrowing a comic from an Algerian spy and the collective anxiety of passengers, who lament De Gaulle's failings and the loss of their homes (p. 5). These visual and narrative shifts invite the reader to consider how individual memories are absorbed into larger historical narratives. The children on board witness violence in multiple forms: attacks on *pieds-noirs* in Algeria, the Algerian War and the hijacking of the aircraft, during which passengers are shot and threatened with grenades, before the hijackers eventually falls from the open-door mid-flight. This is contrasted with the children's fragile grasp on innocence. Upon landing in Marseille, the young boy is preoccupied with his misplaced comic book, despite him witnessing a violent death and mourning the loss of his father who remains in Béchar. This duality of innocence and trauma underscores the intense fracturing and hybridity of the *pied-noir* identity, which is caught between multiple layers of internal and external conflict.

Nostalgia, as with much literature around *pieds-noirs*, plays a central role in the story. On the one hand, characters cling to the memories of their home in Algeria, a land imbued with personal histories and a sense of belonging that is now lost. The longing for a return to the familiar, even

amidst the panic of evacuation, is articulated in intimate moments as when a couple vow to return to Algeria (p. 9), underscoring their enduring attachment to the land. On the other hand, the narrative does not allow this nostalgia to remain unchallenged. The pressing, life-threatening circumstances of the flight, combined with flashbacks of loved ones' deaths, expose the precariousness of this attachment. This is particularly resonant in a sequence where the hijacker brandishes a gun while insisting on landing in Oran, where the FLN await its refuelling to prevent the *pieds-noirs* from fleeing (pp. 28–32),¹³ forcing passengers and crew to confront the dissonance between their memories and attachments to Algeria and the reality of the danger that attachment now poses. This duality reinforces the notion that the *pied-noir* identity is not merely composed of a sentimental longing for a bygone era but is also a site of conflict where competing narratives of victimhood and complicity are in constant tension.

Non-Retour is also concerned with the politics of authority and betrayal, as the narrative constantly foregrounds moments of mistrust and suspicion. The subplot involving a French airplane mechanic who acquires sensitive evacuation plans and is subsequently murdered by an Algerian spy highlights the precarious nature of power dynamics aboard the plane. Although this sequence is seemingly minor within the broader plot, it functions as a microcosm of the larger sense of betrayal experienced by the *pieds-noirs*, who are abandoned by both their beloved France and native Algeria, each of which constitutes part of their identity but ultimately rejects them. The confusion of emergency evacuation and forced separation, as well as uncertainty about the future, is further conveyed through the back and forth between the pilots concerning whether they should land in Oran for fuel or continue directly to France. Should they land, they risk being forced from the aircraft by the FLN, but if they continue to Marseille, they risk running out of fuel. This dilemma reflects the fears of the *pieds-noirs*: if they stay in Algeria they will face further violence, but if they leave for France they will face entirely new challenges.

In this story, *pieds-noirs* are portrayed as both vulnerable victims of circumstance and as a people who are resilient in confronting tragedy. Jusseaume's visual style, marked by abrupt transitions between moments of relative calm and explosive violence, reinforces that the *pied-noir*

¹³ *Front de libération nationale*: Algerian pro-independence forces (Connolly, 2020, p. 4).

identity is constantly in flux, haunted by memories tinged with both trauma and nostalgia. By interweaving personal loss, collective betrayal and a pervasive sense of lack of control, *Non-Retour* interrogates the possibility of any stable, coherent identity emerging from the ruins of settler colonial displacement. The tension between the desire to preserve a cherished, idealised memory of Algeria and the confronting realities of exile is evident throughout the text, which demonstrates great sympathy for the *pieds-noirs*. It must not be overlooked, however, that this sympathy comes at the cost of the subtle demonisation of pro-independence Algerians, who are indirectly presented as antagonists in this narrative.

The Algerian spy, sneeringly called “un petit gros” (“a little fatty”) (p. 25), is drawn as an ugly, weak-willed man who resembles, but is not, a *pied-noir*, and so is brought aboard. In the first pages, he lends the young boy a *bande dessinée* to calm him on the impending flight. The boy later feels a sense of betrayal when his comic is snatched from him by the spy who runs from the gendarmes upon arrival in Marseille. The spy’s pushing through crowds and running from the policemen is portrayed as cowardly (See Figure 3), and he meets a humiliating end by unknowingly running in front of a moving aircraft’s tyres. He is repeatedly depicted as weak, sweating profusely showing fearful expressions (See Figure 4). His support for Algerian independence is vilified by both the police and passengers. This treatment stands in contrast to the representation of the couple, doctors by profession, who have promised to return to Algeria. They claim that they should be allowed to assist in the fight for independence in Algeria. In their case, *their* passion for their country is treated as legitimate, while the Algerian man’s is condemned. In this sense, the conclusion may be drawn that the position this text takes is that the *pieds-noirs* had a great love for their country and are deserving of sympathy for the trauma of exile. As there is no mention of the French of Algeria as an occupying force, but repeated use of “*salaud*” (“bastard”) to refer to Algerians, it appears that the narrative put forth by *Non-Retour* is one in which the *pieds-noirs* are portrayed victims of violence rather than as perpetrators of imperialism.



Figure 3:

Algerian spy running from gendarmes, about to be killed. Patrick Jusseaume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 53.



Figure 4:

Hostess asking Algerian spy “Are you well, sir? You seem feverish...”. Patrick Jusseaume *et al.* *Non Retour* (2021). Paris: Dargaud p. 47.

Interrogation of Nostalgia, Identity and Memory

Both Khadra and Jusseaume’s texts use nostalgia as a lens through which *pied-noir* identity is constructed. In *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit*, nostalgia is layered and ambivalent. Jonas is caught between his innate attachment to Algeria and the conflicting pressures imposed on him by colonial expectations. Like the *pieds-noirs*, he yearns for an almost mythologised version of the past, when he felt a sense of belonging living with his biological family in an Algeria that was his own. This attachment, however, is continuously undermined by the brutal realities of colonial violence and the dislocating forces of colonialism, which move him from place to place and force a French identity onto him (Zuraikat and Sahnoune, 2023, pp. 256–271). Jonas’s internal conflict as he oscillates between pride and shame in his Algerian heritage highlights how memory is not a static repository but a fluid and contested terrain. As the reader encounters *pied-noir* identity through an Algerian lens, they are invited to consider how selective remembrance can both preserve identity and obscure the more troubling elements of the past, as Jonas’s perspective reveals how the *pieds-noirs* create a narrative of victimhood that overlooks their complicity in settler colonialism.

Conversely, *Non-Retour* uses the immediacy of graphic storytelling to capture the raw emotional and physical dislocation felt by the *pieds-noirs* as they experienced exile. As they watched their burning homeland recede below them, their feelings of loss and disruption are plain to see in the panels. In this case, however, nostalgia does not just serve as a consoling force, but also as a catalyst for confrontation. For example, when characters desperately cling to their precious photo albums and memories of Algeria, even though they are forced into evacuation from a home that does not want them, the text exposes the inherent contradictions of a memory that is both cherished and contested. The passengers' lamentations emphasise the role of nostalgia in preserving cultural identity while also exposing its selectiveness and exclusionary nature, as memories of a deeply violent settler colonial past are unacknowledged.

In reading these texts side by side, it becomes evident that literature functions as a mediator between the idealised past and present realities. Khadra's lyrical descriptions and reflective tone create a space where the romanticised version of Algeria is both celebrated and critiqued, while Jusseume's fragmented and episodic narrative captures the disjointed and often vicious reality of exile. These texts reveal that in terms of the *pieds-noirs*, nostalgia is far from a monolithic sentiment but is a multifaceted tool that both comforts and disrupts, serving as a repository for collective memory that is continuously reinterpreted in light of new experiences and traumas.

Implications for Understanding Hybridity

The concept of hybridity and the third space, as developed by Bhabha, is central to understanding the *pied-noir* identity as represented in both texts. In Khadra's narrative this notion of the third space exemplifies the in-betweenness inherent to the *pied-noir* experience, as Jonas's identity is continually negotiated between conflicting cultures as a hybrid subject who is visibly marked by his light features rooted in Arab heritage. This cultural liminality is further highlighted by the narrative's fluid boundaries between past and present and the self and the other, which suggests that identity is not static but perpetually in flux. This intricate construction of identity demonstrates the complexity of memory and the process of subject formation and reformation in a postcolonial context.

Non-Retour, while operating in a different medium, echoes these concerns through its visual representation of identity fragmentation. The panels overlap, shifting between past and present, and particular colour palettes metaphorically illustrate the disintegration of a singular coherent identity in the wake of displacement. The transition from the warm hues of North Africa to the colder tones of metropolitan France signals not only the physical journey of the *pieds-noirs* but also the emotional experience of exile. Through moments of stark violence, the *bande dessinée* exposes how personal and collective identities are perpetually refracted and reformed by historical events and collective experiences. In this sense, hybridity is presented as an ongoing negotiation characterised by tension and ambivalence.

When these texts are read alongside one another, they reveal how hybridity is both a site of creative possibility and a source of vulnerability. Jonas's internal conflict in *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* and the passengers' disjointed experiences in *Non-Retour* converge to show that the *pied-noir* identity is constructed at the intersection of multiple narratives that often compete with one another. Rooted in personal memory, cultural attachment and the materiality of exile, these narratives intersect to produce a subjectivity that is neither entirely French nor entirely Algerian, but is instead a negotiated identity that emerges from the convergence of varied histories and lived experiences. Hybridity and nostalgia are therefore closely linked in the *pied-noir* experience as *pieds-noirs* embody both French and Algerian cultures, yet fully belong to neither. This hybrid identity creates a longing for a lost homeland that only exists in memory, making nostalgia both a product and expression of their cultural in-betweenness.

Implications for Postcolonial Identity Theory

Khadra's text challenges the binary oppositions that dominate colonial discourses. Rather than depicting the *pieds-noirs* as simply privileged oppressors or as pitiable victims, the text presents a more nuanced image of the community. It does not, however, shy away from exposing the systemic abuse and racism perpetrated by certain sectors of that group. Jusseaume, by contrast, leans in the opposite direction: the *pieds-noirs* are represented as a resilient people trying to reconcile a lost past with an

uncertain future, while not acknowledging their colonial origins. Both of these depictions, although different, suggest that identity in postcolonial contexts are inherently unstable and perpetually evolving.

Additionally, by foregrounding the notion of the third space in analysing the texts, both invite a rethinking of how historical, cultural and material forces interact with each other to shape subjectivity. They demonstrate that identity formation is not as simple as binary inclusion or exclusion but is a complex negotiation of a variety of factors. This perspective is crucial to postcolonial studies, as it highlights the need to think beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood and dominance, and instead to recognise the intricate entanglements that define the lived experiences of both the colonised and the coloniser.

Conclusion

Working with Bhabha and Nora's methodologies, this article finds that the *pied-noir* identity is a contested and multifaceted construct that is shaped by the interactions of memory, nostalgia and hybridity. Through a comparative analysis of the Algerian novel *Ce que le jour doit à la nuit* and French *bande dessinée* *Non-Retour*, this study has demonstrated how literature mediates the tension between an idealised past and the dislocating realities of postcolonial existence, while also revealing how diverging cultures and national narratives construct and remember the *pied-noir* identity and experience.

Khadra's deeply reflective narrative presents a critical but nuanced depiction of *pieds-noirs* as a hybrid subject that straddles the cultural divides of Algeria and France, while Jusseaume's graphic novel captures the immediacy and fragmentation of exile through its visual tools and episodic storytelling, reinforcing the French national narrative that often sanitises (settler) colonialism in Algeria. While the novel can explore the experience of being a hybrid subject in colonial Algeria extensively through text, the *bande dessinée* uses visuals to create metaphors and convey tension.

By interrogating identity, nostalgia and memory, this study advances our understanding of how postcolonial narratives are constructed and reconstructed in response to historical traumas. It illustrates how nostalgia functions both as a repository for memories and as a disruptive force that

exposes the selective nature of historical recollection. By emphasising hybridity and the third space, these findings challenge rigid binaries to reveal the fluid and negotiated subjectivity at the heart of *pied-noir* identity.

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Exhuming the Past: Forensic Archaeology and Historical Justice in the Context of the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract

Conflict is an undeniable reality of human history. The long-term impacts of twentieth-century armed conflicts on historical and contemporary societies remain underexplored. Forensic archaeology and anthropology have the potential to provide a distinctive perspective on the past.

Rather than presenting a forensic case study in the conventional applied sense, this article offers a theoretical and contextual analysis of the role of forensic archaeology and anthropology in historical reckoning and justice processes, grounded in the context of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). This article uses the Spanish Civil War as an example of a country dealing with the consequences of armed conflict. Initially developed as part of criminal investigations, forensic anthropology and forensic archaeology have evolved into vital instruments for humanitarian efforts, uncovering previously obscured narratives, including the identification and return of the remains of conflict victims. By analysing the remains from the exhumation of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War, this research emphasises how forensic investigations address both legal and human rights imperatives, offering evidence for judicial proceedings while also providing closure for victims' families. Adopting an 'archaeology of the contemporary' lens facilitates the investigation of the roles of forensic archaeology and anthropology. The findings reinforce these roles in historical reckoning and contemporary justice initiatives, while underlining the enduring challenges of confronting the legacies of armed conflict.

Keywords: osteology, forensic archaeology, Spanish Civil War, forensic justice, bioarchaeology

Introduction

The excavation and examination of human remains serve as both a reflection on past injustices and as a tangible response to them. Yet the adequacy of such responses is still in question, as current global events indicate that societies continue to grapple with lessons from history. Conflict has been a cross-cultural constant throughout history, shaping societies, altering political landscapes and leaving lasting scars on collective memory. The twentieth century was characterised by numerous

armed conflicts that redefined warfare, justice and concepts of historical accountability. Existing literature on conflict has focused on the immediate consequences of warfare, including destruction, displacement and fatalities (Gates *et al.*, 2012; Leaning and Guha-Sapir, 2013; Daw, 2022; Williamson and Murphy, 2025). However, research on the long-term effects of warfare remains limited, particularly within forensic anthropology and archaeology. This article contributes to conflict studies by examining the enduring consequences of conflict from the perspective of these disciplines, which have become integral in uncovering obscured narratives and the realities of war.

Forensic archaeology developed as an approach to examine human skeletal remains from the past, combining forensic methods for skeletal analysis with archaeology's reconstruction of graves, habitation sites and their contexts. The methods utilised in these investigations have the potential to contribute to both legal proceedings and socio-political narratives. This research further emphasises their role in investigating human rights violations and in reconstructing evidence-based narratives of past events. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), a conflict that resulted in widespread judicial and extrajudicial executions, provides a compelling example for understanding the intersection of political violence, historical memory and contemporary reckoning in attempts to return victims' skeletal remains to family members (Araguete-Toribio, 2015; Ferrándiz, 2019; Primorac *et al.*, 2024).

Exhumation and return of remains serve purposes beyond forensic and humanitarian objectives, supporting the confronting of the past and engagement with questions of restorative justice. The socio-political ramifications of these efforts are examined here, particularly in their ongoing impact on Spain's political landscape. The analysis underlying the following interpretations is based on a literature review and direct experience of the Spanish political landscape and its approach to these exhumations and reburials, gained during the primary data collection phase of my doctoral research. Using a multidisciplinary approach, this research contributes to broader discussions of how contemporary society engages with troubling aspects of the past and how forensic disciplines can shape this historical understanding. Ultimately, it advocates for an integration of forensic approaches into historical reckoning, one that has the potential to

bridge the empirical rigour of forensic science with the imperatives of truth, justice and the preservation of memory.

The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936 and was marked by instability. The roots of this conflict stretch back to Spain's perceived decline during the sixteenth century, a trajectory marked by stagnation and failed attempts at modernisation (Clifford, 2020, p. 31). By the twentieth century, these issues had coalesced into a nation deeply fractured along class, political and regional lines. Electoral manipulation and gerrymandering ensured that power stayed between the two right, dominant monarchist parties, Renovación Española and Comución Tradicionalista. Political tensions, coupled with the economic downturn that followed the First World War (1914–1918), led to widespread worker protests and public outcry against the government. The monarchy-backed 1923 coup d'état sought to alleviate these growing tensions and led to the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera (1870–1930) (Thomas, 2003, p. 23; Clifford, 2020, p. 32). Rivera's authoritarian regime lasted until 1930, when economic difficulties and a lack of popular support led to his resignation. The collapse of Rivera's regime left the monarchy exposed to heightened criticism. In a desperate attempt to regain legitimacy, King Alfonso XIII (1886–1941) called for municipal elections on 12 April 1931 (Beevor, 2006; Clifford, 2020).

The Left (Republicans)¹ won, establishing the coalition of the Second Spanish Republic, resulting in the exile of King Alfonso XIII. The Second Spanish Republic held power until 1933, when its coalition broke down following the exit of the Socialist Party (Clifford, 2020, p. 33). This withdrawal weakened the Republic and paved the way for the Right to regain a majority in the Cortes Generales by 1933. Tensions reached an all-time high following the subsequent Right-wing control of the government. Elections were held in February 1936, which saw the Leftist Popular Front coalition return to power, with the primary goal of reforming religion, the state and the military (See Table 1 for a timeline of governments and key

1 In the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Republican “Left” refers to the coalition including included socialists, communists, anarchists, liberal republicans and regional autonomists who defended the Second Spanish Republic. They favoured a secular government, social and land reforms, workers rights’ and separation of church, military and state.

events, including accompanying notes) (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 431).

Year(s)	Government/Event	Political Alignment	Note
1930	Dictatorship of Dámaso Berenguer	Right (monarchist)	Attempt to regain control after Rivera's forced resignation.
April 1931	Second Spanish Republic established	Left (liberal)	Municipal election results in the fall of the monarchy.
April 1931–1933	First Government of the Republic	Left (Republican, Socialists)	Progressive reforms in education, military expenditure and land distribution. Met with conservative backlash.
November 1933	Victory of the Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas	Right	Right-wing government regains control of Cortes, set out to undo all reforms of previous government.
February 1936	Victory of the Popular Front, Second Spanish Republic	Left (Republicans, Socialists, Communists)	Left-wing parties regain power following municipal elections, immediately begins reforming.
July 1936	Right's Coup d'états	Right vs Left	General Franco and others lead a rebellion against the Spanish government.

Table 1: Displaying the Change of Power in the Spanish Government from 1930 to 1936, at the Outbreak of the Civil War

Immediately following this, the Right (Nationalists)² began planning a coup d'état scheduled for July 1936 (Thomas, 2003; Beevor, 2006; Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008; Ruiz, 2018; Clifford, 2020). Despite their careful planning, the Right–Nationalists encountered unexpected resistance, and the coup left the country divided, resulting in the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish Civil War has been referred to as a “wearing down war” due to its attritional nature over the course of three years (Clifford, 2020, pp. 28–29). Some researchers suggest that, due to its ideological and military dynamics, the conflict served as a “curtain raiser” or a “dress rehearsal” for the Second World War (1939–1945) and a precursor to a larger, global conflict (Bowers, 1956, pp. vi, 58). Alexander Clifford (2020, p. 27) cautions against making such comparisons, suggesting that the Spanish Civil War had unique characteristics and should not be viewed merely as a precursor to the Second World War. Stanley G. Payne offers a nuanced perspective, describing the conflict as:

typical neither of World War I nor of World War II, but rather represented a kind of transition war halfway between the two and exhibited certain characteristics of each. (Payne, 2008, p. 7)

The Spanish Civil War ended in April 1939. The Republic's downfall highlighted the Nationalists' superior resources and organisation, in contrast to the Republican cause's internal fractures and external neglect. The end of the conflict did not bring peace or stability to Spain. Instead, it was followed by the dictatorship of the Nationalist General Francisco Franco (1892–1975), remnants of which lasted until his death and whose impact was felt across Spain for many years afterwards (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 431; Clifford, 2020, p. 99). Franco's victory inaugurated an era characterised by severe repression. Political dissidents faced imprisonment, execution or exile. Spain's social structure was profoundly fragmented, with animosities enduring between the supporters of the Republic and those who sided with the Nationalists. Coupled with economic hardship, the Spanish Civil War and its subsequent dictatorship

2 The Nationalist “Right”, led by General Francisco Franco, united conservative forces such as monarchists, fascists, traditionalists, the clergy and military. They favoured authoritarian rule, Catholic values, preservation of traditional social hierarchies and political unity.

led to widespread social unrest. For years, Spain endured isolation and stagnation as Franco's regime pursued a policy of autarky, emphasising economic self-sufficiency. It was not until the 1950s that Spain began to reintegrate into the global community and witness gradual economic progress.

Violence was perpetrated by both sides during the war, and it is difficult to determine in many cases who initiated specific acts (Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 11). Estimates of casualties from the Spanish Civil War and the early years of Franco's dictatorship vary across sources (Clifford, 2020, p. 39). Howson (1998, p. 98) reports over 238,000 total deaths during the Civil War. While Beevor (2006, p. 97) estimates 38,000 Nationalists' deaths occurred, Clodfelter (2017, p. 100) counters this by suggesting that Nationalists' deaths are closer to 90,000. Additionally, Thomas (2003, p. 901) reports that there were around 110,000 Republican deaths, while Beevor (2006, p. 105) claims that the number is closer to 200,000. In terms of individuals who were executed under Franco's rule, Casanova (2002, p. 8) estimates a conservative range of 70,000 to 100,000 individuals. The large number of people deemed 'missing', and the number of extrajudicial executions,³ make it nearly impossible to accurately calculate casualty figures.

The Nationalists killed by Republicans were exhumed, named and commemorated during the early years of Franco's dictatorship; the same cannot be said for the Republicans who were killed during the conflict. To ensure a smooth transition of democracy after Franco's death, successive Spanish governments promoted a policy of "forced amnesia" to avoid the resurgence of conflict and to defuse tensions (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 429).

The 'pact of silence' that followed Franco's dictatorship suppressed public discourse on the Civil War and its aftermath (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 432; Araguete-Toribio, 2015; Ferrándiz, 2019; Parra *et al.*, 2022; Hanson and Fenn, 2024; Primorac *et al.*, 2024). This policy aimed

³ Extrajudicial executions refer to executions which were not legally authorised by the governing body at the time of the executions (Oxford Dictionary, 2026). Two forms of extrajudicial executions were common during the Spanish Civil War, the first were large-scale massacres, and the second referred to as "strolls" or *sacas/paseos*, where individuals, either prisoners or civilians, were marked for execution, driven to a remote location and killed (Espinosa, 2003; Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 8).

to maintain social stability by avoiding contentious historical narratives. Historically, similar patterns of enforced silence or erasure of traumatic events often result in the neglect and forgetting of victims (Flood, 2002; Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008). In the Spanish context, this imposed forgetting is ‘visible’ in the lack of public memorials and the limited efforts to exhume, identify and return the remains of executed Republicans.

Despite attempts to suppress collective memory of the conflict, initiatives in Spain emerged to confront its violent past and ‘recover’ the memory of the Civil War. After decades of ignoring its political history, a public outcry in the early 2000s led to the exhumation and return of remains to family members. These renewed demands for truth highlight the crucial role that forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology play in confronting the legacies of conflict, while offering some consolation through recovery and remembrance.

Legislative measures, such as the Law of Political Amnesty (Law 46/1977), the Democratic Memory Law (2022) and Ministry decrees issued between 2008 and 2011 represent attempts to address the legacy of the Francoist regime by granting amnesty to political prisoners and protecting individuals involved in repressive actions (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008; Escudero, 2014; Kolon, 2021). However, these laws also obstruct legal accountability for crimes committed during the dictatorship. It was not until the Law of Historical Memory (Law 52/2007) that the Spanish government formally acknowledged the illegitimacy of the justice system set out by the Francoist government and took steps to facilitate the exhumation of mass graves and recognise victims. Despite this legislative progress, the law has faced significant opposition and has been criticised for failing to go far enough in delivering justice through legal proceedings and reconciliation.

The Role of Forensic Archaeology and Forensic Anthropology

The efforts of forensic anthropologists and forensic archaeologists are integral to criminal and humanitarian investigations, as both disciplines systematically interpret physical evidence found on bones to establish modes or manners of death. The human body serves as a cross-cultural constant throughout all societies (Joyce, 2005; Sofaer, 2006; Boric and

Robb, 2008), and the ability to accurately read and interpret evidence from skeletal tissue is an essential skill in criminal, humanitarian and archaeological investigations.

Initially developing as two distinct but complementary disciplines, forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology share a concern for the recovery and examination of human remains. This work is designed to aid criminal investigations while expanding into historical and humanitarian inquiries, as discussed here. Forensic archaeology is concerned with the study of human remains within archaeological and historical contexts, integrating biological data to provide insights into societal and cultural contexts. (Blau and Ubelaker, 2016; Rogers, 2016). Forensic archaeologists employ established archaeological practices, including stratigraphic excavation, spatial analysis, documentation of burial contexts and the incorporation of theoretical models. These approaches ensure that all evidence, including skeletal remains and associated artefacts, are preserved and interpreted within the original context while placing the individual and their autonomy at the centre of the investigation (Bartel, 1982).

Forensic anthropology applies the same methodologies in contemporary or medicolegal contexts, supporting the work of coroners, law enforcement and judicial proceedings (Snow, 1973, p. 4; Kerley, 1978, p. 160; Stewart, 1979, p. ix; Reichs, 1986, p. xv; Ubelaker, 2006, p. 4; Cattaneo, 2007, p. 185). Forensic anthropologists, while implementing similar methods, focus on analysing human bones to determine biological profiles (age-at-death, sex, stature), trauma patterns and manner of death. This interdisciplinary approach enables archaeology to directly contribute to the location, identification and contextualisation of victims recovered (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008) and is particularly valuable in relation to mass graves. Together, these fields complement one another, offering an innovative perspective on the examination and analysis of human remains.

Both disciplines employ systematic excavation and forensic analysis to locate, recover and analyse human remains. They adhere to systematic excavation approaches used by archaeologists, while simultaneously integrating scientific and forensic examinations characteristic of anthropology, providing evidence that informs legal proceedings and broader societal discussions, as these “buried bones [are] the silent witnesses of [...] atrocities” (Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 9). The practical

significance of these methods is particularly evident when applied to historical conflicts. In cases of political violence, forensic teams employ advanced techniques, such as DNA analysis, to confirm the identity of victims. The process involves locating and excavating burial sites, recording evidence and analysing skeletal trauma to distinguish between battlefield injuries and execution-related trauma. In the context of the Spanish Civil War, forensic methods, such as DNA, have been central to the identification of individuals in mass graves, thereby aiding in the return of victims' remains to their families (Araguete-Toribio, 2015; Ferrándiz, 2019; Primorac *et al.*, 2024).

More generally, a primary aim of forensic investigations is to use the recovered evidence to initiate and support potential criminal or civil actions against those responsible. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, the initial focus is on identifying and returning victims' remains to family members, as civil proceedings are rarely pursued due to the Amnesty Law (1977) 46, Democratic Memory Law (2022), and Ministry decrees issued between 2008 and 2011 (Escudero, 2014; Kolon, 2021).

Though forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology serve humanitarian purposes, archaeologists remain reluctant to address the relevance of archaeology to discussions of modern warfare (Hamilakis, 2003; Eiselt, 2009; Al Quntar, 2013). Archaeology, in a traditional sense, leaves contemporary issues to historians and focuses on the distant human past (Buchli and Lucas, 2001). However, a shift in the 1970s, with the adoption of the scientific techniques of New Archaeology and the emphasis on human autonomy in post-processualism, has led archaeologists to explore contemporary issues and no longer be defined by a specific period. By adopting the archaeology of the contemporary, combining the analytical principles of processualism with the focus on human agency in post-processualism, archaeologists can reconstruct memory and meaning while prioritising the human experience.

Forensic Archaeology, Forensic Anthropology and the Spanish Civil War

Forensic archaeology and anthropology have been instrumental in understanding the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. The systematic analysis of human remains and related evidence has provided insights into the

circumstances of death, the methods of execution, as well as allowing for the identification of victims, providing answers to the surviving members and contributing to historical knowledge (Herrasti, Márquez-Grant and Etxeberria, 2021; Rios, *et al.*, 2014).

For instance, the examination of those executed for their political beliefs reveals specific or common traumatic lesions directly linked to execution methods, shifting the discourse from theoretical debate to evidence-based discussions (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008). Such investigations involve a thorough exploration of the site, excavation and systematic in situ recording of the remains, along with exhumation and lab analysis. Analysts examine skeletal trauma in a studied data which can indicate the circumstances surrounding the deaths of individuals and can aid in the determination of whether executions were sanctioned or circumvented the judicial system in place at the time (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 437). Additionally, physical trauma is analysed to distinguish between battlefield injuries and execution-related wounds, considering demographic factors such as age, sex and socio-economic status. In determining the circumstances of the executions, the way a grave was created, whether hand-dug or machine-dug, is crucial, as is the forensic evidence of violence present, such as bullets or casings. The context in which the remains of individuals are positioned within the grave can indicate a systematic method of execution, up to the fact that the execution itself was rushed and disorganised. Together with the creation of the grave itself being that of machine dug suggestive of a timely and organised execution to that of a disorganised shallow, hand-dug grave, makes the archaeological aspects of these investigations invaluable.

The *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (ARMH), founded in 2000, has played a key role as the first organisation involved in the exhumation of Spanish Civil War mass graves and advocating for the rights of families to recover and bury their loved ones with dignity. Forensic archaeologists and anthropologists must navigate a complex ethical landscape, balancing scientific objectivity with the emotional and political sensitivities surrounding mass grave excavations while adhering to the region's ethical standards. Key ethical principles include obtaining informed consent from families, respecting cultural and religious burial practices, and maintaining transparency in the investigative

process. The involvement of organisations like the ARMH in Spain ensures that exhumations prioritise the needs and wishes of affected communities. Furthermore, forensic practitioners must remain vigilant against misusing their findings for political agendas and uphold the dignity of the deceased in all aspects of their work. While not a new topic in the discussion of ethics in anthropology or archaeology, this point remains critically important to highlight.

Forensic archaeology and anthropology play a crucial role in addressing the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. Their methodologies ensure the scientific documentation and interpretation of human remains. They provide evidence to confront forced silence and denial while placing the individual and their living relatives at the centre of these investigations. The evolution of these fields—from criminal investigations to humanitarian applications—underscores their profound societal impact in promoting justice and truth. As scientific analysis of skeletal remains progresses, it expands our capacity to uncover hidden narratives and honour the dignity of those who suffered injustice. In carrying out these investigations, the forensic methods of these disciplines serve a dual purpose: they provide material evidence that could support judicial proceedings, even if current legal barriers prevent prosecutions, and they have the potential to offer psychological closure to family members. Despite these benefits, questions remain about whether such efforts are sufficient to achieve broader societal reconciliation.

Forensic Science, Historical Reckoning, and the Broader Implications for Transnational Justice

The Spanish Civil War and its legacy have left deep scars on Spanish society that continue to reverberate today. Among the most significant contemporary issues are the exhumation of mass graves and the forensic examination of those killed during the conflict and under the Francoist regime. The exhumation and examination of remains have sparked intense debates over historical memory, transitional justice and the implications of confronting past human rights violations. It must be understood that a divide can occur in this kind of forensic work, where the material evidence required by both the court and family members in the search for each person's own truth (Buchli and Lucas, 2001, p. 124).

For many, such investigations represent long-overdue recognition of past crimes and a necessary step toward redressing historical injustices. Exhumations provide families with the opportunity for mourning and can offer psychological support by affirming the deceased's identity and returning personal belongings recovered during the excavation. However, revisiting these buried histories can destabilise the fragile consensus underpinning post-Franco democracy, reflecting the challenge faced by post-conflict societies, such as Argentina, Chile and Rwanda, in confronting historical violence in societies where competing past narratives remain unresolved. In the Spanish context, critics have argued that exhumations constitute a form of "second killing" and an "erasure of genocide", essentially retraumatising communities by disturbing victims at their place of rest following a traumatic event that was most likely an execution (Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 9). Others claim that the focus on forensic investigation is driven by profit and media attention, reducing the complex legacy of the Civil War to bones and DNA (Ferrándiz, 2006). Several organisations, i.e. the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory and State Federation of Forums for Memory advocate for above-ground memorialisation, such as monuments or public archives, as a way to preserve historical memory and honour victims without disturbing the graves.

Practical obstacles also hinder excavation, identification and memorialisation. Authority over burial sites can be fragmented. Municipal cemeteries fall under local administration, while provincial authorities govern archaeological and historical sites. This legal ambiguity has stalled many exhumations, as no single authority assumes complete jurisdiction (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008; Escudero, 2014; Kolon, 2021). The political and legal environment further complicates forensic work. Although the Law of Historical Memory marked progress, it did not fully repeal the 1977 Amnesty Law, meaning that those responsible for Francoist crimes remain shielded from prosecution. Additionally, the lack of financial and logistical support for exhumations limits the scope of these efforts, leaving many families without access to justice or closure.

The challenge of reckoning with their histories of violence is not unique to Spain; it recurs across post-conflict settings worldwide. However, the Spanish experience with forensic investigation offers valuable insights for

other societies grappling with the legacy of mass violence. Such work is crucial for uncovering evidence, facilitating legal accountability, acknowledging and redressing historical wrongs and addressing human rights violations. The body serves as tangible proof, allowing us to assert injustice and define collective identity. As Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas note, the murder or execution of an individual:

always leaves its trace, if only in the gap left by its absence, an absence as physical as any presence. (Buchli and Lucas, 2001, p. 122)

Human remains provide concrete evidence of violence, facilitate victim identification and offer survivors a measure of closure.

However, forensic science alone cannot resolve the deeply rooted political and social divisions that such investigations inevitably reveal. In societies emerging from conflict or authoritarian rule, efforts to uncover past atrocities often face resistance from those committed to maintaining dominant historical narratives. This dynamic highlights the delicate balance necessary to pursue truth and justice while promoting social cohesion. One important lesson is that forensic work, while vital for uncovering the truth and ensuring legal accountability, cannot fully address the psychological and moral scope of historical reckoning. Achieving justice also requires public acknowledgement, collective memory and recognition of victim's experiences.

Material culture is particularly relevant in the study of human remains, as it is used to restore and maintain memory while serving as physical evidence. Buchli and Lucas (2001, p. 79) report that, under a Freudian model, all memories can be preserved, and the act of forgetting can be initiated through repression, distortion and condensation—all actions closely related to acts of violence and conflict. From the perspective that remembering is constant, forgetting becomes pathological and requires investigation (Lucas, 1997). Several researchers argue that material culture is an aspect of remembering; therefore, our minds tend to forget without it (Forty, 1999, p. 2; Legendre, 2001, p. 80). Discussing forgetfulness, memory and the search for truth is therefore crucial for understanding human remains.

The role of material culture in the act of remembering becomes relevant to this research through the presence of memorials of mass graves, specifically through the narratives it portrays and the names of the victims. The presence or absence of memorials conveys a message and preserves a memory of the events (Legendre, 2001, p. 80). This, in turn, adds a sense of responsibility to those charged with preserving memory, as the deterioration of monuments and memorials directly contributes to humanity's forgetfulness (de Certeau, 1984, p. 87). The act of forgetfulness itself is rife with tension; it is not usually what is being memorialised that is the issue, but what is not. What is removed, not there, left out of the narrative for future generations (Legendre, 2001, p. 80).

Conclusions

Integrating forensic methodologies into historical investigations represents a crucial advancement in the study of past conflicts. By analysing osteological trauma and exhuming mass graves, these disciplines provide tangible, empirical evidence that enhances our understanding of the human cost of warfare while also reinforcing the material realities of political violence and repression. The Spanish Civil War exemplifies the critical necessity and value of forensic investigations in confronting historical injustices. The graves associated with this period, which had long been concealed by political censorship and societal silence, have emerged as sites of forensic and historical inquiry over the last two and a half decades. Forensic science offers an empirical counterpoint to historical revisionism, underscoring the material realities of political violence and its lasting effects on national identity and collective memory. Beyond the Spanish Civil War, forensic archaeology and anthropology are pivotal in addressing the legacies of conflict worldwide, such as those that occurred in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina (Primorac *et al.*, 2024), Uganda (Kim, Elgerud and Tuller, 2020), and Peru (Parra *et al.*, 2022), among others. Organisations such as the ARMH continue to spearhead efforts in victim identification and repatriation, resisting historical amnesia and fostering closure for affected families. Through these efforts, forensic science uncovers historical truths and restores dignity to those who suffered injustice.

The exhumation of mass graves is, however, not without its challenges. While forensic investigations provide essential evidence for legal accountability and reconciliation, they also expose deep societal divisions. Spain's experience shows that true reconciliation requires more than uncovering physical evidence; it demands a comprehensive, holistic engagement with the past that acknowledges the pain of victims while fostering dialogue across ideological divides. Despite the progress made in uncovering historical injustices, the persistence of modern conflicts raises pressing questions about humanity's capacity to learn from history. Can forensic investigations and historical reckonings effectively deter future atrocities, or do they merely function as retrospective acknowledgements of past violence? This ongoing struggle underscores the complexities of translating historical lessons into actionable strategies for preventing future human rights violations. Forensic investigations must be complemented by broader societal efforts to confront history in ways that foster healing and prevent future atrocities. The study of osteological trauma from past conflicts is not merely an academic exercise; it is a call to acknowledge and address the enduring consequences of violence.

Ultimately, this research affirms that forensic archaeology and anthropology are indispensable in pursuing historical justice. By providing irrefutable evidence of past atrocities, these disciplines challenge revisionist narratives and reinforce the material realities of political violence. The Spanish Civil War underscores the significance of such investigations in addressing historical silences and fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the past. Yet the persistence of modern conflicts reminds us that forensic science's work is far from over. The past, particularly the conflicts central to this study, has indelibly shaped contemporary societies and continues to impact individuals directly and indirectly. By embracing an integrated approach that bridges forensic science, historical analysis, and humanitarian efforts, we move closer to a more nuanced and just understanding of the past. This research serves as a reminder that while history may repeat itself, our capacity to learn, adapt and strive for justice remains an enduring possibility.

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Editorial: Research from the CACSSS Postgraduate Conference

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The College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences (CACSSS) at University College Cork held its annual *Postgraduate Research Conference* on 19 and 20 February 2025. Over two days, the conference held panels on various subjects consisting of papers with common themes. These included: “Environmental creativity”, “Time, space and memory”, “Care and wellbeing”, “Gender identity and authority”, “Interpreting historical voices and sounds”, “Mapping the mind”, “Programming counselling and coaching”, “Student experiences and activism”, “Devotions and obsessions: personal and political”, “Migrations and borders”, “Public and political systems and structures”, “Periods of transition”, and “Language acquisition and literary canons”

In accordance with previous volumes of the journal, which published conference papers, *Aigne* again issued a call for those who presented at the conference to turn their paper into a peer-reviewed article. We were delighted with the level of responsiveness to our call and plan to issue another call for the next CACSSS postgraduate conference which will take place in February 2026. We are pleased to strengthen our collaboration with the conference going forward to ensure that the CACSSS postgraduate community has a clear outlet for publishing research presented at the conference. The next paragraphs offer an overview of the articles published in this volume.

Michał Biedowicz’s article ‘Anarchy/ism and Democracy: A Conceptual Analysis’ analyses the complicated relationship between democracy and anarchism. Often seem as incompatible, the article visualises these two concepts as two opposing poles which can be bridged by the conceptualisation of the term radical democracy. This idiom offers a path which endorses the best features of both ideas, the participatory and deliberative models. Anarchism is viewed as the most radical form of democracy, without crossing the threshold of becoming an anarchy, which

is its aim. The article portrays the three main characteristics of radical democracy and provides arguments showing that anarchism and democracy are compatible to a certain degree.

Jessica Cullen's article 'An Analysis of the Performance of Irish Higher Education Institutions Against Global Sustainability Ranking Systems' examines Irish higher education institutions' performance regarding sustainability. The escalating climate crisis has urged numerous sectors of society, including higher education, to demand swift action and long-term commitment. The article attempts to understand the reasons behind the divergent rankings of Irish institutions. In order to solve this conundrum, Cullen utilises three different ranking systems and explores the potential hurdles that the Irish higher education system faces. Her findings exhibit the need for long-term collaboration which would support underrepresented institutions and sustain and promote the achievements of others.

Graham Gill-Emerson's article 'An Overview of the History of Counselling and Psychotherapy and its Training in Ireland and the UK- Implications for Future Development' explores the training and development of trainee therapists in the field of mental health treatment. Counselling and psychotherapy, despite their long-standing presence as mental health treatments, remain relatively ill-defined as professional practices. While substantial research has established the characteristics of effective therapy and effective therapists, far less attention has been given to how therapists are trained and developed. In Ireland, ongoing transitions toward state regulation further highlight the need to critically examine current training frameworks. Gill-Emerson situates counselling and psychotherapy within their historical and regulatory context, reviews the existing empirical evidence on training and outlines key recommendations to strengthen and advance the field.

Hanke Kelber's article 'Apocalyptic misanthropy and the 'Fall' of modernity in mid-twentieth-century American post-apocalyptic fiction' investigates misanthropy and anti-modern sentiments in post-apocalyptic fiction through a close reading of *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank (1959). It argues that the novel frames apocalypse as both a moral reckoning and a restorative "clean slate", positioning the destruction of civilisation as a deserved punishment for a corrupt, modern humanity. The text constructs

a stark nature–culture divide in which technological modernity is condemned and a pastoral return to an idealised past is valorised. Situating the novel within the mid-twentieth-century nuclear imaginary, Kelber highlights how such misanthropic frameworks have shaped the post-apocalyptic genre and continue to inform broader societal fantasies about collapse, responsibility and the limits of imagining alternative futures.

Cornelius David Moynihan’s article ‘Cultivating the Creativity of Neurodivergent Thinking: A New Educational Approach for ASD Students’ inspects the growing recognition of autistic and neurodivergent creativity as a powerful and underutilised resource within contemporary education. It argues that centring neurodivergent creative practices has the potential to challenge the increasingly rigid, rule-bound training models prevalent in many educational institutions. Building on prior research, Moynihan proposes the development of a collaborative third-level research project grounded in transformative participatory action research, outlining how such an approach could foster more inclusive, innovative and empowering educational practices while identifying key directions for future development.



Anarchy/ism and Democracy: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

This article is a conceptual analysis of anarchy/ism and democracy, the aim of which is to assess the compatibility between the two concepts. By conceptually outlining anarchism and the history of the term “democracy”, the article shows that both anarchism and democracy, in its radical form, attempt to achieve self-government. It submits “radical democracy” as a nuanced, reconciling bridge between the two concepts as a category of passage, a path. Radical democracy is seen as a mix of the “best” features of the participatory and deliberative models. The anarchist scholarship is divided regarding the compatibility between anarchy/ism and democracy. The pro-democracy arguments are often reduced to viewing anarchism as democracy without the state, as in David Graeber (2013) or Wayne Price (2020a, 2020b). The anti-democratic position, by contrast, portrays democracy as simply another form of rule that must be abolished (Markus Lundström, 2023; William Gillis, 2020).

Inspired by the perspective of Amedeo Bertolo (1999) and Laurence Davis (2020), this article takes the position that anarchism is the most radical form of democracy while anarchy, anarchism’s aim, goes beyond it. In outlining radical democracy’s three main characteristics—(i) maintaining political power among the people; (ii) radical extension of equality and liberty; (iii) challenging oppressive power relationships—the article also reviews some anarchist, anti-democratic arguments presented in the written Mutual Exchange Symposium, titled ‘Anarchy & Democracy’ and organised by the Centre for a Stateless Society in 2017 (republished in 2020). In doing so, the article offers three main, novel and a priori arguments in favour of the pro-democracy camp on the level of theory by elaborating on the aforementioned characteristics.

Keywords: anarchism, democracy, anarchist studies, democratic theory, radical democracy

Introduction

The histories of democracy as a concept and of anarchism as both an ideology and a movement have an interesting relationship. While democratic ways of being have existed since time immemorial (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021; Graeber, 2013; Scott, 2009; Isakhan, 2007; Clastres, 2020 [1974]), democracy is classically associated with the ancient city-state of Athens, at least from the Western perspective. Much contemporary

research on democracy, whether theoretical or empirical, has recently turned to non-Western perspectives, using comparative political theory to incorporate different meanings into scholarship whilst avoiding conceptual stretching and abstract universalism (Weiss, 2020; Gagnon and Beausoleil, 2023; Osterberg-Kaufmann and Stadelmaier, 2020). It is acknowledged that there exists ontological pluralism regarding democracy and that Athenian democracy had its limitations. However, in the spirit of the revolutionary romantics, a more radical notion of democracy, within a left-libertarian framework, may be normatively more suitable for framing democracy in terms of self-government or self-management. In other words, a radical notion of democracy would be better suited for capturing the democratic ideal and promise that served as inspiration for many democratic revolutionaries. Contemporarily, Rojava and the Zapatistas¹ can be viewed as suggestive examples of this radical democracy (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012; Esteva, 1999).

In a similar vein, anarchism, which fundamentally seeks to oppose all forms of hierarchies and domination (Davis, 2014, p. 219; Gordon, 2008, p. 49), and ultimately to achieve self-government or self-management, can superficially be seen as converging with democracy in this respect. But there are important nuances, objections and caveats that need to be addressed, which is one of the aims of this article. Historically, anarchism as a coherent political ideology and movement arose in the late eighteenth century, primarily in opposition to centralised states and industrial capitalism (Davis, 2014, p. 219), yet it also contained strains of critique against democracy in the nineteenth century. Anarchists opposed the emerging understanding of democracy as a system in which the populace elect representatives following the American (1776) and French (1789) revolutions, on the grounds that any institution of top-down representation was unjustifiable. Their critique extended beyond universal suffrage. Errico Malatesta (1995 [1926]; 1995 [1924]; 1965) opposed all forms of rule, from constitutional monarchies to direct popular governance. Historical

¹ Rojava (or 'West Kurdistan' in Kurdish) is situated in North-Eastern Syria, and since the 2011 Syrian Civil War it has been a region of deep, grassroots democratic experimentation that follows an anti-state philosophy. The Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, declared its uprising against the Mexican government in 1994, and similarly practices a more profound form of democracy on the ground in opposition to the Mexican state.

anarchists have, however, used majority decision-making within organisations such as the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) and consistently argued that collective decisions should be made in general assemblies (Baker, 2022).

Malatesta (1995 [1924], 1965) contradictorily stressed that authentic ‘government of the people’ cannot exist because he simultaneously asserted that for “[...] those who really want ‘government of the people’ [...]” majorities and minorities need to live in mutual agreement and compromise. So, he uses “authentic government of the people” to describe his desired anarchist society, whilst arguing that such a government cannot exist. Emma Goldman (2020 [1940]; 2009 [1910]) also emphasised individual freedom over the tyranny of social and state institutions, even though she was arguably in the *social* anarchist camp, since she maintained that advancing social change comes from conscious minorities rather than isolated individuals. The individualist iterations of these, arguably *social*, anarchists, presents a historical creative tension between the individual and community, what Laurence Davis (2019, p. 4) calls the ideal of communal individuality, coming from Alan Ritter’s (1980) *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis*, where this value is identified. Ritter’s argument is that anarchists regard individual and community as mutually dependent values (Davis, 2019, p. 4). Studying other classical anarchists like Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin, Ritter (in Davis, 2019, p. 4) finds that all four share an “[...] understanding of individuality as self-development, and of community as reciprocal awareness”. This understanding tries to achieve “[...] the greatest individual development with the greatest communal unity” (Davis, 2019, p. 4). It is asserted, however, that:

individual and community can never be perfectly reconciled, but only balanced in a dynamic and creative tension, [thus] the revolutionary process is necessarily a never-ending one. (Davis, 2019, p. 19)

It will be seen how the understanding of radical democracy advanced in this article is related to this deeper conception of revolution as process. Moreover, from the perspective of democracy, the same creative tension between individual and community can be seen in Alexander Reid Ross’s (2020, p. 196) reading of Malatesta, Goldman, Parsons and Russell,

described as “[...] continued efforts at redeeming democracy in principle while providing a scathing critique of its institutionalisation”. What this shows is that the classical anarchists’ attitude towards democracy up to World War II was largely critical, even though democratic decision-making mechanisms were practised in organisations like the CNT and necessary collective action was emphasised by key classical anarchist figures, rather than being undermined as is commonly misconstrued.

Reformulations of post-World War II anarchism made it more accepting of the term democracy, inasmuch as the latter was understood as a bottom-up, participatory framework. Evidence of this can be seen in the work of Murray Bookchin (1982) on libertarian municipalism and social ecology, Graeber’s (2013) associations of anarchism with democracy, and Noam Chomsky’s (1989) juxtaposition of ‘a really meaningful democracy’ with a capitalist democracy. Practical experiments of a libertarian-socialist nature, such as Rojava and the Zapatistas, also illustrate this trend. These are not strictly anarchist projects but contain significant anarchistic elements. Similar patterns are visible in anarchist elements within the global Occupy and Indignado² movements, alter-globalisation mobilisations and numerous prefigurative projects that are normally pushed to the margins of public attention. These projects display libertarian and egalitarian forms of living, where consensual decision-making can take place. Given the recent focus of academic democratic theory on deliberative and participatory models, it seems only natural that similarities, if not identicalities, can be identified between the concepts of anarchy/ism and democracy, both in theory and in practice.

This anarchist reclamation of democracy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, has been met with a recent anarchist critique. Today, some anarchists, such as Markus Lundström (2023) and William Gillis (2020), present a fundamental opposition to democracy. Being alert to the potential for majority rule, even within the most direct decision-making frameworks, these anarchists argue that anarchism and its ultimate goal, anarchy, cannot accept any form of rule. Their position is

² The Occupy and Indignado movements were anti-austerity protest camps that were partially inspired to action by the Arab Spring developments (2010–2012). The Occupy camps are referenced by anarchist scholars Ruth Kinna and Alex Prichard indicating anarchist ways of organising (Anarchism Research Group Loughborough, 2019). The Indignados are referenced by Laurence Davis (2014) as an example of the same.

that anarchists oppose not only domination itself but also any tendencies towards it. In other words, no arrangement is acceptable if even the slightest amount of domination can ‘slip back in’. This argument, among others, is countered here.

This article can be viewed as a second reclamation of democracy within anarchist scholarship, offering novel *a priori* arguments in favour of the pro-democracy perspective. By conceiving radical democracy as a category of passage, which dissolves negative aspects of democracy as it tries to reach anarchy, the author develops four arguments, the first three of which are original³: i) Radical democracy is about radically extending equality and liberty, which means that, to stay a radical democracy, the decisions that are collectively made should be self-reinforcing of liberty and equality and not diminutive of them in any way as that would be reactionary and, therefore, counterintuitive; (ii) One of the definitions of radical democracy mentions challenging oppressive power relationships, which should make majoritarianism, or tyranny of the majority, also counterintuitive to radical democracy; (iii) Stemming from the two, radical democracy entails radical inclusion, giving priority to those most affected by collective decisions; and (iv) Any envisioned anarchist society described by anti-democratic anarchists can fit the ideal imagined by pro-democrats. This last contention is rephrased from Leonard Williams (2020, p. 131).

Anarchism

Anarchism is both a political ideology and movement that focuses on achieving anarchy. Anarchists have historically viewed anarchy positively, as a condition of being unruled, because they believe that order does not require rule (Woodcock, 1962, p. 10). That is, order can be achieved without rulers. The word “Anarchy” comes from the ancient Greek word *αναρχία* (“anarkhia”), which is broken down to “an-” and “arkhia”, with “an” meaning “without” and “arkhia” meaning “ruler” (Dupui-Déri, 2010, p. 13; Marshall, 2010, p. 3). Although its traces and precursors can be stretched back thousands of years, as already mentioned anarchism emerged as a coherent ideology in the late eighteenth century along with

³ “Radical extension of equality and liberty” actually comes from Dahlberg (2012) but its elaboration to the anarchist debate here is in this sense original. Same goes for the second argument which comes from Philosophy Talk (2019).

the other prominent ideologies of the time—liberalism, socialism, conservatism and nationalism (Davis, 2014, p. 219). Its aim being anarchy, this ideal is often characterised by statelessness, classlessness, free association, non-capitalism, libertarianism and egalitarianism. This definition excludes ideological hybrids, such as anarcho-capitalism and national anarchism, which are arguably outside the anarchist tradition. In political terms, anarchy is more generally portrayed as self-government (Davis, 2020, p. 77; Kropotkin in Kinna, 2005, p. 68). Related terms, including ‘self-administration’, ‘self-management’ are used synonymously (Davis, 2020, pp. 75; Davis, 2014, p. 214; Kinna, 2005, p. 68).

Anarchists are against all types of government, except self-government. This is because governments, portrayed in a statist manner, lead to hierarchy and domination—two features that anarchists are centrally opposed to. Governments are often understood as existing externally and above societies that they oversee. For anarchists, this is unacceptable. The condition of being ‘overseen’ is the same as being ‘managed’, ‘regulated’, ‘monitored’, ‘ordered’, or ‘supervised’. This is a hierarchical arrangement understood as a pyramid that leads to domination. As anarchists reject the state and formal government, an anarchist community must find other ways to manage its affairs without hierarchy and domination. The ethical ideal of self-rule within anarchism stands as the diametric opposite of these through horizontality and consensus. This raises important questions about how political power should be dispersed within society.

Starhawk (in Gordon, 2008, pp. 49–50) distinguishes between three types of power: “power-to”, “power-over”, and “power-with”. “Power-to” refers to the basic capacity to do things and affect reality, for example creating, planting, building and writing. “Power-over” is achieved through domination, whether by physical force or resource-control, and can be found in contexts like the workplace, courts and schools. “Power-with” refers to a non-coercive influence and initiative exercised among equals. Thus, it is “the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to, to begin something and see it happen” (Gordon, 2008, p. 50). Self-government, desired by anarchists, is arguably characterised as “power-with”. While it is often claimed that anarchists are against power altogether and wish to abolish it this is a misconception.

Anarchists want to ‘fight the power’, or at least ‘the powers that be’, and resist all systems of domination [...]. (Gordon, 2008, p. 49).

At the same time, they want to empower ordinary people, especially the dispossessed and powerless.

Democracy

Democracy is possibly the most contested concept in political theory. It is commonly understood as “rule by the people” (Lummis, 1996, p. 15; Cammack, 2019, p. 42). Like anarchy, it comes from ancient Greek and is derived from the term δημοκρατία (“*dēmokratia*”). This is broken down to “*dēmos*” and “*kratia/kratos*”, where the former means “[...] ‘assembly’, defined as the collective political agent constituted by the common people” and the latter means “superior physical strength” (Cammack, 2018, p. 2; 2019, p. 45). In ancient Greece, all cities had assemblies (Cammack, 2019, p. 44). However, a “*polis*” (city-state) was considered a “democracy” when its assembly tipped the balance of power away from the usual ruling elite, (Cammack, 2019, pp. 42, 60). In fact, “[...] *dēmos* and *polis* became used interchangeably when the *dēmos* gained the upper hand over the political elite” (Cammack, 2019, p. 59). In this context, their “*kratos*” was their physical superiority inasmuch as “[...] *dēmos* was an oppositional term, defined by contrast with the political elite” and this understanding was typical “from Homer to Aeschylus [...]”, notes Cammack (2019, p. 45). Using *Athēnaiōn Politeia*, Cammack (2018, p. 2) indicates that “*kratos*” became “*kurios*” when it gained general acceptance. She translates “*kurios*” as “juridical power or jurisdiction” and infers that:

[...] *dēmokratia* implied the capacity, in the first instance physical but soon enshrined in accepted political processes, of the collective common people to dominate its rivals [...]. Who were these rivals? The term *archê* suggests one answer: those who held political office. (Cammack, 2018, p. 2)

Landauer’s piece (2023, pp. 376–378) translates “*kurios*” as “in control” and he connects it with “democratic control” in ancient Greece to mean something like “agenda-setting and initiative”. Moreover, analysing

Pericles' *Funeral Oration*, Papanikos argues that if one reads it carefully, they will conclude that:

Democracy exists when **all** participate to direct (*οἰκεῖν*) the politeia. The word *οἰκεῖν* means that **all** directly (not through representatives) manage their *politeia*, e.g., its economy, its military, its erection of monuments of arts and worship, and its organization of religious, athletic, and educational festivities. In other words, all people govern and there is no need for anybody to govern **for** the people. Without the **all**, the many does not define democracy. (Papanikos, 2022, pp. 107–108; original emphases)

Through practice in different contexts, “democracy”, as a word, evolved over time. Academically it entails an ontological pluralism regarding its meaning. Jean-Paul Gagnon (2018, p. 95) identified at least 2,234 descriptors (adjectives) for democracy, highlighting its status as an essentially contested concept. In ancient Athens, democracy unfolded in three distinct stages, where each meant an increase in popular power and a corresponding decrease in aristocratic power: 594–508 BC, 508–461 BC, 461–322 BC. After 322BC, aristocratic rule was reestablished (Arblaster, 2002, pp. 16–17, 24). Although limited with regards to slaves, women, and ‘metics’, Athenian democracy was seen as self-government, or at least a rule by multitude, according to Aristotle (Dunn, 2019, p. 24). In this respect, it was similar to ‘politeia’, though Aristotle saw the latter as capable of achieving the common good and justice in practice (Dunn, 2019, pp. 24–27). That is, both concepts refer to participatory self-government, but as Dunn articulates, *dēmokratia*:

[...] was a regime of naked group interest, unapologetically devoted to serving the many at the expense of the wealthier, the better, the more elevated [...] democracy is violent, unstable, and menacing to those who already held wealth, power [...]. (Dunn, 2019, p. 27)

This was the understanding of *dēmokratia* that Aristotle transmitted to later European thinkers.

With the likes of D’Argenson (1694–1757), James Madison (1751–1836), Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) and Maximilien Robespierre

(1758–1794) among others, Dunn (2019) points out how democracy became intertwined with the word republic (“Res publicae” = “the public things”) over the years, and that this resulted in democracy being contemporarily understood no longer as self-government, but as a system where ordinary people elect others to govern on their behalf. James Madison (quoted in Dunn, 2019, p. 54), one of the founding fathers of the United States of America, drew a distinction between Democracy and Republic by pointing out how pure democracy was “a Society, consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the Government in person [...]” and that:

the true distinction between these [Greek] communities and the American Government was *the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity* from any share in it [...]. (Dunn, 2019, p. 72)

Thomas Paine (1737–1806) called America’s new government at the time as “representation ingrafted upon Democracy [...]. What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude” (Dunn, 2019, p. 89). Robespierre wanted Revolutionary France to “eclipse the glory of all previous free people, and become a model for all nations [...]”, and he declared that the sole form of government which could realise this was:

democratic or republican: these two words are synonymous, despite the vulgar abuse of language, for aristocracy is no more the republic than monarchy is. Democracy is not a state in which the people, continuously assembled, regulates by itself all public affairs [...] Democracy is a state in which the sovereign people, guided by laws which are its own work, does by itself all it can do well, and by delegates all that it could not. (Dunn, 2019, p. 92)

Thus, representative democracy became synonymous with the simple term ‘democracy’ itself via ‘republic’. C.B. Macpherson (2006 [1965]) also points out how the ‘liberal’ aspect of societies at the time contributed to this synonymity, which is unsurprising considering that contemporary representative democracies are often called ‘liberal democracies’.

There has been, however, a revival in understanding democracy in terms of more “participatory self-government” such as seen in the works of Carole Pateman (1970), Charles D. Lummis (1996) and Dimitrios

Roussopoulos and C. George Benello (2005). Contemporary scholarly work on ‘models’ of democracy, as accounted by David Held (2006, pp. 208–216, 230–254), has in recent decades focused mainly on the participatory and deliberative models, arguably with greater emphasis on the latter.

Radical Democracy

The scholarship of radical democracy has been centred on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) and those that came after, but even Mouffe herself pointed out that:

Our understanding of radical and plural democracy is to be distinguished from many other forms of radical or participatory democracy. What we advocate is a type of “radical liberal democracy” – we do not present it as a rejection of the liberal democratic regime or as the institution of a new political form of society. (Mouffe, 1996, p. 20)

Elsewhere, she described the areas of the liberal tradition that need to be reformulated for the Left to accept that deepening democracy must occur within the liberal-democratic framework and its institutions (Mouffe, 1992, pp. 2–3). As such, the radicality surrounding the Mouffean model is arguably lost. As Karl Marx (1843) put it, to be radical is “to grasp the root of the matter”. In other words, radicality involves challenging something at its foundation, and if that foundation cannot be justified then it must be either significantly reformed or overturned altogether.

Lummis (1996, p. 25) described radical democracy as “quite precisely the thing itself”. As such, radical democracy will always call for a root meaning of democracy, regardless of any additional descriptors to it. The democratic process is often seen here as open-ended, unfinished, ongoing and reflexive. Scattered in different works, the features of radical democracy brought together can be outlined as the following: (i) maintaining political power among the people; (ii) radical extension of liberty and equality; and (iii) challenging oppressive power relationships (Dahlberg, 2012, p. 491; Lummis, 1996, pp. 22, 25–26; Philosophy Talk, 2019). This conception keeps radical democracy within the left-libertarian camp and rejects any qualifiers that attempt to justify removing political power from the people and placing it in frameworks that are, in effect, top-

down and ‘unradical’. By contrast, radical democracy is ‘bottom-up’, a form of democracy ‘from-below’ (Cairns and Sears, 2012, pp. 12–19). Although overlaps can exist, radical democracy is quite different from Mouffe for it rejects the liberal-democratic regime *in toto* and heavily embraces participation to render a completely alternative society.⁴

Within the paradigm of the ‘models of democracy’, radical democracy can potentially be seen as combining the most valuable attributes of the participatory and deliberative models where those are ones that extend liberty and equality (Figure 1). For the deliberative model, these attributes might include institutions like networking and online forums, a commitment to politics as an open-ended learning process and deliberation intended to instigate reflection among participants (Held, 2006, pp. 246–252). For the participatory model, they could include the democratisation of various spheres of life, critiquing asymmetries of power and a conception of society as experimental (Held, 2006, p. 213). The journey of democracy to radical democracy is reflected in Figure 2.

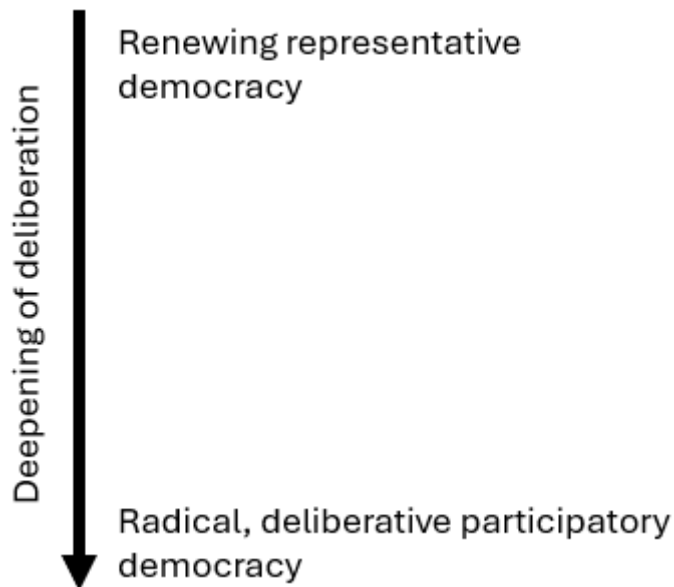


Figure 1: Deepening Democracy

Democracy radicalises as it moves away from representation to deliberation and participation. Source: Held, 2006, p. 253.

⁴ John Dewey (1935) supported more participatory forms of democracy, and his input is recognised in viewing democracy as process in different social spheres, but his theories contain finitude to the liberal paradigm and its institutions, similarly to Mouffe despite both of their critique of liberal democracy.

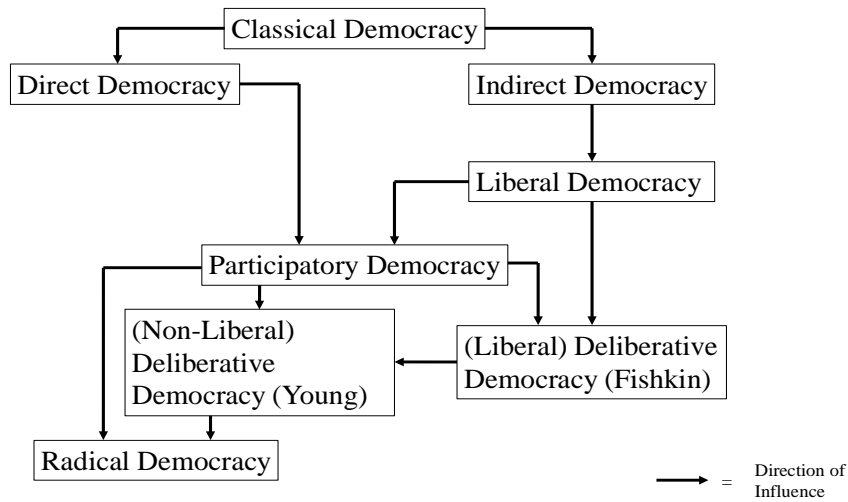


Figure 2: From Democracy to Radical Democracy

Source: Michał Biedowicz.

Anarchism and Radical Democracy

Radical democrats are often inspired by Jacques Rancière whose picture of democratic politics is one of “an emancipatory struggle through which social inequality is made visible and contested” (Schaap, 2021, p. 30). In 2008, Rancière gave an interview to the Anarchist Studies Network where he stated that:

an-archy in general is the doctrine of the illegitimacy of domination and the practice of bringing into play the capacity of the greatest number. (May, Noys and Newman, 2008, pp. 174–175)

This response was prompted by a question about a statement he had made previously, in which he said:

democracy is anarchic, in the specific sense that it is based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern. (May, Noys and Newman, 2008, p. 174)

The relationship between anarchism and democracy is largely twofold. Some view them as incompatible opposites (incompatibilists/anti-

democrats), while others see them as compatible (compatibilists/pro-democrats). Those who are not anarchists often base their opinion on incompatibility through the negative connotations of the term ‘anarchy’. This discussion is usually brief and commonplace, often concluding that people simply need to be governed; otherwise, there will be chaos. Anarchists, on the other hand, who view democracy and anarchy as incompatible, hold this belief for three reasons: (i) the idea of anarchy, meaning ‘rule by no one’, logically refers to the rule by *nobody* literally, not even by the people themselves—it is to abolish *all* forms of government, domination “and encumber [...] that very tendency” (Lundström, 2023, pp. 56–57; Gillis, 2020, pp. 153–169); (ii) majoritarianism, where rule by the peoples effectively becomes rule by the majority, which can result in a majority coercing, or dominating a minority in decision-making processes (Malatesta, 1995 [1926, 1924]; 1965; Goldman, 2020 [1940]; 2009 [1910]). This argument is most often advanced by individualist anarchists; (iii) collective decision-making versus voluntarism, wherein democratic decisions are typically voted on and collectively binding, whereas most anarchists prefer consensual decision-making with a right to veto, so that decisions are not imposed, following the principle of voluntarism (Gordon, 2008, pp. 69–70). There are other arguments, but these three are the most predominant in anarchist thought and have been elaborated upon by Malatesta (1995 [1926, 1924]; 1965), Goldman (2020 [1940]; 2009 [1910]), Gordon (2008), Gillis (2020) and Wilbur (2020).

The anarchist compatibilists justify their position in this debate through the following viewpoints, with the first developed here as underlying the others: (i) anarchy means ‘absence of a ruler’ not *rulership* per se. Rule by no one, politically speaking, refers to the condition of no pyramidal power relations, that is no overlords, kings or elites—a condition of no “power/rule-over”; (ii) From this stems the idea that the positive condition of anarchy holds horizontal power relations to be in effect as the pyramid diffuses. Since there is no one ‘ruling over’, all that is left to do is to manage the society with others on a radically equal basis. The lack of top-down government necessitates bottom-up, collective self-government. Democracy means ‘rule by the people’— when people (i.e. everyone, nowadays) participate in government then that is collective self-

government. This causes anarchism to be simply understood as ‘democracy without the state/government’ (Price, 2020a, pp. 173–178); (iii) Both anarchism and democracy, in its radical notion, purvey self-government/self-rule/self-administration as their political goal through radical participation and deliberation (Price, 2020a, p. 176; Wilbur, 2020, pp. 250–252).⁵ As with incompatibilists, there exist other reasons, but the ones that follow are the main three. The ideas behind these arguments have been and continue to be held, although perhaps worded somewhat differently in their respective works, by Wayne Price (2020a; 2020b; 2007; 2000), Graeber (2013), Ruth Kinna and Alex Prichard (2019), Paul Goodman (2011), the Anarchism Research Group Loughborough (2019) and others.

The recurring viewpoint is that democracy in its radical notion, that is, radical democracy, and anarchism share a fundamental kinship, save for certain nuances, and in practice can be almost identical. At its core, anarchism opposes hierarchy and domination. This opposition to institutions that maintain hierarchal power relations is a convergence point between anarchists and radical democrats. Hierarchy produces domination and power imbalances, which both resist. Lummis says that radical democracy,

Is not a kind of government, but an end of government; not a historically existing institution, but a historical project. (Lummis, 1996, p. 22)

While he is not an anarchist himself, his description intuitively connects with anarchist incompatibilists, whose conception of anarchy is to end *all* forms of government. Both anarchism and radical democracy are struggles against top-down power relations, which further supports their compatibility. This connection is complemented by Proudhon’s categorisation of “Regimes”, as presented by Jesse Baldwin (2020, pp. 219–220):

⁵ This is because ‘representative democracies’ are opposed by all anarchists, pro- and anti-democratic (Lundström, 2023, pp. 43–44). Therefore, not being a point of contention. Hence also, the phrase ‘reclamation of democracy’ by anarchist pro-democrats, i.e. reclaiming it from the claws of the ‘representative’ state apparatus.

Regime of Authority:

- A) Government of all by one — monarchy or patriarchy;
- B) Government of all by all — panarchy or communism.

The essential feature of this regime, in both its varieties, is the non-division of power.

Regime of Liberty:

- A) Government of all by each — democracy;
- B) Government of each by each — an-archy or self-government.

Baldwin (2020, p. 219) points out how Proudhon related anarchy as an evolutionary successor to democracy, even though they both rejected the latter. This article argues that radical democracy can be used as a category of passage to make the succession occur (that is a point '(A/B)' in the above categorisation of Liberty). Knowing that radical democracy is a left-libertarian idea (and so is anarchism); an attempt at radically extending liberty and equality (Dahlberg, 2012, p. 491) (and so is anarchism); and maintaining political power among the people and not delegating it (through force or otherwise) to an external 'overlord', it can therefore be understood as method for achieving anarchy. While the third aspect can be easily criticised by incompatibilists to point out how power among the people can lead to majoritarianism, it is necessary to see that such majoritarianism would go against the second aspect of having *everyone's* liberty and equality radically extended. It is therefore normatively important that the radical-democratic practice in its decision-making process is self-reinforcing of liberty and equality. This makes majoritarianism, or tyranny of the majority, contradictory to radical democracy.

The question of popular sovereignty can arise here, as majoritarianism is arguably one of its instantiations. Sovereignty is understood as "[...] supreme authority within a territory", and most democratic theorists by 'popular sovereignty' would mean "[...] people ruling through a constitution" (Philpott, 2011, pp. 562–563). This notion has been rejected by some anarchists in, for instance, their divergence from Rousseau's notion of the general will (Read, 1941). Yet other anarchists, like in the CNT, have, in recognising individual sovereignty of their members, emphasised also the obligation to comply with majority decisions as per the

CNT constitution, and effectively prioritised the latter (Baker, 2022). Bakunin's words of "pseudo-sovereignty" in relation to representative democracy also presents an indirect positive viewpoint for the concept (Baker, 2022). Therefore, the attitude towards popular sovereignty, as much as toward democracy, is not unison and tensions exist, insofar as anarchism is a diverse tradition containing individualist and collectivist strands. Similarly with radical democracy as outlined here. Its emphasis on reminding the people that they are the source of political power is conjoined by the other two characteristics which stress the respect for individual sovereignty, echoing Gordon's "fighting the powers that be" in anarchism whilst empowering ordinary individuals. It is the same tension as redeeming democracy in principle by classical anarchists with a simultaneous critique of its institutionalisation.

Presenting radical democracy as a category of passage that leads to fully realised anarchy is also an acknowledgment that the two should not be simplistically reduced to one another. Rather, the nuance is that anarchism is the most radical form of democracy while anarchy goes beyond it⁶ (Davis, 2020, pp. 70–71, 75). This makes sense for compatibility does not necessarily mean 'sameness'. This is also inspired by Amedeo Bertolo (1999) whose discussion of anarchism as libertarian democracy appears to be no different to radical democracy understood here, at least on the principal level. Such understanding of anarchism *vis-à-vis* democracy opens up the possibility of making the relationship more dialectical, wherein radical democracy is the sublation process in overcoming democracy's usual negative characteristics.

Anarchy-Democracy Symposium

The Centre for a Stateless Society organised a written Mutual Exchange Symposium in 2017 to gather arguments prevalent to the topic on the anarchism-democracy compatibility through discussions among activists and scholars—the most recently organised symposium. The proceedings of

⁶ This understanding of (radical) democracy as an ideal *and* a process resonates with existing currents in utopian studies which see utopias not as static blueprints but as ongoing, transformative processes (see Levitas, 2013; York, 2023). In this framework, anarchism is the *political project* and *theory* of achieving anarchy, radical democracy is the *method*, and anarchy is the *horizon* (the goal not as a final blueprint, but as a continually unfolding and deepening condition).

the symposium were published the same year, with a second edition, edited by James Tuttle, following in 2020. While Baldwin, Price, Wilbur and Gillis, who are already cited above, all presented at this Symposium, what follows only provides a review of Gillis's entries, with some attention also paid to Wilbur's. These two have been chosen for consideration as their points largely encompass those of the others. In reviewing the arguments of other anti-democrats present at the Mutual Exchange Symposium, while from a different angle, the same points would be largely repeated if engaged here. The review proposes small counterpoints, which should be treated as elaborations of the first three arguments presented underneath (Figure 3).

PRO-DEMOCRACY	ANTI-DEMOCRACY
Kevin Carson	Jesse Baldwin
Nathan Goodman	Peter Jefferson
Robert Kirchner	William Gillis
Wayne Price	Shawn P. Wilbur
	Derek Wittorff
Alexander Reid Ross (undefined)	
Jessica Flanagan (non-democrat)	

Figure 3: Category of Anarchists in the C4SS Symposium

The main arguments in favour of the 'pro-democracy' camp are as follows.⁷ (i) Radical democracy is about radically extending equality and liberty, which means that, to stay a radical democracy, the decisions that are collectively made should be self-reinforcive of liberty and equality and not diminutive of them in any way as that would be reactionary and, therefore, contradictory. (ii) One of the definitions of radical democracy mentions challenging oppressive power relationships, which should make

⁷ (ii) and (iii) implicitly address the discord caused by the major pro-democracy argument that collective decisions must be somehow made, an argument to which anarchists usually counter precisely with concerns about majoritarianism and collective coercion of minorities.

majoritarianism, or tyranny of the majority, also counterintuitive to radical democracy. (iii) Stemming from the two, radical democracy is about radical inclusion and giving priority to those most affected by the collective decisions made. (iv) Any envisioned anarchist society described by the anti-democratic anarchists can fit the desired imaginary held by the pro-democrats. This is rephrased from Leonard Williams (2020, p. 131), and while it is not novel, it pertains to Wilbur (2020), who will be further examined below.

William Gillis

William Gillis makes many points about the meaning of democracy interpreted in many ways such as “having a say in the things that affect you”, or as a “transitory state”, etc. For the former he proclaims an example

if everyone in your generation starts using Snapchat – which you dislike – that puts you at a disadvantage: such an emergent norm clearly affects you in a negative way. But this doesn’t and shouldn’t give you cause to bring your peers before the city council and demand that Snapchat be outlawed. The norms of freedom of association, freedom of information, and bodily autonomy cleave out distinct realms of action that can affect third parties immensely yet should not [...] be dictated or constrained by them. (Gillis, 2020, p. 165)

However, this example is more of an instance of tyranny of the minority than it is of the majority, which for anarchists is intuitively worse. This is because, trying to dictate to your peers to stop using Snapchat by going to the council and outlawing it because ‘you don’t like it’ and you feel ‘affected’, is rather bringing out a private preference to capriciously dominate over a given group, which prohibits their freedom of association. It is easy to agree with Gillis in principle regarding this freedom of association, but this is not an argument against democracy for, by presenting this point as it is, he seems to say that democracy privileges the individual when in the rest of his work he argued the opposite, that it is a tyranny of the majority. In a radical democracy, where those who are most affected by the collective decisions made are given priority of voice, this relates to instances where, for example, there is an important road that needs to be built, but according to construction plans it has to go through houses belonging to someone, who therefore will be affected by the

construction plans. This situation is indeed about prioritising the individuals living in those houses as they are clearly the most affected and vulnerable. It is an instance of considering that they could be substantially worse off, and the decision made could make them dispossessed and powerless. But their priority of voice on this matter is not viewed as their individual preference dictating the collective decision made. The difference between the Snapchat scenario and this one is that the former is not about empowering a seriously deprived individual through a fair lens. There needs to be an important distinction between ‘prioritising’ and ‘privileging’.

It is true that the masses can be horrifically wrong, which is the penultimate area of consideration for Gillis. It regards situations where a thing could be popularly desired and unethical at the same time (Gillis, 2020, pp. 168–169). Indeed, regarding the hypothetical example above such a situation would manifest if the decision to build a road through these houses would take place without a serious and fair regard for the people living in them. But once that happens, it should be noted that it means this radical democracy has been compromised by its own authors. It stopped being a radical democracy the moment it decided to oppress the people living in those houses, because it is a situation of oppressive power relationships being reinstated. The radical equality and freedom of the people living in those houses has been curtailed. It is no longer a ‘rule by all’ if part of ‘all’ is being oppressed. If ‘challenging oppressive power relationships’ is taken seriously, then this hypothetical situation cannot be regarded as ‘democratic’ via radical lens.

With respect to the last area of concern in this entry for Gillis (2020, p. 168), “democracy as a transitory state”, he attempts to make a point that:

democracy is in almost every definition a kind of centralisation [...] [and] even those with sharp anarchist ideals start feeling the pressure to go to the General Assembly rather than doing things outside of it as actual agents.

It seems that Gillis does not recognise the fact that democracy is the most decentralised of ‘archies’ in existence. The people are the source of political power. In a radical democracy they would use it to manage their own affairs in their own neighbourhoods. And yes, the aim should be to asymptotically

approach the most anarchist of ideals and not their half measures, but even in the most ideal anarchy, that does not use the language of democracy, going to a more-than-two-person gathering of a kind will still occur if requisite to feasibly consider matters pertaining outside of one's neighbourhood but still concerning one's greater community.

Approaching the end, Gillis conflates his previous areas of concern to one point—that the pro-democrats are concerned about immediacy in the term “direct” democracy. That this stems from a philosophical confusion regarding freedom is Gillis's (2020, p. 169) argument here, because immediacy diminishes needed reflection and constrains the panel of available choices; it “smothers one's internal complexity, reducing an agent to a mere billiard ball”. This is regarded by Gillis (2020, p. 169) as the opposite of what he calls “a more organic network of reflective individuals [...]”. But radical democracy is mostly concerned about being a reflexive, unfinished, and ongoing process. This process would not have those characteristics if it did not require of its participants proper agency and reflection. By having these features, the considered radical democracy is as organic as it possibly can be in the existing social reality. On the side, it seems counterintuitive for an anarchist to accuse another of ‘immediacy’. If anything, this is what the anarchist framework is all about, regarding taking matters into one's own hands due to circumstances presenting a point of urgency.

Gillis's ending remarks are about demolishing rulership altogether. In his words:

Anarchism's uniqueness is that it doesn't seek to equalise rulership but to demolish it, a radical aspiration that cuts through assumptions of our dystopian world. Anarchism isn't about achieving a *balance* of domination – assuring that each person gets 5.2 milliHitlers of oppression each – but about *abolishing* it altogether. (Gillis, 2020, p. 171)

The perception of authentic anarchist pro-democrats is not that by equalising rulership each person gets a certain amount of oppression or domination. Rather, by equalising rulership, it is ensured that oppression and domination become neutralised. By “cutting through the assumptions of our dystopian world” Gillis possibly means the fact that political power is generated through our social relations and that anarchism, in his eyes,

attempts to go beyond this sociological fact. But this political power is entangled with people's ability to do other things and these cannot be separated. As much as a person uses their hands to cook a meal for their family and neighbours, those same hands could be used to kill someone. This does not mean that one should cut their hands off in the name of anarchy. Indeed, anarchism should strive for a society where the tendency to rule has been encumbered, but it needs to be recognised that it will not bring the end of *rulership*. The political power that is generated by social relations, even if unintentionally, should rather be redirected in such a way that any *ex-post* oppression and domination is overcome. Political power cannot be eradicated *ex-ante*; we can only sublimate its current so that its effects are not oppressive and thus non-dominative. This fits the anarchist framework as it alludes back to Gordon's paradigm above regarding 'fighting the powers that be' and empowering ordinary individuals. This is also in response to Lundström's (2023, pp. 56–57) account which argues for not only needing to oppose domination but also encumbering that very tendency.

Shawn P. Wilbur

Shawn P. Wilbur in his second entry presents conditions for building a road towards a society which is grounded in the principle of federation and sociology of collective force, understood in Proudhonian fashion, outlining it as a possibility for how anarchic self-government might function in practice. The said 'conditions' are rather four basic observations Wilbur makes about social organisation. The first observation relates to the ongoing overestimation of the importance of specific decision-making mechanisms:

We need to make sure that the plans which seem to serve specific local needs can be met with local resources, which will further narrow the possibilities [regarding options in terms of procedures for collective decision-making]. (Wilbur, 2020, p. 253)

Wilbur connects this with a point where a hypothetical assembly might not reach unanimity and resort to a majority vote as it might seem useful circumstantially. And that this *government* is called *self-government* is what Wilbur finds irreconcilable.

Moving to the second observation, Wilbur (2020, p. 253) points out how, due to the above, the notion of self-government revolves around a wrong sort of *self*:

The “self” in anarchic self-government is neither simply the human individual, nor “the People,” understood abstractly, but some real social collectivity.

Individuals may find themselves in conflict regarding their own desires in contrast to those of the collectivity. Negotiations can be structured quite explicitly around the likely trade-offs. In this light, Wilbur (2020, pp. 253–254) says:

To the extent that the health and success of the collectivity depends on lively forms of conflict among the members (and Proudhon made complexity and intensity of internal relations one of the markers of the health – and the *freedom* – of these entities), then the more conscious all members must be of the need to maintain balance without resorting to some winner-take-all scenario.

Wilbur admits that there will be conflicts which cannot be resolved in some one grand collectivity and that smaller-scale ones would need to be established pertaining to interested parties and that this should come from below, addressing shared interests in existing smaller groups, and then on a larger scale concerning not just one small group but others as well. This unfolds federalism, Wilbur (2020, p. 254) notes and argues with his third observation that “the ‘nucleus’ of every unity-collectivity is likely to be a conflict, problem or convergence of interests”. Regarding the last observation Wilbur says (2020, p. 254):

Organisation, according to the federative principle, is a process by which we identify – or extricate – specific social “selves”, on the one hand, or establish their involvement in larger scale collectivities, on the other, and establish the narrow confines within which various “democratic” practices might come into play.

With this, Wilbur admits that sometimes we would be ‘falling back’ on some familiar democratic practices but that this would, in his eyes, constitute a failure within an anarchist society.

Apart from this last note on ‘falling back’, it seems difficult to not argue that the process which Wilbur describes is in fact one of radical democratic practice, ongoing, unfinished, reflexive, and open-ended. However possibly unaware Wilbur might be of this radical-democratic framework, there really seems to be no other way than to say that the anarchist society which the anti-democratic anarchists want to unfold is one which can be achieved via radical democracy as a category of passage, a path. This has been denoted by another anarchist scholar Leonard Williams (2020, p. 131) who said, “In presenting an anarchist alternative to democracy [...] we often finish by describing something very much like it”. What this invokes, in a sense, is radical democracy as the self-overcoming of democracy into anarchy. It is understood as the bridge between democracy and anarchy where each metaphorical wooden plank towards anarchy is a step away from those negative aspects of democracy, such as unreflective popular sovereignty, which anarchism critiques and overcomes as it progresses. Figure 4 is a rough visualisation of this. Lundström (2023, p. 46) called this ‘democracy-as-trajectory’, so the viewpoint is not novel, but its defence here is, with relation to what gradually happens to *ex-post* power as the endeavour toward anarchy unravels. Lundström (2023, pp. 47–48) cites Third World anarchists and Malatesta himself who argue this way, to build his final anarchist critique of democracy centred on the encumbering of the tendency to rule. What is possibly underestimated, however, is the fact that this will be a long *process*, which is how radical democracy is above all defined.

To conclude this section, both Gillis and Wilbur attempted to advance their anti-democratic arguments by referring to the usual critique—majoritarianism, democracy as still a form of rule, etc. Radical democracy, however, is presented here as a dialectical remedy. Knowing that anarchy goes beyond democracy, the radical democracy conceived here is a process of letting go of the usual features of democracy that anarchists find troublesome. This includes, for example, a progressing change of attitude and treatment of political power when it is being diffused, greater emphasis for consensual decision-making, eventual non-bindingness of collective

decisions, and, if discord arises, the freedom to leave the community and form a separate association if some wish so. Radical democracy which is defined as an open-ended, unfinished, and a reflexive process, characterised by the main three features described above, is seen as the practice of this.

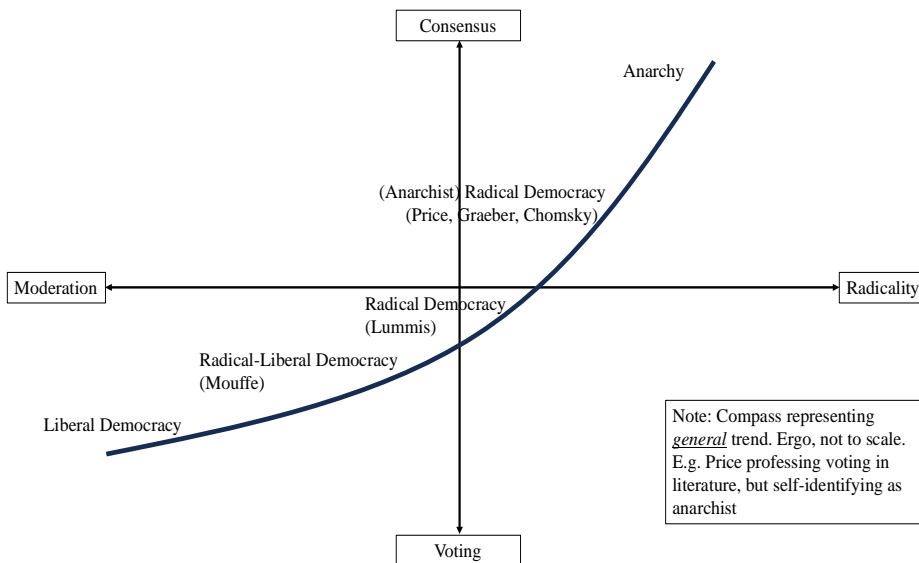


Figure 4: Scholarly Path of Radical Democracy

Source: Michał Biedowicz.

Conclusion

It was attempted to convince the reader that when it comes to the debate regarding the compatibility between anarchy/ism and democracy, it seems appropriate to take on a more nuanced approach and understand that while anarchism and democracy may be compatible, they are distinct, and that anarchy is a more far-reaching goal, with its attainment pertaining to none other framework but that of radical democracy, outlined here, as a category of passage, a practice of an open-ended nature, reflexive in its decision-making format, and, arguably, the only model of democracy that is most sensitive to the concerns that anarchists hold.

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An Analysis of the Performance of Irish Higher Education Institutions Against Global Sustainability Ranking Systems

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Abstract

The escalating global climate crisis necessitates an urgent and transformative shift towards sustainability across all sectors of society, demanding both immediate action and long-term commitment. As part of the international response, global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have called upon Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to leverage their unique position to address environmental, social and economic challenges. However, the extent to which Irish HEIs are responding remains relatively unclear. This article analyses their performance against three leading international sustainability ranking systems: the QS World University Rankings; Sustainability, the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings and the UI GreenMetric World University Ranking. Analysis reveals notable variation in Irish HEIs' sustainability performance, with some institutions gaining strong international recognition while others remain less visible or absent from global rankings.

To explore the reasons behind this variation, this article examines the methodologies underpinning these ranking systems and investigates internal barriers within HEIs that may be limiting progress. Drawing on international literature, the review examines commonly reported barriers, including the complexity of sustainability, lack of senior management support, financial constraints and institutional resistance to change. In response, the article outlines strategic pathways to advance sustainability in Irish higher education, emphasising the need for long-term, collaborative approaches that can both support underrepresented institutions and sustain momentum in those already progressing. These findings contribute to broader conversations about how sustainability can be effectively embedded and measured across diverse Irish higher education contexts.

Keywords: sustainability in higher education; global university sustainability rankings; Irish higher education institutions (HEIs); barriers and opportunities; sustainable development goals (SDGs)

1.0 Introduction

In the last century, human activities have dramatically altered natural processes and significantly impacted social-ecological systems, contributing to the current environmental crisis (Ruiz-Mallén and Heras,

2020). The accelerating effects of climate change pose potentially irreversible consequences for the planet, underscoring the urgent need to integrate sustainability across all sectors of society (Fehlner, 2019). There is a growing societal expectation for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to take a leading role in driving sustainable development (Berchin *et al.*, 2021). Within this context, HEIs play a critical role in addressing global environmental, social and economic challenges, serving as key agents in educating future leaders who will contribute to the successful implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021). HEIs are embedding sustainable practices across teaching, research, operations and governance. This article adopts the widely recognised definition of sustainability as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own “needs” (World Commission on Environmental and Development, 1987, Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 1, para 27).

Focusing on the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability (QS Sustainability), the *Times Higher Education (THE Impact) Impact Rankings* and UI GreenMetric World University Rankings (UI Green Metric), three prominent world university sustainability ranking systems, this article evaluates how Irish HEIs are represented, highlighting disparities in performance and examining barriers that limit wider recognition. To contextualise this analysis, the study first examines the international and national policy frameworks shaping the sustainability agenda in Irish higher education. Key global frameworks, including the 1972 Stockholm Declaration, the 1987 Brundtland Report, the 1992 Earth Summit and the 2015 United Nations SDGs, have driven higher education institutions to embed sustainability within their core missions (Christou *et al.*, 2024). In Ireland, this global momentum is mirrored by national legislation, including the Environmental Protection Agency Act (1992), the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act (2021), reinforced by the latest Climate Action Plan (2025), which broadens requirements for HEIs beyond emissions and energy efficiency to encompass areas such as leadership, procurement, transport, waste and organisational culture (Government of Ireland, 2025). Given these developments, Irish HEIs now operate within legal and institutional

frameworks mandating the integration of sustainability into their core functions.

This article begins by examining the evolution of sustainability in Irish higher education through key international and national policy frameworks that shape the sector's environmental and social responsibilities. It then critically evaluates the ranking systems above and uses them as methodological tools to assess the sustainability performance of Irish HEIs. Findings reveal notable variation: some Irish HEIs perform relatively well, while others rank significantly lower or are entirely absent. This raises important questions about both the capacity of global sustainability ranking systems to accurately reflect institutional sustainability efforts and the extent to which some Irish HEIs may be encountering challenges in embedding sustainability in a meaningful and measurable way.

Global university rankings have been a prominent feature in higher education for the past two decades. More recently, a subset focusing specifically on environmental sustainability and SDGs has emerged, including the QS Sustainability Rankings, the *THE* Impact Rankings and the UI GreenMetric Ranking, reflecting the increasing expectation for HEIs to be recognised as active contributors to global societal challenges (Calderon, 2023). These rankings provide important mechanisms to enhance visibility, accountability and competition among institutions striving to improve their sustainability performance. In this context, the article critically examines these sustainability-focused rankings as frameworks through which the sustainability efforts of Irish HEIs can be assessed and compared. While these rankings offer valuable comparative insights, they also have notable limitations, including the significant resources required for participation, a predominant focus on quantitative metrics and insufficient consideration of qualitative factors, such as community engagement and institutional culture (Lauder *et al.*, 2015; Horan and O'Regan 2013). They often overlook important contextual variables like institutional size, age, financial capacity, infrastructure and regional disparities (Calderon, 2023). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of universities' sustainability commitments, rankings must incorporate both measurable outcomes and contextualised, process-based indicators (Horan and O'Regan, 2021; Bullock and Wilder, 2016).

Despite their limitations, global sustainability rankings still offer a useful means to compare the performance of Irish HEIs. Analysis of these rankings

shows that Ireland's long-established universities generally perform strongly. University College Dublin (UCD) is the highest-ranked Irish institution in the QS Sustainability 2025, placing 49th globally. The University of Galway (NUIG) is Ireland's top performer in the *THE* Impact Rankings 2025, ranking 64th worldwide. University College Cork (UCC) also leads nationally in the UI GreenMetric Ranking, where it holds the highest Irish position.

Technological University Dublin (TUD) is the only Technological University (TU) to appear in two of the three ranking systems analysed, placing 538th in the QS Sustainability Rankings and within the 201–300 band in the *THE* Impact Rankings. No other TUs, Institutes of Technology (IoTs), or specialised institutions such as Mary Immaculate College (MIC) or the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) feature in any of the rankings. The limited presence and varied performance of Irish HEIs in global sustainability rankings raises important questions about whether these methodologies fully capture the complexity of institutional sustainability practices and may also reflect broader challenges in embedding sustainability comprehensively across the sector.

There is extensive research on barriers to sustainability in higher education, highlighting key challenges widely acknowledged across the sector globally. These core challenges, while broadly applicable, provide a critical framework through which this article examines the Irish higher education context, exploring how they shape and influence institutional sustainability progress in Ireland. These include the complexity of sustainability, requiring the balancing of environmental, social and economic dimensions (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021), and persistent financial constraints that limit the scope and ambition of institutional initiatives (Elliot and Wright, 2013). A lack of support from senior management, crucial for the long-term success of sustainability initiatives, often results in their failure due to insufficient investments and administrative backing (Ávila *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, cultural and institutional resistance to change, alongside a lack of support for fostering a sustainability-oriented culture, slows the green transition (Lozano *et al.*, 2013a).

Addressing these internal barriers is critical to mitigating disparities between established universities, newer technological universities and

smaller or specialised institutions in Ireland. Without coordinated, long-term strategies to overcome these challenges, such disparities may persist or even widen, potentially hindering Ireland's collective progress toward urgent sustainability goals.

2.0 International and National Policy Frameworks Driving Sustainability in Irish Higher Education

To contextualise the sustainability performance of Irish HEIs, it is important to examine both international and national policy frameworks.

2.1 International Policy and Frameworks Driving Sustainability in Higher Education

This section highlights key initiatives and milestones that have shaped sustainability in HEIs, beginning with the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, a major international effort to define sustainable development. The resulting Stockholm Declaration called for balancing economic growth, environmental protection and social equity, principles that shaped sustainability education in HEIs. It stressed improving quality of life while ensuring sustainable use of resources for future generations (Berchin *et al.*, 2021). Findler *et al.* (2018a) note that since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, higher education institutions have increasingly undertaken active measures to contribute to sustainable development.

Globally, key milestones advanced sustainability in higher education. In 1975, the Belgrade Charter, issued by UNESCO, identified education as central to addressing environmental challenges. It emphasised fostering a population capable of managing ecosystems sustainably (Berchin *et al.*, 2021). Building on this, the Tbilisi Declaration (1977) reinforced the role of environmental education in HEIs and encouraged integrating sustainability into education systems (Berchin *et al.*, 2021). The Brundtland Report (1987), also known as *Our Common Future*, defined sustainable development and this widely cited definition has shaped global sustainability efforts, with universities among the institutions actively implementing its principles and goals (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2024). Following this, the Talloires Declaration (1990) encouraged universities to commit to sustainability across institutional activities (University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, 1990).

In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or Earth Summit, produced Agenda Twenty-One, urging institutions, including universities, to integrate sustainability into operations, curriculum and research (United Nations, 1992). This emphasised the role of HEIs role in shaping sustainable development at local, national and global levels.

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) promoted sustainability education at all levels, encouraging HEIs to integrate sustainability across curricula, partnerships and campus initiatives (Avvaru and Narayana, 2023). This marked a shift from theory to action, emphasising transparency and accountability in sustainability practices (Findler *et al.*, 2018b). It coincided with a global movement toward transparency in environmental and sustainability reporting (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021). In 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) reaffirmed commitment to sustainable development, urging HEIs to prioritise sustainability strategies, enhance teaching and report on climate action and social sustainability progress.

2.2 National Policy and Frameworks Driving Sustainability in Irish Higher Education

While global frameworks shaped sustainability education worldwide, Irish environmental legislation began evolving in the 1990s. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Act 1992 established the EPA, which played a central role in shaping sustainability policies in Ireland. This encouraged Irish HEIs to align their sustainability efforts with national environmental goals and regulations.

In 1997 Climate Action Programme and the 2005 Climate Change Programme influenced national sustainability efforts, focusing on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and aligning Irish policies with global frameworks like the Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997 (Government of Ireland, 1997; Government of Ireland, 2005). These programmes paved the way for Irish universities to acknowledge their role in climate action through research, environmental management and education.

Ireland introduced its first National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), covering the period 2014–2020 (Government of Ireland, 2014). This strategy aimed to integrate ESD across the entire education system. Building on this foundation, Ireland launched

its second strategy, titled ESD to 2030, in 2022. This new strategy aligns with UNESCO's Framework for ESD for 2030 and outlines five key priority action areas: advancing policy, transforming learning environments, building capacities of educators, empowering and mobilising young people and accelerating local-level actions. These interconnected areas reflect a comprehensive approach to embedding sustainability throughout Ireland's education system (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2024).

The 2015 Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act set binding targets for greenhouse gas emissions and reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Along with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it encouraged Irish HEIs to integrate sustainability practices. The SDGs highlighted education's critical role in global sustainability, positioning HEIs as key players in research, climate action and curriculum development (Fehlner, 2019).

A key development in Ireland's sustainability framework for HEIs is the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, which establishes statutory targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030 and achieve net zero by 2050 (Government of Ireland, 2021). Building on this, Ireland's updated Climate Action Plan (CAP25) further reinforces the country's commitment to sustainability through legally binding emissions-reduction targets and expanded reporting requirements across operational areas including green public procurement, sustainable construction, organic food production, waste reduction, ICT and paper use, limits on single-use materials, water management and improving the energy efficiency and decarbonisation of buildings and vehicles (Government of Ireland, 2025).

Under the Public Sector Climate Action Mandate, HEIs are required to publish annual Climate Action Roadmaps and to report on their energy use and carbon emissions, which are monitored through SEAI's reporting system (Government of Ireland, 2025; SEAI, 2025). Furthermore, Irish HEIs are aligning with the United Nations SDGs by integrating sustainability into curricula, research and governance, operating within comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks that mandate sustainability integration in their core functions.

3.0 Evaluating Sustainability Rankings: Context, Methodologies, and Institutional Performance in Irish Higher Education

This section offers a critical evaluation of key international sustainability ranking systems applied to HEIs, focusing on the QS Sustainability Rankings (2025), the *THE* Impact Rankings (2025) and the UI GreenMetric Rankings (2024). Each ranking employs distinct methodological frameworks to measure institutional sustainability performance, combining policy indicators, quantitative metrics and reputational assessments. These systems offer HEIs both benchmarking tools and strategic incentives for aligning institutional priorities with sustainability goals, particularly those set out in the United Nations SDGs. However, recent research highlights significant structural differences, methodological limitations, and challenges in the validity of such rankings, emphasising the need for a critical and context-sensitive approach to their use (Galleli *et al.*, 2022). This section outlines each system's methodological architecture and profiles the participation and performance of Irish HEIs. A more critical interrogation of their structural and conceptual limitations follows in Section 4.

Two other sustainability frameworks worth noting are the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS) and Ireland's Green Campus Programme. STARS is a comprehensive, self-reporting framework that assesses sustainability performance across multiple institutional areas and encourages continuous improvement (AASHE, 2025). Ireland's Green Campus Programme focuses on student-led initiatives to embed sustainability culture at the campus level (An Taisce, 2025).

Universities worldwide are increasingly encouraged to contribute to the UN SDGs through various ranking systems. These rankings provide platforms for institutions to showcase their sustainability efforts and drive continuous improvement. By benchmarking sustainability performance, rankings motivate universities to enhance their practices and align with international standards. Beyond fostering healthy competition, they encourage institutions to take their sustainability responsibilities seriously, prompting the development of innovative strategies to address identified gaps (Abo-Khalil, 2024).

3.1 QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025

The QS Sustainability Rankings, introduced in 2022, evaluate the social and environmental impact of universities, considering their roles as centres of education and research and as large employers facing the sustainability challenges of complex organisations (QS, 2025). The framework assesses institutions across three overarching categories: Environmental Impact (education, research, environmental sustainability), Social Impact (employability, equality, health and well-being, impact of education, knowledge exchange) and Governance (good governance). Together, these nine thematic lenses form the structure of the rankings and are assessed using fifty-two discrete indicators. QS draws its data from a combination of institution-submitted data, reputation survey responses and third-party sources, including UNESCO and the World Bank.

In the 2025 edition of the QS Sustainability Rankings, 1,745 institutions were assessed globally, with nine Irish HEIs participating. Within the Irish cohort, UCD achieved the highest position at 49th globally, followed by UCC (127th), NUIG (140th), Dublin City University (DCU) (174th) and the University of Limerick (UL)(224th). Trinity College Dublin (TCD)(265th), TUD (538th), Maynooth University (MUI) (677th) and Royal College of Surgeons Ireland (RCSI) (ranked within the 921st–930th band) completed the group (See Table 1).

Higher Education Institution	QS World University Ranking: Sustainability 2025	UI GreenMetric Ranking 2024	<i>Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking 2025</i>
Traditional Universities			
Dublin City University	174	11	101–200
Maynooth University	677	398	401–600
Royal College of Surgeons	921–930	—	201–300
Trinity College Dublin	265	—	401–600
University College Cork	127	4	101–200
University College Dublin	49	—	—
University of Galway	140	—	64
University of Limerick	224	19	76
Technological Universities			
Atlantic Technological University	—	—	—
Munster Technological University	—	—	—
South East Technological University	—	—	—
Technological University Dublin	538	—	201–300
Technological University of the Shannon	—	—	—
Specialist and Other Core-Funded Institutions			
Carlow College, St. Patrick's	—	—	—
Dundalk Institute of Technology	—	—	—
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology	—	—	—
Marino Institute of Education	—	—	—
Mary Immaculate College	—	—	—

Higher Education Institution	QS World University Ranking: Sustainability 2025	UI GreenMetric Ranking 2024	<i>Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking 2025</i>
Specialist and Other Core-Funded Institutions			
National College of Art and Design	—	—	—
St Patricks Pontifical University, Maynooth	—	—	—

Table 1: Performance of Irish HEI Across Three Prominent Ranking Systems

Note: “—” indicates Unranked or ranking unavailable.

UCD achieved the highest global position among Irish HEIs at 49th, while RCSI ranked lowest, in the 921st–930th band. The other institutions fell at intermediate positions, illustrating a wide range of outcomes. Only one Technological University, TUD, and one institution described here as specialised, RCSI, were ranked. No other TUs, IoTs, or smaller or specialised institutions such as MIC and NCAD participated in the QS sustainability rankings. The rankings rely on a combination of institution-submitted data, reputation surveys and third-party sources to calculate overall scores. The way these data are collected and weighted, together with the reporting requirements, may influence which institutions participate and how they perform. Additional factors affecting institutional participation and outcomes will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 *Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings 2025*

THE Impact Rankings, introduced in 2019, evaluate university performance through alignment with the seventeen United Nations SDGs (*THE* 2025). Alongside the overall ranking, results for each individual SDG are published in seventeen separate tables. Key criteria fall across four pillars of evaluation: research, stewardship, outreach and teaching. Institutions must submit data on SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and at least three additional SDGs of their choosing. Overall institutional scores

are calculated using a 22% weighting for SDG 17 and 26% for each of the top-performing three other SDGs, meaning universities effectively secure their strongest three SDG results plus partnerships to compute their final ranking score. This approach means different universities are scored based on varying sets of SDGs depending on their focus. The overall score is an average of the past two years' total scores.

The *THE* Impact Rankings obtain research data primarily from Elsevier's Scopus database, which tracks publications and citations. Additionally, universities submit their own institutional data, which *THE* verifies. Thus, the rankings combine external bibliometric data with self-reported institutional data to assess research performance related to the SDGs.

In the 2025 edition, 2,526 institutions from 130 countries were assessed. Eight Irish HEIs participated. Among these, the NUIG ranked 64th globally, UL placed 76th, while UCC and DCU ranked within the 101st–200th band. RCSI and TUD, appeared within the 201st–300th band, followed by MUI and TCD in the 401st–600th band (See Table 1).

Among Irish HEIs, it is the same as the QS Rankings—TUD is the only TU ranked and no IoTs participated. RCSI is the only specialised institution represented and no other smaller or specialised institutions, such as MIC and the NCAD, took part. Participation and performance may be influenced as much by capacity to engage with the ranking methodology as by actual SDG-related impact. *THE* Impact Rankings, which accommodates institutional diversity and mission focus but can create challenges for comparability, because each institution may select different SDGs and metrics may overlap, cross-institutional comparisons become difficult and potentially misleading.

3.3 UI GreenMetric World University Rankings 2024

The UI GreenMetric Rankings, established by Universitas Indonesia in 2010, focus on assessing how sustainably universities operate their physical campuses (UI GreenMetric, 2024). They base their instruments on a broad philosophy that encompasses the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social and economic. The 2024 edition evaluates institutions using fifty-two indicators across six key categories: Setting and Infrastructure (11), Energy and Climate Change (10), Waste (6), Water (5),

Transportation (8) and Education & Research (12). This framework places strong emphasis on operational and resource-use metrics, reflecting practical sustainability efforts in day-to-day campus management. The rankings rely primarily on self-reported data submitted by universities via detailed online questionnaires covering policies and operational metrics within these categories. Although some verification is performed, the methodology depends heavily on the accuracy and completeness of institutional submissions and does not use third-party bibliometric or citation data.

In the 2024 edition, 1,477 institutions participated. Four Irish HEIs are ranked, UCC 4th globally, DCU (11th), UL (19th) and MUI (398th) (See Table 1). This is a notable achievement, with three Irish universities ranked in the global top twenty, highlighting their operational and infrastructural sustainability strengths. By contrast, MUI's position at 398th underscores the variation in performance levels among Irish HEIs. Notably, no TUs participated and similar to the QS Sustainability Rankings and the *THE* Impact Ranking no IoTs or smaller or specialised institutions participated, which may reflect the resource-intensive nature of the ranking process and the methodological emphasis on extensive physical infrastructure.

The UI GreenMetric methodology's strong emphasis on physical infrastructure and resource use can disadvantage institutions with smaller, specialised, or more urban campuses and the rankings' reliance on extensive self-reported data requires significant time and resources to prepare, which may explain both the under-representation of smaller or specialised HEIs and the high performance of larger, well-resourced universities.

3.4 Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS) and An Taisce's Green Campus Programme

Alongside the rankings above, STARS is a widely recognised global sustainability assessment framework for HEIs (STARS, 2025). STARS evaluates academics, engagement, operations, and planning and administration, with an additional component for innovation (Horan and O'Regan, 2021). Participants select relevant credits from five categories (Academics, Engagement, Operations, Planning and Administration, and Innovation and Leadership) and collect data from campus stakeholders, allowing institutions to tailor their participation based on capacity and

priorities. It supports long-term sustainability goals for high-achieving institutions while also providing entry points for those taking initial steps toward sustainability. A recent study found that SDGs 1 and 17 are less accurately predicted and categorised by the system, while the other SDGs show a reasonable degree of alignment to modules and courses using the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) criteria (Lemarchand *et al.*, 2023). Although STARS participation is voluntary and involves extensive data submission, which may affect direct comparability across institutions, STARS offers valuable opportunities for internal benchmarking and strategic reflection, making it a useful tool for institutional learning.

The Green-Campus Programme is delivered in Ireland by An Taisce, the country's member organisation of the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). This international environmental education initiative provides structured, measurable pathways for educational campuses to integrate environmental issues, innovation and research into the daily management of campus operations. The programme actively involves students, academic staff, non-teaching staff and the wider campus community to embed sustainability into everyday campus life and aligns with established environmental management frameworks, including the Eco-Management and Auditing Scheme (EU EMAS) and ISO 14001 standards (An Taisce, 2025). It uses a seven-step process for ongoing improvement. Campuses address several thematic areas, beginning with the mandatory Litter and Waste theme. Other key themes include Energy, Water Conservation and Protection, Transport and Travel, Biodiversity, and the emerging Green Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Additional themes such as Procurement, Air Quality, Climate Change and Climate Justice may also be incorporated to broaden environmental efforts.

Institutions that meet the programme's requirements are awarded the Green Flag, a mark of sustained environmental commitment, reassessed every three years. Many Irish universities have achieved this recognition, with UCC being the first to receive a Green Flag. Other institutions awarded include DCU, TCD, Maynooth University, TUD and RCSI. Beyond environmental performance, the programme supports student

learning, research projects, community engagement and fosters a national and international sustainability network among campuses.

3.5 Summary

These ranking systems provide Irish HEIs with tools to frame and benchmark their sustainability efforts within global discourses. While they differ significantly in scope, method, and emphasis, each system shapes strategic decision-making and public accountability. However, as discussed in Section 4, these rankings also introduce important structural and epistemological limitations that may obscure or distort institutional sustainability profiles.

4.0 Limitations of Global Sustainability Rankings in the Irish Higher Education Context

Global sustainability rankings are often positioned as neutral tools for benchmarking institutional sustainability performance, yet their assumptions and frameworks embed standardised conventions that shape how sustainability is understood and reported, which may not fully capture local or institutional differences. As Lauder *et al.* (2015) note, “under scientific scrutiny, no ranking can be free from at least some shortcomings”. In doing so, these rankings frequently reproduce reputational hierarchies and resource inequalities, privileging large, research-intensive institutions in specific geopolitical contexts.

A key limitation is the misalignment between the resource demands of these frameworks and the structural capacities of Irish HEIs. Participation requires extensive quantitative and qualitative data collection across a wide range of activities, creating significant administrative and logistical burdens. In recent years, many of Ireland’s IoTs have merged to form new TUs as part of national policy reforms initiated by the Technological Universities Act 2018. For these newer TUs, still undergoing structural consolidation, resources are likely directed towards integration and internal development, potentially limiting engagement with international ranking frameworks. This may create a form of cyclical exclusion, where institutions without sufficient resources are left out of rankings that could enhance their visibility and strategic leverage. Further research is needed

to examine how these structural transitions shape institutional engagement with rankings.

Another limitation is the lack of sensitivity to geographical, socio-economic and policy contexts. As Calderon (2023) argues, it is spurious to compare HEIs across regions with vastly different geopolitical and historical settings. This matters not only for how Irish universities are positioned against global counterparts but also for recognising regional variations within Ireland itself. Differences in infrastructure, institutional footprint and the planning priorities of individual County Councils can either facilitate or hinder sustainability implementation, yet such factors are rarely reflected in global rankings.

A further issue is the overemphasis on quantitative indicators, such as emissions, energy intensity, or waste diversion, which are easier to measure and therefore dominate these systems. Qualitative dimensions, including staff and student engagement, cultural change and ethical governance are harder to quantify and often excluded (Lauder *et al.*, 2015; Horan and O'Regan, 2021). This bias favours institutions with advanced data systems and technical capacity, while undervaluing those whose strengths lie in community partnerships, participatory governance or embedded cultural values. In the Irish context, differences in size, strategic focus and reporting capacity mean some impactful initiatives risk being overlooked when assessed against standardised global metrics.

The design of the *THE* Impact Rankings introduces particular challenges for comparison and interpretation. As already noted, Institutions are required to report on SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and three additional Sustainable Development Goals of their choice. While this design allows for institutional autonomy, it introduces problems of comparability. Calderon (2023) notes that HEIs are not scored on a uniform set of SDGs and significant overlap between indicators leads to potential double counting. For instance, the proportion of first-generation students contributes to both SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), while citation-based metrics related to clean energy may appear under both SDG 7 and SDG 13. This structural feature inflates institutional scores and obscures the actual extent of sustainability progress.

In contrast, the QS Sustainability Rankings evaluates universities across three categories through nine lenses using fifty-two indicators, drawing

from a combination of institutional submissions, bibliometric databases and third-party sources such as QS reputation surveys. The inclusion of reputational indicators inherently favours long-established, research-intensive institutions with strong global visibility. This emphasis on institutional prestige can disadvantage smaller or newer universities whose sustainability contributions may be significant at local or regional levels but are less likely to be captured by international reputation metrics.

The UI GreenMetric Ranking focuses heavily on campus operations but presents notable design limitations. Ragazzi and Ghidini (2017) and Bullock and Wilder (2020) both criticise the absence of minimum scoring thresholds, which allows universities with low sustainability performance to be ranked, and note the lack of scoring bands or validation mechanisms, contributing to volatility and reducing transparency. The ranking's relative scoring system is highly sensitive, so small changes in performance or other universities' data can cause significant fluctuations, making results difficult to interpret over time. Although the framework includes some education and research metrics, its primary orientation toward environmental dimensions may not fully capture institutional sustainability in a holistic way. As part of their proposed indicator framework, Horan and O'Regan (2021) highlight similar concerns with UI GreenMetric and STARS, noting their reliance on narrow and occasionally problematic metrics, such as vegetation cover or efficiency measures, which can skew comparisons between institutions with different local characteristics. Rather than providing a comprehensive view, these tools often present only a partial perspective, making fair benchmarking between institutions more challenging.

In sum, global sustainability rankings provide valuable visibility and benchmarking but are shaped by assumptions and technical frameworks that can produce uneven representations of institutional performance. This often disadvantages newer, smaller or specialised Irish HEIs, as well as those prioritising cultural change over purely data-driven metrics. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach: enhancing resources and capacity for institutions to engage meaningfully with global rankings, while also exploring complementary assessment models tailored to the Irish context. Such models should integrate quantitative and qualitative indicators, allow for flexible and transparent consideration of

contextual factors and prioritise capacity-building alongside fair competition. By combining strategic use of global rankings with more context-sensitive frameworks, Irish HEIs can better support institutional learning, inclusivity and accountability across the sector.

5.0 Barriers Affecting Sustainability Performance in Irish Higher Education: Insights from International Research

To advance sustainability in higher education, it is essential to identify and understand the most common barriers to implementation. While global rankings show some Irish universities performing strongly, they also reveal variation across the sector, indicating that some institutions may face greater challenges in progressing their sustainability agendas. This article draws on well-established barriers to sustainability implementation identified in global higher education research to explore potential challenges faced by Irish institutions. These internationally recognised barriers provide a useful framework for understanding common obstacles that may also be relevant within the Irish context. Drawing on this literature, four major, consistently identified barriers are examined here: complexity of sustainability, lack of financial resources, lack of management support, and cultural and institutional resistance to change (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021; Elliott and Wright, 2013; Ávila *et al.*, 2017; Lozano *et al.*, 2013a), and are supported by Alhazmi and Zain's (2023) comprehensive review of barriers in HEIs, which similarly highlights these factors as key challenges hindering sustainability implementation.

Among these barriers, the inherent complexity of sustainability poses a foundational challenge, as it requires simultaneously addressing environmental, social and economic dimensions (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021). Alhazmi and Zain (2023) found that across the international literature, complexity was often linked to higher education leaders lacking sufficient sustainability knowledge, difficulty operationalising broad sustainability goals, and inconsistent application across academic and administrative domains. This complexity demands interdisciplinary approaches and systems thinking, which involves recognising the elements, interconnections, and a goal or function of a system (Arnold and Wade, 2015). Universities must undergo fundamental change, using the SDGs as a spark to reposition themselves in education and research and to address pressing societal and global challenges (Gual, 2019). Successfully

embedding sustainability often requires significant shifts in academic practices, with interdisciplinary collaboration and a systems-thinking approach being crucial to address the interconnected nature of environmental, economic and social factors. Sustainability education also faces difficulties due to limited awareness of global crises, ineffective learning methods and the need to embed skills like problem-solving and anticipation throughout curricula (Richardson, 2019). Moreover, a lack of comprehensive and integrated sustainability strategies at institutional levels often results in fragmented and inefficient efforts, as many institutions struggle to align sustainability with core operational and strategic goals. Without addressing these factors, institutions struggle to integrate sustainability deeply into their core missions.

International frameworks like the UN SDGs provide a vital global mandate for sustainability, emphasising its importance across all sectors, including higher education (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2018). Yet despite such guidance, universities face a major barrier in the form of limited financial resources, which restrict investment in sustainability initiatives and necessary infrastructure. In a study by Elliott and Wright (2013), twenty-seven Canadian student union leaders identified a lack of financial resources as the primary barrier to advancing sustainability in universities. Insufficient funding limits universities' capacity to invest in sustainability initiatives, including infrastructure improvements and operational changes necessary for embedding sustainable practices. Similarly, Ávila *et al.* (2017) found that limited financial resources are a widespread barrier across universities globally, often resulting in sustainability efforts being underfunded, reliant on volunteer work and unable to achieve long-term impact. Alhazmi and Zain (2023) also identified funding constraints as one of the most persistent global barriers, limiting HEIs' ability to invest in infrastructure, long-term strategies or cross-disciplinary initiatives. Lack of financial support means sustainability initiatives often rely on a few committed individuals, raising concerns about their long-term durability (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2018). This highlights that stable funding is essential to develop strong skills and foster sustainable growth, enabling lasting progress in higher education sustainability.

Lack of support from top management, particularly senior leadership, exacerbates the challenge of embedding sustainability in higher education.

Sustainability initiatives often struggle to gain the necessary backing for long-term success without active commitment and leadership from the top (Ávila *et al.*, 2017). In Alhazmi and Zain's (2023) review, leadership engagement was identified as critical, but they found that even when senior leaders voiced support, weak institutional frameworks and lack of follow-through often prevented sustainability visions from translating into sustained organisational change. Without this support, sustainability policies face significant obstacles in effective implementation and sustained maintenance. According to Alhazmi and Zain (2023), the absence of strong leadership support can prevent sustainability from becoming embedded in institutional culture, even where sustainability strategies exist on paper.

Moreover, cultural and institutional resistance to change remains a significant barrier. The deep-rooted academic culture within HEIs often prevents the integration of sustainability into core institutional practices, resulting in a fragmented approach where sustainability efforts are treated as isolated projects rather than being embedded as the 'Golden Thread' or 'Leitmotiv' throughout the entire university system (Lozano *et al.*, 2013b). This lack of coordination and failure to implement multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary strategies leads to inefficiencies and hinders progress toward systemic change. Building a sustainability-oriented culture requires gradual, cross-departmental collaboration and empowerment of university leaders, faculty and students to catalyse and implement new paradigms. However, the absence of well-defined sustainability strategies and proper academic recognition further complicates this process. Many institutions continue to treat sustainability as a series of isolated initiatives rather than embedding it within their broader governance and policy frameworks, which is essential for accelerating societal transformation and sustainable development (Lozano *et al.*, 2013b). Alhazmi and Zain (2023) also highlight cultural and institutional inertia as a barrier, noting that resistance to new systems and ways of thinking can significantly undermine progress. Additionally, limited awareness and understanding of global crises, including climate change, among both staff and students can undermine institutional support for sustainability initiatives, emphasising the need for deep cultural and educational shifts across the university community.

6.0 Navigating the Path Ahead: Charting Pathways to Sustainability in Irish Higher Education

Analysis of global sustainability rankings reveals that while some Irish HEIs demonstrate strong performance, and even excel, significant disparities exist between established universities and TUs, IoTs, and smaller or specialised institutions in their presence and recognition within these rankings. As discussed in Section 3, established universities often lead in rankings, while TUs, IoTs and smaller or specialised institutions are frequently underrepresented. This gap does not necessarily indicate weaker sustainability efforts but may result from methodological constraints, as discussed in Section 4. Beyond ranking limitations, these disparities may also reflect deeper, systemic challenges faced by some HEIs in embedding sustainability effectively.

The inherent complexity of sustainability poses a significant barrier for HEIs globally. This complexity stems from the need to integrate the interconnected dimensions of people, planet and profit, requiring recognition of their dynamic relationships and the risk of unintended consequences when tackled in isolation (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2018) (see Section 5.0; Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021; Alhazmi and Zain, 2023). Addressing this complexity demands embedding systems thinking approaches that foster holistic planning, interdisciplinary cooperation, and the identification of leverage points to simultaneously address environmental, social and economic sustainability challenges across the sector (Arnold and Wade, 2015; Gual, 2019).

Financial constraints are widely recognised internationally as a major barrier to sustainability initiatives (see Section 5; Elliott and Wright, 2013; Ávila *et al.*, 2017; Alhazmi and Zain, 2023; Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021), as without adequate funding, meaningful progress on sustainability initiatives becomes nearly impossible. Essential investments in infrastructure, technology and programmes rely on sustained financial support to drive lasting change. Navigating these challenges requires access to targeted support programmes, which can be limited and competitive. While Ireland's Sustainable Energy Authority (SEAI) administers the Energy Efficiency and Decarbonisation Pathfinder Programme (EEDPP) which support public bodies including HEIs in implementing energy upgrades, funding opportunities remain limited and highly competitive.

The programme couples SEAI's expertise with HEIs' capacity to test and demonstrate innovative energy upgrade techniques. However, given that applications are submitted annually and only a limited number of projects are selected, institutions managing multiple campuses or aging infrastructure may struggle to secure sufficient funding to meet the 2030 climate targets within the necessary timeframe. To overcome this constraint, expanding the availability and frequency of such targeted funding programmes, alongside developing complementary financial mechanisms, will be critical to enabling comprehensive and timely sustainability upgrades across the sector. Even with sufficient funding, coordinating multiple energy upgrade projects across institutions may create practical capacity challenges, given the finite pool of qualified contractors and skilled personnel available to deliver such work simultaneously. This challenge could be alleviated by revisiting public procurement rules to encourage broader contractor participation and by scheduling work during academic terms or off-peak periods to better distribute workloads and accelerate project completion.

Lack of leadership support is widely recognised internationally as a major barrier to advancing sustainability in higher education (see Section 5; Ávila *et al.*, 2017; Alhazmi and Zain, 2023). While the responsibility for embedding sustainability lies primarily with individual institutions, a coordinated sector-wide strategic approach is essential to ensure consistent progress. Recent national legislation, including the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the updated Climate Action Plan 2025 (CAP25), further reinforces Ireland's commitment to sustainability through legally binding emissions-reduction targets and expanded reporting requirements covering a broad range of operational areas. Ongoing expansion in scope and ambition of the Climate Action Plans (CAPs) will be essential to drive continued improvements in sustainability across Irish HEIs

Institutional reporting on sustainability across the Irish higher education sector remains fragmented. Developing a more integrated national framework, building on existing CAP mandates, could align reporting standards and broaden their scope to cover curricula, research, governance and leadership, critical dimensions for transformative change. Prioritising tailored guidance and resource support for smaller or specialised

institutions and where needed for newly merged institutions, can help ensure equitable sustainability progress across the sector.

Cultural and institutional resistance is widely recognised internationally as a significant barrier to embedding sustainability in higher education (see Section 5; Lozano *et al.*, 2013a; Alhazmi and Zain, 2023). To embed sustainability effectively, institutions must adopt more integrated, multidisciplinary approaches that transcend conventional boundaries. This includes fostering collaborative teaching and learning models, developing shared sustainability curricula accessible across all academic units and promoting interdisciplinary projects. These strategies can cultivate a unified institutional culture around sustainability, equipping students and staff with the holistic understanding and skills needed to tackle complex, interconnected sustainability challenges.

Achieving lasting sustainability in Irish higher education requires a fundamental shift in academic practices, embracing interdisciplinary approaches and systems thinking to address the complex interplay of environmental, social and economic challenges (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021). By fostering innovation, enhancing collaboration and implementing coordinated institution-wide strategies, HEIs can accelerate meaningful transformation and improve their sustainability performance (Christou *et al.*, 2024). This holistic approach is essential not only for advancing Ireland's green transition but also for positioning Irish HEIs as leaders as leaders in the global sustainable development agenda.

7.0 Conclusion

This study reveals considerable variation in sustainability performance across Irish HEIs in the three global sustainability rankings. Established universities generally achieve strong positions, while TUs, IoTs and smaller or specialised institutions often rank lower or do not appear at all. Global rankings provide valuable insights but are constrained by methodological limitations and may not fully reflect institutional context or capacity. Taken together with sectoral patterns and barriers identified in this study, these findings highlight the need for coordinated, nuanced pathways that advance sustainability across Irish higher education, ensuring progress is both meaningful and enduring. Further research into the specific barriers faced by Irish HEIs, potentially through detailed case

studies, would help deepen understanding and inform more effective sustainability strategies



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An Overview of the History of Counselling and Psychotherapy and its Training in Ireland and the UK- Implications for Future Development

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Abstract

Despite being in existence for the past century as a mental health treatment, counselling and psychotherapy continue to represent an ill-defined therapeutic field. Research identifying the core characteristics of effective therapy and the qualities of effective therapists have been well evidenced. There is, however, a dearth of literature examining the training and development of trainee therapists, leaving a space wherein it is difficult to determine whether current training practices of therapists are fit for purpose. Given the quality assurance role of counselling training in nurturing the establishment of best practice therapy and ensuring that therapists are appropriately skilled to deliver it, research into and conversations on what is optimal and effective in this domain are central to the profession as a whole.

Ireland is currently transitioning its governance of the discipline, away from voluntary governing bodies to the establishment of state regulation. This brings renewed emphasis on how the profession is understood and the expectations placed upon those practicing and training within it. This article identifies the context in which the discipline has developed. It offers an understanding of the current empirical base of counselling and psychotherapy training and makes recommendations into what is required to progress this base.

Keywords: counselling, psychotherapy, history, training, education.

1.0 Introduction

Health is no longer defined solely in physical terms but also in relation to psychological wellbeing. In 2022, two decades after the first World Health Organisation landmark report on mental health (World Health Organization, 2001), the issue of mental health and illness has seen an

increase in understanding, yet despite research-informed technical advances, mental health conditions continue to heavily affect people (World Health Organization, 2022). The global burden of mental disorders (GBMD) describes the prevalence and impact of mental health conditions worldwide. GBMD has remained consistent for the three decades between 1990 and 2019, remaining within the top ten leading causes of disease burden worldwide (GBD 2019 Mental Disorders Collaborators, 2022).¹ At an economic level, the global burden of mental health disorders has been estimated at USD\$ 5 trillion (Arias, Saxena and Verguet, 2022, p. 1). In Ireland alone, the cost of poor mental health is estimated at 4% of GDP or €12.4 billion (Mental Health Reform, 2021). Counselling and psychotherapy can be seen as a global professional solution to address mental health issues (Chen *et al.*, 2025, p. 147).

This article explores the current empirical foundations of counselling and psychotherapy training, both internationally and within Ireland, tracing its evolution and identifying key areas for advancing its evidence base. The article begins by offering an examination of counselling and psychotherapy as a mental health discipline, before presenting the background of counselling and psychotherapy, outlining an understanding and definition of the profession and charting its historical evolution within the UK and Ireland. It then presents an overview that highlights the research gaps around training of such professionals. The article outlines the constructs of education and training as a base from which to understand both historical and contemporary structures in therapist training and concludes with recommendations for future national research in this domain.

2.0 Counselling and Psychotherapy

Though little more than a century old as a form of mental health treatment, the psychotherapeutic field remains at a pre-scientific stage in its development (Goldfried, 2019, p. 484). One characteristic of such a stage is the lack of a common language across the field (Rief, 2021). There is a wide selection of counselling and psychotherapy governing bodies throughout the world and over five hundred therapeutic approaches (Prochaska, 2018). The discipline originated with psychoanalysis at the

¹ As articulated in the *Burden of Disease Overview* (2024): “Burden of disease measures the impact of living with illness and injury and dying prematurely”.

turn of the century, and was followed by behaviourism in 1919, humanistic therapy in the 1950's (McLeod, 2019), and what could be classified as postmodern approaches thereafter. Today, the discipline can be consolidated into four main traditions: systemic, cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic and humanistic (Cozolino, 2024). Though these traditions vary in their methods, they strive to achieve the singular goal of facilitating the creation of circumstances in which a client can lead a fuller existence. This achievement is described as ego strengthening, affect regulation, symptom reduction or differentiation depending on the therapist orientation (Goldfried, 2019; Cozolino, 2024). Though the mental health field has made many technical advances informed by research (World Health Organization, 2022), counselling and psychotherapy remain ill-defined field(s) (Bond, 2009). The discipline is still finding itself as a distinct profession within mental healthcare, and as such, often gets subsumed as a subspecialty within other disciplines (Orlinsky *et al.*, 2024). There is a need for “rigorous definition” if the profession is to avoid becoming too vague (Woolfe, 1997, p. 4).

As constructs, the terms counselling and psychotherapy are often used interchangeably. Sources vary in how they frame the two terms. Whilst some view psychotherapy and counselling as essentially the same discipline, others consider them as similar but distinct, with some describing psychotherapy to be a longer-term process than counselling (Gale, 2024, p. 3). Many undergraduate training programs as well as some accrediting bodies and practitioners use both terms in their titles. Some jurisdictions separate the titles and requisite qualifications for one or each of the terms (Gale, 2024; Orlinsky *et al.*, 2024).

McLeod and McLeod (2011, p. 151) define counselling as a spoken encounter which allows a person “to find meaning and possibility within the area of their space that is troubling them”. For the professionals themselves, it appears to be easier to state what counsellors do than to define what counsellors are.

The Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP) introduce counselling and psychotherapy as a singular profession. They reinforce the relational aspect of the encounter, whilst identifying the professional feature of this relationship both explicitly and in the implicit meanings derived from the use of the word ‘client’, stating that:

Counselling and psychotherapy are professional, relational activities involving IACP practitioners and their clients. The practitioner offers an impartial, professional helping relationship which respects the client's autonomy and personal values. (IACP, 2025)

Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapy Ireland (CBPI) take a more medicalised perspective, outlining their members abilities in the

assessment and delivery of clinical interventions for the management and effective treatment for many different health and mental health conditions of varying severity. (CBPI, 2025)

Rakovec (2021) examined the differences between counselling and psychotherapy, tracking their purposes across governing bodies in Ireland, UK and Australia (See Table 1). Two of the three bodies described there being no difference between the counselling and psychotherapy whilst one found there to be a considerable overlap between the two.

Since 2007, Ireland has been in the process of regulating the titles of counsellor and psychotherapist through CORU, the state regulator for health and social care professionals (Rountree, 2023). CORU was established under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 as a multi-profession health regulator. It has a role to protect the public by promoting high standards in the areas of education, training, competence and conduct (CORU, no date). CORU recognises counselling and psychotherapy as distinct professions that will be assigned individual registers and standards of proficiency (SoP). Though it had previously stated that a Level 8 National Framework Qualification (NFQ) would be the entry threshold for each profession—as a Level 7 NFQ ‘did not reflect the demands of practice’ and a Level 9 NFQ ‘went beyond the threshold level standards defined by the board’ (CORU, 2025b)—CORU has since revised this position, setting a level 8 NFQ standard for counsellors and a level 9 for psychotherapists (CORU, 2025a). CORU regulates title protection, not scope of practice (CORU, 2025f) and it does not articulate definitions for either profession (CORU, 2025c). It understands counsellors to engage in time-limited work focused on defined presenting issues, whilst the work of psychotherapists involves deeper emotional processing centred

on longer-term psychological distress (*Counsellors and Psychotherapists: Publication of Standards of Proficiency and Criteria*, 2025).

Organisation	Counselling	Psychotherapy	Overall view
Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP)	Tends to be more immediate issues.	Deals with deeper, chronic issues rooted in the past.	No difference between counselling and psychotherapy.
British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)	No theoretical, practical or research rationale for distinguishing between counsellors and psychotherapists.		No empirical evidence of difference between counselling and psychotherapy and that each occupational area has equal value.
Psychotherapy Federation of Australia	More likely to focus on specific problems, changes and nurturing well-being.	More focused on restructuring personality and development of insight.	Counselling and psychotherapy overlap considerably, with greater overlap occurring at more advanced levels than at more foundational levels.

Table 1: Counselling and Psychotherapy Differentiation Across Governing Bodies in Ireland, UK and Australia
(Rakovec, 2021)

CORU's SoP's for each profession specify the minimum threshold of knowledge across five domains that an individual must possess upon entry to the counselling and psychotherapy registers. Across these domains, CORU assigns criteria for counsellors (n=94) and psychotherapists (n=92), with the first four domains' criterion (n=55) being identical for each profession's SoP (CORU, 2025e, 2025d). Differences emerge in the fifth domain, titled 'Professional Knowledge and Skills', where CORU distinguishes how counsellors and psychotherapists work therapeutically, with the former addressing moderate psychological issues (CORU, 2025d),

whereas the latter manages moderate to severe, complex psychological distress (CORU, 2025e). Other differences include the use of higher-order cognitive skills in the psychotherapists' SoP as they relate to Bloom's Taxonomy (Adams, 2015) and an expectation that psychotherapists have a working knowledge of "DSM/ICD diagnostic frameworks" (CORU, 2025c, p. 10).

In recognition of the heterogeneity of the frames through which counselling and psychotherapy are understood, this article adopts the definition provided by the Quality Assurance Agency, which describes them as a relational activity working:

towards the alleviation of any form of psychological distress and support[ing] clients in developing self- awareness, personal insight, skills and confidence to manage their lives in a way that is more effective for them. (Quality Assurance Agency, 2022, p. 3)

This definition will be represented in this article using the word 'therapist' and 'therapy' to describe the professional role of counsellor and psychotherapist and to refer to the broader profession of counselling and psychotherapy.

2.1 The Emergence of a Therapeutic Discipline within the UK and Ireland

The UK's National Health Service (NHS) has identified poor mental health as one of the most important health challenges of the present time, costing the UK economy 5% of GDP (National Health Service, 2022), similar to Ireland (Mental Health Reform, 2021). Counselling and psychotherapy have evolved from marginal treatments in the early twentieth century to central treatment modalities within health services across the Western world (Buchanan and Haslam, 2019).

The development of the therapy discipline in the UK and Ireland has largely progressed in step since the 1980s. Aldridge (2014) charts the development of psychological therapies in the UK from the late nineteenth century, noting counselling has its historical roots in volunteer work through the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and Police Court Missionaries (PCM). COS volunteers were mainly middle-class women

offering a case work approach to support poor families. COS and the PCM evolved into Social Work and Probation services, with formal training for each commencing in 1903 (Aldridge, 2014).

Another foothold for psychological therapies in the UK emerged from the application of psychoanalytic ideas to treat soldiers suffering from shell shock after the First World War (1914–1918). Following increased marriage breakdowns and incidents of sexual violence after the Second World War (1939–1945), government funding supported marriage guidance organisations (Dryden, Mearns and Thorne, 2000) and a council was established to oversee volunteer training as a quality assurance measure (Aldridge, 2014). The term counselling came into more gradual usage after 1945, largely through the work of the Marriage Guidance Councils (Aldridge, 2014).

The introduction of the NHS (1948) and broader welfare state provided opportunities for further professionalisation of allied health roles (Beresford, 2001). This led to a splitting within the therapeutic setting and mindset, with some practitioners remaining within the traditional voluntary sector, whilst others became state-employed professionals (Aldridge, 2014).

John McLeod (2019, p. 331) argues that early influences on counselling practice and training in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s originated in social action responses as opposed to individual pathology. Such early champions of UK counselling were seen in several fields:

- Pastoral care and counselling, where clergy and lay persons looked to counselling psychology to aid in the healing of those in their congregations. Many Scottish counselling agencies owe their origins to the Board of Social Responsibility within the Church of Scotland (McLeod, 2019, p. 332).
- Universities and polytechnics, where leading figures from the United States made substantive contributions to therapy training courses, such as those at Aston and the Universities of Keele and Reading (Dryden, Mearns and Thorne, 2000, p. 2).
- National Marriage Guidance Counsellors, established in 1938, was a third driver in the development of the field within the UK (Dryden, Mearns and Thorne, 2000, p. 2; McLeod, 2019, p. 331).

Due to its widened development through these spiritual, academic and relational drivers, defining counselling and psychotherapy became a problematic task. Professional definition allows for a degree of professional recognition and culpability (Jenkins, 2017). It offers a “root of understanding” and orients those within and outside of the profession as to what a professional is about and how they work (Saks, 2012, p. 1). The expansion of counselling during the 1960s raised concerns about the lack of standardised training or definition. Government and charity funding supported the establishment of the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling (Aldridge, 2014), which brought together various organisations to form the first UK voluntary counselling governing body, the British Association for Counselling (BAC), in 1977 (Dryden and Thorne, 1991, p. 3; McLeod, 2019, p. 333; Woolfe, 1997, p. 3).

The creation of the BAC was not wholly driven from pressures within the counselling discipline, as external pressures appear to have catalysed momentum. BAC’s aims were to promote sharing and mutual learning, establish standards to protect the public and facilitate the development of an effective training base (Holmes, 2019). The Foster Report of 1971 was prompted by a growing concern for the encroachment of Scientology into psychological therapies. It had recommended that psychotherapy be moved to a regulated footing (Foster, 1971, p. 179). However, the report struggled to distinguish between the psychological disciplines, describing psychiatry as dealing with emotional and mental problems, psychology as concerned with problems of intellect and counselling as “psychotherapy without a fee” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 11). Definitional difficulties were further alluded to in the later Seighart Report of 1978 (Jenkins, 2017). The Seighart Report was published by the Joint Professions Working Party and recommended indicative registration for psychotherapists (Pokorny, 1995).

Throughout the 1980s, efforts to secure regulation through the UK’s counselling and psychotherapy governing bodies were repeatedly hindered by difficulties in clearly differentiating the roles of counsellor and psychotherapist. A Private Member’s Bill in 1981, which sought to regulate psychotherapists, failed—most likely due to issues around the many strands of psychotherapeutic schools, which made it difficult to clearly distinguish counselling from psychotherapy or psychology (McLeod, 2019, p. 333). (Pokorny, 1995; *Psychotherapy (Registration) -Hansard-UK Parliament*,

n.d.). There were later attempts to regulate both titles under the Health Professionals Council (now the Health and Care Professionals Council) and while this approach offered statutory regulation, it was based on a medical model that was not always considered appropriate for talking therapies (Jenkins, 2017, p. 12). Regulation came to be judged as more optimal as an end point rather than a starting point, due to the lack of definitional consensus on the profession(s). The discipline was therefore tasked with establishing professional consensus and returning at a later stage as a more unified field, better positioned for effective regulation (Murphy, 1990).

Following the Private Member's Bill in the House of Commons in 1981, the BAC invited organisations to their headquarters in Rugby to discuss both the Foster and Sieghart Reports. Pokorny (1995, p. 415) notes that this 1981 meeting marked the first Psychotherapy Conference, which became the United Kingdom Standing Conference for Psychotherapy (UKSCP) in 1989, and was later re-named the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) in 1993, in preparation for the launch of a formal register for psychotherapy.

In 1988, the counselling field saw further professionalisation with BAC establishing a Working Group on the Recognition of Counsellor Training Courses (Dryden and Thorne, 1991). This may have been, as the authors suggest, an evolutionary next step in establishing the counselling profession, though one wonders whether such a drive towards standards and coherency was catalysed either directly or indirectly by the parliamentary events of 1981. A more direct consequence of the Private Member's Bill to regulate counselling was the establishment of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). The BAC became the BACP in 2000 (Charity Commission for England and Wales, n.d.) and currently has more than 50,000 members (BACP, 2025).

The Irish Association for Counselling (IAC) was established in 1981, having received permission from BAC for an Irish counterpart organisation. The intention from the outset was to establish and develop recognition, promote knowledge in and define standards for the counselling profession as an entity (Feldstein, 2011, p. 13). Membership criteria were established three years later, welcoming those who had one year of counselling experience and were involved in six supervised hours of counselling per week (Feldstein, 2011, p. 16). These standards of training

and practice are much lighter than those required today but one must remember that there were no set counselling courses being delivered in Ireland at the time. The first counselling course was offered this same year and consisted of a ten-week programme for two hours per week at the Hanly Centre, Dublin (Feldstein, 2011, p. 20).

Whilst in the UK, parliament maintained public focus on the profession within Britain, in Ireland, such attention was largely maintained by the broadsheet media. Counselling training, as well as counselling regulation, were first referenced in the Irish media in 1984, analogising training in counselling as being akin to that of a seamstress learning the trade.

The trainee picks up the trade by watching until she – and it is usually “she” – feels able to tackle the job herself. (Maher, 1984, p. 11)

Odette Thompson, one of the founders of the IAC, in an interview offered to the *Irish Times* in 1989, stated that there was a cohort of counsellors practising in Ireland who were without adequate qualifications (Donovan, 1989, p. 11). In the article, she spoke of the lack of counselling training standardisation both nationally and internationally (Donovan, 1989). The 1989 IAC conference hosted a guest speaker from the BAC, who outlined their process of establishing a Working Party on Recognition of Counselling Training. This consultation culminated in the establishment of an Irish working group to explore how best to set up a system of standardisation in Irish counselling training. This IAC group met for eighteen months and, in 1991, offered a set of draft guidelines for IAC-accredited courses. This embryonic working group later became the basis of the Course Recognition Committee of the IAC (Feldstein, 2011). The IAC has changed its name twice since its creation: in 1994, the organisation became Irish Association for Counselling and Therapy (IACT) and in 2002 its current iteration as the IACP came into being (Feldstein, 2011).

A further *Irish Times* article noted the unregulated nature of therapy in Ireland, highlighting the movement’s origins in the United States and

Ireland's national mix of both contemporary (Gestalt² and Reality³) therapies and more 'alternative' offerings such as amethyst⁴ and shiatsu⁵ therapies (Holmquist, 1990). From the article, it is clear that at the outset of the 1990s a smorgasbord of therapeutic practices was available to the Irish public, some based in more clinical frameworks than others. *The Irish Times* article also illustrated the growing counselling industry in Ireland and the concerns of Irish therapists that the unregulated nature of therapy meant that anyone could set up a therapy practice without formal training or experience (Holmquist, 1990). This conversation has continued in Irish counselling circles and the broader media (Byrne, 2016), with the first green shoots of state regulation only now beginning to emerge through CORU (Rountree, 2023).

2.2 Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy

Research has played a central role in the development of therapeutic theory and practice since the 1920s. From the 1940s, there has been a steady growth in psychotherapy research (McLeod, 2017). Studies identifying the core characteristics of effective therapy (Moloney, 2016) and the qualities of effective counsellors and psychotherapists (Bernes, 2005; Heinonen and Nissen-Lie, 2020) have been well evidenced. A recent scoping review identified 122 competencies for psychological counsellors and synthesised these to thirty core competencies across four categories: attitude, personality, knowledge and skill and ability (Chen *et al.*, 2025, p. 147). Aldridge (2011) has offered a historical and sociological history of the development of counselling in the UK, whilst in Ireland, research into counselling training has looked at Irish counselling students' experiences

² Developed by Fritz Perls in 1947, it focuses on here and now experiencing, with a view to removing blocks to authentic contact with the world brought on by old patterns (McLeod, 2019).

³ Founded by psychiatrist William Glasser in 1965, This transtheoretical approach based on choice theory aids individuals in taking responsibility for their behaviours and learn new ways to meet their needs in a more effective manner (McLeod, 2019; *Reality therapy | Research Starters | EBSCO Research*, no date).

⁴ "Amethyst is said to have a range of properties that support both emotional and physical health, though these aren't backed by any research" (Nall, 2020).

⁵ A specific type of massage derived form of Chinese medicine combining massage and acupressure (Brady *et al.*, 2001).

and expectations of group work during training (McMahon and Rodillas, 2020) and work-integrated learning in therapeutic training programs (Sheedy and Clancy, 2025).

McQuaid (2014) identified three aspects underpinning therapist training programmes being theories that relate to practice, personal development in both group and individual settings and practice in the context of training, such as placement. Many training programs in the UK and Ireland consist of teaching theory and skills in a classroom setting, alongside clinical work placement and clinical supervision with a qualified clinical supervisor (Sheedy and Clancy, 2025, p. 410). Whilst there are many commonalities between therapy training, many variations among training ideologies exist (Orlinsky *et al.*, 2024 p. 560), with some programmes differing in focus due to the underlying philosophical distinctions within therapeutic schools. In this regard, the development of technical aspects of an approach have typically received more attention in behavioural and cognitive therapies, whilst humanistic and psychoanalytic therapies have tended to prioritise the development of self-awareness and interpersonal qualities (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). There remains, however, a gap in the literature examining such training, making it difficult to determine whether current training practices are optimal or fit for purpose (McLeod, 2019). The lack of compelling evidence linking therapy training programmes to effective client outcomes is notable (Owen *et al.*, 2016; Jenkins, 2017; McLeod, 2019). This is particularly concerning given the large investment of resources used to qualify as therapists (Stein and Lambert, 1995, p. 194).

Currently in the UK and Ireland, newly qualified therapists are expected to complete a set number of client hours whilst attending clinical supervision in order to become accredited or licenced. Clinical supervision incorporates a formal relationship, which serves the dual purpose of developing the supervisee so that they can in turn offer the most effective service to the client. Supervision offers protection to the client by means of a 'checks and balances' model of care, supporting cathartic relief for the supervisee, promoting wellbeing in the work, protecting the profession from unethical actions and reducing ineffective practices.

3. Training and Education

Having outlined the core constructs of counselling and psychotherapy and charted its historical development in the UK and Ireland, this article will now explore adult learning principles from pedagogical and andragogical perspectives before moving on to discuss the education of therapists.

Training and education are terms often used interchangeably (Masadeh, 2012, p. 62). Training is described as the “structured education for groups of trainees” (Hill and Knox, 2013, p. 776). It can be associated with procedural skills acquisition (McQuaid, 2014, p. 23) and can involve standardised sets of steps (Hill and Knox, 2013). Education offers a broader outlook and often leading to professional qualification (McQuaid, 2014), the ultimate goal of which is to ensure that people become effective at performing the tasks required by their discipline (Tormey *et al.*, 2022).

Pedagogy can be defined as the guidance provided to students to assist learning, taking the form of teacherly engagement, resources, support and interactions (Billet, 2011). Derived from French and Latin adaptations of Greek, with *ped* meaning child and *agogy* meaning leadership, pedagogy traditionally refers to leadership or guidance of a child (Knowles *et al.*, 2020). Synonyms with the *-agogy* suffix describe a “method or practice of leading, guiding, or teaching” (*Collins English Dictionary*, 2025). While the strict etymological interpretation of pedagogy relates to leading children, it is more commonly understood as the theory and practice of teaching, learning and assessment (Mortimore, 1999) and “the act and discourse of teaching” (Alexander, 2004, p. 8; Black and Wiliam, 2018, p. 4). Though some work in pedagogy has been applied to adult education, many believe that it cannot escape its roots focused on working with children (Knowles *et al.*, 2020). This literal interpretation has led contemporary scholars to develop broader terms, such as andragogy, to address the education of adults (Mortimore, 1999, p. 1).

Andragogy draws its meaning from the Greek words for man (“andros”) and leading men (“agein”) (Loeng, 2018). Though pedagogy and andragogy reflect the skills of teaching and learning, their underpinning presumptions of the instructor and the student differ. Pedagogy views the teacher as omniscient on the subject matter and how it is to be taught (El-Amin, 2020, p. 59). This knowledge is then imparted to a submissive

student, who is seen as a blank slate and whose experience is minimally valued as a learning resource (Knowles *et al.*, 2020). Andragogy differs in that its premise is that the instructor does not possess all knowledge and the students' own experiences aid in developing and creating a fuller understanding of what is being taught (El-Amin, 2020).

The underlying assumptions of andragogy are that as a person matures:

- their concept of self moves from one of being a dependent personality towards one of being a self-directed human being.
- they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
- their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles.
- their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and, accordingly, their orientation towards learning shifts from one of 'subject-centredness' to one of 'problem-centredness'.
- the motivation to learn is internal.

(McQuaid, 2014, p. 20; Knowles *et al.*, 2020, pp. 43–47)

This co-created latter position is more appropriate to higher education leveraging the life experience already accrued by students. In this regard, andragogically oriented lecturers create holistic learning plans and environments that expose learners to a multi-sensory learning experience through the use of learning materials via kinaesthetic, visual, oral and aural modes (El-Amin, 2020). It has been argued that learning pedagogies are not often fully implemented in healthcare educational programming or design (Mukhalalati and Taylor, 2019). Such programming often demonstrates an emphasis on *what* is required to be known whilst offering little focus on *how* it may be learned.

3.1 History of Counselling and Psychotherapy Training

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) is widely considered the father of modern therapy. His development of psychoanalysis from the mid-1890s (Storr, 2001), marks the burgeoning of a new field through which neurotic patients could seek new insights into their own processes and ultimately gain catharsis or relief. The discipline of psychoanalysis is the earliest area of therapy to develop a formal training schedule (McLeod, 2019). This was

developed through Freud's Wednesday Psychological Society in 1902, with five fellow doctors at his home in Vienna. The first therapy training had so commenced as an informal peer to peer supervision where case studies would be presented and analysed.

Training analysis has been a signature pedagogy in psychoanalytic training. This method consists of a trainee engaging in their own analysis with a more senior member of a training institute. The assessment of suitability of candidates for qualification was determined by the training analyst. The privacy and secrecy of such arrangements stifled public discussion on such training pedagogy (McLeod, 2019, p. 427) and led to oppression within a training where appeals were not possible.

From the 1940s, Carl Rogers (1902–1987) and his colleagues sought to develop trainee self-awareness and relatedness through participation in experiential groups. Therapeutic skills were cultivated through the use of trainee dyads, watching films and reading transcripts of sessions as well as attending client sessions as co-therapists with more experienced counsellors. The emergence of democratisation after the Second World War was reflected in the training itself with student self-reflection and evaluation being considered alongside staff assessments (McLeod, 2019).

As structured therapeutic approaches such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) emerged in the 1960 and 1970s, structured approaches to skills training also emerged such as Interpersonal Process Recall (Kagan *et al.*, 1969) and the Skilled Helper Model (Egan, 1982). Such models would offer trainees a standardised programme of specific counselling skills through the use of video, handouts, lectures and role play (McLeod, 2019, p. 428).

3.2 Contemporary Training Structures

Therapist training is a standardised process through which a trainee grows in competency from a baseline novice standard and expectation to that of a qualified therapist (Jenkins, 2017, pp. 25–26). Trainees develop their craft and professional identities in these formative training environments (Orlinsky *et al.*, 2024, p. 559).

There is a broad heterogeneity in the approaches and content utilised by therapy training courses (Cooper, 2008; Orlinsky *et al.*, 2024). Such courses provide trainees with learning opportunities in areas of self-

exploration, supervised work with clients, the acquisition of counselling skills and counselling theory (Dryden and Thorne, 1991; McQuaid, 2014), though differing courses emphasise focus on some of these areas at the expense of others (McLeod, 2019, p. 428).

Personal growth and awareness are mainstays of counselling training, integral to the overall growth of the developing professional therapist (Luke and Kiweewa, 2010). Personal development work aids the trainee therapist in developing greater efficacy in the management of their own life challenges and psychological distress as well as gaining greater awareness of their own subconscious and cognitive biases, which may otherwise leak into their work with clients (Li, Wang and Li, 2024). Training needs a balance between a development of the individual in their 'Being', through personal therapy, group process and reflective practices, whilst shaping the theoretical and technical aspects of their developing professional role, their 'Doing'. If the balance is overweighted toward the 'Being', there is potential for developing emotionally aware professionals with a dearth of the core technical skills to do the work. Overweighting on the 'Doing' is likely to produce hollow professionals, role bound at the expense of congruence and empathic attunement (Jenkins, 2017).

Research into what is effective in therapist training is central to ensuring that therapists are appropriately skilled in the delivery of best practice therapy. Given the centrality of therapist training in representing the requirements of best practice therapy and ensuring that therapists are appropriately skilled up to deliver it, research into this domain is central to the profession as a whole (Orlinsky *et al.*, 2015).

3.3 Competency based Training and the Road Ahead

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) in the USA was set up in 1981 as a nationally recognised accrediting body for Masters and Doctoral degree programs in counselling. Its introduction of competency-based standards in 2001 (Urofsky and Bobby, 2012) places CACREP as an early adopter of such practices in therapeutic training. Therapist training in the UK and Ireland is currently undergoing a similar shift from values and content-based training to that of competency-based standards of proficiency (Hill and Knox, 2013; Jenkins, 2017) through the introduction of the Scope of

Practice and Education (ScoPEd) framework in the UK and CORU's Standards of Proficiency in Ireland. Competency could be understood as the drawing together of training and education to characteristics and core skills sets requisite to effective job performance (Chen *et al.*, 2025). Such characteristics can be divided into visible and hidden aspects (Salman, Ganie and Saleem, 2020). A recent scoping review synthesised the core competencies of therapists into the four domains of attitude, personality, knowledge, and skill and ability (Chen *et al.*, 2025). The Quality Assurance Authority manage standards for university qualifications in the UK. They outline how competence will be informed in therapist training through their criteria of minimum expectations of what therapy trainees need to 'know, do and be' to secure qualification (Quality Assurance Agency, 2022).

In reference to Goldfreid's (2019) assertion that the field of psychotherapy remains at a pre-scientific stage in its development, Rief (2021) offers a critique of the historic 'school based' tradition of therapy training outlining the negative consequences of programs focusing training on a core therapeutic modality (school). He cautions against the rigidity of maintaining adherence to a singular orientation, the creep of bias in research associated to the researchers own therapeutic orientation, and the blinkering of therapists in their psychotherapeutic understandings beyond that of their own immediate modality. He argues for the future of therapy training following evidence-based competencies required by therapists which he has broken into the three areas of *scientifically based knowledge*, *practical skills acquisition* and the development of *personal skills*.

Others warn against the emergence of competency-based benchmarks as minimum criteria to assess for qualification. A task-based approach to training can overlook a clinical professional being more than the sum of their parts (Brightwell and Grant, 2013). With this in mind, the competency-based trainings of medical doctors have evolved to capture higher order qualities under which tasks are undertaken. Such qualities as professionalism, empathy, leadership and problem solving are now included as modified descriptors in curricula referred to as meta-competencies (Brightwell and Grant, 2013). Appropriate responsiveness in therapy as a demonstrable meta-competency is identified through knowing how, when and with whom to implement the skills and knowledge acquired through training (Hatcher, 2015; Hill and Knox, 2013).

4.0 Conclusion

This article has offered a contextual understanding of how therapy and therapist training have developed within Ireland and the UK. It has presented the constructs of counselling and psychotherapy, charting the evolution of the discipline within these islands from the early days of the profession to the upcoming introduction of protected titles through CORU. It has examined the inter-relationship between training and education as a base to understand both historical and contemporary structures in therapist training.

There remains a dearth of research into the effectiveness of therapist training in producing effective therapists (McLeod, 2019). Given the large investment in resources to qualify therapists, the lack of compelling evidence that such programs directly relate to effective client outcomes is notable (McQuaid, 2014; McLeod, 2019). In acknowledging the claim that therapist training is both effective and necessary, the challenge is set for the discipline to provide evidence for such a claim (Hill and Knox, 2013; Orlinsky *et al.*, 2015).

Whilst research has identified the core competencies of practitioners (Chen *et al.*, 2025), a further systematic review of literature connecting training approaches to the development of such core competencies is required. Additionally, though international research has commenced into the structural and organisational variance between therapy programs (Orlinsky *et al.*, 2024), Irish training programs have been under-represented. Further national analysis is required to understand the similarities and differences across Irish therapy training programs ahead of state regulation.

As state regulation of this discipline in Ireland progresses through CORU, the delineations between counselling and psychotherapy have been set out by the regulator through each profession's standards of proficiency, though the evidence base for such distinctions has not yet been shared with the public or profession. The importance of such decisions originating from an evidence-based foundation is paramount in ensuring training and practice criteria within the professions in order to ensure that they progress along established evidence-based pathways.

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Apocalyptic Misanthropy and the ‘Fall’ of Modernity in Mid-Twentieth Century American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

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Abstract

This article critically examines misanthropy and anti-modern sentiment in post-apocalyptic fiction. Focusing on Pat Frank’s ‘Alas, Babylon (1959)’, it explores the misanthropic potential of apocalyptic fantasies that imagine the end of the world as both a clean slate and a deserved punishment for a sinful, ‘fallen’ humanity. The novel’s conservative outlook frames the apocalypse as an opportunity to return to idealised ways of life, evoking biblical themes and misogynist narratives to underscore its engagement with misanthropy. Sin and moral excess are identified with a mid-twentieth-century modernity, which precipitates its own downfall. These misanthropic longings map on to the nature-culture divide prevalent in modern, Western culture, where nature is depicted as a pastoral idyll, which is opposite to technological modernity. Through an examination of these misanthropic constructions, this article highlights the ways post-apocalyptic fiction more generally reflects and shapes societal anxieties about modernity, the natural world and human fallibility. Finally, it challenges these misanthropic paradigms by discussing their narrow conception of power and responsibility and their incapacity to imagine meaningful futures.

Keywords: post-apocalypse, apocalypse, nuclear fiction, Christianity, nature, misanthropy

Introduction

This article examines Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* (1959) to explore how this post-apocalyptic novel represents apocalypse and what this reveals about the novel’s evaluation of mid-century American society. *Alas, Babylon* tells the story of a community in the fictional rural town of Fort Repose, Florida. After a nuclear war erupts between the United States and Russia, the town’s survivors band around the novel’s protagonist, Randy Bragg. They face the challenges of being cut off from a devastated US-America and work to build a thriving community, while Randy evolves into the leader of both his family and of the town. Written in the mid-twentieth century, at a time when the brutality of technological modernity emerged in unprecedented ways—most notably in the creation of the nuclear bomb—*Alas, Babylon* emerged from and contributed to a new apocalyptic imaginary. This makes

the novel a salient case study for examining anti-modern and misanthropic constructions.

Concepts of apocalypse, with their associated destruction, evoke complex emotions. While the apocalypse's immense scale of suffering and horror can be deeply unsettling, apocalyptic fantasies often convey anticipation and longing. The Judeo-Christian ideas that shape Western conceptions of apocalypse prime audiences for awe and anticipation of a final judgement, in which evil is punished and the virtuous and faithful are rewarded. Both the concept and term 'apocalypse' emerge in Christian texts and theology. As Kirsten Thompson (2007, p. 3) notes, the term derives from the Greek *apokalypsis*, broadly meaning to "uncover or disclose". As Stephen O'Leary summarises, apocalypse in the original biblical sense is therefore:

[a] discourse that reveals or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny, rendering immediate to human audiences the ultimate End of the cosmos in the Last Judgment. (O'Leary. 1998, pp. 5–6)

In the Bible, apocalyptic texts include the Book of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah in the Old Testament and chapters from the Gospels of Mark and Mathew in the New, alongside, most famously, the Book of Revelation (Zamora, 1993, p. 2). Zamora (1993, p. 10) crucially highlights that apocalypse is eschatological; "it is concerned with final things, with the end of the present age and with the age to follow", which has enabled a shift in meaning this article will later discuss in further detail.

These origins of apocalypse manifest in *Alas, Babylon*. Drawing on Christian ideas of sin and divine punishment that shape Western apocalyptic thought, the novel presents modernity as corrupt and idealises a pre-modern, rural past. Through this alignment of Christian apocalypticism and conservative nostalgia, *Alas, Babylon* constructs a moral vision that celebrates destruction as a means of renewal. In the novel, Christian ideas serve to justify an apocalyptic event as a deserved punishment for a sinful humanity. Annihilation is morally cleansing, setting the foundations for new and improved societies. The article seeks to evaluate how *Alas, Babylon* depicts apocalypse as a blank slate and cleansing event—a sacrifice for a better future. In doing so, it centres the

misanthropy and political implications inherent in treating annihilation simultaneously as a punishment and an opportunity for renewal. Critics such as Richard Schwartz (2006, p. 410), Jeffrey Porter (1993, pp. 41–42) and Brent Bellamy (2021, pp. 2, 46–47) have recognised the reassuring fantasy of the apocalypse as a clean slate in Frank's novel. Porter (1993, p. 41) critiques Frank's tendency to prioritise pastoral fantasy over the significance of nuclear war. While these discussions recognise key dynamics of the narrative, Frank's reassuring apocalyptic vision also creates political longings and an accompanying misanthropy that remain underexplored. Furthermore, pre-existing discussions of the novel's representation of apocalypse have not examined in detail how Christian concepts of apocalypse manifest in the novel in order to create a specifically conservative and pastoral apocalyptic fantasy.

This article seeks to expand existing discussions by examining the consequences of such apocalyptic fantasies arguing that, more than merely being reassuring, *Alas, Babylon* perpetuates a deeply anti-modern and conservative instinct through its close alignment with Christian apocalyptic narrative. The novel's use of Christian ideas of sin and divine punishment serves to villainise modern society and celebrates a mythical pre-modern, pure past, which helps to construct a conservative and misanthropic fantasy that recasts annihilation as a hopeful act of renewal. This article further examines the political and ethical consequences of such misanthropic apocalyptic fantasises. Finally, this article considers the wider implications of *Alas, Babylon*'s targeted misanthropy and concludes by considering how they highlight a narrow view of responsibility, privilege and change in apocalyptic fantasies of this type.

Apocalypse as a Clean Slate

In *Alas, Babylon*, nuclear apocalypse provides a blank slate that allows the survivors to build more rewarding lives. Many contemplate how their lives and those of their family members have improved since losing modern society. The protagonist, Randy, is a key example of this transformation. The novel traces his journey from an alienated alcoholic, womaniser and failed politician to an assertive leader of his family and his community. Qualities once overlooked, such as his natural survival skills and talent for leadership, emerge through crisis. Johannes Kaminski (2021, p. 916)

describes how Randy typifies male protagonists in survivalist narratives who: “stand out for their physical strength, social cooperation and spiritual tranquillity” amid post-catastrophic conditions. Randy ‘hardens’ through adversity and matures into a respected leader, who displays Christian, masculine virtues. Other characters note this change, with one remarking: “You’re tougher. You’re not the same Randy. I guess you’re growing up” (p. 200). This stands in contrast to the way his girlfriend describes him earlier in the plot as “vegetating” in Fort Repose rather than being a true “man” (p. 52). His moral growth is paralleled by physical improvements, as Randy feels that he benefits from the labour required to sustain the community’s harvests and supplies. Randy describes feeling “leaner and harder, and truthfully, [he] felt better than before The Day [of the bombs]” (p. 178). He is not the only character to experience this beneficial effect. His prospective father-in-law, initially portrayed as senile and unassertive before the bombs were dropped, is later described as “drop[ping] years as well as weight” (p. 182). Through such depictions the novel makes clear that the destruction of mid-century American society has improved the lives of its characters.

The novel’s resentment of modernity becomes apparent here. As the characters flourish under post-apocalyptic conditions, Frank portrays modern society as an obstacle that had hindered their happiness. Their new lives are depicted as a return to a simpler way of life: a pre-modern and pre-electricity existence linked to a vague, ‘better’, American past. The novel continually emphasises a temporal disruption and stripping away of modern progress. Randy remarks that North American civilisation has returned to “the Neolithic Age” or at least regressed a few centuries (p. 143). While the protagonists gradually recover a mode of living that they associate with their grandparents’ generation, they stop short of recovering contemporary amenities and comforts. The novel’s community eschews contemporary invention and embraces a nostalgic past, discovering the value of other items, such as their ancestors’ writings, shaving sets and sewing machines (pp. 298–299). *Alas, Babylon* thereby demonstrates how post-apocalyptic fiction, as Bellamy notes,

treat crisis as an opportunity and encourag[e] an understanding of history that [...] seeks a return to the way things were. (Bellamy 2021, p. 2)

Furthermore, this process of returning to “the way things were”, to expand on Bellamy’s observation, lends itself to a distinctly anti-modern and conservative fantasy.

The temporal reset also reestablishes traditional gender roles. While the men find fulfilment in agrarian labour, the women take on conventionally feminine tasks such as cooking and nursing. Elizabeth, Randy’s eventual wife, exemplifies this change. She is an educated woman with a major in psychology (p. 219) and initially appears to embody the “strong, rational, articulate, independent, emotionally restrained, professional” woman whom Schwartz (2006, p. 418) identifies as idealised in Frank’s fiction, pointing to potential feminist tones within the novel. However, as Schwartz himself notes, while the narrative certainly prizes strength and restraint in its female characters, the domestic roles performed by women in the community place restrictions on any advocacy for women’s greater autonomy. The novel commends Elizabeth’s intellect and education, but her ultimate post-apocalyptic fate is to become Randy’s supportive wife and to bear his child, taking on a purely nurturing role (p. 259). Her trajectory reinforces conservative gender roles, even if there are potential feminist undertones. This highlights an alternative, underexplored and less charitable reading of the novel’s conservative approach to gender roles.

The community’s librarian, Alice, further voices the novel’s anti-modern themes. Prior to the nuclear disaster, her library was largely deserted and underfunded. She attributes this to “distractions” such as televisions, which she calls “mass hypnosis” (p. 186). After the community is deprived of modern amenities, the library becomes a social hub. Alice reflects, “it was strange [...] that it should require a holocaust to make her own life worth living” (p. 186). Beyond her personal new-found meaning, this realisation implies that by re-embracing books as resources, the community has returned to a better time. A society that values traditional, physical knowledge has replaced a society ‘polluted’ by distractions, and therefore one which was intellectually less meaningful.

It is worth noting that in contemporary conservative politics, libraries are an under-valued and stifled place of learning and community, frequently persecuted through censorship and book-banning (Jaeger *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). However, the novel’s depiction of the library does not engage with these contemporary political concerns on this level, instead framing

the library in a contrast between pre-electrical past and a ‘polluted’ modernity. Accordingly, the novel succeeds in constructing an anti-modern and conservative fantasy around this public space through eschatological apocalyptic narrative, which must portray the destroyed modern time as degraded and corrupted.

The novel further enhances these associations between modernity and degradation through Elizabeth’s reflection on humanity’s modern condition, which occurs in the context of a conversation about vaccines and modern medicinal protections:

We were born with silver spoons in our mouths and electric dishwashers to keep them sanitary and clean. We relaxed, didn’t we? What happened to us? (p. 230)

Elizabeth explicitly articulates that humanity has softened due to modern amenities, and that this is a decline, a ‘relaxation’ from a pre-modern existence. The privileges which supposedly make humans ‘soft’ or degrade their condition are associated with electrical appliances, cementing the novel’s association between electrical modernity as a human fall from grace.

Misanthropic Apocalypticism and Christian Symbolism

Alas, Babylon heavily incorporates Christian ideas and themes to depict apocalypse sympathetically, in its justification and rationalisation of the aftermath of the bombing of the US. Biblical tradition lends nuance to the concept of apocalypse. The origins of the term ‘apocalypse’ from the Greek, denoting prophecies of the final judgement, have already been discussed. However, Zamora (1993, p. 1) notes that “our modern sense of apocalypse is less religious than historical”, often referring to nuclear, ecological or demographic “events of recent history” that lay bare our capacity for self-destruction. Thompson (2007, p. 3) accordingly highlights the multi-faceted dimensions of apocalypse, arguing that while popular conceptions commonly conflate apocalypse with “doomsday, disaster, catastrophe, and terminus”, the apocalypse carries “dialectical meanings” of revelation, triumph, order and the millennium (Thompson, 2007, pp. 3–4). The Christian tradition imbues Western apocalyptic fantasies with the connotations of positive transformation and anticipation, as reflected in

post-apocalyptic fiction. In his article on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), Greg Garrard details how Christian apocalyptic visions draw on punishment and transformation:

In Christian belief, destruction was a necessary part of God's transformation of reality, a prelude to the New Jerusalem in which virtue would once and for all be rewarded and sin punished [...]. For all its violence, apocalypse deals in consolations: the revelation of truth and the final triumph of good over evil. (Garrard, 2011, pp. 394–395)

Frank similarly depicts the apocalypse as an opportunity for renewal and transformation, but *Alas, Babylon's* apocalyptic misanthropy further draws on Christian ideas of sin, virtue, punishment and reward.

This is evident in its intertextual use of the biblical story of Babylon and in the Christian morality that influences its characters. "Alas, Babylon" is a code phrase used by Randy's brother to warn him of the impending nuclear war, recalling sermons from their childhood (pp. 14–15). The phrase is also later used by a preacher while describing the nuclear bomb disaster as foretold (p. 150) and establishes a link between Babylon, deserving of divine punishment, and the US. The sermon evokes *Revelation* 18:10, which refers to Babylon as a "mighty city" awaiting its divine judgement because it has "fallen" (*Rev.*, 18:2) and "her sins have reached unto heaven" (*Rev.*, 18:5).

In the Bible, Babylon evolved from the historical empire that enslaved Israel into a symbolic figure for moral corruption that invites divine judgement. The 'fallen' Babylon is destroyed through and purified by apocalyptic fire, as it is "utterly burned" (*Rev.*, 18:8), which presents a parallel to nuclear fire and annihilation. Frank's invocation of the Babylon of *Revelation* places modern American cities, such as Miami, Orlando and Washington D.C., which are targets of nuclear destruction, as manifestations of sinful Babylon. As Schwartz (2006, p. 143) points out, Miami is destroyed after having "been compared with ancient Babylon as a decadent, licentious center of sin". Through these biblical comparisons, the novel implies that cities, as emblems of modernity and sites of excess and sins, are deserving of their apocalyptic fate and that their destruction fulfils the prophecy of *Revelation* (*Rev.* 17–18). In turn, the novel invites a

comparison between contemporary America and Babylon, as bastions of power, wealth and human hubris which incur just punishment.

Claire Sponsler (1993, p. 255) comments on the dynamic between the urban and the rural, highlighting that Frank's story features two distinct spaces: relatively "unscathed rural or suburban outposts" like Fort Repose, versus "the contaminated zones of former cities". The modern cities are wiped out, "seemingly with good riddance". Though neither Schwartz nor Sponsler observe this directly in their discussions, the division between cities and rural spaces amplifies the narrative's misanthropic and anti-modern fantasy. 'Purer' rural spaces gain the opportunity to rebuild new and improved societies, whereas urban spaces must endure the deserved apocalyptic punishment incurred by a sinful modernity.

This mirroring of Christian apocalypse extends to the novel's treatment of characters, whose fates are frequently divided along moral lines. Randy, whose journey frames the story, embraces Christian and conservative values in several ways. For example, he transitions from a womaniser to a married man and increasingly values faith and religious practices. Throughout this journey, he demonstrates Christian virtues, such as being a good Samaritan (p. 98). In contrast, characters who display traditional Christian vices are punished. A key example is Porky Logan, the town's elected politician. Previously described as opportunistic, he accumulates heavily irradiated precious metals and jewellery, looking to sell them and gain wealth. The radiation causes his death. He is punished for his greed, while further representing a modern, corrupt establishment.

Rita, a promiscuous woman and Randy's former flame, redeems herself by selflessly lending her truck and petrol to Randy, as well as relinquishing the irradiated jewellery, which she acquired from Porky Logan in exchange for supplies. However, she is permanently marked by an irradiated ring, which leaves a black mark symbolically brandishing her for her vices (pp. 202–205). This mark is an intertextual link to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in which a similarly sexually deviant must wear a mark (a scarlet letter 'A'). It underscores the novel's perpetuation of conservative gender roles. Rita is contrasted with Elizabeth, who, despite her modern and emancipated education, is portrayed as a chaste and reliable companion for Randy. Unlike Rita, with "an annulled high school marriage and an abortion behind her" (p. 198), Elizabeth does not reveal a sexual

history and expresses her desire for marriage early in both the narrative and relationship (p. 52). Elizabeth becomes Randy's wife and the mother of his future children, through Christian ceremony. As mentioned above, Randy's journey is one that turns towards Christian values, and the female characters reflect that trajectory: Rita, associated with vice, is a marker of his hedonistic past, whereas Elizabeth, a devoted wife, embodies his virtuous present and future.

By aligning characters with Christian virtues or lack thereof, the novel mirrors how the Christian apocalypse provides catharsis "in which good and evil will finally receive their ultimate reward or punishment" (O'Leary, 1998, p. 6). The fallout of nuclear annihilation functions as punishment for the sinful, while allowing the virtuous survivors to rebuild. Christian morality and Social Darwinism unite here, as it is 'natural agents', such as radiation, that weed out both the morally and physically weak and the sinful. Through this justified suffering, the apocalypse becomes:

a [...] moral cleansing agent capable of enabling the hopelessly misguided human race to clean the slate and begin anew. (Schwartz, 2006, p. 410).

The depiction of nature as a corrective force and integration of Christian themes targets modern society, portrayed as fallen and corrupt. In *Alas, Babylon*, the destruction of this sinful modernity allows a reconstituted community to emerge, reflecting the moral and restorative logic of the biblical apocalypse. It parallels *Revelation*, where 'a new heaven and new earth [emerge], for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away' (Rev. 21:1). Following the final judgement, humanity regains close communion with God as the New Jerusalem descends (Rev. 21:1–25). Similarly, the survivors in Frank's post-apocalyptic world reconstruct a morally disciplined community, which suggests a new beginning after the destruction of a corrupt world.

The vision of biblical apocalypse resonates in *Alas, Babylon*, where nuclear war is not only a catastrophe but a morally corrective event. By presenting the nuclear annihilation of large parts of the United States as a sacrifice that enables a return to a better past, *Alas, Babylon* frames apocalypse through a misanthropic lens. It rationalises destruction not only through its disdain for modernity but by drawing on nature and Christian

morality to portray the apocalypse as a deserved and necessary, corrective event. This resonates with the use of the term ‘nuclear holocaust’, as the word holocaust originally describes “a sacrifice completely consumed by fire, and thus a perfect sacrifice” (Livingstone, 2013, p. 141). Accordingly, this also mirrors the punishment of Babylon through fire in the Book of *Revelation*, as previously mentioned. Apocalyptic fire purges the corrupt, allowing for a better future.

Nature becomes a further agent of this purifying sacrifice, echoing the moral logic of Christian apocalypse in which suffering and judgement purge the sinful and allow the virtuous to rebuild. Frank uses nature to justify suffering by alluding to social Darwinism, presenting natural challenges and hardships as forces that strengthen humanity and correct the mistakes of modernity. The narrative follows characters portrayed as physically and morally strong enough to withstand the challenges of life post-nuclear holocaust. The differing fates of Elizabeth’s (who becomes Randy’s wife) parents demonstrate this clearly. While her father regains strength by trading modern physical comforts for agrarian labour, her diabetic mother dies early in the narrative due to a lack of insulin. While this may seem a tragic yet logical consequence of an apocalyptic situation, the novel’s repeated references to Darwin’s theories suggest a different interpretation. Characters frequently allude to the idea of ‘survival of the fittest’ and natural selection. Randy, for example, states: “the strong survive [...] that’s the way it’s going to be” (Frank, 1960, p. 175). Natural conditions for survival become a conservative ideological force, returning humans to ‘traditional’ conditions and gender roles. Nature thus creates a stronger and more resilient human community, reinforcing the novel’s misanthropic and morally corrective version of the apocalypse.

By no coincidence, those who are physically weak, such as Elizabeth’s mother, are associated with the comforts of modernity and shown as lacking moral fortitude in the face of disaster. When Randy warns her of the upcoming war, Elizabeth’s mother dismisses the subject as “horrid” and refuses to consider it, unlike her husband, who is able to face the possibility and accordingly later develops into a stronger man (pp. 74–75). This example of ‘weakness’ exemplifies how, as Schwartz argues, the novel “prize[s] dispassionate reason and deplore[s] excessive, counterproductive sentiment” (2006, p. 410). For example, while Elizabeth’s mother is

depicted as fragile for being emotionally overwhelmed by the prospect of war, Elizabeth herself is shown as strong for showing little grief upon her mother's passing (pp. 173–174). Similarly, Elizabeth's steadiness and constant demonstration for rationality stands in contrast to Helen, the wife of Randy's brother. Helen, in contrast to Elizabeth, frequently demonstrates her emotions and needs to overcome emotional or irrational outbursts, such as an incident in which she mistakes Randy for her dead husband (pp. 218–219). As the perceived superiority reason over emotion has inherent gendered associations, which emphasises the novel's devaluation of qualities deemed 'feminine' here. Strong emotion, traditionally seen as feminine in Western societies, must be rejected in favour of masculine reason, even by the women who carry out traditional female roles. The inability of Elizabeth's mother to demonstrate dispassionate reason condemns her to the fate of the 'weak', compounded by her reliance on modern inventions, specifically insulin.

Similarly, Fort Repose's hotel guests, who were staying there when the war began, fail to accept the reality of disaster and clamour for modern comforts (p. 159). Many of them later die in a fire that breaks out due to the hotel residents' ignorance, which the town doctor describes as "inevitable" (p. 160). The fire thus becomes another corrective natural agent, embodying the cleansing role of fire. In contrast, it is the characters who return to working closely with nature who rebuild the community. This creates the sense that nature eliminates those the novel perceives to as mentally, morally or physically weak to correct for an overly bloated modern society. Human suffering is justified as nature selects the strongest members of the community and sets humanity on track to build a better existence. The town doctor makes this explicit:

It is said that nature is cruel. I don't think so. Nature is just, and even Merciful. By natural selection, nature will attempt to undo what man has done. (p. 215)

This statement implies that through modern inventions, humans have strayed from a purer existence and disrupted nature's ways. The suffering of the community becomes a necessary sacrifice for steering humanity to returning to 'the way things were'.

Apocalypse and the Return to Eden

Alas, Babylon constructs a pastoral fantasy to convey its anti-modern depiction of apocalypse as a form of renewal. The novel's use of nature as an idyllic, but neglected, place of plenitude underlines the resonance of Christian themes in the novel. Garrard (2012, p. 42) observes that: "Genesis 3, the story of Man's fall, is essentially an elegy of lost pastoral bounty and innocence". By being expelled from Eden, Adam and Eve forsake a state of harmony with nature, as well as their immediate and intimate communion with God. As Garrard describes, the pastoral has many meanings. However, a crucial form involves idealisation of existences close to nature. Crucially, nostalgia is central to the pastoral as a general concept (Garrard, 2012, p. 41). That nostalgia reflects a longing for a lost Edenic, innocent and 'pure' nature. These connotations inform the pastoral vision in *Alas, Babylon* and shapes the novel's portrayal of a post-apocalyptic community seeking renewal through a return to nature.

Alas, Babylon contrasts the pre-annihilation reliance on cities with a return to rural self-reliance, aided by a bountiful nature. The pastoral imagery contrasts the urban and the rural, associating the latter with moral renewal. Fort Repose, a rural community, stands in contrast to the 'sinful' and destroyed cities of Miami, Orlando and Washington. Laura Cigliani (2021, p. 996) connects the novel's idealisation of rural spaces to the pastoral, describing how it "can be read as a form of criticism directed at mass-society, in particular at the hypertrophy of American cities". She further points out that concern over urban growth was widespread in years after the Second World War (late 1940s to early 1950s), which contextualises *Alas, Babylon*'s nostalgia for small-town and rural life.

Humanity's 'fall' from grace, just as Adam and Eve did, which incurs the comparisons between the biblical Babylon and modern American cities, which have similarly 'fallen' to sin. The destruction of inhumane and immoral cities allows the rural survivors to build a new Eden, through a pastoral idyll. This demonstrates how post-apocalyptic stories suggest "that after a world-altering event, the only thing to look forward to is the possibility of a new Eden" (Bellamy, 2021, p. 57). The apocalyptic blank slate allows not only a return to the past, but also a return to a pre-lapsarian past. This once again mirrors the Book of *Revelation*, in which, as Zamora (1993, p. 12) described, following the final judgement "the faithful will

enter a timeless realm of perfection, described metaphorically in *Revelation* as the New Jerusalem". In *Revelation*, the apocalypse culminates in a restoration of an Edenic "new heaven and a new earth" (*Rev.*, 21:1), in which humanity regains their close communion with God, who will "dwell with them" (*Rev.*, 21:3). *Alas, Babylon* echoes this sense of renewal through a secular pastoral fantasy. The survivor's restored connection with the natural world evokes an Edenic ideal of innocence and order, even without a divine presence.

As mentioned above in relation to Social Darwinism, the novel appeals to natural laws and conditions as purifying and facilitating rebuilding. Rather than focusing on apocalyptic destruction, the novel's post-apocalyptic vision focuses on the process of rebuilding among plentiful nature. As Porter describes:

We see no refugee camps filled with sick and dying people, no bombed out cities with charred corpses, no sign of madness or despair. Instead, we see happy survivors surrounded by clean water, blue sky and green trees, and amply supplied with fruit, pecans, and catfish. (Porter, 1993, p. 45)

Fort Repose's inhabitants learn to use its plentiful natural resources, such as oranges, sugar cane crops, river fishing, or natural salt groves. Through natural wealth, the novel therefore once more parallels *Revelation's* New Jerusalem, which is depicted as fecund and abundant in wealth (*Rev.*, 21:17–21). The novel also furthers the pastoral fantasy, as the characters replace the comforts of modern civilisation with agrarian labour, which benefits them mentally and physically. For instance, Randy feels "better" and more fulfilled than before the disaster (p. 178). The novel sets aside the true horror of nuclear annihilation in favour of depicting a rural idyll, which supports Porter's reading of the novel's tendency to downplay the significance of nuclear war. As this article further argues, the novel, rather than purely ignoring the implications of the catastrophe, instead frames them as justifiable, granting only the morally and physically strong the opportunity to rebuild an Edenic world in communion with nature.

As Porter notes, Frank expresses three principal conditions of the pastoral:

the return to nature, withdrawal from the world of politics and history, and a belief in the virtues of simplicity. (Porter, 1993, p. 44)

These pastoral elements emerge fully as the novel posits that a simple existence spent harvesting and sustaining their community is more meaningful for the survivors than joining what remains of the United States. At the end of the novel, when the characters are offered reintegration into surviving American civilisation, they not only reject it, but are portrayed as thriving in contrast to the other remaining pockets of civilisation. For example, a government decontamination task force which visits them states that they have more food than most other surviving zones (p. 306). Once again, the novel invokes a comparison between shattered remnants of a 'fallen' modern world with the Edenic idyll of Fort Repose. By emphasising the community's self-reliance, the novel further appeals to a key American discourse: Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of self-reliance, which is, as Hajing Liang (2013, p. 1351) argues, a cornerstone of American individualism. The destruction of modern, urban America becomes an opportunity for the novel's protagonists to return to a simpler, idealised American existence through a localised, individual effort. The rural as pastoral space presents an idealised space disconnected from any networks associated with modern civilisation.

The novel's treatment of nature and Christianity cohere in a clear disdain for contemporary modernity, idealising a return to a better American past, including a return to nature. As the survivors return to nature in a literal sense, the novel thereby naturalises their social formations in turn. They have returned to Eden, and this means that their family and gender roles in turn are those which are 'natural', preceding the modern 'fall' from grace.

Why Misanthropy Matters: The Legacy of *Alas, Babylon*

The highly misanthropic and politically specific approach to apocalypse in *Alas, Babylon* embodies how the dual connotations of apocalypse can yield diverse messages. Despite its specific conservative stance, however, the novel is a case study for themes which permeate across societal and literary apocalyptic fantasies. This is because *Alas, Babylon* originates from a crucial period for post-apocalyptic writing. The 1950s saw a surge in stories that imagine the destruction of society because an apocalyptic future

became, for the first time, a real threat. Nuclear fears in response to this potential future first developed after the use of nuclear bombs in World War II. The development of hydrogen bombs and introduction of Intercontinental missiles reinforced this nuclear threat (Scheibach, 2021, p. 10). Nuclear anxieties further increased in the West due to successful nuclear bomb tests conducted by the Soviet Union (Cigliani, 2021, p. 990), alongside reports of fallout from nuclear tests, such as Strontium-90 found in consumer milk products (Porter, 1993, p. 44). The post-war period of the 1940s and 1950s confronted the world and US-American society with the tangible threat of nuclear annihilation and fallout, which radically opened up the apocalyptic imaginary.

O'Leary (1998, p. 7) writes that while the apocalypse has been a core theme in Christian culture for over two thousand years, the nuclear threat posed by atomic bombs made "the threat of planetary destruction credible to a much wider audience". The existence of nuclear bombs enabled fantasies of an entirely new scale of destruction, which stimulated religious, political, and literary fantasies of this revolutionary potential for annihilation. As Schwartz concludes (2006, p. 406), "the annihilation of the entire species had never before presented itself as a real and present danger", yet with the visible impact and potential of nuclear bombs, ordinary citizens, politicians and writers could "for the first time, contemplate the destruction of the entire human race as a plausible, short-term scenario for humanity". As a result, the number of stories depicting the consequences of complete nuclear war as a plausible scenario increased. As Porter (1993, p. 44) points out, this cultural moment also created a market for reassuring constructions of these scenarios: "the nation's hunger for reassurance [was] at its peak". The 1950s featured a range of anxieties which could merge with nuclear anxieties in this market from reassurance, from concerns over the mass saturation of commercialism and consumption to the fraught and morphing positions of women and people of colour in society (Halliwell, 2007, pp. 4–5, 11). Post-apocalyptic stories had unprecedented scenarios to imagine, but also the opportunity to find positive meaning within these fantasies. Treating nuclear annihilation as a justifiable event could serve a tangible function in addressing contemporary anxieties across the political spectrum.

Alas, Babylon ranked highly in popularity among this wave of disaster stories. Schwartz (2006, p. 410) even argues that out of four mainstream 1950s novels depicting nuclear war, it “had the greatest impact on American culture”. It sold immensely well and due to its emphasis on survivalist techniques, it featured as required reading in many American high schools in the Cold War period (2006, p. 410). Porter (1993, p. 4) and Cigliani (2021, p. 995) similarly emphasise the novel’s popularity, pointing out that the novel was in print for numerous decades. This demonstrates the novel’s long-spanning influence. Due to its enduring popularity, the novel’s approach to apocalypse has influenced not only literary successors, but also the cultural apocalyptic imaginary. This influence extends beyond individual popularity to the crucial role nuclear war stories had in shaping the post-apocalyptic genre as it is frequently recognised.

The novel’s misanthropic approach to apocalypse is emblematic of many science fiction and post-apocalyptic stories of this period, which discuss Christian themes and the potentials of apocalypse in several ways. The establishment of these themes in nuclear literature shaped post-apocalyptic writing to come, as these stories provided the blueprint for literary apocalyptic imaginings that were adapted to new societal crises. In *Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*, Bellamy (2021, p. 32) discusses how post-apocalyptic stories of the post-war period shaped the tropes, images and settings of what he calls the ‘post-apocalyptic mode’. During this period, speculative fiction responded to “the cataclysmic possible futures unleashed by atomic war”, as described above. As a result, he argues, “the calcification of post-apocalypse tropes occurs in the 1940s and 1950s” (Bellamy, 2021, p. 50), within this first significant wave of post-apocalyptic storytelling. These tropes then became “delinked from their historical context and redeployed in the abstract” (Bellamy, 2021, p. 50). Post-apocalyptic stories across the later twentieth and twenty-first century adapt the images and themes first expressed in the setting of nuclear apocalypse to their contemporary cultural crises. Critically reading how stories from this originating period imagine apocalypse therefore provides a crucial tool in understanding attitudes of the post-apocalyptic genre, and the cultural constructions the genre has influenced in turn. Dissecting how *Alas, Babylon* exemplifies a particularly Christian-influenced misanthropic fantasy of apocalypse

enables us to identify and critique these sentiments in the stories and fantasies the novel has helped to inspire.

Critically Examining Apocalyptic Misanthropy

Alas, Babylon conveys a misanthropy that justifies the large scale of apocalyptic destruction and suffering for an opportunity to return to a simpler, idealised past. This approach to apocalyptic fantasy expresses a clear and targeted conservative tendency to mythologise the past and condemn modern civilisations. While not all post-apocalyptic stories replicate these sentiments, many of these themes resonate across the genre. Even when less direct, Christian themes of divine punishment, necessary hardship and a desire to re-create a lost Edenic existence appear in many post-apocalyptic stories. Frank's contemporary, Walter Miller, for example, engages with this theme in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), where he critiques the inherent desire for simplicity and deliberately refuses to provide any unscathed pastoral refuges in his nuclear landscape.

This article has described how influential post-apocalyptic stories of the 1950s were in shaping both literary and cultural apocalyptic fantasies. The key role of these misanthropic and hopeful treatments of apocalypse in these novels therefore highlights a crucial ideological construction that resonates with the apocalyptic fantasies that have followed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. Many of the components of this apocalyptic misanthropy, including those of deserved punishment and conservative yearnings for 'the way things were', thrive beyond the bounds of *Alas, Babylon* and can be found in post-apocalyptic stories up to this day. By recognising these tendencies in fiction, we can perceive and highlight similar desires and attitudes in the apocalyptic fantasies ordinary people across society construct, as literary and societal apocalyptic fantasies strongly influence each other. This justifies an examination of the many problems and implications of this apocalyptic misanthropy. To conclude, this article seeks out relevant critiques of such an approach to apocalypse.

Apocalyptic fantasies which draw on ideas of divine punishment involve a narrow view of responsibility and suffering. Apocalyptic scenarios mostly perceive humanity as a unit. Lucas Pohl (2021, p. 205) elaborates on this in reference to climate catastrophe. He argues that apocalyptic

fantasies elevate a mentality that all of humanity is ‘in this together’, implying that:

such a thing as ‘humanity’ in the sense of a global community that shares the same privileges, values, [and] knowledge [exists]. (Pohl, 2021, p. 205)

This depoliticised mentality fails to account for global power dynamics and diverse modes of living across the planet. In Pohl’s example, specific countries, cultures and groups carry more liability than others for the driving causes of climate catastrophe, while the Global South disproportionately suffers. In the case of *Alas, Babylon* and other nuclear war stories, nuclear holocaust comes down to the political tensions of the Cold War, primarily driven by the United States and Russia. The novel is, additionally, primarily focused and aware of an American civilisation and modernity. Yet the novel implicates all of modern humanity in deserving punishment, all alike guilty in the degradation and corruption of the world. The characters’ discussions of the catastrophe’s consequences frequently refer to a global community of humanity, e.g. “nature will attempt to undo what man has done” (p. 215) or referring to the human “race” as a whole (p. 296). Through its invocation of Christian themes and optimistic outlook on apocalypse, the novel justifies global destruction for grievances levelled against American modernity and cities. Additionally, the life facilitated by nuclear annihilation is not drawn from a universal past but carries connotations of middle-class rural American life.

By treating apocalypse as an opportunity, the novel implies that half the globe can be incinerated in a conflict the US is partially responsible for, yet this is positive if the American middle-class life based on ‘family values’ successfully faces the challenge. The narrative is unable to address the horrific scale of what nuclear conflict would entail, because it is preoccupied with presenting a reassuring, pastoral fantasy for the American middle class. Instead of acknowledging the specific responsibility for this destruction, it obscures the political in favour of implicitly depoliticising Christian themes of divine punishment. In doing so, the novel embodies a core tension of misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies. They eschew responsibility for suffering, choosing to retreat into anti-modern fantasies that give the comfort of a clean slate and return to tradition. As discussed,

these tendencies break the bounds of post-apocalyptic fiction. Furthermore, they are not always politically conservative. In *Ecocriticism*, Garrard discusses how environmental movements often mirror similar anti-modern sentiments, which oppose a tainted modernity with a purer Edenic nature from which we have been alienated. The following apocalypticism often takes on misanthropic tones, particularly that of deserved punishment (Garrard, 2012, pp. 112–113). In real-life and post-apocalyptic stories, misanthropy inhibits taking productive responsibility. This lack of responsibility ties into an incapacity to truly imagine change.

Misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies see the apocalypse as a clean slate. Only after annihilation rids the planet of a disdained modernity, can survivors build a better world, which replicates an idealised past. Such a fantasy deems modern living irredeemable rather than recognising flawed ideas which can be resurrected anew in improved forms. Faced with a malfunctioning and destructive present, those who fall to an apocalyptic misanthropy see that present's destruction as a clean slate leading to the resurrection of simpler pre-modern lifestyles, in which people lived closer to nature. This view of the apocalypse eclipses any possibility for alternative ways of living that transform our flawed present rather than rejecting it altogether. This speaks to a tendency to favour the known over imagining alternatives. This tendency is easily replicated across the political spectrum. The systems of society and forms of modernity forged in the late twentieth and twenty-first century are deeply harmful, while feeling inescapable for many living within them. Apocalyptic fantasies can provide the catharsis of a clean slate, eliminating the need for slow and laborious transformation of modes of living. They offer the reassurance of a simpler past, which lacks the harmful complications of modern life. As a result, these fantasies convey an inability to take responsibility for the work of transforming flawed modes of living into new and alternative societies. The reassuring apocalypse instead offers the opportunity to rid humanity of complications, all at the price of destruction. Just as the specific example of *Alas, Babylon* demonstrates, that destruction can then be justified through invocations of sin and purification. However, while these apocalyptic fantasies seek to be reassuring, they ignore the genuine cost of apocalyptic destruction. In non-fictional contexts, this cost is much harder to dismiss. As O'Leary (1998, p. 228) writes, "the saving bliss of

catastrophe is a luxury we can ill afford". We must be critical of how misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies filter from fiction into real-life political and societal narrative.

Conclusion

This article has traced the misanthropic potentials of apocalyptic fantasies in Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*. The novel shows how apocalyptic fictional scenarios can depict the apocalypse as an opportunity for simplification, creating blank slates that allow survivors to replicate idealised pasts. Christian themes of punishment, final judgement and sin underline a profound disdain for modernity and justify the suffering that the cleansing apocalypse necessitates. A misanthropic treatment, which perpetuates conservative ideas of an American golden past, emerges. As established, *Alas, Babylon* is part of a wave of post-apocalyptic stories in the 1950s which calcified many of the tropes and themes that influence not only following post-apocalyptic stories, but also societal apocalyptic imaginaries. Accordingly, recognising the elements of this apocalyptic misanthropy and its potential politics provides a tool which enhances our understanding of apocalyptic fantasies across society. As consequences of the climate crisis mount and new political tensions arise, a nuanced perspective of apocalyptic fantasies and rhetoric becomes increasingly important. Apocalyptic rhetoric and imaginaries are becoming increasingly widespread in our stories, news media and many other outlets. Similarly, misanthropic acceptance of apocalyptic scenarios becomes easier, as a solution to ecological problems and political tensions seems increasingly unlikely. However, as this article has sought to establish, embracing misanthropic apocalyptic fantasies eschews responsibility and inhibits a capacity for affecting and imagining change. As apocalyptic fantasies populate our stories and everyday life, it is crucial to recognise the narrative reassurance these fantasies provide. In human history, the complete breakdown of societies seldom leaves behind intrepid survivors, but shattered remainders. Unlike fictional apocalyptic scenarios, the narrative closure of a clean slate comes at a cost which we cannot accept.

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Cultivating the Creativity of Neurodivergent Thinking: A New Educational Approach for ASD Students

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Abstract

According to the highly popular American podcast series The Neurodiversity Podcast, there is now a newfound appreciation for the creative works of autistic people and how they help to empower and enlighten young minds in a variety of educational contexts. This article demonstrates how the promotion and cultivation of an autistic and neurodivergent person's creativity could effectively pave the way for a new educational approach that would potentially challenge and revitalise the training influenced rigid, rule-bound approach that has grown in prominence in most educational institutions in recent years. Building on a recent conference paper, this article argues that the seeds for this highly innovative type of education could be effectively sown through the establishment of a collaborative Third-Level-based research project. It outlines how this could be achieved through a stronger focus on a transformative participatory action research methodology. Furthermore, it identifies future directions that would support this vital and pressing educational objective.

Keywords: autism, education, inclusive teaching, participatory research, socio-cultural theory

Introduction

The term neurodiversity was introduced by Australian sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s. She proposed that neurological diversity is a natural and healthy attribute, arguing that such differences should be understood as part of human diversity and regarded as natural variation (Goldberg, 2023). More recently, Singer (2024) added that neurodiversity offers a lens for examining social issues (Singer, quoted in Miller, 2024, p. 1). She described individuals with autism, ADHD and learning difficulties like dyslexia and dyscalculia as “neurological minorities” (Singer, quoted in Miller, 2024, p. 1). The concept has expanded to include those who self-identify as neurodiverse or who think and process in unconventional ways (Goldberg, 2023). In its consideration of curating a new educational approach this article focuses particularly on Autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

ASD are lifelong neurodevelopmental conditions characterised by deficiencies in social and communication skills, alongside patterns of restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests (Sefotho and Onyishi, 2021). These challenges, such as struggling to understand abstract concepts, forming friendships, recognising the intentions of others and reading conventional social cues, pose a significant barrier to accessing and completing courses at higher level educational institutions. A recent *Irish Times* editorial highlights an alarming three-fold rise in autism amongst young school children (Mac Cormaic, 2025). The increase, they argue, results from several factors, including heightened awareness of ASD, improved diagnosis and a broader assessment criterion (Mac Cormaic, 2025).

According to Maximus M. Sefotho and C. Onyishi (2021), there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that learners with ASD and their families experience a number of limiting obstacles when they attempt to transition between different phases of academic life. Studies by K. Sproston *et al.* (2017), R. Salter (2019) and A. Munroe and M. Dunleavy (2023) suggest that ASD-related challenges create significant difficulties in primary and secondary environments. This is certainly true within an Irish educational context. Despite the welcome rise in special schools in Ireland from 300 to 3,000 since 2010 and the fact that around 30% of the education budget now goes towards special education classes, what is sorely required is an effective whole-of government response that ensures the planning and delivery of vital services such as financial assistance, specialised autism units and one-to-one tuition for individuals with sensory difficulties (Mac Cormaic, 2025). Many children still do not have appropriate school placements and long assessment waiting lists are now the norm. Limited access to essential therapies and alternative educational approaches further hinders the independence of neurodiverse learner and affects their self-esteem and overall well-being (Mac Cormaic, 2025).

Recent research by E. McPeake *et al.* (2024) shows that students with ASD encounter similar obstacles in third-level education, where different routines and structure can make coping with postsecondary experiences challenging (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024). Students are expected to adapt to new surroundings, navigate unfamiliar social and physical environments and fulfil the demands of academic life simultaneously. B. Cook and Y.

Purkis (2022) likewise note that this transition poses major difficulties as it severely limits their academic progress, independent functioning and leads to a variety of emotional and behavioural symptoms. One challenge lies in the scale of third-level institutions, which can be very overwhelming for many autistic people. The difficulties with self-awareness, personal skills and the ability to disclose personal information experienced people with ASD can create further challenges. Bell *et al.*, (2018) highlight that higher education may be the first setting in which students with ASD must advocate for themselves to access supports or accommodations, potentially putting them at a disadvantage when entering universities, technological institutions, training colleges or other higher education contexts.

This emphasises the need for measures that support the transition of ASD individuals from secondary to post-secondary education. Furthermore, a glaring omission from current research is the voice of autistic people themselves. J. Shepherd (2022) notes that autistic children and young people may be even less likely to have their views considered. Indeed, in many cases, autistic individuals remain excluded from key decisions about further education, such as where to find and access the types of services and support they require. This lack of autonomy greatly contributes to an autistic/allistic¹ divide in higher education, where neurodivergent students experience isolation from their neurotypical peers.

Including the perspectives of autistic individuals is essential for diversifying knowledge in education. This article argues that cultivating the creative, non-linear thinking of students who are on the autism spectrum would support this objective. Such an approach may generate innovative and authentically inclusive educational strategies while challenging the technically prescriptive mindset that has become a problematic feature of contemporary education (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 1989; Buckley, 2021; Holt *et al.*, 2024; Roth, 2018). This text will draw from the author's current PhD research. It will demonstrate how the promotion of autistic creativity could be more fully explored through the establishment of a collaborative Third-Level-based research project, supplemented by a focus on a transformative participatory action research methodology. This would help to guide future policies and practices in post-secondary education.

¹ Allistics are neurotypical individuals.

Literature Review

This literature review illustrates how the cultivation of autistic, creative, non-linear, neurodivergent thinking could establish a new educational approach that enhances the learning experiences of students with ASD. There is growing recognition of autistic creativity and its potential to enrich education, with commentators addressing stereotypes surrounding autism and discussing the potential of creative practices to challenge conventional models of learning.

To explore the topic, a range of sources were consulted. The Boole Library catalogue at University College Cork was the primary resource for books and journal articles, with searches conducted using terms such as *Autism AND Inclusive Education*, *Autism AND Creativity*, and *Autism AND Creative Research Methods*. Additional material was identified through the Cork City and County Library Catalogues, while streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube were used to access relevant discussions and podcasts. Emerging themes were identified through inductive review, allowing for the organisation and categorisation of the literature.

The Concept of Creativity and Autistic Intelligence

The concept of creativity in education is a prominent theme in the literature. D. Roberts and N.J. Roberts (2015) pinpoint how educators grapple with creative thinking to better understand the “relationship between information and insight” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 3). G.A Davis (1991) argues that helping students to understand and develop their creativity increases awareness promotes innovative ideas. Likewise, T. Warne and S. MacAndrew (2010) suggest that creative practices in the classroom allow students to connect abstract theories to personal experience. In contrast, K. Robinson (2006) contends that the education system suffers from a lack of creative ‘outside the box’ thinking due to entrenched hierarchies of subject knowledge (Robinson, 2006). This, he believes, has resulted in an “academic inflation” that “devalues education and stigmatises creative application” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 3).

V. Lyons and M. Fitzgerald (2013) highlight how the classic portrayal of someone with autism is often moulded by the ‘Rain Man’ stereotype, originating from the 1988 film in which Dustin Hoffman played an ‘autistic savant’. This term refers to an individual with ASD who also possesses

exceptional skills in a particular area, often in stark contrast with their overall cognitive or developmental abilities (Treffert, 2025). *Guardian* journalist K. Knights (2018) convincingly argues that this particular representation of autism still has a profound influence on perceptions of ASD. Roberts and Roberts (2015) reiterate this claim and note that people with ASD are often depicted in popular culture as having “stereotypical behaviours with a preference for sameness and routine resulting in a lack of imagination” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 3). Likewise, J. Vincent, *et al.* (2016), draw attention to the persistent belief that creative thought is rare—and sometimes virtually non-existent—amongst people on the spectrum. I. Roth (2018) offers an important counterargument. Aligning with writers such as E. Buckley (2021), she posits that many autistic individuals possess “exceptional artistic gifts” and often gravitate towards “activities typically associated with creative expression” such as “visual art, music, poetry and theatre” (Roth, 2018, p. 1).

These claims have a great deal of credibility. Like Buckley, J. Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) demonstrate the value of drama techniques and performance-based approaches in enhancing the learning experiences of people with autism. Consistent with other researchers in this field (Corbett, 2003; Kasari *et al.*, 2002; Soorya *et al.* 2015) Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) also stress the increasing focus in recent years on “interventions that improve social skills” for people on the spectrum (Beadle-Brown *et al.*, 2017, p. 916). Due to this, there has been greater emphasis on techniques such as peer interaction, peer modelling and video instruction, which aim to improve the communication abilities of individuals with ASD.

In common with these commentators, Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) venture to affirm that many developmental psychologists and educationalists are increasingly highlighting the value of dramatic play for people with autism. They suggest that such approaches can help participants “read each other’s beliefs and intentions” within a safe, structured and encouraging environment (Beadle-Brown *et al.*, 2017, p. 916). Similarly, M.D. Lerner and A.Y. Mikami (2012) point out that these performance-based activities provide opportunities for students to develop their behaviour in more naturalistic ways. By contrast, N. Shaughnessy (2011) outlines the parallels between the three central concepts of drama—*Imagination* (the construction of a fictional or alternative reality)

Communication (the dialogue between a performer and their audience) and *Interaction* (the physical engagement between an audience and the actual performer themselves)—and the ‘triad of impairments’ often associated with autism (Wing and Gould, 1979).

These views directly echo writers such as J.W. Ivy and K.A Schreck (2016) who demonstrate the effectiveness of the Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). This is therapy based on the science of learning and behaviour (Autism Speaks Inc., 2025). Its main objective is to help us to understand the origins of certain behaviour; how this is affected by the environment and how learning takes place. In addition, it aims to decrease behaviours that are harmful or negative. Within the context of autism, it seeks to improve social skills, communication and reduce challenging behaviour through positive reinforcement (Ivy and Schreck, 2016). Yet this method has also faced strong criticism. J. Garey (2025), for example, echoing feminist commentators such as C. Jones (2022), argues that this emphasis on eliminating ‘undesirable’ behaviours pressures autistic people to suppress their natural characteristics, sacrifice individuality and conform to neurotypical standards.

However, Garey’s (2025) perspective warrants critical examination. The methods used by American-based disability organisations such as Building Blocks Therapy contradict this view. They specialise in using targeted and person-centred approaches to assist children with autism who may experience developmental difficulties (such as executive dysfunction or emotional regulation). They aim to accomplish this through a combination of structured activities, play, and personalised techniques that are tailored to suit the specific needs of an autistic individual (buildingblockstheapy.org, 2025a). Moreover, they call attention to a newfound emphasis on ‘unstructured play’, which seeks to foster creativity and individual expression (buildingblockstheapy.org, 2025b). This approach provides those with ASD the freedom to explore their interests beyond the constraints of a structured environment (buildingblockstheapy.org, 2025b). Furthermore, it allows them to engage in imaginative scenarios that can enhance social skills and emotional intelligence.

J. Holt *et al.* (2024, p. 4) accentuate how some educators are building upon Lave and Wenger’s (1991) ‘situated learning theory’, which stresses

that “people learn by becoming part of a community of practice” and through “active engagement” with other students (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 1). Consistent with N. Gillberg *et al.* (2024), Holt *et al.* (2024) effectively illustrate how this benefits those with ASD as it would lead to a creative and collaborative space in which “autistic individuals” could engage with “neurotypical peers and other autistics” through a variety of shared activities (Holt *et al.*, 2024, p. 4) Expanding on Roth (2018), they advocate for workshops that incorporate a mixture of art and storytelling and demonstrate how such methods can foster psychological empowerment for those on the spectrum. These perspectives underline how emphasising non-linear neurodivergent thinking could pave the way for more innovative educational approaches that would help to facilitate the inclusion of autistic and neurodivergent students within mainstream institutions.

Technically Prescriptive Teaching

The ability to fully incorporate and acknowledge the versatile creative thinking of those on the spectrum is made increasingly problematic if the views of theorists such as Deborah J. Gallagher (2004), who demonstrate another important subtheme within the research on this issue, are considered. According to this school of thought, many Third-Level institutions still adhere to an objectivist educational framework. The logic behind this approach is that good teaching is a matter of applying good technique. It depicts knowledge as a collection of impersonal facts. Knowing how to teach, according to this perspective, means that one must accumulate data, skills and techniques that will somehow eliminate the uncertainties that accompany teaching. This ‘technical-rational’ framework fails to account for the fact that human beings learn best by making sense of the world. To put it another way, it implies that learning is no longer a meaning-making process. It eliminates the role of consciousness. Both teachers and students are discouraged from intellectual engagement and curiosity—which are vital for genuine learning.

Gallagher (2004, p. 6) argues that an over-reliance on an objectivist framework ultimately results in “teacher deskilling”, in which teachers focus on a small set of specialised skills. In doing this they lose the connection between their practices and the ideas that inform them and eventually abandon the idea of teaching as meaning-making process.

Teachers are discouraged from critically engaging with the intellectual aspects of their work, prioritising the “how to” of instruction at the expense of the “whys” of learning (Gallagher, 2004, p. 6).

Various studies (Allington and McGill-Franzen 1989; Gibson, 2012; Kang, 2009) reveal how special-needs students have been subjected to this kind of technically prescriptive teaching. Students with disabilities tend to experience greater levels of failure in general educational settings that are dominated by traditional teaching methods. Indeed, in many cases, there is an underlying assumption that they will benefit from a more tightly controlled form of instruction and that they will be somehow ‘remediated’ (i.e. made more like everybody else) through the use of this approach. However, as with their teachers, traditional teaching methods can render students unable to reach their full potential. Students are left feeling passive, as they are not given the opportunity to develop as learners, often resulting in inattentiveness, low motivation and behavioural difficulties. Such teaching practices reaffirm traditional perceptions of disability within Third-Level institutions, as this type of framework contributes to the notion that some students are ‘different’ from their ‘normal’ peers.

Conversely, many authors are aiming to counteract this deficit-focused approach by adopting socio-cultural perspectives that acknowledge how family, friends, environments and religious views shape an individual’s thoughts, behaviours and actions (De La Ossa *et al.*, 2025). J.G. Kang (2009) notes how many Third-Level teachers are adopting a socio-cultural perspective of disability. This theory advances the view that concepts such as normalcy and disability are “not formed by objective facts but constructed through existing social interactions and discourses” (Kang, 2009, p. 3). More importantly, it demonstrates how students who are “labelled as disabled” can be valued for their differences (Kang, 2009, p. 3).

These theoretical approaches would play a vital role in a cross-collaborative research project which is currently being developed as part of this author’s doctoral thesis. They have very strong relevance within the field of Autism Studies. In addition, they heighten our understanding of how the creativity of neurodivergent thinking can be cultivated. Applying these theories to the classroom would also greatly benefit students with ASD. Social-cultural theory stems from the work of Vygotsky (1978) and it has been used to

develop several related teaching practices. M. Cole (1985) and W.M. Roth and Y.J. Lee (2007) link their work to Vygotsky's way of thinking. They put forward a strong case for viewing education as a socio-cultural process; how it is important to grasp social relations that occur within a learning environment and how it is vital for educators to critically examine it. Grenier (2010), in her work about disability in the classroom argues that engaging in socio-cultural learning theory, particularly with reference to the social interaction of students, can lead the 'critical educator' (i.e. an educator who wishes to critique their own practice) to acknowledge and promote the positive possibilities of their profession. She points out that:

Difference, like nature, calls forth possibilities for developing transformative relationships [...] Disability is a way of seeing the world via the social and cultural constructions that prioritise values and bias actions. (Gibson, 2012, p. 256)

The importance of applying of socio-cultural theory also features prominently in the work of Suanne Gibson. She advances the idea that a socio-cultural perspective on education—which emphasises learner development as understood by an educator—can be easily linked to contemporary work on inclusive theory, practice and policy. Furthermore, she maintains that if this concept were to be applied critically, it may add significant insight to inclusion critiques of special education and could lead to new and innovative developments for the students involved (Gibson, 2012, p. 256). Similarly, A. Jackson and J. Conteh (2008), suggest that the application of socio-cultural theory to one's examination and assessment of a particular learning environment provides insight into previously hidden practices of educational exclusion:

Socio-cultural theories help us to recognize how all players in the game of learning, while they are active and purposeful in a range of ways, have unequal access to the most powerful discourses available [they] add weight to the argument that we need to 'engage with the details [with regard to] classroom processes in order to understand the bigger picture. (Jackson and Conteh, 2008 as quoted Gibson, 2012, p. 256)

J.S. Valenzuela (2007) reaffirms these viewpoints, offering a critical overview of socio-cultural theory that highlights the links between special

education and exclusion, along with a critical history of the theory and its various incarnations. Like Gibson (2012), she proposes that: “a key aspect of socio-cultural theory is the positioning of the social” and adds that it: “has the potential” to “provide a starting point” for addressing key issues in special education (Gibson, 2012, p. 256). In alignment with Roth and Lee (2007), Valenzuela (2007, pp. 280–289) asserts that the development of inclusive teaching practices—that is teaching processes that are geared towards the individual learning styles of students—is clear proof of how socio-cultural theory can help a pupil to become more independent. Echoing Cole (1985), Valenzuela (2007) argues that a stronger emphasis on inclusive teaching strategies could provide a rich and theoretical backbone when investigating complex aspects of ‘educational exclusion’ such as language, culture and identity. Like Gibson (2012), she also maintains that the area of ‘special education’ and related research may have a reciprocal effect on the development and refinement of socio-cultural perspectives of education. Moreover, in contrast to Grenier (2010), she accentuates how this needs to relate to critical theory, especially when addressing what “appears to be [a] hard fixed resistance” towards the empowerment of “previously silenced voices” within the Third-Level system (Gibson, 2012, pp. 256–257).

This desire to provide students with disabilities with a stronger voice within an educational context directly parallels the sentiments expressed by theorists such as S. Lynch and A. Irvine (2009). Yet, unlike theorists such as Gibson (2012), these writers often draw attention to the concept of “authentic inclusion” (Lynch and Irvine, 2009, p. 846). Lynch and Irvine (2009, p. 846) define this as “a unified system of public education” that sees “diversity as the norm” and aspires to deliver “a high-quality education” for every student “by providing meaningful curriculum, effective teaching, and necessary supports”. An influential author in this area is DL Fergusson (1995). Since the publication of his original work, prominent theorists such as J. Andrews and J. Lophart (2000) have sought to adapt and build upon this approach.

A recent article by McPeake *et al.* (2024) illustrates how many theorists still seek to expand upon Fergusson’s theoretical framework. They too emphasise the necessity of developing a more inclusive learning environment for people with disabilities. Like educationalists such as

Lynch and Irvine (2009), they stress its importance for students with ASD. Similar to L.L Geller and M. Greenberg (2010), they demonstrate the vital role that both university professors and disability support staff could play in heightening awareness of how educational professionals could help to facilitate the transition of neurodivergent students from secondary to Third-Level education.

A ‘Deficit’ Model of Autism

McPeake *et al.* (2024) also draw attention to a striking commonality within the literature. Echoing the viewpoint of S. Lambe (2018), these educationalists clearly demonstrate, how, despite a strong desire to incorporate more inclusive learning practices, higher education institutions have come to embody a ‘deficit’ model of autism whereby “students must disclose a medical diagnosis to receive extra support or accommodations (such as extra time in exams)” (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). It views autism in purely medical terms and reinforces certain stereotypes associated with it i.e. difficulties in social communication, executive functioning and a tendency to ‘hyperfocus’ on restricted/repetitive interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Moreover, this conceptualisation of autism ignores the “intellectual capacities and strengths of individual students” (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). It instead reaffirms “pathologizing discourses, where autistic people are viewed as ‘abnormal’, ‘dysfunctional’ and/or requiring treatment” (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). In other words, it does not fully acknowledge the person *behind* the disability.

This tendency to gravitate towards a ‘deficit’ interpretation of autism is a noteworthy subtheme to consider. E. Kircher-Morris (2024) and ESY Tang *et al.* (2024) demonstrate the importance of this finding. They argue that, in recent years, there is a strong desire to deviate from this medical model approach in many higher educational institutions. This, they believe reflects changes in how autism is thought of and demonstrates how “definitions of handicap, impairment and disability” are now being replaced by a “more nuanced understanding of difference” and a fuller acknowledgement of “strengths as well as needs” (Tang *et al.*, 2024, p. 135).

However, one must critically question this perspective. Drawing parallels with theorists such as N. Humphrey and S. Lewis (2008), D.W.

Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) utilise a wealth of primary source material, which are based on a series of semi-structured interviews with autistic students, to demonstrate how people on the spectrum continue to experience discrimination within Third-Level institutions. They address the significant dropout rates amongst autistic people, a factor later also noted by McPeake *et al.* (2024), by observing that they are:

Twice less likely than people with other disabilities and four times less likely than people without disabilities to hold a bachelor's degree or higher. (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345)

Unlike McPeake *et al.* (2024), these commentators express that a “fear of discrimination” is the principal reason for students “not disclosing their autistic identity” and highlight how this reluctance to reveal their diagnosis delays the receipt of supports (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345). Moreover, they point out that no significant studies to date have addressed students’ anxiety concerning the possibility of experiencing discrimination.

In their analysis of autistic college experiences, Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2023) paint a revealing portrait of how autistic students perceive a Third-Level academic environment. It is worth noting that many participants felt “profoundly misunderstood” at universities (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345). Like Shepherd (2022) who articulates a similar viewpoint, Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2024) note a lack of awareness about the true nature of autism amongst university staff. In common with McPeake *et al.* (2024), Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) explore how these findings have important ramifications for the establishment of authentically inclusive practices within Higher Education. It is imperative to bear in mind how many of those interviewed by Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) also believed that autism was something that educational professionals “just don’t have a clue about”, with one student allegedly being told that they obviously had “no support needs” since he did not “act like Rain Man” (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345).

Evidence like this proves how necessary it is for educators to provide a stronger voice within institutions to people with ASD so that that their academic needs are met. Furthermore, it provides ample proof that this can only truly be accomplished through the encouragement of autistic and neurodivergent creativity and the establishment of a new set of inclusive teaching practices that would diminish over-reliance on the deficit model

of autism and the technically prescriptive mindset that often accompanies it.

Ableist Practices

Another significant subtheme emerges in the form of ableist practices, which are often defined as actions that “devalue and discriminate against people with disabilities [...] based on society’s perceptions of what’s considered ‘normal’” (Disability & Philanthropy Forum, 2024, p. 1). Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) note the severe impact that this has had on autistic students within Third-Level settings. They refer to the fact that several interviewees described the design of their curriculum as “extremely ableist”, “deficit based” and “dehumanising” (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1345). Paralleling Waldman *et al.* (2023), Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) show that a widespread lack of knowledge about autism amongst educators raises serious concerns about the effective implementation of inclusive teaching methods in Third-Level contexts.

Similar to McPeake *et al.* (2024), Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2024) draw attention to how a “fear of not being believed” can have negative repercussions for the educational development of autistic students (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348). However, in contrast to McPeake *et al.* (2024), Weiting Tan *et al.*, (2024) cite instances in which applications for special considerations or support from lecturers were perceived as “cheating the system” since they requested “extra time”, “rest breaks” and/or “extensions” (Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348). Furthermore—and unlike Waldman *et al.* (2023)—Weiting Tan *et al.* (2024) also allude to how some participants, who expressed an interest in working in caring professions, such as teaching or nursing, were often “questioned about their career choices” after they disclosed their autism diagnosis (Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348).

One participant in the Weiting Tan *et al.*’s (2024) research describes the current situation for many autistic students who struggle within a university setting due to the ableism they encounter:

People don’t even realise that they are being ableists. If you shove a wheelchair person out of the way, you know you are being ableist. It is pretty clear. If you don’t build a lift. It is pretty clear. It is more overt. Whereas, if you are just not sure if that person is

being a little weird and you make a joke [...] it is much more nuanced, the microaggressions and ableism that autistic and neurodivergent people experience. (Tan *et al.*, 2024, p. 1348)

First-hand accounts like this illuminate the authentic experiences of many autistic students on university campuses. They reaffirm the necessity for educational professionals to support the voices of students with ASD by acknowledging their creativity and strong desire for self-expression in the classroom.

Catering for Non-Linear Thinking

In light of these findings, this article argues that an emphasis on promoting the non-linear, creative thinking patterns of those on the spectrum would help to revitalise the current educational system. It could lead to a whole set of teaching practices, which would yield innovative results for universities and centres for further education. Many commentators have pointed this out. For example, D.R. Sadler (2009) noted that the concept of peer review is of utmost importance as it helps foster a type of learning “whereby [...] individuals with ASD/AS” may be “immersed in an environment where they can focus on recognising elements of creativity” and implement them into their own original work (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 5). Likewise, D. Roberts and K. Ousey (2004) argue that skilled group facilitation strikes an effective balance between letting students think creatively and meeting the required learning outcomes of a particular module. Conversely, others such as A. Rizzo *et al.* (2012) advocate for the use of teaching strategies to “stimulate both convergent and divergent thinking as means of fostering creativity such as problem or enquiry-based learning” (Roberts and Roberts, 2015, p. 5).

Towards a Suitable Methodology

These findings demonstrate the importance of developing a cross-collaborative teaching and learning project to further explore how educators can properly acknowledge the growing field of neurodivergent creativity. This proposed initiative—which will form part of this author’s PhD dissertation—addresses the following research questions:

- i. How can creativity be defined within an educational context?

- ii. What creative approaches can be utilised to help autistic and neurodivergent students develop and thrive as independent learners, particularly in post-secondary environments?
- iii. How can the concept of creativity be used to establish more inclusive learning environment for students on the spectrum?
- iv. What forms of collaboration or new initiatives could be developed to promote autistic creativity across different educational settings?

To show a greater appreciation for neurodiverse creativity, and how it could lead to a more positive college experience for autistic students, a suitable methodology is required. JA Smith *et al.* (2009) and M. Zakai-Mashiach (2022) note that an interpretative phenomenological approach is a particularly suitable way of gathering data from those on the autism spectrum, as it focuses on their lived, authentic experiences. However, recent research by McPeake *et al.* (2024) has drawn to attention to how this particular process is “predominately researcher-led” and does not fully reveal the true perspectives of its autistic participants (McPeake *et al.*, 2024, p. 17). Taking this into account, this article advances the view that different participatory approaches are necessary for deepening the understanding of autistic voices within educational institutions and identifying the creative teaching practices that best support learning.

Autism studies have evolved considerably in recent decades. Early work by L. Kanner (1943) was rooted in psychiatry, but the field has since expanded to include psychology, neuroscience and education (Kourti, 2021). As a result, ideas concerning neurodiversity are now being examined across the humanities and social sciences, to gain a broader understanding of the ways in which social inequalities continue to influence the experience of those on the autism spectrum (Kourti, 2021). Despite these advances, relatively little attention has been given to establishing a robust philosophical foundation for autism, and this area has been widely overlooked by many researchers.

A Transformative Mixed-Methods Design

Contemporary researchers such as L. Dennehy (2024) have provided excellent insights into the relationship between educators and autistic students within an academic context. They have made extensive and effective use of the interpretative/constructionist paradigm, which advances the view that all knowledge is socially constructed. In contrast, the study proposed by this article—and the collaborative doctoral research project which has been designed to accompany it—will directly engage with the ‘transformative paradigm’. The principal aim of this form of educational inquiry is to find new ways to overcome issues of power and allow marginalised groups to have a greater sense of control over the research process. D. Mertens (2005, p. 220) argues that a mixed-methods approach is an essential component of this type of pedagogical research. Its principal focus is on “collecting, analysing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data” within a specific study (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p. 32). Adopting this approach would allow future researchers to gain a greater understanding of research problems. Scholars within the field of autism studies (Rose, 2005; Pellicano *et al.*, 2014; Prince-Hughes, 2002) all make proficient use of this research design. This makes it an ideal form of methodology.

Participatory Research

A strong relationship between participatory action research and mixed-methods designs is well-documented. Several educationalists (Madriaga and Goodley, 2010; Rose, 2010; Vincent *et al.*, 2016) examine the connections between these two areas in greater depth. Participatory action research is closely linked to critical theory, which aspires to transform society through democracy and the empowerment of marginalised groups. It emphasises “doing research *with* people and communities” as opposed to “doing research *to* or *for* people and communities” (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p. 56). This form of research is based on the view that ordinary people are capable of conducting research by critically reflecting on and analysing their own situations (Pinto, 2000). Central to this approach is its democratic ethos: it promotes egalitarian researcher–participant relationships, aspires to participatory rather than representative democracy (Giroux, 1983, 1989) and encourages researchers to share their humanity with participants (Tandon, 2005).

As with mixed-methods and action research, participatory research is pragmatic. It is a fruitful blend of knowledge and action (Tandon, 2005). It focuses on micro-development as opposed to macro-development and aims to enhance overall well-being (Brown, 2005). Researchers who engage in this approach are facilitators, catalysts for transformation. Its main agenda is liberation from all forms of oppression.

In this sense, participatory research bears a striking similarity to W. Carr and S. Kemmis' (2003) "Habermasian theory of action research" which emphasises an "ideological impetus towards promoting social justice and resisting domination" (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305). Furthermore, this agentic approach to knowledge production parallels the social model of disability as it envisages the "systematic demystification of the structures and processes which create disability" as well as the establishment of a more egalitarian relationship between the research community and disabled people to "facilitate the latter's empowerment" (Barnes, 1992, p. 122).

Socially Just Pedagogies

Research methods associated with the participatory research model would heighten awareness of autism and neurodivergent thinking. The tools which accompany these would be an ideal fit for a cross-collaborative university-based research project which is currently being developed to compliment this author's PhD dissertation. Vincent *et al.* (2016) note the significance of participatory approaches within the context of autism research. Many researchers (McPeake *et al.*, 2024; Weiting Tan, 2024, Rose, 2010) identify a lack of participatory studies that deal directly with the topic of neurodivergence. Indeed, M. Madriaga and D. Goodley (2010) repeatedly call for more 'socially just pedagogies in higher education. This type of pedagogical approach aims to counteract resistance and establish conditions of social justice. More significantly, socially just pedagogies aspire to move beyond minimum 'base level' practices and openly encourages creative, participatory and inclusive approaches (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305). If these were more fully integrated into academic institutions, this could effectively 'give voice' to autistic students (Vincent *et al.*, 2016).

Scholars such as Van Hees, Moyson, and Roeyers (2014) echo these sentiments. They stress that participatory approaches—and how they permit students to effectively use their creative abilities—are vital as they allow for increased insight into the lived experiences of participants. Like

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) Van Hees, Moyson and Roeyers (2014) argue that it is imperative to engage with ‘insider perspectives’ as this often yields richer data and, more importantly, provides autistic students with more of a voice in the research process. Furthermore—and in common with Vincent *et al.* (2016)—they convey how research methods that accompany the participatory model effectively foreground the perspectives of people on the spectrum and pave the way for a “creative space” in which different aspects of university life could be explored and critiqued” (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305).

Creative Qualitative Research Methods

The perspectives of V. Van Hees, T. Moyson and H. Roeyers (2014) and Vincent *et al.* (2016) is reinforced by Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent (2023), who argue that the use of creative qualitative research methods in psychology and other disciplines has steadily increased in recent decades to address power imbalances within research (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023). They highlight how these considerations are particularly pertinent for historically marginalised groups, including autistic and neurodivergent people. Like other authors, (Cook and Purkis, 2022; Vincent *et al.* 2016; Weiting Tan *et al.*, 2024) Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent (2023) also outline how research on first-person perspectives is still limited and represents a significant gap within the literature.

However, in contrast to theorists such as McPeake *et al.* (2024) Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent (2023) suggest that embodied techniques, which are grounded in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of existence and feminist theories of corporeality, have the potential to open creative and novel data possibilities (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023). Potential methods could include imaginative play (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023), drama or performance (Medina *et al.*, 2021). Like Jager *et al.*, (2016) they effectively pinpoint how the concept of body-mapping is another promising participatory method. This involves tracing around a person’s body to establish a life-sized outline. Through a reflective and creative process, it is then annotated to produce an image representing multiple aspects of their embodied experience (Jager *et al.*, 2016). Guided ‘walking’ tours, a therapeutic technique, in which students are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings to reduce stress and anxiety and boost creativity and

inspiration (Camponovo *et al.*, 2021; Stephenson and Adey, 2010, Vox City, 2025) also offer opportunities to better understand how an autistic person experiences their environment (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023).

The recognition that such methods are more naturalistic than traditional or experimental approaches—or even qualitative studies in psychology—illustrates the unlimited possibilities that lie in drawing on creative and participatory approaches in developmental research (Lewis, Hamilton and Vincent, 2023). At the heart of this approach lies the principle of seeing autistic and neurodivergent people as ‘credible knowers’ of their own experiences (Fricker, 2007). Moreover, it aspires to democratise the research process and lead to a greater sense of empowerment amongst the autistic community.

Developing a New Measure of Creativity

Exploring creativity within the autistic and neurodivergent community is important as their strengths are often overlooked. It should be recognised that these individuals may express creativity in ways that differ from standard expectations. However, commonly used measures do not account for the unique ways that neurodivergent individuals interpret information (Hayashibara *et al.*, 2023). Ultimately, these conventional approaches fail to capture their distinct presentations of creativity.

The desire to establish more innovative research methods is reflected in the work of many contemporary scholars. Several explore how the power of narrative can facilitate self-expression amongst neurodivergent students and challenge the technically prescriptive approaches that have become common in educational institutions in recent years (Hayashibara *et al.*, 2023, McMurdo, 2023, Russ *et al.*, 1999). E. Hayashibara *et al.* (2023) demonstrate the value of utilising story-based approaches. They argue that contrary to traditional ways of conducting research, which are thought to measure only one creative process, storytelling uses and critically examines real-life products that are then evaluated by others (Hayashibara *et al.*, 2023) This, they believe, allows for a multidimensional evaluation of creativity (Fehr and Russ, 2016; Russ *et al.*, 1999). Narrative and visual components, such as film, also allow both students and practitioners to explore different thinking styles, such as visual and verbal thinking

(Nishimura *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, adopting this approach would provide further insight into both autism neurodivergence and establish a valuable outlet for their creativity within the classroom.

Conversely, Vincent *et al.* (2016) note that narrative-based projects need to move beyond personal story-telling and closer to what he calls ‘critical autobiography’, whereby “individual experience is mixed with theory and reflection about politically situated realities” (Vincent *et al.*, 2016, p. 305). Likewise, I. Rose (2005), argues that the mere existence of autistic narrative and autobiographies (what she memorably describes as ‘autie-biography’) allows those on the spectrum to radically question the diagnostic criteria for autistic conditions (DSM-V) and resist de-humanising interpretations of neurodiversity (Vincent *et al.*, 2016).

A recent study by N. McMurdo (2023) echoes these sentiments. She also stresses the importance of more visual forms of creative expression. In her thesis on the nature of self-identity amongst young autistic adolescent women, McMurdo explores how a greater engagement with non-verbal narratives could potentially result in a more positive sense of self and encourage more autistic and neurodivergent students to freely express their creativity within classrooms. The principal way of accomplishing this, she argues, is through the use of *collage inquiry*. The term collage literally means “to stick” and derives from the French verb “coller”. It involves the process of combining bits of different materials together to transform it into something new. This approach also helps to generate new and often unconscious ideas (McMurdo, 2023).

Commentators such as R. Leitch (2009) note how a major concern within this type of arts-based research is that that students may be reluctant to participate, due to concerns that they lack artistic ability. However, collage does not raise this kind of concern (Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010). This research tool uses materials that are readily available. It does not require a certain level of skill (Prasad, 2018). Collage is often regarded as a ‘safe container’ and ideal for working with vulnerable people (Kramer, 2000). It often leads to moving, powerful and emotional stories through a visual representation (Leitch, 2009). This particular method has excellent potential. It clearly illustrates how visual methods could be used alongside and to compliment language-based data to discover more about the lived

experiences of young autistic and neurodivergent students within Third-Level institutions.

Innovative Data Collection Methods

Prominent researchers (Attard, 2012; Rose, 2005; Vincent *et al.*, 2016) draw attention to the value of these approaches. Vincent *et al.* (2016) note that emphasis on creative research methods empowers participants and encourages a greater degree of self-expression as it allows individuals to analyse their lived experiences and reflect more deeply on their own situation (Vincent *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, writers such as K. Attard (2012) increase our understanding of how they can also be used as an effective means of analysing and collecting data from autistic and neurodivergent students. J. Cammarota and M. Fine (2010) have clearly shown how this has led to unconventional, inventive and innovative ways of discovering more about the individual, lived experiences of people who are on the spectrum. Including the voices of autistic students has traditionally been viewed as problematic (Stalker, 1998). It is often erroneously assumed that these students lack empathy and do not possess the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith, 1985). More recently, however, there is a stronger desire to show the true value of their perspectives and illustrate the vital contribution that they could make to the entire research process. Unlike these authors, commentators such as R. Winter (2002) accentuate the importance of providing those who may be autistic and/or neurodivergent with the opportunity to analyse each other's narratives (based on their own consent) to create a greater sense of solidarity (Vincent *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, educationalists such as Vincent *et al.* (2016) have demonstrated how this approach is pivotal as it allows these students to gain a greater sense of ownership of the research material and share their own personal accounts of the educational system.

These interpretations highlight the major strengths of transformative and participatory research designs and how they could provide valuable insights into how educators could effectively cater to the autistic student population within educational institutions by encouraging and fostering their innate sense of creativity. The research project described throughout this piece—which is being designed in conjunction with this author's PhD thesis—will build upon this approach. Adopting the research methods associated with these is an ideal way of addressing its core research questions. It focuses

primarily on a university context. It aims to shed more light on the views and perspectives of both sexes from the ages of eighteen to thirty-five. At a later stage, to supplement the data, a reflexive thematic analysis will be employed to demonstrate different presentations of creativity across this particular sample. Full ethical approval will also be sought from Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at University College Cork. The eventual research findings of this initiative and the author's final dissertation may have significant implications and could help policymakers to design effective strengths-based interventions to facilitate the creative and non-linear thinking of autistic and neurodivergent individuals.

Conclusion

This article has explored and highlighted the benefits of establishing a university based collaborative research project on autistic and neurodivergent creativity. It has demonstrated that this could effectively establish a new and highly educational approach that would directly challenge the technical training influenced mentality that has become a regrettable feature of many modern educational institutions. Moreover, it has drawn attention to how this would also lead to more positive, transformational and rewarding educational experiences for students with ASD.

A stronger emphasis on cultivating the creativity of neurodivergent thinking could also result in a wealth of new and exciting educational possibilities. These could include:

- An increase in teacher knowledge: Several theorists (Barry *et al.*, 2021; Sproston *et al.*, 2017, Sweeney and Fitzgerald, 2023) convincingly argue that it is necessary to create opportunities for teacher knowledge when it comes to the area of autism and education. In light of this, future research could effectively build on the work of educationalists such as Holt *et al.* (2024) by establishing creative and collaborative communities of practice between both staff and students which would showcase the artistry of autistic students and allow teachers and lecturers to gain more insight into what teaching approaches would be of most benefit to people on the spectrum within secondary and post-secondary environments. Furthermore, it could lead to the establishment of educational

programmes and or departments that cater specifically for students on the spectrum, which would help this demographic to thrive and grow as learners within a variety of educational settings.

- Opportunities for cross-collaboration: Beadle-Brown *et al.* (2017) highlight how techniques from the world of the performing arts are often beneficial for autistic and neurodivergent students within the classroom. Taking this into account, it can be argued that such an approach could lead to fruitful collaborations between educational institutions and arts organisations, for example partnerships between University College Cork and the Everyman Palace Theatre. Collaborations of this kind have the potential to generate new and innovative ways of encouraging the creativity and non-linear thinking patterns of autistic and neurodiverse students.
- Arts-based research: Cultivating autistic creativity could also result in more engagement with the much-neglected area of arts-based research. According to Barone and Eisner (2006), the principal aim of this type of approach is the ‘enhancement of perspectives’ to suggest “new ways of viewing educational phenomena” and to “entertain questions that might have otherwise been left unasked” (Barone and Eisner, 2006, p. 96). Similar to Holt *et al.* (2024) and Buckley (2021), Barone and Eisner (2006) emphasise how a stronger engagement in this particular research process allows educators to discover new techniques that would enable autistic students to grow and develop within an academic context.

This article has outlined how the promotion of the creativity that often accompanies neurodiverse thinking could result in some radical reforms within the current educational system. It has highlighted this through a thematic review of the literature, an emphasis on a transformative, participatory methodology and suggestions for possible future directions.

Fiona Earley, the Autism Co-Ordinator from Dublin City University once remarked that we should value individual difference and strive to ensure that every neurodivergent student gets what they need as well as educating others about neurodiversity (O’ Neill, 2024). This statement encapsulates how this change would have positive outcomes for the autistic community and why it is such an important research area within the field of contemporary education. Yet, this topic is summed up most aptly in the

words of the musician Tori Amos. She once stated that: “[s]ome of the most wonderful people are the ones who don’t fit into boxes” (Letch, 2023, p. 1). These words beautifully capture how it is now high time for Irish academia to fully integrate these “wonderful people” with autism spectrum disorders into its educational institutions through the establishment of new teaching approaches that would help cultivate a more open, inclusive and progressive university (Letch, 2023, p. 1).

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Book Review — *On the Threshold: Hospitality in*

***Shakespeare's Drama*, by Sophie E. Battell.**

**Edinburgh University Press, 2025. 264 pp. £ 24.99 (paperback, 2025) /
£95 (hardback, 2023) / £0 Open Access PDF**

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On the Threshold offers a nuanced investigation of hospitality in five of Shakespeare's plays, namely *The Comedy of Errors* (1623), *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), *Troilus and Cressida* (1609), *Timons of Athens* (1623—co-authored with Thomas Middleton) and *Pericles* (1609—co-authored with George Wilkins). Hospitality appears to constitute different (changeable) material and discursive forces that could be political, social, economic and even environmental. The tension between these forces shapes hospitality and (re)produces it as a site of violence and vulnerability. This could also be a book about loss as an aspect that would relate hospitality in Shakespeare's plays to our contemporary moment of climate change, political upheavals and ongoing genocides. As indicated by the author, the book demonstrates how protagonists and antagonists in the selected plays approach hospitality in ways that can foreshadow violent practices adopted by governments toward other countries, asylum seekers and the environment.

As an interdisciplinary project, the book draws on literary scholarship in general and Shakespeare studies in particular, while Battell also makes great use of research from fields such as apothecary, medieval romance, eco-feminism, posthumanism, ethnography and more. The book's argument that hospitality in Shakespeare's plays is a "relationship [that] can go spectacularly wrong" (p. 1) is theoretically framed by many thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Emmanuel Levinas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Giorgio Agamben, Sara Ahmed and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others. Capitalism and the ethos of marketplace is a common concern that recurs throughout its chapters and is demonstrated in events where the loss of money, life, and even identity becomes possible. The first chapter, for instance, discusses *The Comedy of Errors*, exploring the interplay of

politics, economy, law and hospitality. Loss of life is a threat associated with Egeon's entering a foreign country and being unable to afford the "thousand marks" (p. 18) fine. Battell argues that unknowability and "opacity" (p. 13) haunt hospitality as a relationship between guest and host. Interestingly, the nation, house and body are all perceived as sites of physical and spiritual hospitality that place the guest and the host on two separate planes. One is "dark, diseased, and invisible" (p. 15) and the other is "clean, healthy, and visible" (p. 15). The supernatural elements deployed in the play through scenes of exorcism and witchcraft further unsettle the host's confidence in the laws governing intruders.

Focusing on the sensory experience as a determinant of hospitality and assimilation, Battell links loss to the ability to hear in *The Merchant of Venice*. Modes of hearing voices through eavesdropping, blocking noises, footsteps, music and salutations shape hospitality and carry ethical implications. Ears, Battell (p. 60) explains, are "thresholds" whose anatomy bears similarities to the architecture of a house. As Battell (p. 67) points out, the law in Venice "encodes silence and omissions", as well as what is voiced and written. Comparing Shylock to asylum seekers or refugees, Battell argues that Shylock's inability to execute the conditions of his contract and obtain his pound of flesh represents a problem of translation faced by many asylum seekers and refugees where:

violence against the stranger begins with the problem of translation, [...] inevitably [putting them] [...] at a disadvantage when [...] confronting the legal system. (p. 86)

I am not fully convinced that Shylock's defeat in court results from a confused translation of what Venetian law "implies but leaves unsaid" (p. 67) or that this constitutes a weakness that Portia takes advantage of. While Shylock "uses the law to silence moral obligations to his bonds" (p. 89), as Battell rightly suggests, Portia's argument "reinforces a kind of virtue ethics that underlies her conception of law throughout" (Michaelson, 2005, p. 25). Harold Bloom (1999) gives an explanation that considers Shylock's character from a political and settler-colonial perspective, rather than framing him as analogous to an asylum seeker based on his violent demand. Bloom writes that:

the ontological weight of Shylock [...] places him as a representation of reality [...] [making him] our best clue for tracing the process by which Shakespeare [...] invented or reinvented the human. (Bloom, 1999, p. 182)

This perspective allows us to consider Shylock in light of the imperialism and capitalism that constitute the Western conception of the ‘human’ and occlude the pathos implied by considering Shylock’s defeat in court a translation mishap. Shylock’s loss, thus, is the product of his insistence on his inhumane demand, despite being offered twice or ten times the repayment of Antonio’s debt by Bassanio, and his refusal to listen to the other and admit other people’s appeals for mercy, making him unable to move or “be moved by the entreaties of others” (p. 92).

Understandably, in the following three chapters, Battell links hospitality to the guest’s behaviour by exploring conditional versus unconditional forms of hospitality. Chapter three shows how hospitality in *Troilus and Cressida* is expressed as a militarised environment by focusing on the body. (Dis)armament, vulnerability, retaliation and reciprocity are relevant aspects that shape the battlefield as a site of hospitality. Chapter four explores the parasitic aspect that haunts hospitality in *Timon of Athens*. Battell (p. 135) points out how images of “cannibalism and ritual sacrifice” complicate Timon’s hospitality and invoke the danger of excess, betrayal, mourning and revenge. Loss of friends and life through “economic martyrdom” (p. 142) is a high possibility in hospitality. Battell (p. 158) “blurs the categories of guest, host, and parasite” to affirm Derrida’s assumption that “Man is the universal parasite” (p. 158). This aspect is further explored in chapter five when discussing *Pericles*. Battell (p. 189) shows how hospitality and environmental ethics appear to be entangled in a way that sees our dependence on the earth as making us all refugees. A dehumanised Pericles, likened to a “poor worm” (p. 191), becomes a model of the dehumanised refugee by contemporary western politics. Loss marks asylum seekers who, by losing their homes, become disarmed and deemed a threat and human waste.

On the Threshold would be useful for readers and researchers interested in posthuman theories, literature, politics, law and Anthropocene discourses. Indeed, this book presents a strong argument that, for this reviewer, centres loss at the heart of hospitality. Through Battell’s careful

and nuanced discussion of hospitality in Shakespeare's plays, anthropocentrism is unsettled along with its hierarchical attachment to Western aspirations to superiority and domination of the other.

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Book Review — *Syrian Stylites: Rereadings and Recastings of Late Ancient Superheroes*, edited by Barbara Crostini and Christian Høgel.

Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2024. 350 pp. €27.15

ISBN: 978-91-89840-24-9

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Modern stylite studies rest on a nucleus of Greek and Syriac *Lives*, but Crostini and Høgel, building on a 2019 workshop in Istanbul, expand this diachronic field by gathering essays into an anthology. Rather than offering a life of Symeon, they chart reception and fascination, tracing how the pillar saint has been reread and reimagined across centuries and geographies. Their premise is that a solitary hermit balanced on a column is an adaptable motif. His vertical ascent may suggest transcendence, but it is his horizontal migrations that truly re-casts him as a mythical “super-hero”, elevating him beyond his modest Syrian origins. The volume suggests the stylite as a visual beacon, an ontological motif that re-adapts pagan spectacle and invites both re-enchantment as well as occasional pejorative reception from those engaged with him.

Stylite scholarship, we are reminded, blossoms whenever new translations appear: the availability of the *Lives* in multiple languages both attests to a fascination stretching well beyond late antiquity and provides prime material for a growing field of academic interest. Translation, therefore, functions as a generative principle. Stylite narratives’ meanings shift nuances when read in English, Italian, Arabic or other languages; each translation opens the canon to new audiences and prompts reinterpretation. Situated at the forefront of this evolving scholarship, *Syrian Stylites* self-consciously incorporates multi-disciplinary contributions and voices, enlivening reception beyond a static moment but as an ongoing *process*.

The book is divided into three sections, with thirteen chapters. Part I (*Textual Reception: Stylites and Their Texts*) discusses literary portrayals of stylites. Andreas Westergren explains the volume’s interesting subheading, reading the first stylite biography as a paradoxical myth,

Charles Kuper analyses parody and imitation in the *Life of Theodulus the Stylite*, Barbara Crostini discusses necrophilia themes in Antonios' *Life of St Symeon the Stylite*, Thomas Arentzen studies depictions of pillars and shadows, Christian Høgel evaluates stylites in the Byzantine *Metaphrastic Menologion* and Béatrice Caseau, with Charis Messis, explores the novelistic *Life of Theodore of Edessa*. Fabrizio Conca and Laura Franco close the section with a study of modern poetry about Symeon that compares Alfred Tennyson, Giuseppe Nencioni and Constantine Kavafis. In this section we grapple first with what it is that we think we know, based on our literary artefacts. What do we know of the culture, the languages and the societies? How do we receive, interpret, or trust what we are given?

Part II ("*Visual Reception: Stylites and Their Images*") turns to material and visual culture. Esen Öğüş traces how late antique audiences viewed the figure on a pillar and the cultural stimulation of a human figure elevated above the ground. Tiffany Apostolou juxtaposes stylite portraiture with contemporary art, reading the column as frame and support and noting how artists subvert the classical pillar. Basema Hamarneh examines archaeological remains of stylite towers in the Levant, providing measurements of the tiny rooms and noting that these structures sheltered monks and even reclusive women. Maria Raffaella Menna studies the stylites of Cappadocia, showing how natural rock cones functioned as stylite stone reliquaries. Maria Veronese analyses Luis Buñuel's film *Simón del Desierto* and Christine Amadou reflects on performance and reclusion. This section moves our enquiry on reception to the depths of symbolism. What might material artefact *signify*? What does it communicate beyond itself?

Part III presents a short anthology of images and poems about stylites and includes Charles Lock's translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem '*Der Styлит*'. This section, by contrasting visual materials with poetry, draws the reader into the imaginative reception of pillar saints, providing a creative counterpoint that exemplifies that reception is as much a creative process as a purely analytical one.

Methodologically, *Syrian Stylites*'s cross-disciplinary voices collaborate to map the stylite's 'afterlives', elevating their historical negative space. The pillar saint is treated as a placeholder for inquiry, a stand-in iconic performer, whose vertical ascent structures ineffable space and whose

horizontal diffusion allows us to better map the perimeter formed by the imprints that surround him; what might this stylite shaped motif tell us, if anything, about the context it emerged from?

The volume treats the amorphous topology of the pillar saint through its scholarly erudition, interweaving these threads of nuance through its collation of multifaceted responses. The volume's strengths lie in this breadth, interdisciplinarity and reflective stance. Essays are authored by specialists in diverse disciplines from philological and archaeological approaches to film studies. The cross-media framing allows the stylite to be understood as both ascetic figure and symbol. In synthesising Greek and Syriac texts with modern translations, the book foregrounds the politics of reception and the role of translation as a catalyst. It demonstrates how vertical and horizontal axes generate a liminal space that is both metaphysical and material, inviting readers to contemplate how our methods may shape the figures we study.

Conceived as a by-product of a scholarly workshop, there is a real sense of intentionality in the volume's conversational conviviality. The workshop origins, however, do produce a degree of unevenness. Essays noticeably vary in depth and the absence of a synthesising conclusion may disorient those searching for solid ground as well as frustrate those looking for closure. Those expecting a linear, thorough and deep 350-page biography of the life of Symeon may be disappointed; this is a compendium of readings, re-readings, ideas, critiques, inversions and myths, suited to readers who embrace ambiguity. The collection rewards specialists in classics, late antiquity, reception theory, religious studies and art history. It will deeply enrich the academic understanding of those studying any single period of stylite history, while those in translation studies are sure to appreciate its centralising of nuance and its mistrust of myopic interpretation.

Syrian Stylites avoids drawing firm conclusions. The book invites us to walk through a museum of texts and objects, to wander between asceticism and art. Its structure walks the reader through a practical ladder of interpretation, literary analysis, symbolism and internalised imaginal reception. It cautions against both positivism and reductionism and reminds us that the importance of an artefact is proportional to our willingness to engage in the creation and revision of meaning making. For readers

prepared to engage with complexity, this book encourages us to rethink how we research, read, see and imagine the past and to recognise that ambiguous motifs, when viewed through multiple lenses, can enliven the dynamic interplay between the known and the unknown.

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Book Review — *Catastrophe: Nakba II*, by Fintan Drury.

Irish Academic Press, 2024. 307 pp. €18.99

ISBN: 9781785375590

 **Samavia Zia**

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In *Catastrophe: Nakba II*, Fintan Drury presents a text urgently rooted in historical witnessing. Framed by the events of the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent military campaign in Gaza, the book treats these developments as part of a continuum of dispossession, which stretches back nearly eight decades to the first Nakba of 1947–1949, when 750,000 Palestinians were displaced during the founding of the state of Israel. In so doing, Drury offers not only a blistering critique of Israeli and Western complicity, but also a re-contextualisation of the present as a second catastrophe, or second Nakba, one unfolding before our eyes in ways even more devastating than the past.

Drury writes soberly and in an emotionally engaging manner. With careful restraint, he assembles a set of unsensational yet powerful facts. This measured approach enhances the book's authenticity which is seldom found in polemics. Unsatisfied to overwhelm the reader with abstract outrage, Drury allows testimonies, data and historical parallels to speak for themselves. Drury writes as both journalist and moral witness, a combination that enables him to patch together historical detail while maintaining a voice that is direct and unflinching. The result is a reading that resists any comfortable resolution of its own harsh truths: suffering is systemic among Palestinians; the violence of October 7th has roots deeper than the immediate event; and in this instance, the states that claim to advocate for human rights have facilitated their erosion.

The book opens with 'One Day, One Attack', a chapter that anchors the reader in the shock of 7 October 2023. Yet Drury will not leave that day suspended in the empty ether. He interacts directly with reality and frames the assault as a predictable outcome of a systemic oppression. Historical perspective, he suggests, is not something that can be brushed aside in times of paroxysmal crisis. The beginning of *Catastrophe: Nakba II* burns itself

into memory: “Today, we are witnessing a second Nakba—one being played out in front of our eyes” (as stated in the publisher’s summary). It does not echo history; rather, it pulses—alive, urgent, unstoppable. With that line, Drury breaks whatever complacency the audience may have harboured, daring them to confront the brutal continuity of dispossession.

The next chapter, ‘Israel 2023’, situates the discussion within the political realities of Netanyahu’s government and the rightward drift of Israel, where expansionist policies and settler-colonial aspirations have deepened the vulnerability of Palestinian life. Drury’s main argument is that what followed the 7 October attacks, the Israeli military response and the mass dislocation of Gazans, amounts to a second Nakba. It is an intentional parallel to 1948: both moments have driven hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes and threatened the erasure of their history. The catastrophe of 1948 never actually ‘ended’ but rather transformed and came back with far greater might. The catastrophe of 1948, he contends, merely changed forms and resurfaced with renewed vigour in the twenty-first century.

The middle chapters provide a detailed exploration of the mechanisms that sustain Palestinian dispossession. ‘Oppression’ and ‘Erasing the Past’ reveal the structural logic behind Zionism’s territorial project. Drury argues that land control has always been intricately tied to controlling history. By erasing the world’s memory of Palestinians—whether by destroying villages, disseminating counter-narratives, or delegitimising Palestinian identity more broadly—Israel solidifies the ideological groundwork for its continued expansion.

The chapter on ‘United Nations Relief Works Agency’ is especially telling. Drury shows how, for some time, the agency has worked as a band-aid for a problem the international community refuses to solve. Most recently, Drury has scrutinised United Nations Relief Works Agency’s (UNRWA) standing, which has sustained not only Israeli hostility but also the withdrawal of Western support. For Drury, the weakening of the UNRWA is not mere coincidence, but symptomatic of a more profound condition: The West’s willingness to regard Palestinian misery as a manageable affair rather than an urgent one.

Perhaps one of the harshest chapters is ‘The West’s Asleep’. Here, Drury unleashes a barrage of criticism upon the U.S.A. and its allies, whom he

holds responsible for facilitating the Israeli campaign in Gaza by means of military support, diplomatic protection and rhetorical balance. In contrast, ordinary citizens across the globe, mobilising in massive demonstrations, have shown a moral urgency by refusing to accept the agendas of Western governments and rejecting their silence through protest. A critical gap exists between public outrage and political inertia, underlining one of Drury's recurring points: silence and consent are forms of violence too.

The penultimate chapter, entitled 'One Year On', acts as both a reflection and an indictment. Drury takes stock of the first year post-7 October, documenting the extent of destruction in Gaza, the breakdown of diplomacy in international institutions and worsening humanitarian crises.

What distinguishes *Catastrophe: Nakba II* from other studies of the Israel-Palestine conflict is its readiness in drawing historical parallels, showing how today's mass displacements mirror the expulsions of 1948, and in affirming that the present crisis is not an isolated event but is instead the new form of an ongoing catastrophe. While some analysts, like those at the *New York Times*, were asked to avoid terms like genocide or Nakba due to controversy concerns, Drury insists that words must represent reality. To call the ongoing displacement anything less than a second catastrophe, as he argued, is to encourage and sustain denial.

Drury's book is not a light read, nor should it be. Rather, it is a necessary one. *Catastrophe: Nakba II* insists that we recognise the continuity of Palestinian suffering and the structures that sustain it. If one wants a reflective, historically rooted and uncompromising call to witness what is happening in Palestine today—not as breaking news but as part of a continuing disaster—then *Catastrophe: Nakba II* is that book. Drury's accomplishment lies in transforming journalism, with its purported objectivity, into the testimony of a witness. His book is not just about the Gaza Strip or West Bank, rather, it is about the act of witnessing. Reading *Catastrophe: Nakba II* challenges the violence of silence, forcing readers to recognise that neutrality is also a choice during catastrophic events.

SAMAVIA ZIA Samavia Zia is a PhD scholar at Government College University (GCU) Lahore where she focuses on English Literature. Additionally, she is the recipient of the 2025 Emerging Scholar Award by University of Hawaii, USA. Her area of expertise involves the intersection of literary studies, decolonialism, feminism, and other disciplines.



Book Review — *Language and Politics: A Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Perspective*, by Juliane House and Dániel Z. Kádár.

Cambridge University Press, 2025. 231 pp. \$95.00
ISBN:9781009092180 | doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009092180>

 **Mariam Titilope Olugbodi**
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Language and Politics offers a holistic exploration of political discourse through the lens of pragmatics. Juliane House and Dániel Z. Kádár adopt the linguistic approach of pragmatics to maintain objectivity in evaluating political language across diverse politics-oriented discourses (pp. 1–2). They depart from typical monolingual and ethnocentric perspectives by integrating multilingual and cross-cultural methods to analyse data from different linguacultures. Specifically, House and Kádár employ a contrastive cross-cultural pragmatic framework to study political language in multilingual data, compare the language of politicians in different roles, examine foregrounding in political language and evaluate stance-taking by political actors in diverse speech contexts.

This book explores a territory different from previous approaches to language and politics, such as critical discourse analysis (CDA), in terms of its aim and methodology. The primary focus of CDA is to critique power relations, social discrimination and oppression as conveyed in different social interactions, especially political discourse. In *Language and Politics*, the pragmatic approach proposed by House and Kádár is an offshoot of CDA—the political discourse analysis (PDA), to be precise. While PDA explores the domains of political power abuse, domination and reproduction, the authors shift drastically from ascertaining social injustices in their approach to PDA, and instead, evaluate political language use without invalidating the CDA approach to PDA. By strictly adhering to the linguistic principles of pragmatics rather than borrowing the interdisciplinary perspectives of CDA, House and Kádár investigate how ideology produces ethnocentric interpretations of language and politics, as well as how it manifests in politically relevant interactions.

The volume is constituted of eleven chapters, including a glossary of key terms and indices. It is organised into two parts, with a separate introductory chapter. The first part covers methodological issues in four chapters, while the second part addresses the key topics in six chapters, ending with the concluding chapter. The introductory chapter outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations of the text and situates the adopted approaches within the field of linguistics. The authors present a synopsis of the book's contents and its structure in this chapter to give the readers an idea of what to expect. As a customary practice, every chapter of the book, including the introductory chapter, ends with a list of recommended readings.

In its four chapters, part one of the book dwells on the framework upon which the study is built, the pitfalls of adopting an ethnocentric view when studying politically related data, associating values with political actors and entities at the outset of research and using research to support a pre-held conviction. The book is particularly “linguistic-oriented”; it adopts a “bottom-up” approach to language use, as well as “replicability” view and “contrastive” analysis (p. 17). Its analysis is linguistically anchored in an inventory of pragmatic concepts, especially speech acts and context. One substantial issue addressed relates to how ethnocentric conceptions influence researchers themselves. Similarly, House and Kádár link the risk of associating values with political actors and entities to the adoption of the top-down approach for comparing them (p. 51).

The book's second part considers topical issues that are closely related to communicative strategies in news reports, ideological convictions and language use, aggression in political institutions, as well as politics and translation. The discussion in this part of the volume also includes an exploration of sensitivity in language and politics, particularly regarding politically relevant data in countries that do not support such research. Other sensitive language issues that are discussed in the section are the study of secretive data produced by politicians and the study of painful topics, including “public ritual apology” (p. 96). The conclusion, which is the last chapter of the second part, provides a retrospective of the chapter discussions and incorporates recommendations for future studies.

House and Kádár have clearly explored how three distinct pitfalls could impede objective analyses of language use in politically relevant data. They

provide scientific justifications and moral understandings through case studies and replicability. These approaches have not only provided detailed insights into underlying issues related to the adoption of the ethnocentric perspective to the analysis of political language across diverse politics-oriented discourse; they have also helped in establishing a proper methodological framework for PDA. In addition to the authors' use of case studies and reflections for clarity, objectivity and establishment of a proper analytical model for evaluating political discourse, the choice of the cross-cultural pragmatic approach adds further significance to the book. The volume has provided a foundation for researchers to reflect on how the understanding of cultural differences could help them to navigate variations in different politics-oriented conversational data.

As mentioned in the foregoing, the book analyses data from different linguacultures by integrating multilingual and cross-cultural methods. However, House and Kádár have explored eight countries (UK, Slovenia, Germany, Hungary, Croatia, US, China and Japan), selected from three continents—Europe, North America and Asia—without consideration of data from Africa and other regions. For those continents that are examined, there is an imbalance in representation, with Europe more heavily featured. This is a limitation to the cross-cultural and multilingual positioning and choices of this volume. Even though this limitation is worthy of consideration and incorporation into possible future studies, the book in its current form qualifies as a valuable roadmap for more comprehensive analyses of wide varieties of politically oriented discourses from the pragmatic standpoint.

Overall, *Language and Politics: A Cross-cultural Pragmatic Perspective*, is a good source of reference for critical studies that explore a wider variety of politics-oriented data texts, be it spoken or written. The in-depth methodological and theoretical foundations of the texts in pragmatics and PDA establish the book as a veritable resource for scholars and students across humanities and social science disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology as well as politics and governance. The exploration of diverse political discourses from different linguacultures extends the relevance of the book to a variety of cross-cultural contexts.

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Book Review — *Geographies of Gender: Family and Law in Imperial Japan and Colonial Taiwan*, by Tadashi Ishikawa. Cambridge University Press, 2025. 283 pp. eBook/Hardback €105.04

ISBN:9781009534215 | doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009534215>

 **Clay Darcy**

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This book examines a multitude of fascinating issues relating to gender, family and law during the first half of the twentieth century in Imperial Japan and Colonial Taiwan. Covering issues as diverse as Japanese and Taiwanese betrothal gifting customs, forced marriage, daughter adoption, prostitution, sexuality and family dynamics, this monograph is rich in historical content and insightful analysis. Tadashi Ishikawa's *Geographies of Gender: Family and Law in Imperial Japan and Colonial Taiwan* uncovers how the Japanese metropole (the parent state of a colony) operated as a gendered space. This work focuses on the boundaries of, and tensions within, family and marriage in Imperial Japan and Colonial Taiwan.

The monograph takes an integrative approach to court case records, revealing, through a gender lens, the intersections of family and law in Japan and Taiwan between 1895 and 1945. Ishikawa examines what he terms “traditional” and “modern” understandings of gender in his study, and how these shaped women's and men's behaviours both within and outside the home. “Traditional” gender is conceptualised in terms of gendered practices, norms and ideals before, during and after the 1910s, while “modern” gender relates to the period following the 1910s (p. 5). The specific (re)configurations of gendered practices, norms and ideals in relation to family, marriage and sexuality that played out within the Japanese Empire and Colonial Taiwan are further conceptualised by Ishikawa as “circulations of gender” (p. 6). This term refers to recurring and arbitrary circular patterns of practice that worked to reinforce and perpetuate gender norms, structures and practices.

Geographies of Gender is broken into six chapters. The first two chapters delve into Japan's deteriorating international relations, its colonial politics and changing definitions of marriage and family. Chapter one

specifically focuses on how international relations shifted practices and approaches to family, marriage and sex. This chapter uncovers how the concepts of “freedom of love” and “love marriage” entered into the mainstream through “new middle-class readership of newspapers and magazines” and through separate external influences, namely Soviet Russia, the United States of America and the League of Nations (p. 43). Chapter two then examines the role of family, marriage and sex in redefining Japan’s imperialism and colonialism in Taiwan. The chapter highlights historical attempts toward social reform, specifically in relation to daughter adoption, premarital relationships and marriage gifts. Ishikawa contends that, while there were divergences in gender politics between Japan and Taiwan, there were also areas of convergence relating to gendered expectations of women. Nonetheless, tensions existed between “traditional” and “modern” perspectives on gender.

In chapter three, Ishikawa makes the point that, while Taiwan was colonised by the Japanese, it was not solely defined by this colonisation. Taiwan had its own approach to gender, family and marriage, which was shaped primarily in discursive spaces by male elites and the development of individualism. Ishikawa argues that Taiwanese masculinities developed more egalitarian forms, in opposition to the patriarchally constructed masculinities of Japan. Chapters four, five and six focus on courtrooms, where issues concerning gender, family dynamics and marriage were determined according to Japanese colonial laws. Chapter four examines how Japanese colonial courts and Taiwanese men placed the treatment of women and household relationships at the centre of how masculinities were constructed from the late 1910s to the mid-1930s. This culminated in a “contradicted logic of inclusion”, whereby premarital women were socially excluded and scrutinised with regard to their sexual propriety (p. 184). Chapter five returns to the concept of “circulations of gender”, with Ishikawa focusing on how matters relating to women’s freedom played out in Japanese courtrooms. Lastly, chapter six highlights the experiences of marginalised women in Japanese colonial courts and their efforts to gain greater agency.

Ishikawa’s conclusion centres on the argument that family and law played pivotal roles in how gender relations were reformed and reinforced in interwar Japan and Colonial Taiwan. This “circulation of gender” is

essentially a recurring temporal and spatial flux of tensions and interests working to (re)define the parameters of gender within the social milieu of Imperial Japan and Colonial Taiwan. Ishikawa systematically puts forward an articulate and authoritative argument supported throughout by historical and archival evidence. The use of court case files is particularly noteworthy; however, aside from a note on the text at the outset and a brief mention in the introduction, there is little detail provided on the research methods employed. Ishikawa states that an integrative approach was used but provides no account of how this was conducted. Greater methodological detail would aid those interested in replicating or conducting similar analysis in other jurisdictions. It would also offer some insight into how representative the case files are (the sample size is not stated) and further support the persuasiveness of the argument throughout.

Geographies of Gender takes both macro and micro perspectives on gender within this temporal and socio-geographic context. It makes a substantial contribution to the fields of gender and East Asian studies. The text is both articulate and accessible, appealing to a broad audience across the arts, humanities and social sciences. Most notably, this book would be of interest to scholars of sex and gender; East Asian studies; colonialism and colonial law; family studies; and those examining Imperial Japan and Colonial Taiwan from historical, sociological or anthropological perspectives. Ishikawa's study is suitable for recommended reading lists at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, making it a valuable addition to any higher education library catalogue.

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**Book Review — *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World*, by
Antony Loewenstein.**

Verso, 2023. 272 pp. £12.99

ISBN: 9781839762093

 **Sara Meghar**

University College Cork

Anthony Lowenstein’s *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World* carefully analyses how Israel uses its occupation of Palestinian land as a testing ground for developing weaponry and surveillance technology, which it then markets and sells to other states. The book is divided into seven chapters, each exploring a different aspect of the “Palestine Laboratory”. The first chapter focuses on Israel’s arms trade, emphasising the sale of “battle-tested” weapons to regimes, regardless of their human rights records. The second and third chapters explore how the post-9/11 War on Terror created new global markets for Israeli security products, with ongoing conflict serving to continually test and promote these technologies. The fourth and fifth chapters examine how other governments are adopting Israeli methods of surveillance and control as models for their own security systems. The final two chapters delve into the export of Israeli cyber-surveillance tools—originally deployed in the occupied Palestinian territories—to monitor journalists, activists and political opponents worldwide. These practices also extend to social media platforms, where content moderation often disproportionately censors Palestinian voices, revealing a broader system of digital control.

Against the backdrop of renewed turmoil in the region, Loewenstein’s book, which was published earlier in the same year as the Hamas attack on October 7th, gains increasing relevance. It is among the few contemporary studies that offer an in-depth analysis of Israel’s actions in Palestine through its defence industry and its far-reaching global impact. The author combines on-the-ground reporting with past investigations. He also draws upon interviews, including with Israeli activist Daniel Silberman, who has

persistently pushed for transparency regarding Israel's involvement with the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990) (p. 26). Throughout the book, the author skilfully links Israel's military-technological industry to racism, the repression of Palestinians and censorship implemented by social media platforms.

The Palestine Laboratory exposes how the global export of Israeli military and surveillance technology supports a lobbying apparatus that helps to legitimise and sustain the ongoing occupation. It uniquely illuminates how the West Bank and Gaza are a military laboratory for the Israeli military-technological complex, encompassing surveillance systems, devastating military operations, home demolitions, indefinite detention and the deployment of high-tech lethal weaponry. The author argues that the global network of arms trade has expanded through military alliances with both authoritarian regimes and democratic governments, several of which have been implicated in war crimes using Israeli weapons. His analysis reveals the global nature of this arms trade including countries in South and Central America, the USA, Africa and West, East and South Asia. He observes that the military relationship between Israel and these governments is mutually beneficial, as Israel secures strategic alliances and constant arms deals, while the governments gain access to advanced weaponry. Plus, these regimes seek to emulate Israel's violent tactics against their own populations, while Israel maintains its settler-colonial system over Palestinians. Loewenstein contends that Israel is exporting what he terms "politicide" (p. 69), a strategy aimed at undermining the social, political and economic existence of the Palestinian people.

Furthermore, the book explains how Israel has exploited its relationships with repressive governments in an opportunistic manner, leveraging crises such as September 11th and the COVID-19 pandemic to market its weapons. The sixth chapter, 'Israeli Mass Surveillance in the Brain of Your Phone', demonstrates how the COVID-19 pandemic allowed Israeli surveillance companies to expand their operations and provide additional control technologies to other countries. These included tools and systems to monitor, manage or suppress populations, such as real-time facial recognition in public spaces and remote access to smartphones using spyware. The chapter also highlights how these companies engaged in

espionage, primarily targeting European and American nations. These measures were initially employed to control the lives of Palestinians.

Loewenstein also shows how Israel uses social media to surveil and suppress Palestinian voices, describing the censorship of Palestinian content as digital orientalism (p. 173). He demonstrates how Meta and Twitter comply with Israeli government requests to remove content critical of Israel or presenting the Palestinian perspective. This censorship undermines Palestinian human rights by restricting free expression, obstructing advocacy and solidarity and impeding justice by removing crucial evidence. This is especially evident now, as platforms like Instagram have repeatedly removed accounts, stories and posts that reference or depict the crisis in Gaza (Shankar, Siddiqui and Bhutto, 2023).

While the book offers a strong empirical foundation, it lacks an analytical framework that situates Israel's weapon testing on Palestinians—and the broader occupation—within the global political-economic system. Israeli military industries exploit colonisation and occupation to sell weapons, but like all military industries, they are driven by both finance capitalism and capital accumulation and use repressive structures to maximise profit. In addition to profit motives, these industries are accountable to shareholders, creating structural incentives to sustain or even manufacture conditions of conflict and repression. Without addressing capitalist dynamics and government complicity, our understanding remains incomplete; a full understanding requires confronting the global forces shaping military industries.

Similarly, Loewenstein's discussion of digital orientalism would benefit from placement within a broader framework of manufacturing consent, an indispensable strategy Israel uses to rationalise its military power over Palestinians. Historically, selective language and biased narratives have been used to justify violence against entire groups and continue to be weaponised against Palestinians (Chomsky and Herman, 1995). The author should have emphasised the historical dehumanisation of Palestinians by Israel, its European allies and the US, which fuels the continuous violence and oppression. Mainstream officials from these governments employ dehumanising language when referring to Palestinians to absolve Israel of responsibility, legitimising attacks on civilians, religious sites and hospitals as testing-grounds for Israeli, US and European weapons. This

manufacturing of consent contributes to global militarisation and corporate surveillance, perpetuating Palestinian oppression. Incorporating these perspectives would have strengthened the author's ability to provide a more holistic understanding of the dynamics that sustain Israel's and its allies' profit-driven defence network.

In conclusion, this book is among the few which expose trade of deadly weapons. It examines case studies, including the use of the Pegasus spyware against individuals like Jeff Bezos and Jamal Khashoggi, weapons sold to the Myanmar military used to kill of thousands of Rohingyas and the use of drones by the European Union, with Frontex and the European Maritime Safety Agency, to monitor refugees in the Mediterranean. The book highlights how Israel has emerged as a global leader in surveillance technology and defence hardware, which has fuelled some of the world's most brutal conflicts. Throughout the seven chapters, the author posits that Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands has not only influenced its domestic policy decisions but has also served as a comparable model of subjugation that other states have sought to emulate in their efforts to establish analogous systems of control. This book is essential reading for both academics and general audiences concerned with human rights, liberation and justice, as it sheds light on the troubling intersection of capitalism, militarism and Palestinian oppression.

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Book Review — *Kincora: Britain's Shame—Mountbatten, MI5, the Belfast Boys' Home Sex Abuse Scandal and the British Cover-Up*, by Chris Moore.

Merrion Press, 2025. 272 pp. €19.99 (Paperback)

ISBN: 9781785375545

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In *Kincora: Britain's Shame*, Chris Moore provides an in-depth analysis of the harrowing abuse that occurred at Kincora Boys' Home. Drawing on interviews with survivors and George Caskey, the detective in charge of the criminal investigation, alongside transcripts from police interviews with both victims and the perpetrators, Moore provides a disturbingly clear account of years of abuse that culminated in the conviction of six men in 1981. Three of these men—William McGrath, Joseph Mains and Raymond Semple—were employed at the Kincora Boys' Home. However, these convictions failed to provide a neat conclusion to the Kincora saga. As Moore aptly observes, key questions remained unanswered, primarily: why had the abuse been allowed to continue for so long despite multiple reports from residents? And why did William McGrath, who had staunchly professed that the allegations levelled against him were politically motivated, suddenly plead guilty at the eleventh hour—just when it seemed he was on the cusp of implicating the British state in a cover-up of the abuse (pp. 43–44)?

Moore claims that shortly after the Kincora convictions he was approached by a social worker who put him in contact with a detective who had uncovered evidence of abuse at the Kincora home in 1975. It was this source that led Moore to suspect a larger cover-up had taken place. The unnamed detective had been ordered to stand down an investigation into Kincora after he uncovered information that implicated multiple police officers and civil servants, amongst them Peter England, an undersecretary at Stormont and MI5 officer (p. 53). Moore concludes that William McGrath was at the centre of the British intelligence services attempt to suppress investigations into the abuse at Kincora due to his status as an intelligence asset. McGrath was first approached by intelligence services in

1958 to facilitate clandestine communications beyond the Iron Curtain under the guise of bible shipments. Later, his position within the Protestant Unionist community would be used to subtly influence political tension in Northern Ireland through political agitation and to gather information on key players in the Unionist community through his relationships with leaders such as Ian Paisley. As the Troubles began in Northern Ireland, suspicions of McGrath's involvement with British intelligence services arose. Intelligence officers investigating the Unionist movement were ordered by their superiors to disregard McGrath and Tara (his Protestant paramilitary organisation). Accusations that he was both a homosexual and an intelligence asset from UVF leadership drove a wedge between the UVF and Tara, decimating the latter's membership. It was following the decline of Tara in 1971 that McGrath came to be employed in Kincora (pp. 78–79).

Moore claims that he was first notified in 1982 of MI5's interest in the Kincora investigation by Caskey, who warned him that his reporting on the subject was upsetting those at the intelligence services. Further digging revealed that in 1975, the same year the RUC's investigation of Kincora was shut down, an intelligence officer, Brian Gemmel, was ordered to cease his investigation into the Tara organisation and McGrath's alleged homosexuality. Moore concluded that this was no mere coincidence but instead a concerted effort to obstruct investigation into Kincora. This obstruction would continue as intelligence services refused to allow police to interview officials despite demands from the Northern Ireland director of public prosecutions. It was confidentially relayed to Caskey that Kincora was the centre of an intelligence operation. Moore claims that leaked MI5 documents show that the RUC were kept in the dark about the true nature of the intelligence assets within Kincora. The extent of intelligence services' interference in the Kincora investigation is far more sinister than mere non-cooperation with police. Moore recalls the experience of Collin Wallace, an intelligence officer, who attempted to blow the whistle on the danger posed by McGrath to Kincora residents. Wallace was subsequently reassigned, dismissed and imprisoned for six years on manslaughter charges that were later overturned due to falsified forensics presented by the state, leading Wallace to believe he had been targeted in retaliation for whistleblowing. Additionally, Moore claims that one of his confidential

sources inside Stormont was threatened with imprisonment if they continued feeding information to Moore.

Beyond the institutional cover-up, Moore also investigates the extent to which the abuse extended outside the walls of Kincora. In an interview with survivor Richard Kerr, Kerr divulges that he was sometimes brought to hotels or the homes of men, where he was subsequently abused, making Kincora not just a site of abuse but a centre for child trafficking. One instance detailed by Kerr involved him and another Kincora resident, Stephen Waring, being abused by Lord Mountbatten at his Sligo residence. Given that Mountbatten already had a reputation for perversion and deviancy, and considering his proximity to the Royal Family, Moore asserts that it may have been in the interest of the British state to prevent him from being publicly implicated in a paedophilia scandal. Kerr contends that Mountbatten was not the only wealthy and influential man he was abused by, recalling similar incidents involving 'businessmen, politicians, doctors and lawyers' (p. 230). This led Moore to believe in the possibility of a paedophile ring that operated out of Kincora, with the consent of MI5 to obtain leverage on possible intelligence assets. Kerr was living in London by the time that the Kincora scandal had garnered public interest and during this time he was visited on multiple occasions by individuals who he assumed were plainclothes officers, who encouraged him to stay silent about the abuse he suffered, a request he complied with out of fear for his life.

Overall, Chris Moore provides a thorough analysis of the abuse carried out at Kincora and of the intelligence services' obstruction of both the 1975 investigations and later inquiries that followed the public scandal. Moore offers several possible motives behind the cover-up: that intelligence services intervened to protect William McGrath, an MI5 asset; that inquiries were obstructed to shield the Royal Family from embarrassment if Mountbatten were implicated; or, most disturbingly, that MI5 knowingly allowed a paedophile ring to operate at Kincora in order to gain leverage over potential assets. The selection of sources is excellent—first-hand accounts from survivors and George Caskey provide vivid insight into both the abuse and the investigation. Official documents, used alongside leaked or declassified intelligence files, demonstrate how the cover-up was sustained by selectively withholding key information. The book's thematic

organisation allows Moore to explore the institutional breadth of the scandal, though it occasionally comes at the expense of temporal clarity, making the timeline somewhat difficult to trace. Nevertheless, *Kincora: Britain's Shame* is a well-articulated and accessible work that will appeal to both academic and general readers alike.

EOGHAN FITZGERALD is a third-year PhD student at University College Dublin. His research focuses on the link between property and familial relationships in eighteenth-century Ireland as part of the 'Law *versus* Practice' project, a wider interdisciplinary research project on women and property ownership in early-modern Ireland.



Book Review — *Heading to the Fleadh: Festival, Cultural Revival and Irish Traditional Music, 1951–1969*, by Méabh Ní Fhuartháin.

Cork University Press, 2024. 262 pp. €49.00

ISBN: 9781782050131

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Méabh Ní Fhuartháin provides us with “the first full-length, critical study of the Fleadh as a transformative cultural phenomenon” (Ní Fhuartháin 2024, cover). Through a complex interdisciplinary frame, *Heading to the Fleadh* explores aspects of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (All-Ireland Fleadh) as a historical, cultural and temporal event. Ní Fhuartháin presents the information in this book using the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of Irish studies, cultural history and festival studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, cultural musicology and folk music studies. The work outlines aspects and various iterations of the All-Ireland Fleadh as they are linked to the trajectory of the organisational development, growth and strategic objectives of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (Comhaltas). Organised in chronological order, each of the seven chapters provide an in-depth account of the intertwined histories and evolution of the Fleadh festival and Comhaltas as an organisation. There is a substantial amount of detailed historical information regarding the annual events held from 1951–1969, which includes, but is not limited to the following: accounts of critical dates and key actors within Comhaltas, the event administration of the Fleadh, and the role of these actors and events in the greater revivalist movement and Irish traditional music scene. Beyond this historical perspective, Ní Fhuartháin situates the Fleadh as a social and cultural touchstone of Irish traditional music and investigates the ways in which various aspects of the All-Ireland Fleadh have become embedded in the community’s collective consciousness.

Chapter one addresses the social, political and economic pretexts that shaped the cultural landscape in the decades prior to the formation of Comhaltas in 1951, which influenced the organisation’s effort to create an

event that responded “to a period of perceived crisis in Irish traditional music” (Ní Fhuartháin 2024, cover). Ní Fhuartháin notes that Comhaltas, as an organisation, eventually drew on the outreach structure that other national organisations had found success in, which capitalised on local branches to encourage participation at the community level. Another element deemed essential for the event was the inclusion of competitions. The practice of festival-competitions such as those held by the Feis Ceoil Association were a familiar part of musical culture in Ireland. Through these familiar programming choices and the addition of new ones, Comhaltas cast a wide net to attract as many participants as possible to engage with the revivalist movement centred around Irish traditional music.

Chapter two explores the inaugural event held in 1951 in Mullingar with a particular emphasis on the significant contributions of local participants, which foreshadowed the continued importance of that dynamic in later years. Ní Fhuartháin provides a comprehensive account of the programme, results and reception of the multi-day event with details of the competitions, concerts and academically oriented presentations. Though aspects of the event underwent continual change in subsequent years, this chapter clearly outlines the structural elements of the festival that have remained central to the All-Ireland Fleadh.

Chapter three covers the period 1952–1955, highlighting the continued largely positive reception of the event, evident in increased attendance and host localities beginning to anticipate economic benefits from their involvement. The author traces changes in competition categories, special additions or notable omissions of categories for particular instruments, as well as the distinct local flair and participation that had become central to each host community’s identity over these years. Importantly, this chapter deals with the introduction of parades and pageants as a collective transition into the “Fleadh Zone” and the addition of Céilí band competitions alongside the individual categories. As the event grew in both attendance and prestige, so too did the demand for celebrity acts in the concert programme. While many of these performers were not considered to be traditional musicians, they were well known, which speaks to Comhaltas’s aim of engaging as many participants as possible.

Chapter four focuses on the years 1956 (Ennis) and 1957 (Dungarvan). Themes throughout this chapter draw attention to regional variants in what

constituted Irish traditional music. Another continuous theme examined is the stark contrast between these two events: the Fleadh in Ennis was economically successful, while the following year in Dungarvan it was perceived as a failure. By this time, host localities had developed certain expectations of mass attendance and substantial economic gain, which Dungarvan did not achieve, highlighting the growing involvement of economic stakeholders in the Fleadh as a mobile, annual event. The Ennis Fleadh became a cultural and commercial benchmark against which the Dungarvan Fleadh was measured. This dominant narrative persisted despite several culturally significant and successful aspects of the Dungarvan Fleadh, which, as Ní Fhuartháin points out, are often overshadowed in popular memory. Chapter five continues to explore the cultural and commercial themes raised in chapter four but largely delves into an examination of the re-remembering and re-telling of Fleadh-related events and how those accounts have impacted the perceived identity of the Fleadh.

Chapter six investigates the dichotomy between Comhaltas and the Fleadh as actors with the power to shape style and practice in Irish traditional music. One way the author explores that dichotomy is through a discourse analysis of the roles that members of Comhaltas have played, both as adjudicators of competitions held at the Fleadh and as organisers and/or curators of the event. Further, Ní Fhuartháin examines the Fleadh itself as a site where creative approaches and preferences have been publicly mediated by performers and adjudicators. The inherent subjectivity that has, since the event's inception, played a role in these outcomes is at the fore of discussion. As the author notes, winning a competition at the Fleadh usually resulted in a significantly enhanced reputation and profile for the winners, which often translated into greater opportunities to perform or record. For this reason, some felt that Comhaltas and the Fleadh exercised almost a monopolistic control over processes of learning, performance and recognition in Irish traditional music.

The final chapter examines the Fleadh throughout the 1960s and addresses the continued expansion of the event as a commercial success. Ní Fhuartháin details the internal conflict amongst cultural revivalists that emerged as a result of the increasing scale of the event, along with some negative associations that factions of the community began to attach to the

Fleadh as a rambunctious social gathering. While the challenges of managing the event had evolved over time both from an organisation and administrative point of view, the ever-growing crowds and shifting identity of the Fleadh brought both positive and negative outcomes for revivalist stakeholders. The session, which remained the primary form of unstaged music-making, rose to a new height of popularity as part of the Fleadh identity during these years, which situated Irish traditional music in dialogue with other revivalist movements around the world. This global engagement was further reflected in the composition of attendees at the Fleadh.

While this book is primarily an academic text, it is also compelling for non-academic audiences with aligned interests. The author's writing style is approachable, engaging and any instances of specialised vocabulary or use of terms in the Irish language are clearly defined. Ní Fhuartháin confronts power dynamics and mythologised histories in and around Irish traditional music as a part of the revivalist movement, which is woven throughout a dense historical account of the evolution and identity of the Fleadh. She presents a prismatic, interdisciplinary study of the Fleadh as a cultural phenomenon that has wide-ranging implications for the field of Irish traditional music and beyond.

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Book Review — *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, edited by Sunyoung Park.

University of Michigan Press, 2019. 311 pp. \$34.95

ISBN 9780472074129 (Paperback) | doi: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10027900>

 **Luke O'Brien**

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This edited collection will be of primary interest to readers who are already familiar with scholarly discourse on this period of Korean history. Because the collection offers new perspectives, highlighting gaps in the historiography, a reading of the collected essays will benefit from some prior knowledge of South Korea's frustrated transition from strongman authoritarianism to democracy in the latter half of the twentieth century. For the casual Korean culture enthusiast, the introduction provides a useful summary of key events preceding this period.

The term “minjung”¹ (“the people”) gained “activist currency” during the 1980s, denoting “a broad alliance of labourers, students, intellectuals, religious activists and oppositional politicians” (p. 1). These “dissident forces” agitated for change and pressured strongman Chun Doo Hwan's (1980–1988) successor, Roh Tae Woo (1988–1993), to announce unprecedented “conciliatory measures” (p. 1). The introduction argues that scholarly discourses on this period of Korean history tend to “emphasize narratives of upheaval and liberation”, resulting in a “frequent bracketing of [the decade] as an ideologically saturated time of crisis” (pp. 4–5). Consequently, alternative themes such as economic development, social change and the introduction of new media and technology are overlooked, and the “centering” of minjung intellectuals “has led to a neglect of the contributions of other groups” such as workers, women, everyday citizens and artists (pp. 4–5). To address this problem, this collection of essays

¹ In Korean public discourse, the term “minjung” “connotes [...] the counterhegemonic masses” (p. 1). More precisely, minjung refers to “those who are oppressed in the sociopolitical system but who are capable of rising up against it” (Lee, 2007, p. 5).

offers new perspectives, highlighting “the diversity of social, intellectual and artistic formations that made up the rich ecosystem” of 1980s South Korean culture (p. 5). Because the memory of this decade has been associated with “controversy [and] historical recrimination”, speaking to the “centrality” of the 1980s in the contemporary Korean psyche, it is thereby suggested that revisiting this period “has become ever more interesting, urgent, and complicated” (p. 4). The editor makes a compelling argument that “minjung”-centred scholarship may be too narrowly focused.

The collection is organised into five parts, and three directions of research are pursued. The first situates cultural history within a historiographical framework, highlighting “the discontinuous and heavily teleological narratives that affect today’s memory” of the 1980s (p. 5). This again suggests that popular discourse on the 1980s is disjointed and primarily concerned with the *purpose* of events rather than on their causality. The proposed framework offers a more chronological or symptomatic reading in that regard. In Part I. The 1980s in Korean History and Memory, Namhee Lee discusses the various “narrative strategies” that are deployed and Kyung Moon Hwang outlines progressive and conservative perspectives (p. 38). The second considers [new] theoretical lenses of transnationalism, new labour culture, intersectional feminism and popular culture, revealing “alternative narratives and hitherto unexplored aspects of the decade” (p. 5). Parts II–V offer a focused reading on each of these themes, respectively. The third approach, which is multi-theoretical and interdisciplinary, gathers “critical insights” from the fields of cultural history, social history, literature, film, art, music, gender studies and historiography (p. 5). The meta-analytical (historiographical review), multi-thematic and interdisciplinary dimensions of the research methods outlined allow for rigorous investigation, as demonstrated throughout. Because “minjung” culture is approached without a dominant theoretical focus, opting for a more holistic framework, this collection challenges the conventional historiographical paradigm. Speaking from experience, an interdisciplinary framework is indeed warranted. Seldom can a hegemonic framework fully appreciate the causal relationships between systems and groups, particularly when approaching South Korea’s relatively brief but

unrelenting history. *Revisiting Minjung* typifies proactive scholarship,² unhindered by convention or ideology.

It might be helpful to suggest the utility of this collection for other academics in the field. Two of the featured essays will be highlighted. ‘Part II. Transnationalism’ concerns South Korean intellectual history, political travel and the foreign exhibition of minjung art. Sohl Lee’s essay ‘Exhibiting Minjung Art Abroad: Tokyo, New York, and Pyongyang in the Twilight of the Cold War’ offers valuable insights into the reception of minjung art abroad. Lee refers to the *Min Joong Art* exhibition (1988) in New York, which featured various installations (photographs, video) that commented on political life in Korea.³ When first exhibited in the United States, minjung art was regarded, critically, as being politically charged or edgy when compared to US antiwar or anti-imperialist art (p. 114). Lee explains that minjung art came about as a “visual language of dissent opposing the anticommunist, authoritarian government”, considered “an assertive presence as fierce, symbolic, nationalist, androcentric [...] as the dominant power it sought to oppose” (p. 114). For those approaching contemporary Korean film, literature or media, the determined potency of Korean art in the West and the intimate relationship between minjung art and dominant (domestic) power structures will be of particular interest. It has been found that the geopolitical fallout of the 1980s and 1990s (the processes of globalisation) “applied further pressure on the conceptual paradigm of the national” (Chung and Diffrient, 2015, pp. 5–6). East Asian cinema, for example, is considered “transnational on several fronts” (Chung and Diffrient, 2015, p. 6). Lee’s “rare account and assessment” of minjung art, concerning intercultural exchange, could therefore prove beneficial for scholars in an equivalent field (p. 7). Other essays featured in ‘Part II. Transnationalism’ include Jae-Yong Kim’s discussion regarding South Korean intellectual history, reflecting on their own work and

² New Historicism, an approach to literary criticism, might be of interest to some readers (Morris, 1972). New Historicism has been described as “nuanced, imbued with emotion and written from the perspective of ordinary [marginalised] people” (Hickling, 2018, p. 55). The analytical framework demonstrated in *Revisiting Minjung* aligns with the sentiment or practice of New Historicism, which routinely challenges conventional historiography in a similar way.

³ Photographs and promotional material from the exhibition can be viewed here: <https://artistspace.org/exhibitions/min-joong-art-a-new-cultural-moment-from-korea> (Accessed: 10 January 2026).

envisioning an alternative, non-imperialist modernity, and Ruth Barraclough's account of political travel and exchange between Australia and Korea during this period.

'Part V. Popular Culture' features Yun-Jong Lee's essay 'Between Progression and Regression: Ero Film as Cinema of Retreat', which stands out as an important essay from a Korean film studies standpoint. Lee outlines the emergence of the "supergenre" of Chungmuro erotic (ero) cinema in the 1980s, after the "cinematic eroticism" of the 1970s, which integrated the hostess film genre and Korean melodrama, merging with the horror genre, among others (p. 228). An "overestimation" of the role of the 3S policy (sex, screen and sports) is documented, which challenges the popular understanding of the proliferation of erotic content around this time (p. 232). The main argument is that 1980s ero cinema "oscillated between progression and regression", corresponding to "national and international cultural politics at the intersection of class, gender, and race" (p. 239). For scholars who are primarily familiar with the (erotic) psycho-drama films of the 1960s and 1970s (Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid*, for example), Lee's assessment of the emergence of a supergenre of erotic cinema in the 1980s offers historiographical continuity. New perspectives on the 3S policy are also of particular interest. The 1980s have been considered a fallow period for Korean cinema, however, as others have argued, [horror] films released at the time were just as "thematically meaningful and creatively dynamic" as those already mentioned (Peirse and Martin, 2013, p. 8). New insight into this period is welcomed. Lee's approach demonstrates the multi-theoretical, interdisciplinary framework outlined, considering minjung culture through situating Korean ero film within the perspectives of gender and politico-economic and cultural development. Also featured in 'Part V. Popular Culture' is Sunyoung Park's essay considering the "reciprocal relationship" between Korean science fiction (comic books, for example) and the democratisation movement (p. 266).

Essays from Part II. Transnationalism and 'Part V. Popular Culture' have been highlighted. There are also significant insights shared in Part III. New Labor Culture: Jung-Hwan Cheon discusses South Korean workers' literary clubs and labour literature and Chang Nam Kim documents the minjung [activist] song movement. Part IV offers an intersectional feminist perspective: Hye-Ryoung discusses women's liberation literature and

Kyunghee Eo addresses race, gender, queerness and Black femininity in South Korean literature and film in a postcolonial context. In summary, the utility of the publication as a useful reference when approaching Korean film and other media from a meta-analytical, theoretical and historical/cultural perspective has been considered. *Revisiting Minjung* addresses gaps in the historiography and highlights the contributions of marginal groups that may otherwise have been neglected in mainstream “minjung”-centred commentary. For academics in the field, the new perspectives offered, strengthened by the robustness of the research methodology, might certainly warrant serious consideration.

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Book Review — *We Are All Migrants: A History of Multicultural Germany*, by Jan Plamper.

**Cambridge University Press, 2023. 280 pp. €28.01
(Digital/Paperback) / €85.20 (Hardback)**

ISBN: 9781009242264

ID **Brandon Hamilton**

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The movement of people across international and domestic borders is a heated recurring topic of dialogue that shapes political debates, cultural identities, and personal narratives across the globe. The history of migration is both long and deeply interwoven with questions of belonging and survival, making it essential in understanding how societies have been formed and reshaped over time and into the modern day. German migration, in particular, has fascinating roots tangled in power and identity, revealing how factors such as cultural belonging, shifting borders, and drastic changes in politics have shaped the nation's history and national identity. In his translated monograph, *We Are All Migrants: A History of Multicultural Germany* (2023), the late German historian Jan Plamper explores Germany's complex, often dark, migrant history, showing how migration has repeatedly reshaped the country and its national identity. Plamper is successful in demonstrating various phases of German migration, specifically throughout the mid-to late twentieth century, primarily from 1945–1989. *We Are All Migrants* carefully, yet successfully, integrates forgotten and unheard accounts from oral histories that tells the stories of various individuals, giving voice to experiences that illuminate the broader social and political transformations of modern Germany.

We Are Migrants is broken into two sections. Plamper begins his analysis by briefly examining the history of emigration from Germany in the first chapter, establishing the broader evolution of belonging and identity. German migrants carried their culture widely across the globe. For instance, Plamper's discussion of "parallel societies" highlights how Germans, along with their belongings, skilled labour, and families, blended their culture into new homelands while simultaneously negotiating the

tensions between integration and the preservation of distinct German identities (p. 11). From the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century, mass waves of emigration flowed into South America, the United States, and Russia. Here, Plamper employs personal narratives to illustrate the gradual integration of German cultural practices—such as the introduction of kindergarten into American society in the nineteenth century. Yet emigration from Germany did not unfold without prejudice. In 1918, for example, a mob of 300 men stormed a jail in Collinsville, Illinois, dragged German-American Robert Prager from his cell, wrapped him in an American flag, and hanged him outside the city after accusations that he had made “[...] disloyal utterances against the United States and President Wilson” (p. 23). Such gruesome depictions of ethnic Germans being brutally murdered, mocked, and humiliated in both the United States and Russia during the early twentieth century exemplify the fragility of migrant belonging and reveal the violent limits of cultural acceptance within host societies.

Throughout the first part of his book, Plamper examines the expulsions of Germans from territories of the Third Reich in addition to ethnic German minorities from Eastern Europe after 1945. Here, his work resembles that of European transnational historian Tara Zahra, particularly her book titled, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe* (2017), as Plamper examines migration not simply as movement across borders, but as a lens through which to understand contested notions of belonging, much like Zahra’s analysis of Eastern European departures. Throughout the four chapters of the first section—‘Twelve-and-a-Half Million in Six Years’, ‘Labor Migration to West Germany’, ‘Labor Migration to East Germany’, and ‘Asylum’—Plamper successfully traces the long-term consequences of Nazi-era displacement, emphasising how it not only uprooted millions but also fostered enduring resentment and hostility among Eastern European populations. In addition, he tactically distinguishes between legal frameworks, asylum, and various forms of migration within the European context, offering a layered analysis of migration in two German worlds, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, i.e. West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR, i.e. East Germany). The emphasis on labour migrants in Germany, especially within the GDR, throughout the twentieth century sheds light on the issue of respect. Social stigmas, accusations from

far-right groups like the AfD (Alternative for Germany), marginalisation, and underpayments still plague the country. Many labour migrants are “[...] often forced to live on the margins of society instead of being able to profit from their labour migration” (p. 105). Taken together, Plamper shows that the experiences of labour migrants in both German states cannot be separated from longer histories of displacement and exclusion, and he makes clear that the social and political tensions born out of these migrations continue to shape debates over belonging and inequality in Germany.

The second half of *We Are Migrants* is split into three chapters: ‘Germans There, Russians Here’, ‘Jewish Germaniya’, and ‘Welcoming Culture’. Each of these chapters spotlight current (1989–2023) migrants who experience the difficulties of living between cultures, negotiating differences of daily life such as a language and religion. In census data, according to Plamper, many of these groups are not formally accounted for as “migrants”. Labour migrants from places such as Italy and Turkey, Jewish “Quota Refugees” from the Soviet Union, and ethnic Germans from the USSR and Eastern Europe who began emigration around the time of Perestroika underwent processes of marginalisation and partial exclusion, as their legal status or ethnic background often obscured the reality that their daily lives were marked by displacement, adaptation, and the constant negotiation of belonging in Germany (p. 210). The latter half of the book shows how these unaccounted groups complicate easy definitions of who counts as migrants and reminds readers that belonging in Germany has always been contested and uneven. Much of this tension grows out of Germany’s colonial past, particularly the ways the colonial economy “[...] contributed to the accumulation of German wealth during the German colonial era dating from 1884 until 1919” (p. 216). By linking the struggles of contemporary migrants to the legacies of colonial wealth and exploitation, Plamper shows that exclusion in modern Germany is inseparable from its longer imperial history. In doing so, the latter half of the book urges readers to view migration not as a break from German history, but as central to its continuing debates over identity and belonging.

The spread of both political violence and scare tactics of immigrants by political authorities only furthers the fundamental truth of Plamper’s book: culture is shaped by diaspora, inclusivity, and most fundamentally, the

human experience. *We Are Migrants* is triumphant in displaying the humanistic elements to migration, which is historically glossed over, that is necessary to understand the difficult and oftentimes harsh realities that millions face all over the world. By incorporating first-hand and oral accounts, Plamper reveals how migration unfolded in multiple phases across Germany and its surroundings, especially throughout the twentieth century. Plamper reminds readers that migration is not just a series of policies or statistics, but a deeply human story. His work challenges us to see migrants not as abstract numbers, but as individuals whose experiences continue to shape culture and society in profound ways.

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**Book Review — *Glór ón Sceilg*, by Mícheál Ua Ciarmhaic,
edited by Máirín Nic Eoin and Mary Shine Thompson.**

Cork University Press, 2025. 216 pp. €25.00 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 9781782050179

 **Luke Ó Donnchadha**

University College Cork

A timely revival of a worthy author, in *Glór ón Sceilg* the editors attempt, and largely succeed in the daunting task of summarising Mícheál Ua Ciarmhaic's (1906–2005) Irish language oeuvre, spanning nine books and almost thirty years of writing in a comparatively slender volume. Ua Ciarmhaic became a Renaissance man later in life, turning his hand to writing in Irish and later also in English as 'Michael Kirby', as well as painting, in his sixties. A selection of Ua Ciarmhaic's work in English was republished in *Skelligs Haul* in 2019, but the more prolific part of his body of work, composed in Irish, had fallen entirely out of print until the publication of *Glór ón Sceilg*. Unfortunately, the book's title may cause confusion for those who seek out the author's work in library catalogues, as *Glór ón Sceilg* is remarkably similar to Ua Ciarmhaic's *Guth ón Sceilg* (2000). The editors might have been wiser to select a more distinct title, especially given that "glór" and "guth" can be synonymous with each other.

The book is laid out thematically rather than chronologically, meaning that material from the earlier book *Cliathán na Sceilge* (1984) appears next to a later work, such as *Guth ón Sceilg* (2000) and so on. There is a danger that the individual context and focus of each book, and indeed Ua Ciarmhaic's development as a writer over such a lengthy period, might be obscured by this approach. However, the results are highly readable, and the source book and date of composition are clearly marked at the beginning of each excerpt and in the index. The pieces are also deftly arranged in a way that contributes to the flow of the book. For example, the essays placed directly before the book's selection of Ua Ciarmhaic's poems themselves quote poetry extensively, giving the impression of a gradual transition between the book's prose and poetry sections. The editors could possibly have gone even further with this process of

arranging. For example, the phrase “iascach ó thóin” (‘Fishing from the bottom’, i.e. the seafloor) is explained by Ua Ciarmhaic in the section ‘Iascach traimilí’ (p. 110), however the term appears regularly earlier in the book where that explanation might have proved useful to a reader unfamiliar with fishing terms.

Prose material makes up most of the volume and Ua Ciarmhaic proves to be a clear and engaging stylist. At a glance the autobiographical pieces that begin the book recall the Gaeltacht memoirs that have proven so influential in modern Irish language literature, particularly those taken from Ua Ciarmhaic’s *Ríocht na dTonn* (1989); it is easy to think about Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s (1856–1937) *An tOileánach* (1929), another work by an author who came to writing late in life, as Ua Ciarmhaic recalls his early experiences on the ocean. The editors make special reference in the introduction to the lesser-read *Seanchas Chléire* (1940)¹ by Conchúr Ó Síocháin (1866–1941), who shares Ua Ciarmhaic’s interest in detail when describing sailing and fishing. Comparison can be made between Ua Ciarmhaic’s ‘Na báid saighne’ (pp. 103–109) with the chapter on ‘Iascach na mbád mór’ in Ó Síocháin’s book (1970, pp. 32–42), both of which discuss similar subjects in granular detail.

Like Ó Síocháin, Ua Ciarmhaic can also communicate this type of detail while recounting short engaging stories. ‘Eachtra Raice’ is an excellent example of this, describing the illicit salvaging of ship wreckage alongside his father. The minutiae of sailing and salvaging is recounted alongside the tension of the ‘peelers’ seeking to catch them. Over the course of the narrative the author provides insights into his relationship with his father, which is characterised by admiration. The account culminates in a wonderfully atmospheric episode where a young Ua Ciarmhaic hauls a salvaged board out of an otherworldly sea cave. There are many other prose gems to be found in the book, of particular interest is a passage on an arrogant visitor to Skellig Michael (pp. 32–35) that blurs the line between memoir and folk-tale and an episode where an older Ua Ciarmhaic helps Pól, a young boy, build a small bridge and harbour for paper boats in a stream only for them to be destroyed in a storm (pp. 42–44). This second piece demonstrates a disarming tenderness that is one of Ua Ciarmhaic’s most impressive traits as an author.

¹ Page numbers referenced derive from the modernised edition, published 1970.

Samples of Ua Ciarmhaic's poetry are represented in a smaller section towards the end of the book. Of interest here is the large difference between the early poems selected from *Íochtar Trá* (1985) and his later work, which has a more modern character. Although Ua Ciarmhaic quotes folk poetry extensively in his prose, it does not seem to have served as a model for his compositions. The samples of Ua Ciarmhaic's paintings are a welcome aesthetic addition to the book as well.

While *Glór ón Sceilg*'s index and endnotes are welcome, the addition of a glossary is the most obvious improvement that could be made to the book, particularly in those sections that have an abundance of terminology to do with fishing, farming, etc. The editors describe the variety of sources they used to engage with Ua Ciarmhaic's dialect, including unpublished material from the folklore archives, out-of-print dictionaries and academic texts. More of this work could have been shared with the reader who will quickly encounter words and spellings that cannot be checked in available dictionaries. The glossary found in the modernised edition of *Scéal mo Bheatha* (Ó Céileachair, 2008, pp. 199–218) would have served as an excellent model for this work. Even reprinting the brief glossary of birds and fish already included in *Ríocht na dTonn* (Ua Ciarmhaic, 1989, pp. 115–116) would have greatly improved the text's accessibility, especially as the glosses in *Ríocht na dTonn* do not always reflect those found in Ó Dónaill's dictionary (the most commonly available Irish-English dictionary). For example, "cánóg" is glossed as "puffin" in *Ríocht na dTonn* (Ua Ciarmhaic, 1989, p. 115) but refers to different birds in Ó Dónaill meaning that a reader is likely to misinterpret Ua Ciarmhaic's use of the word in this book. The lack of a glossary causes small problems in other areas also, for example the word spelled "barraois" (p. 103) in the text, meaning 'phosphorescence', is particularly awkward. The form "baraois" is listed in Ó Dónaill and indicates the same pronunciation, but the additional 'r' will lead a reader seeking an explanation of this obscure term astray in the dictionary. It is admirable that the editors have sought to preserve Ua Ciarmhaic's dialect; replacing his words whole-sale with ones found in the dictionary would certainly have marred the work stylistically, but a glossary would have provided vital help to the average reader as well as useful information to those with a particular interest in the dialect. All in all, these are only minor problems that hamper an otherwise well-arranged

survey of an author who is well worth reading. This work is also an important step towards reviving interest in the literature of the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht; as demonstrated in the book's list of sources, Ua Ciarmhaic is just one of many regional authors whose works have fallen out of print. The book should have a broad appeal to scholars of Gaeltacht literature and enthusiasts of Irish language writing in general. For dialectical scholars Ua Ciarmhaic's work is valuable as a more recent source of a dialect that faced a sharp decline throughout the twentieth century.

LUKE Ó DONNCHADHA is a doctoral student in Modern Irish at University College Cork (UCC) focusing on eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish-language manuscripts from Co. Cork. He was awarded a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant scholarship and taught Irish in the University of Montana Missoula for the academic year 2024–2025. He received his master's degree from UCC in 2024 with a dissertation focusing on stories of the Fianna from the collection *Fionn agus Lorcán* (1901).

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Book Review — *Deportation Limbo: State Violence and Contestations in the Nordics*, by Annika Lindberg.

Manchester University Press, 2022. 208 pp. £25.00

ISBN: 9781526160874

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Annika Lindberg's *Deportation Limbo: State Violence and Contestations in the Nordics* is an anthropology of regimes of deportation. Lindberg takes Denmark and Sweden as paradigms of the highly bureaucratised Nordic welfare state, situating political ethnographies of institutions and individuals within broader narratives of state violence. The emergent claim is that deportation in these countries is not the result of policies or systemic technical failures but a form of state violence; the continuation of policies of deportation despite clear ineffectiveness and, as Lindberg depicts, brutal consequences, is Lindberg's setting. The result: "deportation limbo". This "deportation limbo", the central theoretical concern of the book, describes the experience of deportees in the Nordics. Lindberg breaks down this term into a number of key components: a liminal legality, a spatial liminality and a temporal indeterminacy. With this framework, Lindberg effectively straddles the gap between multiple fields of study, bridging anthropologies of law, space and temporality with deportation studies, border-migration studies and studies of state violence. Situating this case within the existing literature, Lindberg produces a comprehensive image of the deportation experience, contrasting with great effect the "state fantasies of effective enforcement" and the "violent realities they generate" (p. 11). The task of the book, then, is to effectively motivate the notion of "limbo" as a form of state violence.

Lindberg's methodological approach is, as described, somewhat hybridised; she visits detention centres, deportation camps and welfare offices, interviewing prison officers, migration officials, police, NGO staff and a mixture of im-migrants and asylum seekers. In drawing from such diverse sources, Lindberg supplements the argument that the state violence at play is totalising, bleeding into every facet of life for migrants and those

working in migration. How this “slow violence” is enacted, normalised and justified is sketched out by Lindberg in great detail at every level of society save for the very top. The “patchworks of ethnographic observations and engagements” (p. 19) leads to a broad view of deportation and effectively probes those on both sides of the border. The sections on Lindberg’s shadowing of frontline workers in detention camps are highly effective in evoking sympathy in the reader whilst also contributing conceptually to understandings of the legal, spatial and temporal limbo. In spite of this, Lindberg appears to miss the final piece of the deportation puzzle: the involvement of politicians or policy makers into her ethnographic approach to propose a complete view of the deportation system.

Subtly present within this multifaceted investigation is a question of liveability: liveability for those who are threatened by deportation and forced into the aforementioned limbo, but also the question of the lives of those who are the enforcers of the deportation regime, the arbiters of that limbo. In the final chapters of the book, having moved comprehensively through a series of institutions, Lindberg turns to the effects of this violence in a psychological sense, using the term “colonise” to describe the power of the violence over its participants. Lindberg’s application of Césaire’s famous framing of colonisation as damaging to both the colonised and coloniser is worked neatly into her conceptual apparatus. Sustaining order as a necessary evil has, she claims, become a developed supposition of many frontline workers who enforce deportation. Despite investment into humanising reforms, the slow violence appears to have a way of creeping in. In line with Césaire, Lindberg’s ethnography could, as mentioned, push to higher policy making positions. Although it is unlikely that honest accounts of state violence would emerge through this method, it would be productive to see whether strands of necessity that are found in frontline works are present or whether policy failures are well accounted for by policy makers.

Overall, Lindberg effectively proves that the deportation limbo can be seen as a form of state violence. The slow violence that has a corrosive effect on both those that are the victims and those who are the upholders of it is explored in sufficient depth; the connection of this case to extensive anthropological understandings of time and place on the other hand and theories of state on the other is highly successful. Lindberg’s synthesis of these modes is the main success of the book, without which ‘limbo as

violence' may not be entirely convincing. By embedding the concept of limbo, played out as the torture of waiting on account of critical state failures, Lindberg shows a tangible form of violence against the deportees. It is the accumulation of the effects of suspension and indeterminacy that play out here in full force.

Lindberg's work appears at a time in which deportation studies is of paramount importance. The dismantling of the "myth of Nordic innocence" to reveal a critical mishandling of state powers that has disillusioned many of those participating in its systems is of pressing concern, both politically and academically. Of particular significance is Lindberg's straddling of multiple fields of academic study, the major voices of each of which are accounted for in this text; this ethnographic dimension may well be applied to other regions and political contexts to great effect. Lindberg's framework is productive for further studies in the emerging discipline of deportation studies. Further, the placement of this text in conversation with other major proponents of state violence research points to a number of new avenues for research. The book is therefore of great value to any scholar interested in the fields of migration studies or as modern application of diverse ethnographies to contribute to a theoretically justified whole.

LEWIS EBERT is a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, where he previously completed his BA and MPhil. His research focuses on the historical development of steppe cultures in Mongolia, with particular attention to the intersections of cuisine, medicine, and cosmology. His DPhil thesis examines the period of Mongol rule in China, analysing how the influx of steppe cultural practices reshaped established dietary and medical frameworks. Through a close reading of contemporary dietary manuals, the project combined textual, historical, and anthropological methodologies to reconstruct the culinary cosmologies of the period and to trace their lineages into the present. His current book project with Bloomsbury Publishing, *Food Cultures of Mongolia: Cuisine, Customs, Issues*, offers a culinary history of Mongolia, tracing foodways from the Bronze Age to the modern era. His broader engagement with Eurasian history has led him to research across multiple dimensions of steppe culture, including religion, political history, and art history, on which he has published and presented widely. Underpinning his work is a sustained interest in the cosmological relationships between ritual, culture, and everyday practice on the steppe, which continues to inform his interdisciplinary historical approach.



Editorial: Event Reports

Charlotte Troy (Section Manager)

Department of English, University College Cork

The eleventh volume of *Aigne* features a record number of academic event reports, with twelve reflective accounts written by the contributors. These reports cover a variety of events, from workshops and talks accompanying museum exhibitions to symposiums and conferences, many of which the contributors were involved in organising themselves. Taken together, these reports demonstrate how this volume's theme of 'Responses: Reflection and Action' relates to the constantly evolving landscape of academia.

At the crux of these event reports, contributors emphasise how academic events allow for research to be disseminated, critiqued and celebrated. For postgraduate students and early career researchers in particular, events such as those outlined in this issue are important in cementing their role within the academic community. They are valuable opportunities for building connections with peers, exchanging ideas with fellow academics and affirming the relevance and importance of their research endeavours.

The event reports team oversaw twelve submissions detailing different events and academic interests, which give a glimpse into the breadth and vitality of research being carried out across the arts and humanities at University College Cork (UCC). Most events took place on the UCC campus and are documented here by researchers from CACSSS. One report has been written by an international scholar and extends the coverage of academic events presented here to an international setting in Canada. The reports in the section are arranged according to chronological order, beginning with the earliest event and moving towards the most recent. This structure allows the section to be read not only as a collection of individual reflections, but also as a partial record of a year of academic activity:

December 2024

Noreen Kane's (Department of Italian) report of the 2024 Society for Italian Studies Postgraduate Colloquium (6 December), themed "Memory and Italian Culture", begins this volume's Event Report Section. In the context of the theme of the present volume, this colloquium encouraged reflection

on culture and memory, inspiring action in the form of scholarly exchange, threads that continue in the events held throughout 2025.

February 2025

The annual CACSSS Postgraduate Research Conference (19–20 February) brought together postgraduate scholars from across CACSSS to present their work. In their report, Aoibhínn Callaghan (Department of Asian Studies), Gabrielle Dufrene (Department of English) and Charlotte Troy (Department of English) highlight how this conference encourages responses from the CACSSS postgraduate community, allows for reflection on the research being undertaken within the college and can inspire action through collegial dialogue and constructive feedback.

March 2025

Three of the events reported on were held in March, underlining the variety and vitality of the research community, where participants reflected on the scholarly topics relevant to each respective event.

The 76th Irish History Students' Association Annual Conference (1 March), was organised by the UCC History Society—namely, Rebecca Bourke (School of Law), Cian Mulhearn (Cork University Business School) and Conor Taylor (School of History).

Rosemary Kelly (Department of English) provides an account of the 2025 Inkwell Symposium (15 March) that ran with the theme “Narratives Through Time”. Inkwell is an annual conference on medieval and renaissance studies for undergraduate and postgraduate students at UCC.

The 2025 SOFEIR (Société Française d'Études Irlandaises) Annual Conference (21–22 March 2025) was covered by Hope Noonan Stoner (Department of English) and Luke Watson (School of History).

April 2025

Brian de Ruiters (Center for Canadian Studies, Brock University) reports on a talk addressing memory and preservation at Auschwitz, hosted by the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, 30 April 2025.

May 2025

Charlotte Troy reports on the proceedings of the annual UCC Bookends Conference (2 May).

Billy Goodwin (Department of Sociology & Criminology) highlights key moments from the 2025 Sociological Association of Ireland Annual Conference (8–9 May).

Noreen Kane's second event report in this volume details the Memories Beneath the Skin Decolonial Feminist Workshop (12 May 2025).

June 2025

Fiona O'Driscoll (Department of Folklore and Ethnology) and Rebecca L. Hall Moran (Department of Folklore and Ethnology) detail the proceedings of the 2025 iteration of The Folklore Society's Annual Conference, themed "Folklore and the Senses" (20–22 June).

November 2025

The third annual Haunted Futures Conference (12–14 November), covered by Rachel Gough and Ellen Scally invited papers that explored the theme of "Haunted Technologies".

The Gerald of Wales: Identity, Afterlives and Wonders — The First Chris Williams Memorial Colloquium on Ireland and Wales, on which Natasha Dukelow (School of History) and Richard Keyes McDonnell (School of History) report, is the final academic event covered in this volume. The report pairs highlighting the reflection on historical topics with action in honouring the legacy of the scholar commemorated in the event.



Academic Event Report

Noreen Kane

Department of Italian, University College Cork

Event: 2024 Society for Italian Studies (SIS) Postgraduate Colloquium
“Memory and Italian Culture”

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 6th December 2024

In 2024, the Department of Italian at University College Cork (UCC) and the Society for Italian Studies (SIS) collaborated to bring to fruition a postgraduate colloquium entitled “Memory and Italian Culture”. The Department of Italian at UCC has a long tradition of organising annual conferences to promote the work of the international postgraduate Italian Studies community. The SIS is an organisation that furthers the study of Italian Studies in the United Kingdom and Ireland, which holds an annual colloquium for its postgraduate members. The 2024 colloquium was organised by PhD students Noreen Kane (UCC) and Francesca Nieddu (UCC), with the support of SIS postgraduate representatives Dario Galassini (UCC), Silvia Vari (University of Warwick) and Elisa Vivaldi (University of Edinburgh). The event was generously funded by the SIS.

The colloquium consisted of three panels and two keynote talks focusing on national and transnational Italian memory across a range of contexts and media. The papers that were presented focused on issues such as mass emigration, Italy’s twenty-year Fascist dictatorship, violent colonial expansion, the Holocaust, political violence, gender inequality, police brutality, and environmental destruction, all of which have shaped Italy’s tumultuous twentieth-century history. Papers explored the role of cultural products in mediating these difficult histories. Nine participants travelled to Cork from both Ireland and abroad, including Italy, the UK and the US,

with one speaker joining online. Keynote lectures were given by senior scholars Professor Silvia Ross (UCC) and Professor Stefania Lucamante (The Catholic University of America and the University of Cagliari). Participants had the opportunity to share their work, engage in meaningful discussions, and receive valuable feedback from keynote speakers and peers.

Opening Address and Panel 1

The colloquium opened with a warm welcome from Dr Daragh O’Connell, Head of the Department of Italian at UCC and Director of the Centre for Dante Studies in Ireland. The first panel, titled “Problematising Postcolonial, Migratory and Marginalised Memory”, was chaired by Silvia Vari (University of Warwick), and featured three papers. Michele Baldaro (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt) presented a paper that investigated how the figure of the doctor in postwar colonial texts challenges the *italiani brava gente* (“Italians—good people”) myth and highlights the inclination to exoticise the colonial Other. Elisabetta Visaggio (King’s College London) followed with a paper that explored the oceanic journeys and memories of economic migrants from Southern Italy who travelled to North and South America between 1890 and 1930. The final paper of the first panel was delivered by Francesca Passasseo (University of Texas at Austin) and focused on the Wages for Housework Movement, a 1970s campaign led by Italian feminists, combining theoretical perspectives with insights from her archival research.

Panel 2

The second panel of the colloquium, “From the Second World War to the Present Day: (Re)mediating Memory and Historical Trauma”, was chaired by Dr Chiara Giuliani (UCC). The panel commenced with an online intervention by Irene Ros (University of Edinburgh and University of Strathclyde), titled “Performing the Collective Memory of *Stragismo*

[terrorist violence]”. Ros juxtaposed the portrayal and spectacularisation of political violence in 1970s Italy with contemporaneous oral histories of women. Following this, Matilde Piu (University of Pisa) presented a paper on intergenerational trauma in Włodek Goldkorn’s Holocaust memoir *Il bambino nella neve* (*The Child in the Snow*), examining how the literary imagination serves as an intervention in processing trauma for the post-memory generation. The panel concluded with a paper presented by Cristian Bergonzo and Giuliana Pala (University of Bologna), who explored the concept of intermediality and the dynamics of multidirectional memory in the work of political philosopher Massimo Palma. Their discussion investigated the relationship between music, text and memory.

Keynote Address 1

The first keynote address, “The Natural History of the Dead: From Ernest Hemingway’s WWI Narratives to Contemporary Historiographical Novels: History through the Lens of Nicoletta Verna and Ilaria Rossetti”, was delivered by Professor Stefania Lucamante. In her talk, Professor Lucamante offered thought-provoking reflections on literature as an epistemic field in its own right. She emphasised the power of literature to create alternative interpretations of the past, enabling readers to actively reimagine pivotal historic moments and explore what might have been. The historiographical novels discussed also highlighted the prominent—yet frequently overlooked—role of women in the world wars.

Panel 3

The third and final panel, “Reshaping the Past and the Future through the Urban Environment”, was chaired by Elisa Vivaldi (University of Edinburgh). Zoe Fox (University of Birmingham) opened the panel with an intervention that focused on the Fascist use of Romantic imagery depicting a vanishing Rome. This was followed by Claudia Sbuttoni’s (University of Gastronomic Sciences, Pollenzo) paper on memories of the resettlement of Istrian Italians to Villaggio Giuliano, an urban development on the outskirts

of Rome after World War II, when Italy was forced to cede its former territory to Yugoslavia (1947–1954). To conclude the panel, Giulia Bernuzzi (UCC) presented an intervention on the role of memory and resistance within the futuristic urban setting of Venice as depicted in Antonio Scurati's 2011 dystopian climate novel *La seconda mezzanotte* [*The Second Midnight*].

Keynote 2: Closing Address

The colloquium was brought to a close with a second keynote address, which further explored the theme of memory and the urban environment, delivered by Professor Silvia Ross, “Re-membering World War II through Ruins: Wounded Bodies, Memory and Regeneration in the Postwar Florence of Aldo Palazzeschi and Michael Ondaatje”. The expressive possibilities of “wounds” in the urban environment were explored.

Conclusion

Throughout the colloquium common themes emerged among the papers. These included the agency of individual memory in relation to prevailing memory narratives, the ability of cultural products to engage the reader or viewer in an active interpretative process, which can potentially inspire change in the present and future and, finally, the relationship between the urban environment and both dominant and resistant memories.

The colloquium provided the opportunity for ample conversations in formal and informal contexts on memory and Italian culture. Meaningful connections were forged and participants were invited to submit an article to the 2025 special issue of *Notes in Italian Studies*: “Memory and Italian Culture”. The event concluded with a group trip to local Cork pub Fionnbarra, where participants, organisers, and keynote speakers enjoyed a pizza and pint in a relaxed atmosphere, with attendees commenting that it was one of the friendliest conferences they had attended.

NOREEN KANE has just completed a PhD in the Department of Italian at University College Cork (UCC). Her thesis, entitled “Transgenerational Trauma and the Gendered Body: Postcolonial Women’s Writing in Italy” was funded by Research Ireland and a National University of Ireland Travelling Doctoral Scholarship. She has published articles in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (2024), *Quaderni d’italianistica* (2025), and *Atlantic Studies* (forthcoming). She currently teaches Italian language at UCD and lectures on contemporary Italian women’s writing in UCC.



Academic Event Report

Aoibhínn Callaghan

Department of Asian Studies, University College Cork

Gabrielle Dufrene

Department of English, University College Cork

Charlotte Troy

Department of English, University College Cork

Event: College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences (CACSSS)

Postgraduate Research Conference 2025

Venue: CACSSS Seminar Room, O' Rahilly Building, University College Cork

Dates: 19th to 20th February 2025

The annual Postgraduate Research Conference of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences (CACSSS) at University College Cork (UCC) highlights the diverse and innovative research of CACSSS postgraduate students. This conference welcomes presentations from all research areas, giving students the opportunity to share their work with peers and academic staff from across the college's various departments. For many CACSSS students this postgraduate research conference is their introduction into the academic community and often marks their first encounter in presenting and defending their research in front of their peers. As an interdisciplinary research event, CACSSS students benefit from receiving invaluable and constructive feedback from students and staff outside of their own academic discipline, which in turn elevates their own research. Beyond the scope of their own research project, participants develop an understanding of how their research relates to other disciplines, which allows them to ask further questions of themselves and push the boundaries of their own work.

To demonstrate the interconnectedness of CACSSS research, the conference is divided into thirteen thematic panels. This allows students to recognise how their research relates to other postgraduate work being conducted in other departments and fields and to foster further connections outside of their own department. At the crux of this event, the CACSSS

postgraduate research conference highlights the diverse research being undertaken by postgraduate students and affords PhD candidates the opportunity to become further immersed in the CACSSS scholarly community. Following each panel, presenters took part in a question-and-answer session, allowing for rich discussions and facilitating interdisciplinary connections.

Day One

The conference began with opening remarks from Professor Cathal O’Connell (Interim Head of CACSSS, 2024–2025), followed by the first of seven panels for the day. This opening panel, “Environmental Creativity”, was chaired by Dr Aoife Granville (Department of Folklore and Ethnology). It commenced with Shelley Etkin’s (Department of Sociology & Criminology) paper, titled ‘Herbologies of Repair: Medicinal Plants, Land Stewardship, and Pedagogies of Solidarity in Palestine-Israel’, followed by Luca Gambirasio’s (Department of Music) presentation, ‘Diverse Music and Sound-Mediated Environmentalisms in Contemporary Tuscany: Mapping Ecomusicology Frameworks in Central Italy’, and Jessica O’Hara’s (School of Education) ‘What’s Stalling the Green Transition in Irish Higher Education?’. The panel concluded with Joshua Wagner’s (Department of Drama and Theatre Studies) paper, ‘The Transformative Potential of Ongoing Forest-Based Affective and Aesthetic Practices’.

Dr Ciara Chambers (Department of Film and Screen Media) chaired the second panel, “Time, Space and Memory”. The panel opened with Daniel Fraser’s (Department of German and Department of French) paper ‘Resistant Temporalities: History and Geological Time in Paul Celan and Marguerite Duras’. This was followed by Kane Geary O’Keefe’s (Department of Film and Screen Media) presentation on ‘Hunting for Lost Time: Folkloric Institutions and the Erasure of Pandemic Years in Tony Devlin’s *The Glenarma Tapes* (2024)’. David Mackey (Department of Film and Screen Media) continued this engaging panel with his paper, ‘Manufactured memory: Analysing the Relationship between Time, Film and Memory through *La Jetée* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*’, after which Philip Maguire (Department of Music) presented ‘Time and Space in a Piece for an Indeterminate Number of Speakers and Listeners’.

This panel concluded with Tomasso Verga's (Department of Italian and Department of Film and Screen Media) paper, titled 'Towards an Intertextual and Intermedial Reading of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950)'.

Following a short break, the third panel, "Care and Wellbeing", chaired by Dr Siobhan O'Sullivan (School of Applied Social Science). The panel began with Maureen Considine's (Department of History of Art) presentation, 'Official State Commemorations of the Residential Institutions 2009 to the Present'. This was followed by Imelda Fitzgerald's (School of Nursing and Midwifery) paper, 'The Role of Obstetricians and Midwives in Co-ordinating and Providing Person-centred Compassion Care during the Birthing Experience'. Bob Grumiau (Department of Sociology & Criminology) then presented a paper titled 'An Investigation of the Use of Art-Based Practices in the Humanities and Social Sciences', which was followed by Fiona Kelly's (Department of Music) presentation 'The Attitudes of Caregivers and Residents of Residential Care for Older Individuals on Implementing a Caregiver-Led Music Programme'.

After lunch, the conference recommenced with the fourth panel, "Gender Identity and Authority", chaired by Dr Alan Gibbs (Department of English). Gabrielle Dufrene (Department of English) opened with her presentation, titled 'Mammy Gets Behind the Wheel: Form Enabling Freedom in Claire Keegan's *Men and Women*', followed by Jow Huber's (Department of Film & Screen Media) paper, 'Queer Cinema of the Weimar Republic'. Elodie Martin (Department of Philosophy) then directed the discussion to gender in Japan with a presentation titled 'Fukuzawa Yukichi and Gender Equality in Japanese Society'. This dynamic panel concluded with Charlotte Troy's (Department of English) paper, "'I'm not gonna bite you" – The Ultimate Girl's Girl Eats Boys in *Jennifer's Body* (2009)'.

Dr Mastoureh Fathi (Department of Sociology) chaired the fifth panel of the day, 'Interpreting Historical Voices and Sounds'. The panel began with Rosemary Kelly's (Department of English) paper, titled "'Hit that sinful man, that enemy of the people" – Pluralised Masculinities in the Old English *Andreas*' which was followed by Vassileios Varelas's presentation (Department of Music), titled 'Vocables and Rhetoric of Music: Medieval Semiotics in the Relation of Rhetoric with Music in Byzantium'. Jessica

White (Department of English) concluded this panel with ““Can I invent?”: Education and Gender in Maria Edgeworth’s *Harry and Lucy*”.

After another brief break, the penultimate panel of the day, “Mapping the Mind”, commenced, moderated by Dr Mastoureth Fathi. This insightful panel started with Tadhg Connery’s (School of Applied Psychology) paper, titled ‘A Study of Sensory Processing Sensitivity’. Next, John Gilroy (Department of Sociology & Criminology) presented ‘The Annual Reports of the Inspector of Lunatic Asylums/Inspector of Mental Hospitals 1847 to the Present’, and Katie Marah (Department of Applied Social Studies) gave her paper ‘An Exploration of the Enablers and Barriers to Autistic Children’s Participation in Decision-Making in Irish Primary Schools’. Nello Maruca (Department of Philosophy) continued proceedings with a presentation titled ‘Challenging the Understanding of Anhedonia in Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorder’. The panel concluded with Brónagh Murphy’s (Department of Archaeology) paper ‘The “Archaeology of the Contemporary” in Assessing Trauma and Injury Patterns from 20th Century Wars’.

The final panel of the first day, “Programming Counselling and Coaching”, was chaired by Dr Mark Prendergast (School of Education), bringing together postgraduate researchers from the School of Education and the School of Nursing and Midwifery. The panel commenced with Graham-Gill Emerson’s (Department of Sociology & Criminology and School of Nursing and Midwifery) paper, ‘Outlining a Plan for Examining Core Programmatic Underpinnings of Irish Counselling Training Programmes’. This was followed by Eoghan Long’s (School of Education) presentation of his paper, ‘A Critical Analysis of a Recent Teacher National Professional Development Programme’ and Cornelius David Moynihan’s (School of Education) paper, ‘Cultivating the Creativity of Neurodivergent Thinking – A New Educational Approach’. Coran Swayne’s (School of Education) presentation, titled ‘Cultivating Coaching Cultures in Primary Schools: The Role of Leadership, Teachers and Policy across Ireland, England, and New Zealand’, brought the first day of the conference to a close.

Day Two

The second day began with the engaging “Student Experience and Activism” panel, chaired by Dr Kate Hodgson (Department of French). To begin, Aoibhinn Callaghan (Department of Asian Studies) presented her paper, ‘The Role of University Students during the Independence Movements in Korea (1919) and Ireland (1916)’, which was shortly followed by Jordan Carolan (School of Languages, Literatures & Cultures), who delivered a presentation titled, ‘An Investigation of the English Language Learning Experiences of Chinese and Korean Studies in Ireland’. In addition to these presentations, Breda Connell (School of Education) offered ‘A Scoping Review of Library-Based Academic Writing Groups for Academic Identity Development in PhD Students’. The panel closed with Yu Wang (Department of Asian Studies), whose presentation was titled, ‘Boarding Schools in Chinese Female Fiction of the Republican China (1912–1949): Gendered Space and Female Identity’.

The ninth panel of the conference, “Devotions and Obsessions: Personal and Political”, was moderated by Dr Sharon Lambert (School of Applied Psychology). This session began with Beth Aherne’s (Department of English) paper, ‘Devotion, Obsession, and the Family in Octavia E. Butler’s *Dawn* (1987) and *Fledgling* (2005)’. Following this presentation, James Dineen (Department of English) delivered his paper, ‘Simone Weil’s individuated Christianity’, and Gabriella Fattibene (Department of Criminology and Sociology) concluded the panel with ‘The Far-Right Playbook in Ireland’.

After a break, the conference continued with its tenth panel, “Migrations and Borders”, which was moderated by Dr Órla O’Donovan (School of Applied Social Studies). Opening this panel, Cian Lynch (School of History) presented ‘An Investigation into the Role of Naval Trawlers and Drifters in Protecting Ireland’s Coastal Waters during the Great War’. Pivoting the discussion, Grainne-Kate Mulcahy (School of Applied Social Studies) delivered ‘Hierarchies of Belonging and Racialisation in Europe: Experiences of Irish Women Living in Scandinavia in the 21st Century’, which was followed by Pooja Priya’s (Department of Sociology & Criminology) ‘Intersectional Placemaking in Delhi: Experiences of Belonging and Exclusion Among Nigerian and Congolese Migrants’. Subsequently, in her paper, Nataliya Ryzhova (School of Languages,

Literatures & Cultures) analysed linguistic and narrative practices amongst displaced Ukrainians who were temporary relocated to Ireland. To conclude the panel, Joy Uwanziga (Department of French), examined the migration effect on social and cultural developments in the Great Lakes Region through her case studies of Rwanda and Uganda.

After lunch, members of *Aigne*'s editorial board delivered a brief presentation, highlighting their continued success publishing the work of UCC postgraduate students and announced a call for papers related to the CACSSS Research Conference.

Dr Niall Duggan (Department of Government & Politics) oversaw the eleventh panel, "Public and Political Systems and Structures". The panel was begun by Michał Biedowicz's (Department of Government & Politics) 'A Conceptual Analysis of Anarchy/ism and Democracy', the aim of which is to assess the compatibility between the two concepts. Tobias Heyduk (Department of Government & Politics) delivered 'The Autonomy of Public Administration: A Systematic Literature Review', which was followed by Sara Meghar's (Department of Government & Politics) 'The Dialectical Relation of Financial Capitalism and US Defence Industries since the 2000s'. The panel ended with Benita Wolf (Department of Sociology & Criminology), whose paper offered a deconstruction of the criminal courthouse.

The twelfth panel, entitled 'Periods of Transition', was moderated by Dr Sarah Foley (School of Applied Psychology) and featured papers from the Departments of Film and Screen Media, English, and Government & Politics. Tadgh Dennehy (Department of Film and Screen Media) commenced the panel with his paper, '*Hush-a-Bye-Baby* and "Myths of Modernity" in 1980s' Ireland', which was followed by Hanke Kelber (Department of English), who interrogated apocalyptic misanthropy and the collapse of modernity in mid-twentieth century American post-apocalyptic fiction. The panel reached its conclusion with Rojin Mukrihan's (Department of Government & Politics) 'Founding a Post-Islamic Republic Iran: Social Contract versus Modus Vivendi'.

The two-day conference concluded with its thirteenth panel, "Language Acquisition and Literary Canons", chaired by Dr Katharina Becker (Department of Archaeology). Julia Coughlan (School of Education) opened the panel with 'Enhancing Teacher Knowledge and Plurilingual

Competencies and in the Primary School Classroom’. Sustaining the focus on education, Aoife Hill (School of Education) presented on teachers’ approaches to grammatical accuracies in Irish immersion settings. Rachel McCarthy (Department of Digital Humanities) then pivoted the discussion to how word utilisation and meaning has evolved in Irish literature throughout the decades. Jincal Yang (School of Education) concluded the panel by delivering ‘A Systematic Review of Existing Research on Using Electroencephalography (EEG) in Classroom Settings to Analyse How Children Acquire Languages’.

Closing remarks were offered by Dr Barry Monahan, the Vice-Head of College (Graduate Studies), who affirmed the importance of this conference.

Conclusion

The 2025 College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences Postgraduate Conference once again proved to be an invaluable setting for scholars to exchange and refine ideas and engage in interdisciplinary dialogue. The event showcased the depth and breadth of postgraduate research at UCC, with papers exploring topics from environmental humanities, film studies, psychology, education, literature, migration studies and beyond.

Events like the CACSSS Postgraduate Conference are key to helping early-stage researchers develop confidence. In addition to the conference serving as a fruitful setting for presenting papers, the question-and-answers sessions that followed each panel offered participants the opportunity to receive constructive feedback, defend their ideas, and engage in the kind of interrogative exchange that is essential to academic growth. Notably, this engagement also extends beyond the conclusion of the conference itself through the conference’s association with *Aigne*. By devoting a dedicated section to these conference papers, *Aigne* boosts the visibility of postgraduate student research, further reiterating the importance of this platform for UCC’s research community. The success of the 2025 conference speaks to the value of creating such spaces for postgraduate researchers and suggests promise for CACSSS conferences in years ahead.

AOIBHINN CALLAGHAN is a third year PhD student in Korean Studies at University College Cork. Her research focuses on gender and education

during the Korean colonial period (1910–1945). She is a recipient of the Korea Foundation’s Scholarship for Graduate Studies.

GABRIELLE DUFRENE is a second-year PhD student in the Department of English at University College Cork. Gabrielle is a recipient of the CACSSS Excellence Scholarship, through which her doctoral research project, “An Island on a Sea of Grief: Irish Women Writers and Trauma”, is funded.

CHARLOTTE TROY is a third year PhD student in the Department of English at University College Cork. Charlotte is a recipient of the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship, which funds her research project titled “EcoGothic Gardens and the Collapse of Social Binaries”.



Academic Event Report

Rebecca Bourke

School of Law, University College Cork

Cian Mulhearne

Cork University Business School, University College Cork

Conor Taylor

School of History, University College Cork

Event: The 76th Irish History Students' Association Annual Conference

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 1st March 2025

In 2025, the Irish History Students' Association (IHSA) Annual Conference returned to University College Cork (UCC) for the first time since 2011. The IHSA, established in 1950, is the national association for third-level history students in Ireland. Each year, the IHSA hosts an annual conference that brings together undergraduate and postgraduate students, researchers, academics and history enthusiasts from both across Ireland and internationally.

The 76th IHSA Conference was hosted and organised by the UCC History Society, one of the oldest societies at UCC. Originally founded in 1947, it currently enjoys one of the largest followings of any university history society in Ireland. Known for its innovative programming and inclusive events, the society collaborates with academic departments and student organisations to make history accessible and engaging through lectures, panels, publications and themed social nights. Hosting the 2025 IHSA Conference was an opportunity for the UCC History Society to re-engage at a national level and reflected the society's continued commitment to historical dialogue and student-led scholarship.

The IHSA Conference enables students from across Ireland to meet scholars at a similar career stage, as well as more senior academics, and presents an avenue for forging professional networks. The 76th IHSA Conference was no exception, welcoming attendees and presenters from a

range of institutions, including Trinity College Dublin (TCD), New York University Glucksman Ireland House (NYU GIH) and a range of other universities from Ireland and beyond. As the IHSA is open to all areas of history, the papers ranged from the post-Great Famine funeral system and post-Independence Irish identity to contemporary LGBTQ+ rights movements in the United States. To accommodate the number of papers, the conference ran two concurrent sessions, each with three thematically linked panels.



Figure 1: UCC History Society Organising Committee for the IHSA 76th Annual Conference

Left to right: Bill Shanahan, Conor Taylor, Rachel Cotter, Will Ryan, Becky Bourke, Donogh Hutchinson, Justin Isberg, Keela Dixon, Cian Mulhearn, Brendan Mee, James Power, Daniel O’Connell, Tommy Cosgrave
(Photo Credit: Cian Casey).

Keynote Address and Opening Panel

The conference began in the Dora Allman Room, located in the Hub building on UCC's campus. Following opening remarks from Rebecca Bourke (Chairperson of UCC History Society) and William Ryan (Conference Director), Dr John Borgonovo, senior lecturer at the School of History at UCC and co-author of the *Atlas of the Irish Civil War* (Cork University Press, 2024) and *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (Cork University Press, 2017), delivered a keynote speech. He talked about how history is remembered and celebrated, explaining the important roles that historians and academics can play in this process. By working with the public, these experts can ensure that history is shared in a way that helps have a positive impact on wider society. A panel followed, in which John and some of his fellow editors of the *Atlas of the Irish Civil War*, Mike Murphy (UCC) and Dr Donal Ó Drisceoil (UCC), discussed this recently published work. Participants then proceeded to the West Wing, where the first panels of papers began. With two sessions running concurrently, attendees chose between parallel panels.



Figure 2: Dr John Borgonovo and Rebecca Bourke

(Photo Credit: Cian Casey).

Session One

Broadly speaking, Session One explored various aspects of Irish identity and culture. Panel One examined Irish identity in the context of historical conflicts, while Panel Two considered texts and images spanning the thirteenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Panel One

Donal O’Connell (UCC) presented on prevalent ideologies of Young Ireland in a post-War of Independence Irish political sphere, while Henry Swords (TCD) discussed the heroes of the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) and the construction of Irish identity. Martin MacMahon (University College Dublin (UCD) presented a talk discussing John Anderson, who purchased land in Fermoy in 1791 and established British military barracks there.

Panel Two

Benjamin Casey (Maynooth University) delivered a paper titled ‘Picturing the Professions: 1760 to 1850’, which examined artistic satire in Dublin from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, focusing primarily on postcards and other works of art. Pierce Woodall’s (UCC) paper, ‘The Spirit of Cú Chulainn’, explored the art of Louis le Brocquy in the 1969 Publication of the *Táin*, focusing on how the narrative was presented in le Brocquy’s illustrations. While the first two presentations engaged with aspects of art history from different perspectives, the third paper of this panel shifted focus toward textual history. Dr Natasha Dukelow (UCC) presented her research, ‘Reconsidering the Dating of a Thirteenth-Century Franciscan *Exempla* Collection’, which offered a reassessment of the dating of a medieval preaching text.

Session Two

The second session of the day continued to reflect a broad range of research topics. Panel One focused on personal and social experiences within historical Irish contexts, exploring healthcare inequality during the Land War (1879–1882) and the experiences of Irish emigrants. Panel Two broadened the scope to examine social, political and cultural issues in post-

Independence and mid-to-late twentieth-century Ireland and Europe, addressing crime, motherhood and Cold War-era European diplomacy.

Panel One

Dr Maura Irwin of University College Galway (UCG) gave a paper titled 'Medical Inequality in the Land War in Mayo', which covered disparities in healthcare provision during the Land War. Examining a case in which a large group of people were attacked in a rural setting, Dr Irwin contrasted their treatment with the superior treatment of a wealthy doctor injured in an urban area. Helen Hayes Sweeney's (UCG) paper, 'Dear Father and Mother...', looked at the letters of Irish emigrant Mick McGee, who left Donegal for the United States. Her research followed his story through these letters, considering the places where he lived and worked and how he communicated with his family in Donegal. The presentation concluded with the man's death in a mining accident and the loss of a prospecting claim he believed would have transformed his family's fortunes.

Panel Two

Gregory Walls (TCD) presented his paper, titled 'Crime and Violence in Post-Independence Ireland', examining the wave of crime that hit the country in the wake of independence. Aviv Corrigan presented her paper, 'The Feeding Work of Motherhood in Ireland, 1945–1974', discussing such topics as advertising and innovations in food-preparation technology and how these impacted mothers. Glen Rothwell (UCC) closed the panel by presenting his research on 'The Common European Home', a doomed proposal made by USSR Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 which would organise Europe into a network of interdependent commonwealth nations. Rothwell detailed the vague, noncommittal details of Gorbachev's proposal, and how the ultimate failure of the idea as the USSR collapsed.

Session Three

The final session featured two panels that covered a wide array of topics. Panel One looked at the debates of the Anglo-Irish Treaties, the clash of religions in, and the constitution of Dáil Éireann. Panel Two focused on international topics, such as the position of women in Colonial Korea and queer identities in New York.

Panel One

Conor Roddy (Dublin City University (DCU)), presented the paper ‘Liaison During the Anglo-Irish Truce’, which covered the period of Irish revolutionary history during which a truce was agreed. He examined how the IRA and Dáil Éireann maintained the truce with Westminster. His paper also discussed the impact on Northern Ireland and the consequences of accidental breaches of the agreement. Dr James Meighan’s paper ‘The Constitution of Dáil Eireann’, analysed the elements of the first Dáil’s constitution. Emma Hurley’s presentation, ‘Keeping the Faith – Examining the Nationalist Reaction to The Most Reverend Dr. Daniel Cohalan’s Excommunication Decree, December 1920’, discussed the bishop of Cork’s decision to excommunicate the IRA following the burning of Cork (1920) and the reaction of the Republican forces at his actions.

Panel Two

Aoibhínn Callaghan (UCC) presented a paper on the women of Colonial Korea and their relationship with university education in the 1920s. She examined the role and influence of Japanese colonialism on universities and how this affected the education of Korean women, including their access to higher education and the barriers imposed on them during this period. Gracelyn Barmore-Pooley (NYU GIH) concluded the panel with her paper, ‘Reconciling Queerness and the Irish Identity in New York’, discussing the “othering” of Irish members of the LGBTQ+ rights movement in New York in the 1980s and 1990s. She detailed the knock-on effects of this tribalism in the movement and how both Irish and American members of the LGBTQ+ community reconciled these identities.

The conference ended with closing remarks from Rebecca Bourke, William Ryan and IHSA Chief Organiser, Dr Sarah-Anne Buckley (UCG).

Conclusion

The 76th IHSA Conference, hosted in collaboration with the UCC History Society, was a resounding success, reinforcing the dynamic and active research culture present in history departments across Ireland. A key takeaway from the conference was its inclusive and welcoming environment. Participants, ranging from undergraduate and postgraduate

students to established academics, valued this aspect. Feedback from attendees indicated that this was especially beneficial for first-time presenters, who found it helped build their confidence in public speaking and academic presentation. The Q&A sessions, held after each panel, gave speakers useful feedback and allowed the audience to explore the topics further. These respectful and collegial exchanges embody the collaborative spirit that the IHSA aims to promote.

This conference is highly recommended for undergraduate and postgraduate students who are keen to present their research in a supportive setting. History enthusiasts from all backgrounds are encouraged to contribute their research and consider presenting at future IHSA conferences. UCC History Society looks forward to seeing both familiar and new faces at the 2026 conference at Maynooth University, where the IHSA will continue to showcase vibrant and diverse historical scholarship and discussion.

REBECCA BOURKE is a master's student in Business Law at UCC, focusing on intellectual property law. She completed her BCL at UCC, where she began her involvement with the UCC History Society as an Ordinary Committee Member. She later served as Chairperson for the 2024/2025 academic year, during which the society won Best Arts, Cultural, and Debating Society at the UCC STAR Awards. Rebecca also received a STAR Award for her individual contributions to student societies. She has published articles on topics like Amelia Earhart, Roman law and the Battle of Rochestown in the History Society's publication, the *UCC Student History Journal*.

CIAN MULHEARNE is a final-year accounting student at UCC. Like his predecessor, he made the leap from Ordinary Committee Member to Chairperson, elected for the 2025/2026 term. His leadership experience and commitment to student engagement are set to guide the society through another dynamic year.

CONOR TAYLOR is a History and Politics graduate at UCC and the 2025/2026 UCC Student's Union Entertainments Officer for the academic year 2025/2026. His final-year dissertation focused on the raid of the Mallow Barracks during the War of Independence. Passionate about

fostering student engagement, Taylor brings both academic insight and enthusiasm to his roles within the UCC community.



Academic Event Report

Hope Noonan Stoner

Department of English, University College Cork

Luke Watson

School of History, University College Cork

Event: 2025 SOFEIR Annual Conference: “Ireland and Transnational Solidarities”

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 21st to 22nd March 2025

University College Cork (UCC) hosted the 2025 SOFEIR (Société Française d’Études Irlandaises) Annual Conference, marking a departure from the usual setting for SOFEIR events, which are usually held in France. SOFEIR’s 2025 conference focused on the topic of “Transnational Solidarities”, and included two plenary sessions, seventeen workshops, an exhibition in conjunction with UCC Library Special Collections and a poetry reading.

This conference was generously supported by the Ambassade de France en Irlande, the UCC Department of French, the UCC Future Humanities Institute, the UCC School of English and Digital Humanities, the UCC School of History, G.I.S. Eire and SOFEIR. It was organised by Dr Heather Laird (UCC), Dr H  l  ne Lecossois (Universit   de Lille), Hope Noonan Stoner (UCC), Dr Oliver O’Hanlon (UCC), Dr Danny Shanahan (UCC) and Dr Luke Watson (UCC). Due to the interdisciplinary and international profile of its sponsors, organisers and attendees (which included postgraduate students and faculty members), the 2025 SOFEIR Conference was a densely packed event.

Day One

The first day of the conference began with a plenary address from Professor D  nal Hassett of Maynooth University (MU) titled “Colonial Complicity and the Limits of Irish Anti-Imperialism: The Scheme to Settle Irish Peasants in French Algeria”. After the talk, attendees visited the library

exhibit, “Ireland and France: Transnational Nations”, organised by Professor Emeritus Patrick O’Donovan (UCC) and Dr Watson (UCC), with support from the staff of UCC Special Collections. This exhibit explored Ireland’s many-sided relations with the wider Atlantic world, featuring artifacts in French, Irish, Latin and English, demonstrating Ireland’s innate liminal nature in both the past and the present.

This day featured six workshops on a variety of topics. These all addressed the issue of transnational solidarity, but each presenter adopted an interesting and novel approach. Dr Watson, Dr Sylvie Kleinman (Trinity College Dublin) and Dr Raphaël Willay (Université du Littoral Côte d’Opale) spoke on Ireland’s historical connections with France from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, while Dr Marie-Violaine Louvet (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès), Adrian Kane (SIPTU) and Ugo Rychman (Université de Pau) considered Ireland’s links not only with Palestine but also with the cause of transnational solidarity generally. Professor Pauline Collombier (Université de Lorraine), Dr Martin O’Donoghue (Max Planck Institute) and Professor Valérie Morisson (Université Paul Valéry Montpellier) offered an analysis of Ireland’s political links with other national movements, for example India and New Zealand, as well as the role of Irish art movements, such as EVA International, in fostering solidarity across borders.

Other workshops on the conference’s first day dealt with the issue of transnational solidarity in the context of literature and linguistics. Professor Emer Nolan’s (MU) and Dr Ellen Howley’s (Dublin City University) papers, which argued for a transnational examination of Séamus Heaney’s works, dovetailed with Professor Przemysław Michalski’s (Jagiellonian University) discussion of the similarities between Heaney’s poetry and that of Polish-American poet Czesław Miłosz. Andrea Zvoníčková (Charles University), Sarah Levy Volensi (University of Caen Normandie) and Dr Adam Hanna (UCC) expanded the literary focus, with papers on the works of Elizabeth Bowen, the McCourt brothers and Yan Ge respectively. Another workshop considered linguistic and ecological solidarities, with Dr Marion Naugrette-Fournier (Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle) discussing the ecopoetry of Grace Wells and Kerron Ó Luain and Verena Commins (University of Galway) examining Irish language activism.

Day Two

The conference's second day consisted of eleven workshops, an engaging and interactive plenary session—"Postcolonial and Partitioned Displacement: Interdisciplinarity, Co-creation and Solidarity from the Balcony of the Mediterranean Sea"—led by Dr Bahriye Kemal (University of Kent) and a thought-provoking poetry reading by Irish poet Sarah Clancy. Workshops on this day considered transnational solidarity from a variety of perspectives. Professor Adrian Mulligan (Bucknell University), Dr Joanna Wharton (UCC) and Dr Susan Manly (St Andrews) considered Ireland's role in the abolition movement, while also highlighting Ireland's complicity in the Atlantic slave trade. Dr Michael G. Cronin (MU), Dr Olivier Coquelin (University of Caen Normandy) and Professor Emeritus Lionel Pilkington (University of Galway) expanded on the idea of international liberty in Irish thought and political activism, discussing Ireland's involvement in anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements. Dr Alexandra Maclennan (University of Caen), Professor Phillippe Brillet (University of Tours) and Dr Molly-Claire Gillett (University of Galway and Trent University) mirrored this focus with papers discussing the role of the Catholic Church in buttressing Irish transnational solidarity and the role of the Irish Countrywomen's Association in fostering international curiosity and solidarity among rural women.

Considerations of transnational solidarity between France and Ireland and Palestine and Ireland continued through the second day of the conference. Dr Flore Coulouma (Université Paris Nanterre), Dr Mark Walsh (MU) and Dr John Murray (MU) considered the practical and emotional links between Ireland and Palestine, while Dr Oliver O'Hanlon, Dr Claire Dubois (Lille University) and Kevin Doyle (University of Limerick) discussed the links between Ireland and France in the twentieth century. Dr Chandana Mathur (MU), Hope Noonan Stoner (UCC) and Hafsa Askar (La Sorbonne Nouvelle) added to this dialogue on solidarity through their analysis of the relationship between the United States and Ireland, both in the context of the Irish-American diaspora and in the similarities between organisations like the Black Panthers and the Provisional IRA.

The conference also included significant consideration of transnational solidarity outside of Ireland, France and Palestine, and from unusual

epistemological contexts. Professor Fabrice Mourlon (La Sorbonne Nouvelle), Dr Charlotte Barcat (Nantes Université) and Dr Magali Dexpert (Institute Universitaire de Technologie (IUT) de Valence) brought the discussion to Northern Ireland, with papers on Belfast, Derry and the Northern Irish peace process. Meanwhile, Dr Hiram Morgan (UCC), Dr Alfred Markey (University of León), Dr Tadhg Ó hErodáin (University of Strasbourg) and Lugh Ó hErodáin (Herbal Alliance), presented on Hugh O'Neill; the links between Ireland, Equatorial Guinea and Palestine; and the ties between Ireland and France in the context of traditions of herbal medicine, respectively. Kamel Salmi (La Sorbonne Nouvelle) and Dr Evi Gkotzaridis (University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines) considered Irish connections to the Mediterranean, specifically the Ottoman donation to Ireland during the Famine and Irish solidarity with Greece during the 2008 IMF Bailout.

While the solidarities between nations, nation-states, activist groups and artistic movements dominated much of the conference, some presentations considered transnational solidarity from a more embodied and visceral perspective. Dr Danny Shanahan (UCC), Louise Gerbier (Université de Tour) and Paddy Brennan (University of Liverpool) focused on the stomach, with papers on the role of famine and hunger strikes in transnational solidarity movements. In a similar vein, Dr Angela Flynn (UCC) brought our discussion towards solidarity and physical health with papers on reproductive justice and global healthcare solidarity in times of crisis.

Conclusion

The Irish government's recognition of the State of Palestine in May 2024 partially inspired the theme of "Transnational Solidarities" for the 2025 SOFEIR Annual Conference. This event did not shy away from the central political issues of the contemporary moment, both in Ireland and globally. Instead, speakers employed diverse historical, literary, sociological, medical and ecological perspectives to comment on contemporary political events and to explore historic discourses that continue to influence and infiltrate the current political moment. The presentations and plenaries reflected the conference organisers' belief in the potential of interdisciplinary engagement to prompt fruitful academic discussion and

tangible activism in response to pressing political questions. We hope that this report, written by two members of that interdisciplinary organising committee, reflects the rich and thought-provoking perspectives offered by the interdisciplinary SOFEIR: “Ireland and Transnational Solidarities” Conference.

HOPE NOONAN STONER is a doctoral student in the Department of English at University College Cork, funded by the Research Ireland Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship. She holds an MA in Irish Writing and Film from UCC and another MA in Global Security and Borders from Queen’s University Belfast. Her PhD focuses on the diasporic, transnational, and postcolonial connections between modernist poets Lola Ridge and Julia de Burgos.

DR LUKE WATSON is an early-career researcher from University College Cork who has just recently completed his PhD, which concerns the impact of the French Revolution on Irish political discourse. His research interests include Franco-Irish history, social history and post-colonial discourse in particular in the context of revolutionary organisations.



Academic Event Report

Rosemary Kelly

School of English and Digital Humanities, University College Cork

Event: Inkwell Symposium: “Narratives Through Time”

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 15th March 2025

Inkwell Symposium is a one-day conference open to students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels across the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences at University College Cork (UCC). Inkwell has been organised annually by the Old, Middle and Renaissance Officer (OMR) of the English Literature Society at UCC since 2016, a role that the author fulfilled for this year’s symposium. The ninth annual symposium, held at UCC in March 2025, explored the theme of “Narratives Through Time”. This conference was generously funded by the Societies Executive and the School of English and Digital Humanities. Over the course of three panels and a keynote address, speakers explored a variety of different narrative types, overlapping themes across form and language and their use in the modern world.

Panel One: Artistic Narratives

The first panel of the day, titled “Artistic Narratives”, featured two History of Art students who explored women in late medieval art. The session was chaired by Cathie Cowhig, a PhD student from the School of English and Digital Humanities. The first paper, ‘Disciples of Mary and Daughters of Eve: Female Martyrs of Renaissance Florence’ was delivered by Chloe Rudolph, a PhD student from the Department of History of Art. This paper examined how female martyrs were depicted as the example of an ideal woman, understood as the antithesis of Eve. She argued that female martyrs can be divided into three categories: chastity, obedience and corporal sacrifice. The second paper in this panel, entitled ‘The Increase in Women’s Participation in Literature Throughout the Medieval period’, was delivered by Roisin Pavie, a first-year undergraduate History of Art student. She opened by stating that women writers are often reduced to a category of

their own despite covering a variety of topics and genres. She focused on three key women; Heloise (c. 1100–c. 1163), Mechtild (c. 1207–c. 1282), and Christine de Pizan (1364–c. 1430) to examine how religious contexts created opportunities for women to become literate and engage in literary production.

Panel Two: Narratives of Medieval Britain and Ireland

The second panel explored narratives written in Britain and Ireland, along with the varying themes and interpretations offered by scholars and was chaired by Robyn McAuliffe, a PhD student in the School of English and Digital Humanities. The first paper of this panel was ‘Terra Incognita: The Otherworlds of *Sir Orfeo* and *Serglige Con Culainn*’ by first-year English student, Jake Griffin. He asserted that the otherworld can be depicted in wildly different ways and can intersect with the everyday lives of the audience. *Sir Orfeo* (c. 1290–1330) and *Serglige Con Culainn*, (c. 1200) though written in Middle English and Middle Irish respectively, contain portrayals of the otherworld that align more than they diverge.

The second paper was delivered by second-year English student Bláithín Smiddy, whose paper ‘Allegory and Admonishment in Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale”’ examined issues of female autonomy in the text, alongside its issues of generic classification. She argued that ‘The Clerk’s Tale’ and ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’ from *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387–1400) are set in dramatic opposition, despite both dealing with issues of female autonomy. Griselda, in ‘The Clerk’s Tale’, is depicted as a model of virtue and the tale’s style is dictated more by its intended audience than by its content. She further argues that the tale rejects the idea that genteelness is inextricable from noble birth.

Liam McDonagh, who is currently undertaking a postgraduate diploma in ancient and medieval languages, gave the final paper of the panel, titled ‘Perceived, Transformed and Incidental Narrative in *The Song of Dermot and the Earl*’. His paper defined an incidental narrative as one that exists outside the main text and depends on the specific version a reader possesses. He claimed that physical evidence tells a story of its own and this dictates how an audience experiences a text. He drew attention to lines 1730–1732 in the manuscript that preserves the text of *The Song of Dermot and the Earl* (c. 1225–1230), which are marked in red ink. This scribal

intervention highlights Diarmait Mac Murchada's (c. 1110–1171) death and makes this a special mark within this point of the narrative. It is also the only death that receives this treatment in the text. Liam pointed out that the example of this preservation of this text in a single surviving copy suggests that further incidental narratives like this one may not have appeared in earlier versions that are now lost.

Panel Three: Modern Interpretations

The final panel examined modern interpretations of medieval narratives and was chaired by Jack Conroy, an MA student from the Department of English. The sole paper of this panel was “‘No Dishonourable Tale Will Ever Be Told About Me’: The Function of Tragedy in *The Song of Roland* and Firefighter Education’ and was delivered by Eleanor Lynch, a PhD student in the School of English and Digital Humanities. Her paper discussed how *The Song of Roland* (c. 1040–1115) teaches soldiers of the first crusade lessons of morality; Roland makes the wrong choices, and everyone dies as a result. She compared this to the Yarnell Hill Tragedy Fire (2013), in which nineteen of twenty firefighters were tragically killed. Video accounts of the tragedy are used to train wildland firefighters in leadership roles. She contended that these videos have similar themes to *The Song of Roland*; they both feature entrapment in a hostile landscape and use tragedy to motivate its audience.

Keynote Address

The keynote address took place at the end of the day and was delivered by Professor Andy Murphy of Trinity College Dublin's School of English. His paper ‘Shakespeare Repurposed: *Coriolanus* in Irish’ discussed the translation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (c. 1608) into Irish and its interpretations by Irish fascists in the 1930s and 1940s. He stated that Irish translations first appeared in 1926 with an Irish performance of *Coriolanus* being staged in 1938. There were ideological purposes to these nationalist gatherings. Alongside this, a rise in fascism across Europe led to *Coriolanus* being in vogue. Murphy argued that many of those attending Irish renditions of the play may have seen *Coriolanus* as a model figure, with the play reinterpreted as pro-fascist instead of anti-fascist.

Conclusion

The ninth iteration of Inkwell facilitated compelling discussions and allowed undergraduate and postgraduate students alike to share their research and engage in critical discussions with one another. This symposium provides a wonderful opportunity for UCC students to present their own unique research in an encouraging and relaxed environment among peers. It allows for interdisciplinary exchange and showcases research on the medieval and renaissance periods across CACSSS.

ROSEMARY KELLY is a PhD student in the School of English and Digital Humanities at UCC and organiser of the 2025 Inkwell Symposium. Her research examines how Old English literary genre creates space for the expression of multiple masculinities that may contradict or counteract one another. She is also interested in translation and reception in Old English and Old Norse literature.



Academic Event Report

Brian de Ruiter

Centre for Canadian Studies, Brock University

Event: Immortalizing Sacred Spaces: A Virtual Conversation

Venue: Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Ontario, Canada

Date: 30th April 2025

On 30th April 2025, the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Ontario, Canada, hosted a talk by Paweł Sawicki, an author and press officer at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (ABSM), as part of its “Conversations” series. Sawicki’s talk, entitled “Immortalizing Sacred Spaces”, was designed to coincide with the travelling exhibit “Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away” at the ROM. Sawicki’s presentation, live-streamed from the Auschwitz I section of the ABSM, was under thirty minutes in length and was followed by a period for questions and reflections, during which participants shared their experiences at memorial sites that commemorate tragic events.

Outside of the introductory remarks, Sawicki’s talk was divided into eight sections: ‘Creation’, ‘Development’, ‘Memorial’, ‘Space of the Memorial’, ‘Space of Memory’, ‘Preservation’, ‘Development for the Future’ and ‘Sacred Spaces’. Although the talk was designed to explain the development and evolution of the Auschwitz-Birkenau-Monowitz complex and the ABSM, one of the main objectives of Sawicki’s talk was to discuss some of the challenges of preserving the site and maintaining the ABSM’s vision of how it should present itself to tourists.

Authenticity was a major component of Sawicki’s talk and his responses to questions: he used either the term ‘authentic’ or ‘authenticity’ approximately eighteen times. For Sawicki, authenticity is important since it “is helping us to tell the story”. One of the ways in which the ABSM has tried to cultivate a sense of authenticity is through the preservation of on-site structures, which is part of the mandate of the ABSM. Sawicki illustrated this with the example of a barracks. The ABSM engaged in a multi-year conservation effort to preserve it despite it being more cost-effective to demolish and reconstruct the barracks. He stressed that the ABSM aims to maintain the authenticity of the site “for as long as is possible”, a concern that Robert Jan van Pelt recognised: the site’s

authenticity continues to fade since it “constantly needs to be rebuilt in order to remain a ruin for us” (van Pelt, cited in Curry, 2010). There are reconstructed areas at the ABSM, including its execution wall, and as Sawicki correctly highlighted, visitors need to be aware that they are not interacting with the original structures used during the Holocaust. Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt (2008) noted that such an acknowledgment has not always been the case for visitors to Crematorium I.

One of the questions following the presentation homed in on why trees and grass are present at the ABSM, as the questioner felt their presence created a false sense of “humanity” within the concentration/extermination complex. Sawicki suggested the answer comes back to authenticity: photographic and artistic images document trees at the site during the Holocaust, although trees are removed if they threaten the structural integrity of the buildings. Interestingly, such visuals at the ABSM can clash with the ways in which visitors have conceptualised the site, especially at Birkenau, as Sawicki noted the ABSM does not “want to turn it into mud”. Daniel P. Reynolds (2018) similarly observed that he “was not prepared to experience the tree-lined lanes among solid brick structures as superficially pretty” when he laid eyes on Auschwitz (p. 64), while Andrew Curry (2010) pointed out that the “peaceful” setting of Birkenau makes it “almost impossible to imagine the sea of stinking mud that survivors describe”. This raises one of the more common questions in Holocaust studies regarding representations: how can such an event be represented when even survivors are unable to fully articulate it? Sara Grossman-Weil, reflecting on what she witnessed at the Bergen-Belsen camp in 1945, captured this challenge: “It was a sight that is beyond any description or understanding or imagination” (Grossman-Weil, 1987, cited in Dwork and van Pelt, 2008, p. 397).

Sawicki noted the narratives the ABSM presents and the ways it manages visitors are a “work in progress”. The site has had to constantly negotiate with the requirements of its educational objectives, its mandate on preservation, the demands of tourism and the various socio-political influences that have all shaped the site into its current incarnation. In the ‘Development for the Future’ section, Sawicki discussed the need to strike a balance between preserving the site’s authenticity and building the infrastructure to support its educational objectives and manage the flow of visitors. During his talk, Sawicki mentioned the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, which was erected

between the remains of two of Birkenau's gas chambers in 1967. Henry Kamm (1967, p. 1), who covered the dedication of this monument, felt this location "provide[d] a setting no other monument can dominate". Sawicki asserted that this monument would not have been erected at that location had it been proposed today, indicating a shift in thinking at the ABSM since it does not currently "want to build any more monuments because we would spoil the authenticity of the space". Sawicki is also aware that such an approach "limits the commemorative aspect" at the site, and he contrasted this approach with the number of monuments erected at the Mauthausen site, which leads to the question of how memorials utilise the space that they have at their disposal. There is no single way in which to commemorate the Holocaust, and the nature of the memorial can be dependent on local contexts, including the condition of the space in which a camp is located and the nature of its remains, if there are any.

The ABSM bears an enormous responsibility since the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex is one of the main symbols of the Holocaust in the popular imagination, with its notorious phrase "Arbeit Macht Frei", and it has become a popular destination for tourists. It has been eighty years since the liberation of this complex, and the number of survivors of the Holocaust and of Auschwitz-Birkenau specifically has been steadily dwindling. Reflecting on this talk prompts me to question how the ABSM's role might evolve once the last of the Holocaust survivors have passed on—whether it will become more significant as a tangible space, or will it initiate any fundamental changes. Such concerns have been a part of Holocaust discourse, as Steven Cooke and Gilly Carr (2023) believe "Holocaust sites take on additional responsibilities as witnesses to the past" when there are no Holocaust survivors left to testify. The question of whether these sites will play an additional role in Holocaust remembrance is notably pertinent given the levels of Holocaust denial and ignorance. It also brings up the question of whether the ABSM will change its philosophy on monuments, especially at Birkenau. A monument in the form of a walkway 1,000 metres in length through the Birkenau site was proposed by Oskar Hansen and Zofia Hansen in the 1950s, and it had some degree of approval, but Dwork and van Pelt (2008, p. 378) noted survivors rejected it since it did not have a "place for them". Dwork and van Pelt (2008) believe that this monument could fit well into the Birkenau site once the last of the survivors have died. Whatever the future holds for the ABSM, it is likely that

the ways in which it represents the Holocaust will continue to be a site of academic and popular discussion.

DR BRIAN DE RUITER has been an adjunct professor at Brock University since 2008, teaching in the Centre for Digital Humanities, Department of History, the Centre for Canadian Studies and the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. In 2018, he was awarded the Clarke Thomson Award for Excellence in Sessional Teaching for this work. He received his PhD in 2014 from Swansea University, focusing on North American Indigenous Cinema.

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Academic Event Report

Charlotte Troy

Department of English, University College Cork

Event: UCC Bookends Conference

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 2nd May 2025

Bookends is an annual conference held at University College Cork (UCC), organised by PhD students from the School of English and Digital Humanities. The 2025 conference was organised by Ailish Brassil, Gabrielle Dufrene, Laura Mulcahy, Hope Noonan-Stoner and Charlotte Troy. Since its inception in 2005, the UCC Bookends Conference has showcased the research of postgraduate students from the School of English and Digital Humanities, affording them opportunities to receive feedback from peers and faculty members of the School of English and Digital Humanities. Though the conference is organised by students registered in the School of English and Digital Humanities, students from the School of Film, Music and Theatre are also encouraged to participate. To ensure that all postgraduate students can take part in the event, the UCC Bookends Team does not assign a particular theme or topic for the annual conference. The 2025 Bookends conference featured three panels, a plenary talk and a roundtable discussion.

Panel One: Challenging Confinement and Marginality

Chaired by Gabrielle Dufrene, the first panel focused on forms of media that explore diverse representations of marginality and attempts to resist confinement. Ailish Brassil (Department of English) examined alternating depictions of motherhood in media with a particular focus on *Matilda* (1988) by Roald Dahl and the film adaptation (1996) directed by Danny DeVito. The topic of motherhood and relationships with children was continued in the next paper titled “‘It’s good luck, or anyway it’s supposed to be’ Sowing Satan’s Seed in *Rosemary’s Baby* by Ira Levin”, which was presented by Charlotte Troy (Department of English). Pivoting from the topic of motherhood, Laura Mulcahy (Department of English), presented a

paper on the intersection of monstrosity and the atrocities of American history through an analysis of *IT* (1986) by Stephen King. The final panellist was Hope Noonan Stoner (Department of English), who delivered a presentation entitled “‘Here and there a woman....’: Redefining ‘We the People’ from the Margins of Lola Ridge’s and Julia de Burgo’s Modernist Writing’.

Plenary: Queering the Family in Science Fiction: An Overview of My Thesis

Beth Aherne, a final year PhD student from the Department of English delivered the plenary talk. She offered a clear and concise talk, titled ‘Queering the Family in Science Fiction: An Overview of My Thesis’, which summarised the main points of each chapter of her thesis. While her research project primarily focuses on the representation of the American family in science fiction, Beth also examines the portrayal of queer families in Afrofuturist, feminist and Indigenous futurist science fiction novels.

Panel Two: Trauma and the Body

The second panel of the day explored interconnectedness between themes of trauma and the human body and was chaired by Laura Mulcahy. To begin the panel, Gabrielle Dufrene (Department of English) delivered a presentation on *Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan to analyse the relationship between the Irish female experience and trauma narratives. Following this, MA student Luca Cavallo (Department of English) discussed the poetry of Ciaran Carson in his presentation, “‘Two Time-worn Notes’: Postcolonial Memory in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson’. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Cathie Cowhig (Department of English) was unable to attend the conference and deliver her presentation on *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In her absence, Hope Noonan Stoner delivered the paper on Cathie’s behalf, presenting it alongside her presentation slides. The final panellist was Chiara Valcelli, a PhD student at the School of Languages, Literatures & Cultures and the School of English and Digital Humanities, whose paper was titled, ‘Digesting Dante: Cannibalism, Appetite, and the Esophagus in Joyce’s *Ulysses*’.

Panel Three: Creating and Critiquing Masculinity

This panel was chaired by Ailish Brassil and offered a cross-cultural examination of masculinity, focusing on its representation in Old Norse texts, Nordic mythology and American literature. Rosemary Kelly's (Department of English) paper looked at the connection between *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* and the narrative structures of Old Norse-Icelandic Sagas. The second presentation was given by MA student Tess O'Regan (Department of English), who looked at the representation of gender in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*. The final paper, titled 'From God of Mischief to God of Stories: How Marvel put Loki at the Heart of the New Creation Myth', was given by Kevin Fylan (Department of English).

Roundtable: PhD Experiences

For the final portion of the conference, the UCC Bookends Team organised an interactive roundtable discussion on PhD experiences. For this roundtable, doctoral candidates from the School of English and Digital Humanities were asked to participate (Beth Aherne, Ailish Brassil, Kevin Fylan and Hope Noonan-Stoner). This session touched upon a variety of topics including funding opportunities, career and training development, as well as the impact of imposter syndrome on research outputs. Attendees were also encouraged to participate in this event, which allowed for further in-depth questions to be asked.

Conclusion

The success of the UCC Bookends 2025 Conference reaffirms its importance to the professional development of postgraduate students from the Department of English and Digital Humanities. Since 2005, UCC Bookends conference has demonstrated the depth and diversity of research being conducted by postgraduate students. This event affords students the opportunity to disseminate their research endeavours, network amongst peers, and gain invaluable feedback from staff and students from the Department of English and Digital Humanities. For the Department of English and Digital Humanities, UCC Bookends is a source of pride, as it continues to encourage and inspire postgraduate students as they explore their research interests. On the 1 May 2026, UCC Bookends will return, taking place in the Dora Allman for another exciting and engaging event.

CHARLOTTE TROY is a third year PhD student in the Department of English at University College Cork. Charlotte is a recipient of the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship, which funds her research project titled “EcoGothic Gardens and the Collapse of Social Binaries”.



Academic Event Report

Billy Goodwin

Department of Sociology & Criminology, University College Cork

Event: 2025 Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) Annual Conference

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 8th to 9th May 2025

The Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) Annual Conference 2025 brought together a vibrant and diverse community of sociologists, ranging from doctoral researchers to established academic professionals, for two days of intellectually rich exchange. While the conference did not adopt a formal theme, its structure and content reflected a shared commitment to addressing the urgency of contemporary global crises. Set against the backdrop of democratic erosion, global elections, war, economic instability and climate catastrophe, the event encouraged wide-ranging explorations of sociology's role in navigating a fractured world. Across panels and keynotes, participants engaged with pressing issues such as authoritarianism, migration, inequality and the politics of care, while grappling with enduring legacies of violence, injustice and neglect. The conference cultivated a critical yet convivial atmosphere in which the sociological imagination was mobilised to clarify, contest and transform the present. While this report highlights a selection of panels and papers from the event, it can only represent a portion of the broader programme given the volume of scholarship presented at the conference. Many valuable sessions are not described in detail here, though their contributions were integral to the collective spirit and scholarly vitality of the conference. Further details of all panels and papers are provided at the end of this report.

Day One: Selected Panels and Papers

Keynote 1

On Day One, Dr Gema Kloppe-Santamaría (University College Cork, hereafter UCC) delivered a keynote titled 'Violence, Politics, and the Sacred: A Decolonial Approach to Religious Conflict'. Drawing from her

fieldwork in Latin America, she articulated a decolonial framework for understanding religiously inflected violence, challenging dominant secular-liberal paradigms. Her analysis emphasised the interplay of the sacred and the political, interrogating the enduring power of religious imaginaries in shaping conflict. The keynote was notable not only for its theoretical sophistication but also for its deep ethical commitment to decolonising sociological epistemologies.

Session One: Panel 1

This session opened with diverse papers that examined the intersection of identity, structure and agency in the contemporary labour landscape. Particularly notable was the paper by Amy Healy (University of Limerick) and Seán Ó Riain (Maynooth University), which deployed European Social Survey data to trace how different workplace regimes influence support for far-right parties. Their key finding—that low-autonomy, low-learning environments correlate with far-right political leanings—resonated with current concerns about authoritarian populism.

Session One: Panel 5

Meanwhile, Dr Jody Moore-Ponce's (UCC) paper (presented later in Panel 5 on Populism and the rise of the far-right) made a striking contribution by analysing how far-right actors appropriate the language of "lived experience" to reframe debates on immigration and gender. Dr Moore-Ponce's intervention was theoretically sharp and politically urgent, interrogating how the far-right mobilises affect and authenticity to cultivate legitimacy.

Session Two: Panel 3

Shelley Etkin's (UCC) presentation, 'Herbologies of Repair: Tea Talk', offered transdisciplinary engagement with herbal medicine, care and feminist praxis. Shelley's ethnographic work on community-based herbalism challenged the biopolitical governance of health and opened up space for imagining alternative ontologies of wellness. The discussion that followed was rich, engaging themes of posthumanism, ecological embodiment and settler-colonial logics of health.

Session Three: Panel 2

This theoretically ambitious panel was marked by provocative contributions from Dr Jonathan Heaney (Queens University Belfast) and Professor Kieran Keohane (UCC). Heaney's paper on wisdom and emotions critiqued the reductionism of dominant psychological frameworks, proposing instead a relational-sociological perspective that foregrounds emotional habitus and cultural capital. Keohane, in a sweeping historical-theoretical arc, explored the "social pathologies of contemporary civilization", situating contemporary despair within *longue durée* transformations from antiquity to neoliberalism. His call for a "redemptive logos" was both intellectually and morally galvanising.

Day Two: Selected Panels and Papers

Keynote 2

Day Two's keynote by Dr Philomena Mullen (Trinity College Dublin) 'Trapped in the Comments Section of Offline and Online Worlds: Antiblackness and Digital Pogrom', was a tour de force. Mullen's analysis moved deftly between digital landscapes and material realities, situating online antiblackness within broader structures of racial capitalism. With clarity and precision, she explored how digital technologies amplify and reproduce racist discourse, likening the toxic affective economies of online comment sections to digital pogroms. Mullen's keynote provoked a necessary reckoning with the epistemic and corporeal violences faced by Black individuals in digital spaces and beyond.

Session Four: Panel 2

This panel provided a critical interrogation of the neoliberal university. Papers examined diverse themes, from contemplative pedagogy (Steven Thurston Oliver of Salem State University) to decolonising curricula (Peter Doak of University of Leeds). A collective paper from scholars at UCC, led by Cairríona Ní Laoire *et al.*, interrogated the politics of student voice and participation, advocating for structural shifts in university governance to enable genuinely inclusive education.

Session Four: Panel 5

Presentations here traced the sociotechnical imaginaries of contemporary digital life. Particularly salient was the paper by James Cuffe and Nasrin Khandoker (both from UCC), which explored smartphone use as a form of embodied self-protection. In parallel, Eric Deibel of University College Dublin and colleagues examined platform urbanism and “the global digipolis”, foregrounding the entangled dynamics of data, governance and everyday life in smart cities. These interventions illuminated how sociological methods can render visible the otherwise occluded politics of digital infrastructures.

Session Five: Panel 3

This panel brought together scholars exploring care, dependency and ageing. Papers ranged from Joe Moynihan’s (Munster Technological University) theoretical reflections on intellectual disability to empirical work on bereavement, ageing and housing. The transnational paper by Siobhan Saravanamuttu *et al.* (York University), ‘In Service of Capital’, analysed how care work constructs subjects through contradictory imperatives of dependency and independence—an insight with implications across welfare regimes.

Session Five: Panel 4

Pooja Priya’s (UCC) paper stood out for its rigorous interrogation of decolonial sociological methods and its commitment to praxis. Drawing on both empirical research and theoretical innovation, she demonstrated how mapping disciplinary boundaries can be a tool for critique and transformation. Her paper effectively bridged intersectional theory, institutional analysis and the lived realities of racialised scholars.

Session Five and Six: Panel 6

These paired panels—Theorising the Edges of the Social—were perhaps the most conceptually rich of the entire conference. In Panel 5, Dr Tom Boland’s (UCC) intervention on antagonism and social war pushed against complacent interpretations of conflict, suggesting instead that antagonism can be a constitutive force in sociality. In Panel 6, Dr Diana Stypinska (University of Galway) delivered a moving and analytically acute paper on

marginality and annihilation, weaving together theory and biography to explore what it means to be rendered socially null. These papers illustrated the vitality of social theory when it dares to confront crisis directly.

Conclusion

The SAI 2025 Conference was more than a gathering of sociologists; it was a space of reflection and renewal. By embracing diverse modes of knowledge, from statistical modelling to visual ethnography, the event embodied a sociology that is both critical and caring. In a moment of global fracture and flux, the conversations which began in UCC will undoubtedly reverberate far beyond it.

BILLY GOODWIN is a third-year PhD student in the Department of Sociology & Criminology at University College Cork (UCC). Prior to beginning his PhD, he completed a master's degree in Sociology at UCC. Billy's research explores the affective and political dynamics of indignation in contemporary digital culture. Drawing on critical theory, affect studies and political philosophy, his work investigates how indignation operates as both a moral sentiment and a form of governance within accelerated, media-saturated societies. Accordingly, his research engages the frameworks of Foucault, Baudrillard and Hartmut Rosa, with particular interest in the intersections between dignity, affective economies and platform capitalism.

Full List of Panels and Papers Presented at SAI 2025:

Day One

Session One

Panel 1—*Work 1: Working Lives*

- Filip Majetić, Rajter, M., Blažev, M. and Šimunović (Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences): ‘Being a “Protean” Worker’.
- Vicki O’Reilly (Technological University Dublin): ‘Should Businesses Reflect Society? A “Possible Others” Intervention’.
- Amy Healy (University of Limerick) and Seán Ó Riain (Maynooth University): ‘The Impact of Work Organisation on Voting for the Radical Right’.
- Ingrid Holme (University of Galway): ‘Tension Points in the Postdoctoral Talent Pipeline: A Comparative Study’.

Panel 2—*Sociologies of Gender and Sexuality 1*

- O’Connor (University of Limerick): ‘Athena Swan: The Driver Transforming Inequality in Irish HEIs or Institutional Peacocking?’
- Egle Gusciute, Oksana Damaris Avendano Flores, Carlos Maria Collado Garcia and Daniel Guigui (University College Dublin): ‘Breaking Barriers: Female Farmers in the Transition to Sustainable Agriculture in Ireland’.
- Edith Busteed (University College Cork): ‘At the Frontline of Climate Activism: An Ethnographic Exploration of the Gendered Dynamics within Contemporary Climate Movements in Ireland’.
- Evie Gilbert (Queen’s University Belfast): ‘Mind the Hermeneutical Gap: Analysing the Epistemic Injustices Surrounding HIV/AIDS and Gay and Bisexual Men in the 1980s–1990s’.

Panel 3—*Politics 1: Nation, State, Power*

- William Persichilli (Università degli Studi di Messina): ‘Statelessness, Gender, Minorities. Kurdish Women’s Quest for Freedom and Democratic Confederalism for a New Positive Peace’.
- Michael Murray (Maynooth University): ‘The Politics of Fear and “Normal Living”: Power, Quiescence and Resistance’.
- Cydney Sheridan (Maynooth University): ‘Vigilante Justice and the Rise of Far-Right Nationalism in India: Cow Protectionism and the Citizenship Amendment Act’.
- Xiaojian Zheng (University of Galway): ‘Constructing Place Identity in a Non-Metropolitan City of Contemporary China: An Ethnographic Study of Tai’an’.

Panel 4—Exploring the Lives of Working-Class Academics through Autoethnography

- Iona Burnell Reilly (University of East London)
- Stephen Baker (Ulster University)
- Keith Murphy (Technological University Dublin)
- Declan McKenna (University of Limerick)

Panel Outline: This research project aims to explore the experiences of academics who identify as Irish and working class, using an autoethnographical approach. We intend to collect 13 autoethnographies; each will be an account of the author's life, their experiences, and their journey into becoming a higher or further education professional, in an educational system fraught with elitism and exclusion.

Panel 5—Populism and the Rise of the Far-Right

- Yasmine Ahmed (University College Cork): 'Understanding and Mapping the Development of the Far-Right in Ireland'.
 - Rebecca Close (University College Cork): 'Imaging/Imagining Reproductive Crisis in Europe'.
 - Titaś Biswas, Catherine Forde and Vanessa Liston (University College Cork): 'Pedagogy as Body Politic: Exploring the Saffronised Classroom Setting as a Fascist Space in the Making'.
 - Jody Ponce (University College Cork): 'How the far-right has co-opted the term "lived experience" to express how they "feel" about political issues from immigration to trans-rights'.
- Amin Sharifi Isaloo (University College Cork): 'Artificial Intelligence, Media and the Far-right'.

Session Two

Panel 1—Work 2: Futures and Transitions

- Sasha Noonan (Technological University of the Shannon): 'Reflecting on and reimagining the role of professionals in young peoples' futures'.
- Sébastien Antoine (South East Technological University): 'The Socio-Linguistic Politics of Global Tech Work in Brazil and India: A Decolonial Perspective'.
- Xueting Zhang (Trinity College Dublin): 'Female, Foreign, and Freelance: The Intersectional Challenges to Professionalise Public Service Interpreting'.
- Guillaume Negri (Université de Rennes 2): 'Arts participation and young migrants' lifecourse: Strategies and tactics for reshaping one's identity: a comparative study between Ireland and France'.

Panel 2—Sociologies of Gender and Sexuality 2

- Eeva Sointu (York St John University): ‘The dangers of going solo: on femininity and masturbation’.
- Leanne Zarroug (Queen’s University Belfast): “‘Girls! You shouldn’t be fucking them anyways!’” An insight into how Black Female Students navigate a predominantly white sexual field’.
- Shannon Hughes-Spence (South East Technological University): “‘Out in the club” – young women’s experiences of the Night Time Economy’.
- Luke Roantree and Megan O’Sullivan (Queen’s University Belfast): ‘Queer gan teanga, queer gan anam - The intersection of Irish-speaking and LGBTQIA+ communities in Northern Ireland’.

Panel 3—Health and Illness 1

- Shelley Etkin (University College Cork): ‘Herbologies of Repair: Tea Talk’.
- Meadhbh Hannon (University of Galway): “‘The Missed Disease”’: Endometriosis awareness, life disruptions and pain disclosure habits of an Irish university student population’.
- Jenny Säilävaara (Maynooth University): ‘Infant Feeding in Finland and Ireland: A Multilayered Contextual Practice’.

Panel 4—Conspiracy, Crime and Subterranean Worlds

- Áine Bernadette Mannion (University College Cork): “‘I Think I Have Been Ghosted... Again.”: Perspectives And Learnings From Undertaking Research With Irish Judges And Gardaí’.
- Rian Mulcahy (University of Greenwich) *et al.*: ‘The Hidden Pandemic: Consequences of and Responses to Qanon’.
- Aogán Mulcahy (University College Dublin): ‘Police Abolitionism: Critique, Context and Public Safety’.

Panel 5—Home, Borders, Movement and The Far-Right

Yasmine Ahmed (University College Cork)

Masatoureh Fathi (University College Cork)

Amin Sharifi Isaloo (University College Cork)

Theresa O’Keefe (University College Cork)

Session Three

Panel 1—Science & Technology 1: Technopolitics

- Talya Deibel (University College Cork): ‘Workplace Neurotechnologies, Exploitation, and Discrimination: A Socio-Legal Analysis’.
- Evelien Geerts (University College Cork): ‘Why Memes (Analyses) Matter: Critical New Materialisms for Troubled Times’.

- Iarfhlaith Watson (University College Dublin) and Lorenzo Posocco (University of Copenhagen): ‘Columbus Rediscovered Himself: Unpacking National Identity with DNA Tests’.
- Alexander Kladakis (University of Galway): ‘The Sociology of Scientific Elites: From Intellectual Aristocracies to Academic Ultra-Elites’.

Panel 2—*Theory 1: Challenges and Possibilities*

- Kieran Keohane (University College Cork): ‘Social Pathologies of Contemporary Civilization: turning from the darkness towards the light, with Fernando Pessoa and Elana Ferrante’.
- Jonathan G. Heaney (Queen’s University Belfast): ‘Wisdom and Emotions: Towards a Relational – Sociological Perspective’.
- Erin Silver (University of Otago): ‘Toward an abolitionist modality in sociology’.
- Quinn Roberts O'Mahar (Ulster University): ‘Deaths of Despair’.

Panel 3—*Health and Illness 2*

- Carmel Hannan (University of Limerick), Ross Macmillan, Elke Hayes, Michael Anyanwu and Saoirse McInerney: ‘Cohort Comparisons of the Consequences of COVID on Youth Psychological Wellbeing’.
- Monica O’Mullane and Tara Kenny (University College Cork): ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Reflections on using an action research approach to clarifying and actioning Health Impact Assessment practice in Ireland’.
- Miriam Dillon (University of Queensland): ‘Circulating distress within an Advanced Practice Physiotherapy-led clinic’.

Panel 4—*Belonging, Hustling, Entrepreneurship & Manifesting: Emerging Discourses in Employment and Education*

- Ryan Wilkinson (University of Leeds), Kirsty Finn (University of Manchester) and Nicola Ingram (University College Cork): ‘Against Higher Education Belonging: A Cautionary Tale from an Unloved Sector’.
- Kirsty Finn (University of Manchester) and Kim Allem (University of Leeds): ‘Thrifting, meditating and Hustling through the crisis in Higher Education: Financial precarity, entrepreneurialism and student wellbeing’.
- Kirsty Morrin (University of Liverpool): ‘To be Against Everything and Nothing: The Case of Entrepreneurship in Education’.
- Tom Boland (University College Cork): ‘Transformation Talk: From jobseeking and career advice to manifesting and social theory’.

Panel 5—*Digital Public Employment Services in Action*

- Ray Griffin (South East Technological University): ‘Digital PES-in-Action’.
- Antoinette Jordan (South East Technological University): ‘From politics to code: the unfolding of EU digital aspirations into practice’.
- Órla Hayes (Propelor BIC): ‘Exploring Omni-channel Welfare Experiences in Unemployment Services’.
- Zach Roche (South East Technological University): ‘Digitising Exclusion: The Challenges of Modern Unemployment and PES Delivery’.
- Aisling Tuite (South East Technological University): ‘Cyborg Futures of Care and Welfare’.

Panel 6—*Changing the Gender (In)equality Landscape in Agriculture and Rural Areas in Ireland: Challenges, Innovations and Opportunities*

- Muireann Prendergast (South East Technological University)
- Aisling Murtagh (University of Galway)
- Martina Roche (Maynooth University)
- Mary Curtin (University of Limerick)

Panel Outline: In this panel, the current challenges to achieving gender balance in agriculture and rural economies and communities will be explored. Also, the gender dimension to recent policy documents following the publication of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 at European and national level will be discussed, specifically Ireland’s latest Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan 2023–2027.

Day Two

Session Four:

Panel 1—*Migrations, Belonging and Bordering 1: Identity and Solidarity*

- Aine Lyne (Mary Immaculate College): ‘Cultural Identity Formation—A participatory approach to working with children’.
- Mervyn Horgan (University of Guelph): ‘Civic Action Spheres: Improvising Migrant Solidarity through Public Sociability’.
- Marc Scully (Mary Immaculate College): “‘Am I culturally appropriating Irish citizenship?’ – discourses of effortfulness and essentialism in negotiations and understandings of Irish citizenship among post-Brexit applicants for Irish passports’.
- Aidan O’Sullivan (Birmingham City University): ‘Irish Reunification and the Irish Diaspora in Britain’.

Panel 2—*Education 1: Perspectives on Higher Education*

- Caitríona Ní Laoire, James Bilson, Olive Byrne, Claire Dorrity, Claire Edwards, Caitríona Honohan, Piaras Mac Éinrí and Stephen O'Brien (University College Cork): 'Enabling diverse student voice in higher education: a critical perspective'.
- Steven Thurston Oliver (Salem State University): 'Utilizing Sociological Understandings and Contemplative Pedagogy to Engage Across Human Differences in Higher Education'.
- Franciszek Krawczyk (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań): 'Two opposite traditions of writing about centre and peripheries of higher education: a comparative analysis of Wallerstein's and Ben David's work'.
- Peter Doak (University of Leeds): 'Decolonizing the Curriculum: Preliminary Thoughts on the Potentials of Irish Sociological Thought'.

Panel 3—Theory 2: Ireland in Transition

- Lisa Smyth (Queen's University Belfast): 'Explaining Ireland's Moral Revolution'.
- Louise Brangan (University of Strathclyde): 'The Stories We Tell: Or why can't we remember the Magdalene Laundries?'
- Ciaran McCullagh (University College Cork): 'The Catholic Church and Criminality'.
- Kevin Warner (University College Cork): 'The Path Not Taken: the failure to follow the Whitaker Report in Irish penal policy'.

Panel 4—Revisiting Classics, Mapping the Field, and Seeking new Directions for Critical Race, Antiracist and Decolonial Sociology I

- Pilar Luz Rodrigues (University of Galway), Monica Rudi Kent (South East Technological University) Hazel O'Brien (South East Technological University): 'Understanding Race Equality in the South East: Reflections from an EDI Project in the South East of Ireland'.
- Bríd Ní Chonail (TU Dublin): 'Developing antiracist practice in community and higher education – lessons learned from action research'.
- Dr Niamh McGuirk (DCU Institute of Education): 'Critical Race Theory and Education: Racism and anti-racism in sites of initial teacher education in Ireland'.
- Lennita Oliveira Ruggi (Federal University of Paraná) and Nata Duvvury (University of Galway): 'Intersectional EDI approaches for higher education: a proposal for Grassroots Key Performance'.

- Cormac Forkan (University of Galway): ‘Equal education for all? Reflecting on mainstream education through students’ experiences attending alternative education programmes in Ireland’.

Panel 5—*Science and Technology 2*

- James Cuffe and Nasrin Khandoker (University College Cork): “‘My phone is a protective shield for me’”: Technology and human subjectification with embodied entanglement’.
- Eric Deibel (University College Dublin and ADAPT), Jack Lehane (UCD, Smart Dublin and ADAPT), Mani Dhingra (UCD, Smart Dublin and ADAPT) and Talya Deibel (University College Cork): ‘The Global Digipolis and its inhabitants: reflections on platform urbanism and smart city governance’.
- Marcus Leaning (University of Limerick): ‘Towards a sociology of Open Access publishing’.

Panel 6—*Qualitative Secondary Analysis in Ireland: Challenges and Opportunities*

- Rong Bao (Maynooth University) and Jane Gray (Maynooth University): ‘Opportunities for Qualitative Secondary Analysis in Ireland: First Findings from the QSA*Net Project’.
- Rosalind Edwards (University of Southampton): ‘The Value of Qualitative Secondary Analysis of Archived Data – Now and Into the Future’.
- Kahryn Hughes (University of Leeds): ‘The Ethics of Qualitative Secondary Analysis’.

Session Five

Panel 1—*Migrations, Belonging and Bordering 2: Intersectional Perspectives*

- Theresa O’Keefe (University College Cork): ‘Beyond trucks and tariffs: What might a feminist analysis of the UK/Irish border offer?’
- Nasrin Khandoker (University College Cork) and Niamh Reilly (University of Galway): ‘Bordering, Belonging, Beyond Surviving: Critical Readings of Intersectionality in the Nexus of Gender-Based Violence and Migration in Ireland’.
- Titaś Biswas (University College Cork): ‘Addressing intersectional inequalities in local governance: Feminist decolonial intervention in producing inclusive participation with migrant women in Kildare, Ireland’.
- Noah Agbo (Queen’s University Belfast): ‘Exploring the social support needs of migrant parents of children with disabilities in Northern Ireland’.

Panel 2—*Education 2: Migration and Education*

- Yohei Yoshizawa (King's College London): 'Effort and Inequality of Opportunity in Educational Attainment: An Application of Machine-Learning to PISA Data'.
- Yongyi Wu (University of Manchester): 'Examining Digital Practice among Chinese Young People in Higher Education: Variations across Class and Gender'.
- Philip Ryan (Trinity College Dublin): 'Pushing and Pulling the New Arrivals: The Irish Government's Approach to Migration and Education'.
- Adepeju Aderogba-Oti (Lead City University): 'Optimizing and Integrating Migrants' Education, Skills, and Competencies into the Irish Labour Market'.

Panel 3—*Disability, Life-course and Care*

- Joe Moynihan (Munster Technological University): 'How Can Sociological Theory Enhance Our Understanding of Intellectual Disability?'
- Siobhan Saravanamuttu (York University), Kate Rossiter (Wilfred Laurier University), and Jen Rinaldi (Ontario Tech University): 'In Service of Capital: Producing In/Dependent Subjects through Disability Care Work'.
- Aoife Gallagher (Atlantic Technological University): 'Supporting the Bereaved Child in Primary School and Early Years Settings: A Compassionate Community Approach'.
- Michael Tobin (South East Technological University): 'Analysing the lived experience of a new age friendly social housing development in Waterford City'.
- Emmet Fox (South East Technological University): 'Revisiting Senior Leisure Travel Demand in the UK'.

Panel 4—*Revisiting Classics, Mapping the Field, and Seeking new Directions for Critical Race, Antiracist and Decolonial Sociology 2*

- Pooja Priya (University College Cork): 'Intersectional Encounters: Gendered Ethnography and African Migrants' Negotiation of Place and Identity in Delhi'.
- Aisling Walsh: 'Weaponising Whiteness: The Paradoxes of Post/Anti-Colonial Irish Identity and Solidarity'.
- Eburn Joseph (University College Dublin): 'Being Black in academia and the teaching profession in Ireland'.
- Judith O'Connell (University of Galway): 'Dissecting History text books and their role in creating Nationalist sentiment'.

Panel 5—Feminist and Queer Epistemologies: Qualitative research in University College Cork

- Charlotte Waltz (Erasmus University): “‘The Dis/Comfort of Your Own Bed’’: Abortion, Telemedicine, and Moral Governance in Ireland’.
- Doris Murphy (University College Cork): ‘Street walking, crip talking, care imagining: Disabled sex workers in Ireland’.
- Ellen O’Sullivan (University College Cork): ‘On Effigy: Femicide, Nation and Representation in Ireland’.

Panel 6—Social Theory Panel 1: Theorising the Edges of the Social: Antagonism, Social War and Critique

- Billy Goodwin (University College Cork): ‘Antagonistic Forces: How journalists and news consumers are pushed to the edges of society’.
- João Nunes de Almeida (University of Glasgow): ‘Vagabonds, Drifters and Quitters: Toward the Abandonment of Social War’.
- Tom Boland (University College Cork): ‘Critique and Counter-Critique: How polarised critical discourses problematise power’.

Session Six

Panel 1—Migrations, Belonging and Bordering 3: Integration, Exclusion, Care

- Zihan Chen (University of Birmingham): ‘Exploring Urban Migrants’ Integration Policies in China Based on LDA: Textual Analysis from Central-Local Dual Dimension Perspective’.
- Jianfei Niu (University College Dublin) - Confucian Egalitarianism: Gender-role Attitudes of Chinese in Ireland’.
- Evan Carron-Kee *et al.* (Economic and Social Research Institute), Frances McGinnity (ESRI), and Anousheh Alamir (ESRI): ‘Social Distance to Travellers and Roma: A cluster analysis of attitudes in Ireland’.
- Olanike S. Adelakun (Lead City University): ‘Transnational Reproductive Practices: ART and Cross-Border Reproductive Care’.

Panel 2—Education 3: Stress and Solidarity

- Helen Lowe (University of Limerick): ‘The Role of Friendships in Social Class Mobility: Are Schools Doing Enough to Foster Cross-Class Friendships for Disadvantaged Students?’
- Carol Bruce (Marino Institute of Education); ‘Work & Welfare: Teachers’ Experience of Stress, Attitudes to Reporting and Awareness of Employee Supports in the Further Education Workplace in Ireland’.

- Steph Hanlon (Carlow College): ‘Critical Pedagogy and Interrogating “Crisis”: Harnessing Critical Thinking Within and Beyond the Sociology Classroom’.
- Keitumetse Mabole (Maynooth University): ‘The Impact of Indigenous Knowledge in Enhancing Lifelong Learning amongst Marginalised Communities: The case of the San Communities in Botswana’.
- Lisa Moran (Technological University of the Shannon): ‘The Discursive Reconstruction of Emotions in Higher Education (HE): A Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) Study of Emotional Labour of Female Senior Leaders in Ireland’s Technological Universities (TUs)’.

Panel 3—*Conflict, War and Genocide*

- Sarah Carol (University College Dublin) and Faouzia Zeraouia (University of Jijel): ‘Content analyses of the Gaza war reporting in the Palestinian, Israeli and German discourse’.
- Michael Edward Rose (University College Cork): ‘Expulsion and Resistance: The Rohingya at the Systemic Edge’.
- Laura Smith (University of Liverpool): ‘Everyday Peace in Northern Ireland’.
- John McNamara (South East Technological University): ‘War: What is the Art for?’

Panel 4—*Poverty, Precarity, Inequality*

- Anousheh Alamir and Bertrand Maître (Economic and Social Research Institute): ‘Persistent income poverty and material deprivation in Ireland’.
- Emma Holden *et al.* (South East Technological University): ‘Understanding Economically Marginalised Young Adults’ Exclusion from Digital-First Government Services: An Ethnographic Journey’.
- Matteo Moraschini (University College Cork): ‘Political Lives and Permanent Liminality: Biopolitical Struggles in Narratives of Refuge’.
- Tanja Kovačič (University of Galway): ‘Equal education for all? Reflecting on mainstream education through students’ experiences attending alternative education programmes in Ireland’.

Panel 5—*Mixed-heritage Relationships and Racialised Boundaries in European Societies*

- Iris Wigger (Loughborough University) and Margaret Byron (University of Leicester): ‘Exploring the life histories, shifting identities and representations of Mixed-Heritage families’.

in Europe: The Mixed-Relationships-racialised Boundaries Research Network’.

- Elena Zambelli (Maynooth University): ‘Improper Couples, Suspicious Mobilities: Sexuality as Currency and Stigma in Black-White Couples’ Everyday Lives in Europe’.
- Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain (Maynooth University): ‘#blackandIrish and #wasian: New Mixed-Race Voices in Ireland’.
- Elizabeth Mavroudi (Loughborough University): ‘Negotiating mixedness in diaspora: young people in the Greek, Jewish and Palestinian diasporas’.

Panel 6—Social Theory Panel 2: Theorising the Edges of the Social: Marginality, Agitation and Annihilation

- Jody Ponce (University College Cork): ‘When we’re all outsiders, then nobody is: On the proliferation of claims of marginality’.
- Diana Stypinska (University of Galway): ‘In the glare of the noisy majorities: Theorising society on (the) edge’.
- Oliver Simpson (Lancaster University): ‘Thinking the outside of the social: Annihilation as Becoming’.



Academic Event Report

Noreen Kane

Department of Italian, University College Cork

Event: Memories Beneath the Skin: A Decolonial Feminist Workshop

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 12th May 2025

Over twenty MA students, PhD students and staff from across University College Cork (UCC) and beyond participated in a decolonial feminist workshop, “Memories Beneath the Skin”, held on 12th May 2025. This event was generously funded by the Society for Italian Studies (SIS) and the Centre for Advanced Studies in Languages and Cultures (CASiLaC). The workshop was conceived by researchers, activists and translators Dr Marie Moïse (John Cabot University, Rome) and Dr Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfau (University of Padua) as part of the project *Decolonising Knowledge: Practices of Anti-Racist Feminism*. It was facilitated by Dr Moïse and organised by Noreen Kane (UCC).

In the first section of the ninety-minute workshop, Dr Moïse led the group through several walking exercises in which participants introduced themselves to different people in ways that disrupted typical power dynamics. For example, in one instance, attendees were tasked with presenting themselves without using any form of the verb ‘to be’. The high percentage of linguists in the room found this task extremely perplexing! In another activity, participants introduced themselves by narrating a story connected to a part of their body. The activities encouraged a sense of vulnerability and mindfulness, and within a short time the atmosphere of the room was transformed.

Participants were then divided into small groups and given literary works by women of colour to read together. The objective of this exercise was to discuss how the texts resonated with and affected attendees. The preceding “embodied” section of the workshop allowed people to shift from an academic, analytical mindset to a more intuitive and experiential one, which resulted in participants being able to engage more deeply with the texts. Emotions such as guilt, shame, sadness, anger, relief, recognition, hope and compassion surfaced. The workshop closed with a circle, in which attendees

were given the opportunity to share their experiences with the group. The breadth of responses and the honesty with which they were expressed was impressive. Over the course of the workshop, participants were taken on quite a profound emotional and relational journey, albeit led with lightness and ease by Dr Moïse.

Feedback following the workshop was excellent and included comments such as: "It was among the best workshops I have ever attended"; "spaces like this are what convince me that I want to stay in academia"; and "this was an incredible event". This shows the necessity for further collaborative workshops in which one can openly and honestly discuss the challenges of conducting research and teaching on race, gender and coloniality. Hopefully it is a journey that will be continued.

NOREEN KANE has just completed a PhD in the Department of Italian at UCC. Her thesis, entitled "Transgenerational Trauma and the Gendered Body: Postcolonial Women's Writing in Italy" was funded by Research Ireland and a National University of Ireland Travelling Doctoral Scholarship. She has published articles in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (2024), *Quaderni d'italianistica* (2025), and *Atlantic Studies* (forthcoming). She currently teaches Italian language at UCD and lectures on contemporary Italian women's writing in UCC.



Academic Event Report

Rebecca L Hall Moran and Fiona O’Driscoll

Department of Folklore and Ethnology, University College Cork

Event: The Folklore Society’s Annual Conference: “Folklore and the Senses”

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 20th to 22nd June 2025

This accessible hybrid event, which was organised in collaboration with the Department of Folklore and Ethnology, University College Cork (UCC), marked The Folklore Society’s first conference outside of Britain. It was held across two, tiered lecture halls in UCC’s atmospheric West Wing. Opening the conference, Dr Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, head of UCC’s Department of Folklore and Ethnology, praised the organisation efforts of all involved, while giving a warm welcome to delegates and attendees. Dr Cliona Ó Carroll (Department of Folklore and Ethnology, University College Cork) and Professor David Hopkin (President, The Folklore Society) then welcomed the conference delegates. Delegates, consisting of students, academic teaching staff and independent researchers, hailed from Ireland, the United Kingdom, mainland Europe, Asia, the United States and Canada, and delivered their papers either remotely or on site.

Taking place over three days, and structured over fourteen sessions, with parallel sessions on the second and third days, forty papers were presented. While a full list of papers is provided below, this event report highlights only a selection, primarily chosen to represent the

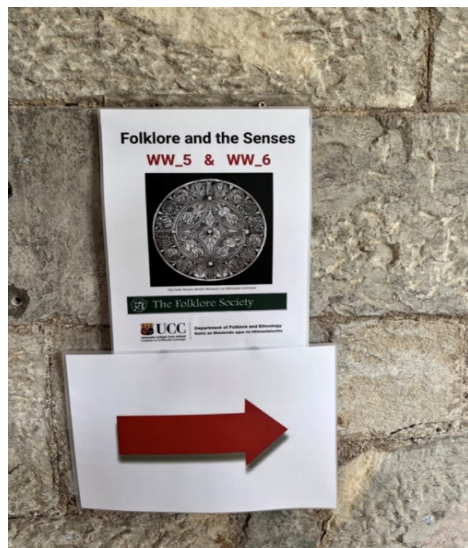


Figure 1

(Photo credit: Dr Ciarán Ó Gealbháin, Head of the Department of Folklore and Ethnology at UCC).

diversity of conference delegates and their interpretation of the theme, “Folklore and the Senses”. The papers, diverse and layered in theory, highlighted important aspects of folklore, collectively surpassing the event’s theme of “the senses” and its disseminative function.

Day One:

Afternoon Sessions 1 and 2

Comprised of two papers on the theme “A Sense of Nature”, the conference’s first session on Friday (20 June) opened with Dr Ryan Lash (University College Dublin) presenting the insightful paper ‘The White Cow, the Crooked Mouth, and the Corncrake: Sensing the Other-than-human in Inishbofin Island’. From within the context of his ethnographic fieldwork with maritime sheep farmers on Inishbofin, Lash argued that folk knowledge functions as an embodied memory, an essential multi-perceptual sensory skill, that should be considered in the development of environmental policies. Following this, Tiernan Gaffney (National Museum of Ireland) presented ‘The Still Murmur: Bee Folklore and Museum Galleries’, which focused on the Country Life exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland in County Mayo. Gaffney highlighted the importance of curating a multi-sensory, interactive exhibition experience in order to retain the sensual significance and cultural richness of bees within folkloric traditions.

In Friday’s afternoon sessions, three presentations were given on the theme of “Proverbial Senses”. This concluded with the paper ‘Sensory Organs in Modern Greek Proverbial Discourse’ by Dr Georgios Tserpes (Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Academy of Athens). Tserpes outlined the common linguistic root of the Greek words for senses, emotions and aesthetics, and provided examples of traditional proverbs relating to the eyes, ears, nose, hands and tongue. He further highlighted that sensory proverbs also function as metaphorical moderators of emotions within cultural and social mores.

Day Two:

Morning Session 3B and 4B

Across four morning sessions on the second day, twelve papers were delivered on the themes of “A Feel for Old Media”, “Death and the Senses”,

“Embodying the Intangible” and “Food, Taste and Memory”. In ‘Smelling Death: English Funeral Customs, c.1850–1920’, Dr Helen Frisby (University of the West of England) demonstrated the olfactory onslaught of this period’s death customs through comparative materials: decaying pork flesh, rosemary, thyme, caraway, tobacco, beeswax, musty wool, lavender, camphor and port wine. Frisby explained the odoriferous folkloric and scientific connections related to traditional customs and rituals in the past that provided a sensory processing of grief through the cleansing of spirit and scent. Leading into the lunch break, Dr Julia Bishop (University of Sheffield) explored the relationship between senses and emotions in children’s lore and adult recollections regarding British school meals in her paper ‘The Good, the Bad, the Picturesque and the Revolting: The Lore and Language of School Dinners as Sensory History’.

Afternoon Session 6A

One of two parallel sessions concluding the second day was entitled “Sensing Ghosts and Spirits”. The first paper delivered was Dr Adam N. Coward’s (Independent Researcher) ‘Empirical and Emotional Evidence for Apparitions in the Writings of the Rev. Edmund Jones (1702–1793)’. Delving into the work of empiricist Rev. Edmund Jones, Coward presented the sensory aspects of Jones’s recordings regarding metaphysical beings, while conveying the depth of his religious fanaticism in the quest for confirmation of the divine. Continuing the Christian theme, PhD student Fiona O’ Driscoll (University College Cork) presented her paper ‘Otherworldly Sensations: Exploring the Female Spirit “Petticoat Loose” as the Epitome of Human Sensory Experience’, which examined the afterlife of a corporeal spirit as portrayed through the National Folklore Collection. Interpreting their exaggerated sensory aspects, she outlined how the narratives—through manipulating the senses—didactically conveyed the perils of sin and the importance of piety to their 1930s rural audience, highlighting the era’s supernatural-orientated religious fervour. The final paper of the day, ‘The Celestial Nocturnal Sensorium of War: Night Battles, Folklore and the Senses in History’, was presented by Professor Sarah Covington (City University of New York) who merged historical events with testimonies involving spectral-filled sky-battles. Illuminating the role of the senses in oral tradition—including

misinterpreted natural phenomena—Covington demonstrated how combining history, folklore and human experience can advance contemporary folkloristics.

Day 3:

Morning Session 7B

The third day of the conference commenced with PhD student Angela Byrne (University College Cork) and her paper 'Sensing the Past: Personal Effects and the Sensory Archive of Asylums and Industrial Schools in Ireland'. Engaging with the theme "Seeking the Senses in Collections", and by examining interview data, Byrne communicated the importance of access and knowledge dissemination regarding the sensory experiences of those who resided in Ireland's past institutions.



Figure 2

(Photo credit: Dr Ciarán Ó Gealbháin).

Revealing the collective microculture of former institutional residents, her paper transgressed the boundaries between folklore studies and sociology. Later that morning, pertaining to the theme of "A Sense of Self and Extensions of Self", Dr Fionnán MacGabhann

(University College Cork) presented the penultimate paper of the conference 'Sensing the Self in Contemporary Folklore from Connemara'. Exploring narrative material collected from Catholic priest Fr Éamonn Ó Confhaola, MacGabhann theorised how personalised nuances within Ó Confhaola's reimaginings reflect his unique worldview and effectively communicate a discernible 'sense of self'. He further explored the general overlap and semi-autonomous coexistence between tradition, society and the concept of 'self'.

Conclusion

The wide spectrum of sensory themes and topics of The Folklore Society's Annual Conference evoked visceral responses, from the opening presentation's call to action to align environmental policies with sensorial folk knowledge, through to one of the final papers of the conference, closing Session 8A, by Dr Clodagh Tait (Mary Immaculate College), "More like one that tuck love powders, than a reasonable being": Potions, Passion and Poison in Ireland, C. 1820–1940'. This presentation's reflections on the sensual illuminated the dangers of navigating love in an era of belief in potions, magic, and rituals. Within this broad array of themes, epochs and perspectives, the conference's collective focus on the senses successfully held not only a collaborative and academically educational function, but also a deeply relatable insight for its audience; it revealed the underlying yet all-encompassing sensory facets of oral history—consciousness, perception, and emotion: the ever-present human undercurrents of the folk tradition.

REBECCA L.+ HALL MORAN is a PhD student in the Department of Folklore and Ethnology, University College Cork. Rebecca is a 2024 Puttnam Scholar and a 2025 PhD Excellence Scholar. Her research focuses on exhuming and examining Kathleen Hurley's forgotten contributions to the Irish Folklore Commission, particularly women's lore, investigating her role and impact as a female collector, and restoring Hurley's folklore to its origins in oral performance.

FIONA O' DRISCOLL is a PhD candidate and assistant lecturer in the Department of Folklore and Ethnology, University College Cork (UCC). She also works as a course coordinator and lecturer for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at UCC. Fiona's doctoral research centres on the mostly unknown, yet multidimensional Irish 'witch figure', as evidenced through the oral tradition (c.1750–c.1940). With a particular focus on vernacular perceptions—fuelled by political, religious and sociological concerns—her thesis aims to uncover the factors which led to the construction of 'woman as witch' in rural Ireland.



Figure 3

Amanda Clarke at the podium (Independent Scholar) presenting 'Tobar na Súil: A Site for Sore Eyes: The Gift of Sight at the Holy Wells of Ireland'. Helen Frisby (University of West of England), chair of panel on the right (Photo credit: Dr Ciarán Ó Gealbháin).



Figure 4

Tiber Fizett (University College of Dublin) presenting '*Leig air falbh i!*' ('Let it fly!'): Sensing (E)motion in Scottish Gaelic Aesthetics' (Photo credit: Dr Ciarán Ó Gealbháin).

Full List of Panels and Papers at Folklore Society's Annual Conference 2025:

Day One

Session One- A Sense of Nature

- Ryan Lash (University College Dublin): 'The White Cow, the Crooked Mouth, and the Corncrake: Sensing the Other-than-human in Inishbofin Island'.
- Tiernan Gaffney (National Museum of Ireland): 'The Still Murmur: Bee Folklore and Museum Galleries'. [Online]

Session Two- Proverbial Senses

- Fionnuala Carson Williams (Independent Scholar): 'Walls have Ears: The Role of the Senses in Everyday Proverbs'.
- Tulika Chandra (Shiv Nadar University, India): 'Savouring Wisdom: Food, Taste, and Sensory Representations in Hindi Proverbs as Living Folklore in India'. [Online]
- Georgios Tserpes (Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Academy of Athens): 'Sensory Organs in Modern Greek Proverbial Discourse'.

Day Two

Session 3A- A Feel For Old Media

- Catherine Bannister (University of Sheffield), Paul Cowdell (Independent Scholar) and Abbi Flint (University of Oxford): 'Excursions into a twilight world': Taking a Critical, Creative, and Sensorial Approach to the Reader's Digest Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain'.
- Gianna French (PhD student, Courtauld Institute, London): A Visual Séance: Materializing the Spectral Imagination in Pre-Raphaelite Drawings. [Online]
- Anthony Bak Buccitelli (Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg): "'Fairytale as Fuck": Anti-Modern Media, Sensory Experience, and the Folkloresque'.

Session 3B- Death and the Senses

- Helen Frisby (University of the West of England): 'Smelling Death: English Funeral Customs, c.1850-1920'.
- Simona Kuntarič Zupanc (PhD student, University of Ljubljana): 'Sensory Experiences of the Dead in Rural North-Eastern Slovenia'.
- Penny Johnston (Manchester Metropolitan University): "'Three tastes of salt to ward away the fairies": Salt and the Senses in the Irish Folk Tradition'.

Session 4A- Employing the Intangible

- Lucija Biličić (Independent Scholar) and Lea Biličić (Independent Scholar): 'The Museum of Lost Tales: Transforming Slavic Folklore into an Embodied Experience'.
- Ian Brodie (Cape Breton University): 'Joy and the Senses in Folklore: Feeling Vernacular Performance'.
- Cozette Griffin-Kremer (Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique, Brest, France): 'Bringing Luck, with a Flower in France'. [Online]

Session 4B- Food, Taste and Memory

- Siobhán Browne (University College Cork): 'Making Sense of the Research: Research Methodologies and the Senses in an Ethnographic Study'.
- Regina Sexton (University College Cork): 'The Hungry Grass: An Féar Gorta'.
- Julia Bishop (University of Sheffield): 'The Good, the Bad, the Picturesque and the Revolting: The Lore and Language of School Dinners as Sensory History'.

Session 5A- Experiencing the Supernatural

- Clodagh Doyle (National Museum of Ireland, Turlough Park): 'In the Blink of an Eye—Vulnerability of Being “Overlucked” by People Possessing the Evil Eye'.
- Solveiga Šlapikienė (PhD student, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore): 'The Sense of a Guardian Angel in Lithuanian Belief Narratives'.
- Andrea Kitta (East Carolina University): "'I Just Had a Feeling"--The Senses and Experience in Supernatural Narratives'.

Session 5B- Healing and Revival

- Meg Nicholas (American Folklife Center): 'Crying in the Archive: Connecting Archival Research and Creative Grief Therapy'.
- Cecily Gilligan (Independent Scholar): 'Traditional Cures, Intuitive Bonesetters and Colourful Rag Trees'.
- Amanda Clarke (Independent Scholar): 'Tobar na Súil: A Site for Sore Eyes: The Gift of Sight at the Holy Wells of Ireland'.

Session 6A- Sensing Ghosts and Spirits

- Adam N. Coward (Independent Scholar): "'Here was a proof of the being of evil spirits to 3 of his senses": Empirical and Emotional Evidence for Apparitions in the Writings of the Rev. Edmund Jones (1702 1793)'. [Online]
- Fiona O' Driscoll (PhD student, University College Cork): 'Otherworldly Sensations: Exploring the Female Spirit "Petticoat Loose" as the Epitome of Human Sensory Experience'.

- Sarah Covington (City University of New York): ‘The Celestial, Nocturnal Sensorium of War: Night Battles, Folklore and the Senses in History’. [Online]

Session 6B- A Woman’s Touch, Hair and Smell

- Ailbhe Nic Giolla Chomhail (University of Galway): ‘Sensory Experience in “Scéal an Anró”, an Irish and Scottish Wonder Tale Ecotype’.
- Saeedeh Niktab Etaati (Canadian National Museum of History): ‘Women’s Hair: Outraged Protest and Embodied Solidarity in the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement’. [Online]
- Ciara Joyce (PhD student, Open University): “‘The Precious Air of Romance’: Folkloric, Historical, and Contemporary Views on Vaginal Odour’. [Online]

Day Three

Session 7A- Music, Metaphor and Emotion

- Tiber Falzett (University College Dublin): “‘Leig air falbh i!’” (“Let it fly!”): Sensing (E)motion in Scottish Gaelic Aesthetics’.
- Olha Petrovych (Estonian Literary Museum) and Mari Väina (Estonian Literary Museum): ‘Sweetness and Bitterness: Symbolism of Taste in Ukrainian and Estonian Folk Songs’.
- Ciara Thompson (University College Cork): ‘Traditional Lullabies as House, Hearthkeeper, and Sensorium’.

Session 7B- Seeking the Senses in Collection

- Angela Byrne (PhD Student, University College Cork): ‘Sensing the Past: Personal Effects and the Sensory Archive of Asylums and Industrial Schools in Ireland’.
- Liam Doherty (National Museum of Ireland): ‘The Catalogue, the Poet and the Irish Folklife Collection at the National Museum of Ireland’.
- Susanne Österlund-Pöttsch (Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland): ‘Movement, Body Memory and the Senses in the Folklore Archive’.

Session 8A- Love and the Senses

- Alessandra Curtis (Independent Scholar): ‘Making Sense of Military Folklore’.
- Emmanouela Katrinaki (Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Academy of Athens): ‘The Senses of Love in the Folk Distichs of Eastern Crete (1900-c.1950)’. [Online]
- Clodagh Tait (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick): “‘More like one that tuck love powders, than a reasonable being’”: Potions, Passion and Poison in Ireland, c.1820-1940’.

Session 8B- A Sense of Self and Extensions of the Self

- Aphrodite-Lidia Nounanaki (Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, Academy of Athens): 'What If Our Senses Are Not Enough? Technology as a Tool to "Sharpen Perception": The Tesla Car Case'.
- Fionnán Mac Gabhann (University College Cork): 'Sensing the Self in Contemporary Folklore from Connemara'.
- Kristiana Willsey (University of Southern California): 'Ritual and Embodiment in Online Self-Diagnosis Narratives'. [Online]



Academic Event Report

Rachel Gough and Ellen Scally

Department of Film and Screen Media, University College Cork

Event: Haunted Futures Conference 2025: “Haunted Technologies”

Venue: University College of Cork

Dates: 12th to 14th of November 2025

The Haunted Futures conference was held at the Department of Film and Screen Media, University College Cork, from 12–14 November 2025. Organised by Dr Ellen Scally and Dr Rachel Gough (University College Cork), the event returned for its third year to continue its exploration of haunting as a powerful site for radical social transformation. This three-day hybrid conference was organised into ten different panels, typically comprising three or four papers, and included creative showcases, film screenings and experimental exercises. A third of this year’s delegates were facilitated in remote presentation of their research. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s theory of hauntology in *Spectres of Marx* (1993), this conference invited delegates to consider the ways in which hauntings disrupt hegemonic relationships with time. Hauntings are interpreted as imaginative pathways for alternative futures within the capitalocene, that can serve to amplify the voices of marginalised and exploited identities—both human and more-than-human. Alongside their core conceptual focus of haunting as a radical staging ground for social change, this year the organisers invited papers that specifically considered the theme “Haunted Technologies”. This thematic focus encouraged reflection on the ethical, ecological, political and aesthetic dimensions of technologies both contemporary and defunct.

Day One

The first panel of the day had four speakers and was chaired by Dr Rachel Gough. The presentations in this panel foregrounded the persistence of the past in shaping contemporary imaginaries, emphasising reflection on environmental, cultural and technological residues. Damien O’Connell’s (Technological University of the Shannon) ‘Living Ruins: Haunted

Technologies of Labour and Leisure at Óstán Rinn Rua’ examined haunted technologies of labour and leisure at the now defunct hotel, Óstán Rinn Rua. Maz Jardon (University of Amsterdam) traced atmospheric pollution and eco-histories of collapse and disaster in Centralia, Pennsylvania. Beth Doyle (University College Dublin) explored melancholy and feminist agency in the poetry of Blanaid Salkeld. Nina Milonet (University of Lille) interrogated fossil fuel ghosts in the work of James Joyce.

The second panel had three speakers and was chaired by Alfie Howard (University of Leeds). This panel considered sensory and digital hauntings. Marta Snoch’s (Jagiellonian University Poland) work on scented hauntologies highlighted nostalgia and olfactory memory in online fragrance communities. Aditi Joshi (Jamia Millia Islamia) explored asexual futurities in Sayaka Murata’s work but focused in particular on Murata’s novel *Earthlings*. Professor Russell Williams (The American University of Paris) examined immersive fandom in contemporary investigation narratives, presenting an engaging analysis of the series *Hellier*.

The third panel, with three speakers, was chaired by Kane Geary O’Keeffe (University College Cork). This panel focused on gendered hauntings. Eleanor Thorpe’s (University for the Creative Arts) paper ‘Supernatural Technologies of the Possessed Slasher: Aiding Transition and Reproduction in *Chucky* and *Ash vs Evil Dead*’, analysed how the films *Chucky* and *Ash vs Evil Dead* mobilise spectral embodiment to negotiate gender transition and reproduction. Victoria Santamaría Ibor (University of Zaragoza) explored the haunting of the digital double in the film *Cam* (2022), tracing how sex work, viscerality and excess, unsettle boundaries between flesh and image. Joining online, Sam Dubois (Birmingham City University) discussed transgender embodiment in Steven Soderbergh’s *Presence* (2025), foregrounding the film’s innovative use of visual technologies to trouble the stability of corporeal presence.

The fourth panel of the day was chaired by Dr Rachel Gough and expanded the focus to cinematic archives, civilisational afterlives and spectral industries. The first of the three speakers, Claudia Ferrando Paulo (Universitat Jaume I), presented remotely and explored cinema as a spectral archive, considering how *Cerrar los Ojos* (2023) reconstructs memory and the soul through reanimation, the moving image as a kind of séance. Hanke Kelber (University College Cork) examined the lingering remains of past

civilisations in Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), tracing how ruins and defunct technologies prompt difficult questions about the stability of memory, language and human culture. Closing the panel and presenting remotely, Dr Marie Pierre Burquier (Université Paris Cité) mapped the spectres of contemporary Hollywood, analysing how found-footage films conjure a haunted industry through unstable images, residual media and industrial anxieties.

The final panel involved a creative practice showcase, where Alfie Howard introduced his short story *How the Earth Language Was Made*.

Day One of Haunted Futures 2025 concluded with a ghost tour of Cork City which gave delegates the opportunity to learn about the city's history, in particular its social and commercial history. The event was engaging, fun and informative with some sufficiently spooky moments thrown in for good measure.

Day Two

The second day began with a four-speaker panel exploring hauntings across media, memory and sociopolitical landscapes. This panel was chaired by Dr Max Bledstein (University College Dublin). Angela Byrne (University College Cork) examined YouTube's 'ghost hunters', reflecting on folklore and ethical engagement with Irish asylums. Alfie Howard, reflecting on his own writing, considered speculative folklore as creative practice, imagining haunted landscapes and languages. Joining online, David Ketelby (Independent researcher) revisited the British children's TV series *The Changes* (1975). Dr Lennart Soberon (Independent researcher) traced Brexit-era anxieties in Irish border cinema, exploring the spectral presence of unseen social and political forces.

There were three speakers in panel six, which was chaired by Eleanor May Thorpe. This panel considered the intersection of the architectural and the digital in hauntings. Siobhán Scarlett O'Reilly (University of Brighton) presented a reflective visual diary on liminal photo elicitation interviews. These were conducted during her doctoral research into liminal spaces and backrooms culture. Kane Geary O'Keefe explored haunted architecture in *My House Walk-Through* (2016), his research the mediation of personal and spectral space and collective trauma. Dr Thomas Conner (University of Tulsa), who presented remotely, considered holographic haunting at the

Greenwood Rising museum, investigating how the past interpolates the visitor and implicates the future. Following this was a screening of Dr Lennart Soberon's *Dragon's Teeth* (2024), which won Best Documentary Short at the 2025 Galway Film Fleadh. The film is a hauntological examination of Bessbrook Garrison, Co. Armagh, formerly a significant military zone and a centre for sensitive operations until the British Army's withdrawal in June 2007.

The penultimate panel of day two saw four speakers present their research and was chaired by Kane Geary O' Keeffe. Dr John Kavanagh (Ulster University) analysed masculine entitlement, AI technologies and their intersection with the manosphere. Joining remotely, Federica Palazzi (University of Macerata) presented a study of how female literary ghosts inform the design of a haunted digital game-based environment, which she will design as part of her doctoral research. Paula García-Rodríguez (University of Málaga) presented remotely on gendered haunting in Tracy Fahey's *They Shut Me Up* (2023), and Violet Burns's (Independent researcher) paper, also delivered remotely, considered the exploitation and commodification of the dead female body in Western cultural discourse.

The final panel of day two comprised three papers and was chaired by Dr Ellen Scally. Dr Max Bledstein considered the use of acousmetre and the Ken Burns Effect to examine temporality in the Australian horror film *Lake Mungo* (2008). Presenting online, Dr Weija Zeng (Peking University) explored the spectral logic of the image in contemporary cinema, focusing on doppelgängers, hauntology, and affect. Dr Karen Smith (Independent researcher) closed the session with a paper which examined the role of select Stanley Kubrick films in the shuttering of the Scala Cinema in London. Smith's paper was complimented by the addition of select archive materials which were passed around to delegates during the presentation.

A creative practice showcase featuring Elizabeth Carlisle (BIMM University) closed the second day of the conference. Carlisle presented on her zine *Lycanthropozine of Speculative Wolf Spectres* and discussed zine-making as a practice for articulating the Anthropocene and exploring speculative hauntings through form and process.

Day Three

The opening panel of day three comprised two papers and was chaired by Dr Rachel Gough and focused on the intersections of technology, extractivism, as well as postcolonial and neoliberal hauntings. Dr Jac Lewis (Independent researcher) presented remotely his paper, 'Fashwave to AI: Hauntology and Hegemony of the Late Capitalist Far-Right', which traced how aesthetic and technological forms participate in contemporary political hauntings. Following on from this, Alaz Okudan (University of Galway) examined the spectral logics through which emergent AI technologies reinforce extractivist, exploitative systems while offering some conceptual alternatives.

The final panel was comprised of four remote presentations and was chaired by Dr Ellen Scally. This panel focused on examples of environmental and extractive hauntings. Dr Ana Clara Alves (University of Freiburg) presented a history of the mining industry in Minas Gerais, Brazil, exploring how promises of development leave enduring afterlives of predation and dispossession. Rhys Handley (Royal Holloway University of London) analysed cinematic acts of resurrection in Clio Barnard's *The Arbor* (2010), considering how extraction and necromancy intertwine in representations of social and ecological memory. The day concluded with explorations of the postcolonial and televisual gothic. Aqsa Eram (University of Lucknow) discussed the postcolonial gothic in Vikram Chandra's "*Dharma*" (1994), interrogating how gothic forms articulate legacies of colonial violence. Brontë Shiltz (Manchester Metropolitan University) examined neoliberalism and the televisual gothic in *Ghostwatch* (1992) revealing the ways media hauntings reflect and critique the anxieties of late capitalist television culture.

Conclusions

Participants departed with new perspectives, collaborative possibilities, and renewed commitment to research and practice attentive to the ethical and transformative potential of the spectral. The third annual Haunted Futures Conference offered a dynamic and inclusive forum for exploring the complex interplay of the spectral, the social and the technological. Through its combination of academic panels, creative practice and experiential engagement, delegates noted that the event exemplified the potential of

hauntology as a site for critical reflection and creative engagement. Participants departed with new perspectives, collaborative possibilities, and renewed commitment to research and practice attentive to the ethical and transformative potential of the spectral. Haunted Futures continues to be an engaging and vibrant conference predominantly catered towards postgraduate and early career researchers. Haunted Futures will return in 2026 with funding generously provided by University College Cork's Collective Social Futures Fund.

DR RACHEL GOUGH is a writer, lecturer, and researcher based at University College Cork. She engages in interdisciplinary research on climate and sustainability—at the Sustainability Institute—and lectures on film theory, video game theory, screenwriting and national cinema in the Department of Film and Screen Media. She is the Public Relations Officer for Women in Research Ireland. She is a member of the *Estudios Irlandeses* editorial board and the co-founder of Haunted Futures. Her creative work includes poetry published in *Quarryman* and *One Good Day* as well as short fiction broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and published in *The Waxed Lemon*, *Outpost*, *Bealtaine*, *The National Flash Fiction Anthology*, and *Best Small Fictions*. In 2025, she was awarded first place in the flash fiction category at the Write by the Sea Literary Festival. Dr Gough was awarded the Lord Puttnam Scholarship in 2023. In 2024 she was an awardee of the CACSSS Creative Connections Fund.

DR ELLEN SCALLY recently graduated with a PhD from the Department of Film & Screen Media at University College Cork. She is a former graduate of the MA in Film and Screen Media at UCC. Her PhD project concerns the history of amateur film and cine-culture in Ireland, and research interests include Irish cinema history, amateur film practice, community cinema culture, and the audio-visual archive. Her research was awarded an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar, and from April-June 2025 she was a fellow at the Centre for Advanced Internet Studies in Bochum, Germany. She is a co-convener of the annual Haunted Futures conference at University College Cork.



Academic Event Report

Natasha Dukelow and Richard Keyes McDonnell

School of History, University College Cork

Event: Gerald of Wales: Identity, Afterlives and Wonders — The First Chris Williams Memorial Colloquium on Ireland and Wales

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 21st to 22nd November 2025

In November 2025, the School of History at University College Cork (UCC) held a two-day colloquium, titled ‘Gerald of Wales: Identity, Afterlives and Wonders’. This event was hosted in conjunction with the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences, to commemorate Professor Chris Williams (1963–2024), who served as Head of the College from 2017 until his passing. Professor Williams was a distinguished historian and a highly regarded and respected member of the University community, remembered for his leadership, scholarship and collegiality.

The theme of the memorial series reflects Professor Williams’s Welsh roots and his life and career in Ireland. In his exploration of the historiography and postcoloniality of Wales, the late Professor Williams (2003, p. 10) noted that the “clearest parallels” of Wales’s post-colonial experience were not to be found in the European colonies of Africa, Asia, or South America, but “are instead to be found with Scotland and Ireland”. Thus, it was very fitting that Gerald of Wales (c. 1146–1223), sometimes latinised as *Giraldus Cambrensis*, a cleric and writer whose family were actively involved in the twelfth-century military conquest of Ireland, and whose grandfather, Gerald of Windsor (c. 1075–1135), was a key figure in the Norman consolidation of south-west Wales, was the subject of the inaugural colloquium in the series.

Organised by Dr Natasha Dukelow, Dr Hiram Morgan and Dr Diarmuid Scully (School of History, UCC), the event welcomed early career scholars as well as more established academics and experts both from across Ireland and internationally. The colloquium consisted of two keynote talks—delivered by Professor Huw Pryce (Professor Emeritus, Bangor University) and Professor Anti Selart (University of Tartu)—and thirteen paper

presentations, divided into five different sessions. Most papers were delivered in person, with two presented remotely online.

Day One

The colloquium began with a speech by Dr Hiram Morgan that paid tribute to Professor Chris Williams as a scholar, colleague and friend. This was followed by a keynote address from Professor Huw Pryce, that focused on the environment in Gerald of Wales's writings on Ireland and Wales. The lecture considered Gerald's depiction of the land, its influence on its inhabitants, his attention to the physical landscape, and his treatment of non-human animals. Professor Price concluded by noting that this research provides a crucial foundation for understanding how Gerald's work can illuminate interactions with the environment in medieval Ireland and Wales more broadly.

Session One

The first session consisted of two papers, which were given by Dr Daryl Hendley Rooney (Little Museum of Dublin) and Dr Jesse Harrington (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies). Dr Hendley Rooney examined how Gerald's representations of the Irish varied depending on whether he was portraying individuals or groups. Dr Harrington's paper set Gerald's assertion that the Irish had no Christian martyrs in the broader contemporary context in the aftermath of the death of Thomas Becket.

Session Two

The second and final session of the first day saw three papers given by members of the School of History. In her paper, Dr DukeLow looked at how material on Ireland was included in the *Gemma Ecclesiastica*—a text that Gerald claimed was intended for the Welsh clergy. This session continued with Dr Damian Bracken's paper on 'Gerald and the Irish Church: Literate Barbarians and Failed Pastors', which considered how Gerald reconciled his worldview, informed by Classical Graeco-Roman ideas of the barbarian, and Ireland as a land of barbarians, with the reality of the Irish 'literate-barbarian'. The session concluded with a paper by Dr Scully that examined how Gerald of Wales addressed Bede's claims about Ireland in the former's *Topographica Hiberniae*.

Day Two

The second day consisted of three sessions, in which eight papers were presented, and concluded with a second keynote address.

Session One

Dr Ben Guy (Cambridge) got the day off to an engaging start, with his paper ‘Gerald, Merlin and Welsh Prophecy’. This paper asked what Gerald really knew about Merlin in Welsh prophecy and explored the relationship between the *Vaticinalis Historia* and the *Prophetia Merlini Silvestris*. Professor Thomas Charles-Edwards (Emeritus Professor, Jesus College Oxford), who presented remotely, offered his paper ‘An Apology for Gerald’ that presented a more sympathetic account of the often-maligned Gerald.

Session Two

This session was constituted of three papers. Nicholas Scollard (Independent Scholar) focused on Welsh Marcher fortunes in Ireland in the twelfth century. Dr Caoimhe Whelan (University of Glasgow) then provided an examination of Philip of Slane’s use of Gerald’s work in the fourteenth century in her paper ‘From Pembrokeshire to Cork: Gerald’s Colonial Shadow. Richard Keyes McDonnell (UCC) gave a paper that examined the treacherous nature attributed to people who live on the peripheries with discussion of Gerald of Wales’s and Henry of Livonia’s (1187–1259) texts.

Session Three

The final session of the day and of the colloquium, featured papers that focused on the reception and afterlives of Gerald’s texts in the early-modern period. Dr Morgan began the session, giving his paper ‘Hooker, Hanmer and Boate, Protestant Uses of Giraldus in the Early Modern Conquest of Ireland’. This was followed by two papers that focused on the refutation of Gerald in the seventeenth century. Dr Jason Harris (UCC) paid particular attention to Steven White. While Dr Felix Levin (Aarhus University), who presented remotely online, presented his paper ‘Refuting Cambrensis in the Seventeenth-Century Historical Narratives: Some

Epistemological Observations’, which focused on comparisons between John Lynch, John Keating and Philip O’Sullivan Beare.

Professor Anti Selart brought the colloquium to a close with the second keynote. In his concluding remarks, he reflected on the similarities and contrasts between Ireland and the Baltic as peripheral regions that experienced forms of coloniality.

Conclusions

The ‘Gerald of Wales: Identity, Afterlives and Wonders — The First Chris Williams Memorial Colloquium on Ireland and Wales’ was a successful event that facilitated exchange among researchers working on various aspects of Gerald of Wales and medieval Irish and Welsh history. The colloquium showcased both the diversity of approaches taken in studying Gerald’s rich literary legacy and illuminated the possibilities for future research. So too, did the colloquium highlight the intersection between Wales’s and Ireland’s shared history. It is hoped that the success of this inaugural memorial colloquium will lead to the organisation of future events as part of the Chris Williams Memorial Series on Ireland and Wales, thereby continuing to honour Professor William’s legacy and fostering scholarly collaboration between Ireland and Wales.

DR NATASHA DUKELOW received her PhD from University College Cork (UCC) in 2025. Her thesis, undertaken at the School of History under the supervision of Dr Małgorzata Krasnodębska-D’Aughton and Dr Diarmuid Scully, focused on the thirteenth-century Franciscan *exempla* collection known as the *Liber Exemplorum*. She is currently the Head Tutor of UCC’s School of History and has been an Editor-in-Chief of *Aigne* since 2023.

RICHARD KEYES McDONNELL holds an MA in History from University College of Cork (UCC). They are an Archives Assistant at the Cork LGBT Archive, and tutor in the School of History at UCC, and has been an *Aigne* editor since 2023.

Works Cited

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Editorial: Creative Section

Gianmarco Balzani
Creative Section Manager

Aigne's inter-disciplinary nature ensures wide readership among academics and the Creative Section plays a significant role in accomplishing this task. This year's call for creative pieces received an overwhelming response. As a team, we were delighted by the numerous interpretations of 'Response: Reflection and Action' sent. The variety in styles and formats, and the quality of the submissions were remarkable, making the editorial process challenging, to say the least. Our aim was to select and compile the works that best aligned with the volume's theme, without excessively limiting the artistic reach of the section, while allowing for the broader possible audience to find something that they could personally resonate with. Whether we have achieved this goal remains to be decided by our readers.

This is the largest creative section *Aigne* has ever published, and the works presented include poems, short stories, photographs, a painting, and a photo essay. In a way, the section itself engages with the volume's theme, tempting the reader with each individual piece in different ways to induce a response that is both a reflection and an emotional re-action.

The five poems chosen vary in style, length and subject. They are, as most poems are, ductile expressions of their authors' sensitivity: reflection in action of an individual response to a corner of the material reality, to a fleeing sensation, to an otherwise little, ordinary 'something', that someone, somewhere shares with us, in an entirely different light. They give us, at least in their intention, the opportunity to look at something not merely from different eyes, but from a different 'heart'.

Two short stories follow the poems, more rational and discursive in nature. They were selected for their capacity to speak of a personal experience through the shared language of the human feelings, without forcing onto the reader the limits of an unequivocal interpretation. Both stood aside for their gentle and yet sophisticated style.

Next are the visual submissions, photographs and a painting that communicate with immediacy to our sense of beauty, of the harmony—or lack of it—that generates an emotional response to our individual sensitivity. They are, in a sense, a more simple and direct window into someone else's experience, a second look into something that already exists but we did not notice, or the re-arrangement of visualised and signified thoughts shared with us by another mind. If poems can be seen as mid-ground hybrids in the arch of the communicative effort, being both visual and rational, stories and images sit at the two opposite ends of it, the first entirely rational articulations, the second purely visual and therefore truly universal.

The last piece in the creative section is a photo essay that offers a tone that is individualistic and one that cannot be compared with the rest of the submissions. Nevertheless, it captures a unique response to reflection and action, and we found it best fitting to conclude this collection.

Creative pieces are, as artistic endeavours in general, subjective by definition, and ultimately gambles on the part of those who are tasked to select and present them to the public. If in the next few pages you, the reader, are confronted with an image, of shapes and colours or of words and emotions, a story, a description, or even a single stanza that resonates with you and your individual experience, then we will have succeeded, and that is all what we could have asked for.



Looked Down One Day About Three Years Ago

Peter Mac Donnchadha

University College Cork

See the broken floor. It was once the social welfare office and sometimes a gallery. Now most days it is empty and hollow, a forgettable building lost in Galway city. How many have walked upon this floor and how many still pass it by, what stories they might have? I wonder what might have become of them, as the exposed concrete will wear and crack and break. One can find beauty in rather unexpected places.



Looked Down One Day About Three Years Ago

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The Edge of Saturday Night

Peter Mac Donnchadha

University College Cork

The night spills its mystery
With the same few songs.
A parade of changing faces
Always young,
Dumb and inexplicably glum.

The ennui is upon me
And still, I never want to die.
As the bleeding edge is bled
So erosively dry.
It was here, at the wasteland
That the clock turned over.
For a man
Can live
Voraciously.
For only so long.

Night after night,
The vessel is emptied.
The same drink, song and sight
Dance, kiss and chance.
Until the scene is played
And you want...
Out.

That life can take a heavy toll,
Upon the Human soul
And the eyes,
Like a stomach

Fill to burst.
While there is no taste upon the tongue.

But

The path is not always clear.
For even with gentle eyes
And a restful heart,
A man can age
Long before his time.
You can feel it
In the way he talks.
A caution,
A fear,
A sense.
That the best is all behind.

So, tell me.
Did you ever find,
Whatever it was,
You set out,
To find?

We found the edge of Saturday night,
And it bores me,
So fantastically.



Land Untouched

Cornelius David Moynihan

University College Cork

On the spot
Where his house stood
Across the way
From deep, dark wood

Marshland plants
Grow tall and high
The place
Awash with butterfly

I think of how
He left too soon
A vacant lot
No trace of ruin

What he'd say
If with us now
On land untouched
By man or plough?



Parallel War

Kieran Fionn Murphy
University College Cork

In a parallel world, there's war
on a frosty Finbarr's Road;
bodies repose near brown water,
where the swollen river flows.

On a frosty Finbarr's Road,
explosions crater silver streets
where the swollen river flows.
Black ash drops instead of sleet.

Explosions crater silver streets.
Instead of cars, armed drones and tanks,
black ash drops instead of sleet,
broken phones and bombed out banks.

Instead of cars, armed drones and tanks.
Are they volunteers? Conscripted?
Broken phones and bombed out banks,
bellies empty, food restricted.

Are they volunteers? Conscripted?
Bullets strike in red and bloom.
Bellies empty, food restricted,
do children hide in shattered rooms?

Bullets strike in red and bloom.
Too dark by day, too light at night.
Do children hide in shattered rooms?
Who decides to run or fight?

Too dark by day, too light at night.
That man, ahead, in yellow vest –
who decides to run or fight? –
muscled arms, DeWalt tool chest,

that man ahead in yellow vest
would wear a flak jacket instead.
Muscled arms, DeWalt tool chest –
not that – grey gun, helmet on head,

would wear a flak jacket instead.
A woman pulls her laundry in –
not that – grey gun, helmet on head.
Does she hide a sniper's grin?

A woman pulls her laundry in;
her balcony: four-story height.
Does she hide a sniper's grin?
Am I cross-haired in her sight?

Her balcony: four-story height.
Though this day I walk in peace,
am I cross-haired in her sight?
In that world, am I deceased?

Though this day I walk in peace,
pray for family and friends,
in that world, am I deceased,
earth-propped, leaking, shot all ends?

Pray for family and friends.
I had a cousin twice removed
earth-propped, leaking, shot all ends.
What has conflict ever proved?

I had a cousin twice removed,

in Clougheen: six young men dead.
What has conflict ever proved?
Some missed hands, a foot, a head.

In Clougheen, six young men, dead.
Tans reloaded, checked on them.
Some missed hands, a foot, a head.
Were they hit again with phlegm?

Tans reloaded, checked on them.
Coffins shiny, wood like toffee.
Were they hit again with phlegm?
I'm untouched – need a coffee.

Coffins shiny, wood like toffee,
in Forde's dead house, Proby's Quay.
I'm untouched – need a coffee –
a flat white waits in Alchemy.

In Forde's dead house, Proby's Quay,
bodies repose near brown water.
A flat white waits in Alchemy.
In a parallel world, there's war.



Shades of Maharees

Mairead Kinsella, Zoë Rush, Jeanne Spillane, Emer Fallon
Neart na Machairi Project

Béal Geal – sandy bay, sandy hair, feet and toes in bed,
soft and warm, coarse, cold and wet –
sand displaced from marram green dunes
lovingly protected by chestnut centurions.

Brambles reveal the stone remnants of old Maherabeg.
Ruins on dunes, the orange and black caterpillars curled
on yellow-green ragwort, paper-white cocoons.
From tall straw marram stalks, moths and larks ascend.

Sun falls behind Garrywilliam, every day it drops
but every day it's different.
Swallows chirp over Fahamore, swooping and climbing,
they signal an end to summer.

Wrinkling our noses against the tang of sunbaked seaweed,
journey under starling thronged telegraph wires and along gentle
laneways,
clamber down through the white-worn limestone rock
– melting and folded –
drift into crevasses and find the marks of deep time in Port a' Cathasaigh.

A sense of home, lonesome, sometimes.
Soaring cacophony; saltwater smell; constant, changing light.

Found home or temporary harbour? It's uncertain sometimes.
The fierce salt winds and soft light remould me.

Home from home – overwhelming sometimes.
The future is an echo of hard-fought resilience.



The Art of Letting Go

Athira Sanal

NSS Hindu College Changanassery

Let go of the unhealed trauma that shadows your nights,
Of pain that clings like a ghost in silence.
Let go of faces that smile but carry deceit,
Of friends who despise the light you hold,
Of envy that whispers against your blessings.

Let go of love that never found its way home,
Unfinished stories that weigh your heart.
Let go of diseases that haunted your body,
Of the scars that tried to write your fate.

Let go again and again,
Until you are free enough to rise like a phoenix.
For letting go is a true response,
Not silence, not surrender,
But reflection turned into action,
A decision to release the inner turmoil and be free.



Birdsong

Rajarshee Bhattacharjee

Independent Author

Elliott was nine years old when he realised that he could not save the world.

It was a summer Saturday. Lazy, warm, and drizzled with cinnamon and vanilla.

His alarm had gone off almost an hour ago, a little cuckoo which cried out once every ten seconds, except it only did so once now, fading into an echo of rustling springs and memory.

“You’d better be here in five, or no pancakes for ya today!” mama shouted from the distance, her voice drowned by the sizzle of sweet, sweet batter. She was lying, of course.

Elliott knew that, which gave him the courage to lie down on his bed even as the sun no longer remained hidden behind the distant hills. Sunlight spilled into the room, on him, on the bed, on the cuckoo which barely cried. Mama had asked him to get rid of it, for he was a big boy now and big boys needed better alarm clocks, ones which beeped and kept beeping till Elliott was out of bed and ready to face the world.

But Elliot wasn’t ready to face the world that morning. So much so that not even the promise of syrup laden pancake would get him up.

“I ain’t gonna call ya again, son. I mean it!”

In one story, Elliot goes back to sleep. The pancakes remained on the table, till they got cold and the syrup drizzled onto the side of the table. Mama ran her fingers through his hair, and put them in the oven that evening, and Elliot gave her a little kiss before promising her that he’d never miss pancake day again. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn’t. But that did not matter.

Here, in this moment, Elliot slowly made his way up. He stretched his arms first, and then his legs. He had learnt it from the dog, the one they never could come up with a name for, and just like a beast of instinct, followed the smell of cinnamon, slowly making his way off the bed.

Life was not perfect. But life was good.

As his eyes adjusted to a new day, he stared out of his window, into the suburb he had seen a thousand times. His neighbour, Mr. Graham, with the newspaper and a cigarette (his mama always said it'd hurt him, those nasty things, though he didn't know if she was talking about the papers or the cigarettes); a couple of women he had never seen before in particularly bright leggings jogging past his fence; and a cat with yellow streaks on its black fur... sitting on the fence, almost crouched, almost like a hunter waiting for its prey to make a mistake.

"You really don't want no breakfast today, do ya?" mama said, walking into the room.

Breakfast was a little bird, fresh into the world. A fledgling, his science teacher William would say. He would call him Mr. William, but he insisted that he be called William. To be cool with the kids.

It rested near the window, just a pounce away from the cat's paw. Shivering against the morning breeze, almost resigned to its fate.

If death must come, let it be a good death.

It would take an avian philosopher to decide if ending between the jaws of a house cat was a just way to die, but Elliot was too young for the ethics of mortality.

The feline arched its back. It was not the villain in this story; there are no villains in nature. Just the one who are hungry, and the ones who will feed them.

Time stood still.

The cat jumped.

"Mama!!!"

"... didn't mean to make you cry, if I'm not back again this time tomorrow ... carry on, carry on as if nothing really matters..."

"He's a real shit singer, you know?"

"What, no! Freddie was ..."

"Not Freddie ... this guy".

Vanessa pointed at the young college freshman, and his unkempt long hair covering half his face. They paid him a couple of dollars to keep the bar anything but quiet, and he did precisely that. Nothing more. Nothing less.

"Well, better than having Garth put on the news. Can't ... can't deal with that anymore".

Vanessa stared at Elliot for a moment, before popping an ice cube into her mouth.

“You look like shit, do you realise that? When was the last time you got some sleep?”

Elliot never thought he’d need glasses. Always ate the veggies mama asked him to. Stayed five feet away from the TV. Never read with a torch under the bedsheet, except that one time when mama got him the new Superman comic.

So every time he had to pull them off his face, and clean them on the flannel shirt he was wearing that evening, he had himself a little chuckle.

“Yeah, uh ... I’ve been, a little out of sorts, I guess”.

The ice had almost melted.

“Out of sorts? El, you look like you don’t sleep. You look like you don’t eat. You barely call. You ...we can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep doing this. You care so much about the world that it leaves you a crumpled mess. You are angry, you are upset, and you ...”

She spat out what remained of the ice onto the floor.

Behind the counter, Garth clicked his tongue. But he wasn’t going to interfere. Not now.

“Look, I know. I know it sucks to see this, this entire country go down in flames. I know that there are innocent children dying halfway across the world. And I know that it hurts. I ...”

Her hand held Elliot’s. It was shivering. Maybe she’d have a fever later that night. She always did when she was upset.

“You can’t save them all, El”.

He knew that. Of course he did. And it was killing him.

Him, and this relationship.

“couldn’t look you in the eye ... you’re just like an angel ... your skin makes me cry ...”

Elliot didn’t register Vanessa moving her hand away from him. The coldness of her palm gave way to the coldness of emptiness. He didn’t know which was worse.

The brown jacket, flung over her shoulder, almost kissed the floor as she walked towards Garth.

“If I have to come back here and listen to this shit again, either I’m gonna kill you, or I’m gonna kill him”

Garth put her night's drinks on the tab.

The door flung open. Wind whooshed in, almost like a senile man taking in a long, laboured breath.

She looked back, the neon sign above her head showering her with an ethereal, green glow. Just like an angel.

"You can't save the world, Elliot."

THUD.

THUD.

Between a cat's claw, and a glass pane.

Mama rushed over, thinking that Elliot had hurt himself. He had. Her arms wrapped around the young boy, smothering him with desperate kisses. She looked out the window, half expecting a daylight spectre or a man. But there was nothing, just a kitty that'd been spooked by a little boy's scream.

"Mama, there's ... there's a little birdy down there. The cat almost got it. Mama, it's gonna die, mama. We need to save it."

Mama held Elliot's face, as tears began to roll down his cheeks. Oh, my sweet, sweet boy.

Something had begun burning at that moment. And it wasn't just the pancake she'd left on the stove. Mama rushed back to throw it all into the water, a swoosh of steam filling the kitchen. Burnt cinnamon, and a burning heart.

The dog with no name had heard the commotion, rushing into room, expecting a burglar or a dropped piece of meat. There was neither, just a young boy on the verge of tears, asking his mother to take him into the backyard.

The backyard that'd be the grave of not only a little bird, but his innocence. Dog was the first to rush out into the untrimmed grass, before Elliot stepped out, rubbing away both sleep and sorrow with both hands off his face. From a distance, the feline fiend stared as the child knelt under the windowsill, rubbing his palms into the dirt and the soil.

"It ... it fell somewhere here, mama. Lemme help it, mama. It ... it's just a baby..."

Mama could feel her lips quiver.

"Help me, mama!"

He's just a boy. He'll understand.

“Mama, please!”

He’ll understand that he can’t save them all. But not today.

“Mama ... I ...”

WOOF!

Dog snarled, and growled. The obvious suspect would have been the age-old enemy, who had now perched above the fence, a front row audience to the drama of it all. But it wasn’t the cat which got dog’s attention. It was a faint chirp, among the grass. A single chirp, and then silence, like the spring within its sinews rusting with every passing moment, just like the cuckoo on Elliot’s desk.

Elliot was never athletic. But perhaps, at that moment, he was the fastest boy on the planet. He rushed to where dog was, falling onto his knees like prayer, and dug his fingers into the soil.

Chirp. And then ... silence. He put the handful of soil against his ear. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

“Mama ... it’s...”

Of course not. Mama’s been around long. Seen the grass grow, and the sun set. Seen the blood spill, and held tears like floodgates.

Mama knew.

“Take a good look at it, would ya?”

Dog whimpered a little. A low, shrill noise. Elliot opened his palm.

Wrinkled feathers. Open beak. A tinge of crimson red where it hit the ground.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

The last pulses of a beating heart, in his palm. And then, nothing.

Death and Elliot were no strangers. Papa’s absence reminded him of it all the time. The little cuckoo clock, that he’d gotten Elliot on his 5th birthday, rotted with every passing second. Death incarnate.

But this was different. This wasn’t a star he could cry to in the middle of the night.

He felt mama’s palm on his shoulder, and shuddered.

“Hey, kiddo. The pancakes are getting cold”.

Cold. Like this corpse, claimed by death, gifted to decay.

“Ya can’t save the world, Elliot”.

He knew that. Of course he did.

But that didn’t change a thing.

He cried.

He cried. And licked the salt off his finger, humming away to the tune of Radiohead's 'Creep'. The freshman was gone (fortunately), and so were most of Garth's patrons.

The wind had turned into a tempest, knocking on the bar's door, rattling the roof, shaking the soul.

"Look, kid ..." Garth began, mop in hand, "I know it's been a shit day, but unless you plan to sleep on one of the tables, which I'd definitely not recommend, you might want to check out, eh?"

It was a cold night, and it would only get colder.

Elliot held onto his jacket, walking past flickering lights and desolate alleyways.

A part of him hoped he'd never see her again. Vanessa. And a part of him knew that he'd rather be dead.

"Listen ... I ... I tried it all, okay? I tried writing, and volunteering, and making petitions, and going to rallies ... and ... and it does work, but it doesn't work enough, okay? It ... it's like throwing a cup of water at a forest fire. It ... just doesn't work ... and it hurts".

Maybe she loved him because he cared. Maybe she hoped he'd care about her the same.

Maybe she was wrong.

A pamphlet swerved past his ear. The wind was picking up pace. In the distance, the campus oak stood tall, its branches swaying, but not giving in to the tempest. It'll have to do.

Elliot's shadow pulsed with the flickering lights, as he dug his fingers into the bark of the tree. Knives had left the marks of lovers who had long forgotten each other, and a little squirrel scurried into its hole. All around him, the leaves echoed with an ancient hum. If he didn't know any better, he'd think they were laughing.

He'd laugh with them. But the joke was on him.

The wind pulsed against him. This was a bad dream, maybe, except the itch in the back of his throat reminded him just how real this was.

Elliot closed his eyes.

Just breathe.

Breathe.

You'll be alright

One ... two ... three.

Again.

Slower ... slower.

Slow ... one ... two ...

THUD.

On overcast afternoons, when he smoked a cigarette by the great oak, Elliot had noticed the crude nest of straw and hay which would hang from the side of the oak, always threatening to fall, but never quite tipping over.

Hope, he thought.

Not tonight.

Nature is cruel. Nature is unbiased. Nature doesn't care that the bluebird's eggs were about to hatch.

Death claims, and gifts it to decay.

Eyes wide shut, Elliot could see it. The splatter of the incubated eggs, right in front of him. Life, stolen away even before it could have a chance.

A single tear rolled down his cheek.

"You can't save the world, Elliot."

.

.

.

Chirp.

Chirp ... chirp.

Elliot opened his eyes. Under his feet, lay the dilapidated nest, with nothing but a single egg. Light blue, and cracking open from the inside. Even as the wind howled and the leaves laughed, the chirp of the little nestling cut through the vortex.

Elliot kneeled, just like he had all those years ago. The shell cracked further, as a blind, crinkled bird made its way into the storm, before he shielded it with his palms.

His mama would have asked him to take a good look at it. And he did. It was frail, and it was weak. And he could feel its life in his palm. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Elliot placed the nestling against the heat of his chest, covering it with his jacket, their hearts beating together.

The chirping stopped. The leaves stopped laughing. The wind gave way to a softer breeze.

Not tonight.

Not again.

It'd survive the night. It'd survive. He'd make sure of that.

He couldn't save the world, maybe.

But he'd try.



Pomegranate

Emma Soye

Queen's University Belfast

I'm doing my makeup before work, holding a hand mirror up to the bedroom window to catch the best of the morning light, when a taxi pulls up two doors down. That house has been empty for months. I pause and watch as a dark-skinned man and teenage boy step out onto the pavement. A moment later, a woman gets out the other side—also dark-skinned, wearing a long dress and a headscarf. A sudden gust of wind loosens the scarf, threatening to whip it away, but she calmly tucks the ends back in. As she straightens, her gaze lifts to the row of flags across the street, Red Hands waving bloodied greeting.

The man moves to the car boot, and the woman joins him, helping to heave two battered suitcases and a threadbare rucksack onto the pavement beside the boy. A pink-faced man in a rumpled white shirt and blue lanyard climbs out of the front passenger seat, leaning back in to say something to the driver before shutting the door. The taxi idles as he heads up the cracked concrete path towards the house. He gestures for the family to follow, mouthing something I can't make out, and they fall in behind him, dragging their bags. At the doorstep he fumbles with the lock, finally pushes the door open, and ushers them inside.

I turn back to getting ready for work. The three-lettered group who control the estate are doing a roaring trade in loans these days—dirty money that keeps a roof over your head and your kids fed but soon has you crippled in debt. I've told myself I'll never take money from them, but even working all the hours I can, it's been getting harder and harder to cover the basics.

I've all but forgotten about the newcomers when, several weeks after their arrival on the estate, the woman in the headscarf comes into the shop. I watch her on the CCTV behind my till, drifting from square to square until

she slips out of view. Then she's standing in front of me. She has brown eyes, a straight nose, full lips. 'Excuse me?' she asks, 'You have...'—she pulls out a phone and types something in. A robotic voice pronounces, 'Pom-e-gran-ate'.

The word stirs a memory: a family holiday when I was a teenager, my first and only time out of the country. All of us overwhelmed by strange sights and sounds and smells. Sunburnt shoulders, a green plastic table, a fruit salad scattered with burgundy gems—those best avoided, being unknown. But one slipping past all the same, hiding behind a tooth, discovered hours later by a curious tongue. A surprising burst of sweetness.

I look up sharply. 'You won't get those here'.

I'm not sure she's understood me, but she nods and murmurs, 'Ok, thank you'. A queue has formed behind her and a man near the front is sighing loudly, tapping his foot. She turns to leave, and I watch her pass him, then the row of newspapers. I wonder if she's noticed his hard stare or the newspaper headlines. MIGRANT INVASION.

'Next'.

Two weeks later I'm waiting for my bus home, wrecked after a long day of stocktaking, standing on the till, Stevie melting my head about the new car he's just bought on finance. It starts pissing it down, and those of us at the stop huddle under the bus shelter, staring through the rain at the sign outside the church across the road: PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD. Cheery. A boy is standing on his own a little way from the shelter, hood up. I realise it's the kid from the house down the street—younger than I thought, twelve, maybe thirteen. Onboard he sits at the front near the driver, well away from the messers at the back. It's warm and stuffy, and I start to drift off, almost missing my stop. Stumbling onto the pavement, I spot the woman in the headscarf standing under the bus shelter, waiting for the boy. She catches my eye and her mouth starts to open as if to speak. I turn away quickly.

It's still raining the next day and the shop is quiet. Half-starved, I decide to chance a few bites of my lunch while no-one's about. I've just taken a mouthful of my sandwich when she appears again, standing at the counter with milk and a bar of chocolate. I hadn't even heard her come in. She gestures towards the chocolate—'My son, Ali, he love it'.

I nod, chew my white bread as fast as I can.

'Please,' she says, smiling gently, 'Enjoy your food. Or "sahtain", in my language'.

Scundered, I gulp it down, pretending I haven't heard her, but during my break I find myself whispering the word in the toilet mirror. *Sahtain*.

I'd always liked languages, doing well in them at A-Level, getting into university to do French and Spanish. First in my family to go. Neither of my parents had been interested in school, Ma a cleaner, Da a welder at the shipyard. He'd come home and eat his dinner every night in silence, head down, silent, never really with us. But he was proud as punch that his wee girl was going to university, bragging about it to anyone who'd listen. Raised all our expectations so high that when the inevitable crash came, it came hard.

A night out a few months into second year. The after-party, a drunken fumble, a missed period. Two blue lines confirming the worst six weeks later. I spent most of my student grant getting over to England to deal with it and dropped out of uni soon after.

Twelve years ago.

I think of Ali—about twelve. Tell myself to wise up and get back to work.

Weeks go by without seeing any of them. I find myself wondering what Ali's parents do all day, why they aren't out working. Not much work in them, if my newsfeed is anything to go by. Then, one Friday in late October, I spot her sitting a few seats ahead of me on the bus. When we get off, I

keep my distance. She's carrying two plastic bags full of shopping, and as she turns onto the estate a lemon tumbles from one of them without her noticing. It rolls down the slope towards me. Without thinking, I pick it up, jog after her, and tap her on the shoulder. She turns, and I'm shocked by the fear in her eyes. The fear quickly turns to relief when she sees it's only me. I suddenly feel like an *eejit*, standing there with the single lemon in my hand.

'You ... dropped this'.

Her face breaks into a smile. 'Oh, thank you very much!'

She looks so grateful that I can't help but feel pleased. 'No bother'.

She's starting to respond when I see a curtain move in the front window of the house behind her. Mumbling an excuse, I cut her off, gesture vaguely up the street. Hurry home.

It's not often I have the weekend off. I want to enjoy it, but there's a loneliness in it that's hard to shake. I'm sitting in the living room on Saturday afternoon, scrolling through Instagram, when the doorbell rings.

I stiffen. Wait.

When it rings again, I walk out to the hallway. Open the front door slowly. I relax when I see it's herself. She's carrying a white bowl of something, which she presses into my unwilling hands.

'This ... for you. I am Afnan. And you ...?'

I hesitate, settle for my full name—one which I hate and rarely use, but which feels suitably formal. 'Rosemary'.

She smiles. 'Rose'.

I go to correct her but decide not to drag this out any longer than necessary, pointing to the bowl instead. ‘Thanks for this, but really there’s no need...’

She shakes her head. ‘Please, you try. It is *makdous*. We make with...’ She produces her phone and types something in. The same disembodied voice floats out—‘Egg-plant’.

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. ‘Aubergine, you mean!’

She asks me to say it again, and we repeat it a few times until I catch myself on. This isn’t a bloody English lesson. ‘Better be getting back to...’ I gesture inside. ‘And thank you’.

‘My pleasure’.

I step back and close the door. Watch the shape of her get smaller through the frosted glass.

Against my better judgement, I find that the *makdous* is delicious—baby aubergines with crunchy walnuts, sweet red peppers, tangy garlic, and red-hot chilli. I wonder where on earth she found baby aubergines in Belfast. It’s near the end of the month and I’ve very little fresh food in, so stretch them as far as I can, eating them first with rice, then with bread. The empty bowl sits on my kitchen counter for weeks. Every time I go to return it, something stops me.

It’s almost the end of November, and I’m on my way home from work when I see that someone’s spray-painted something on Afnan’s house: LOCALS ONLY. Before I know it, I’ve gone inside, grabbed the bowl off the kitchen counter, and marched round there. Afnan comes to the door, adjusting her headscarf as she opens it. Her skin is sickly pale, and there are dark circles beneath her eyes. She invites me in, but I tell her I should be getting on, offer over the bowl. She asks what I thought of the *makdous*. ‘Delicious,’ I say, glimpsing a sparse room—a single sofa, a bookcase with no books, a damp stain spreading across one corner of the ceiling. I ask where her husband is. A shadow passes over her face.

‘He is out,’ she says, and offers no explanation.

Christmas is coming. I’ve gone into town to do a few messages, regretting it the minute I step off the bus. The place is heaving. The fella on the corner with the loudspeaker is especially fired up today, shouting louder than usual something about Bethlehem and, bizarrely, the end of the world.

I’m in the fruit and veg aisle at the supermarket when I notice a young couple ahead. The woman is pregnant and wearing a headscarf, her bearded partner in a black leather jacket. An older white man and woman are standing nearby, glancing at them with disapproval, shaking their heads as if offended by their presence. The man mutters something and the woman responds, loudly, ‘Aye, right enough. You never know what he could have under that jacket.’ They move off towards the dairy section. Stomach twisting, I shuffle towards the oranges, carefully avoiding eye contact with the young couple.

And then I see them, packaged in small plastic cartons: pomegranate seeds. An extravagance I can’t afford. But I know immediately I’m going to buy two cartons. The second I get home, I open one and use my fingers to eat each seed individually, savouring their clear, sharp sweetness. The other I bring to Afnan.

She’s delighted, invites me in again. This time, I accept. She serves me black tea and small syrupy pastries stuffed with nuts, saying she got them from a Turkish shop a few streets away. I admit I had no idea we even had one of those.

I ask what brought her family here. In broken English, with the help of a translation app on her phone, she explains why they left their country. This house, she says, is the third they’ve lived in since arriving five years ago. So far, it’s the best—a bit of graffiti preferable to the rats in the first place, fireworks shoved through the letterbox of the second.

We see each other again. And again. In time, she tells me that she had a good job in her country. That not working feels a bit like dying—endless days without colour. That her husband, Hisham, goes out for hours on end, anything to avoid thinking about what he's left behind. Comes home like a zombie. Angry sometimes. I think of my Da and tell her about him. She talks about Ali, says she worries about him, wishes she'd been able to give him a better childhood.

She discovers the English classes run by a charity in a church hall down the road. Eventually, she convinces me to get involved, help with the teaching. I go along, reluctantly at first, but get into the swing of things surprisingly quickly. I meet people who've exchanged one beautiful, fucked-up place—Syria, Palestine, Iran, Eritrea, Yemen, Sudan, Ukraine, Somalia—for another.

The charity organises an international food festival. A few locals rip down the sign for it, gather outside the hall to protest.

The following summer, we take a coach trip to Strangford Lough. Dip our feet in puddles of rain and seawater, watch the sun sink over the grey, unbroken sweep of the Mourne Mountains. Lilac and lavender, pink, blue, cream, gold and amber—a dazzling cliché needing no translation. We feel joy. See it reflected in each other's faces, suddenly familiar.



The Round Table

Peter Mac Donnchadha
University College Cork

After a meeting the air remains heavy around such a table, as though the action of the spoken word has left a marked impression. Later, when the room has settled, the empty table will beckon more to sit and talk. While we might think of response from the point of view of the individual, reflecting on the situation and taking action, we should consider its impact on the built environment. A table and other furnishings chosen to facilitate response, and the atmosphere thus created. As such, an empty round table conveys a feeling of incongruousness, an unnatural stillness.



The Round Table

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The Service Area

Peter Mac Donnchadha

University College Cork

During the first year of my PhD, I worked in a shop that rented a unit in a city centre shopping centre. The photograph below depicts the service area around the back of said shopping centre, where the bins were kept. While this was a grotty and uninviting place at first, it offered staff a quiet place to rest for a moment. As such, it became a place for quick smoke breaks, casual conversation and quiet reflection. Over time I came to see a type of beauty in the place, rooted in its human connections and calm, oasis-like quality.



The Service Area

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The Year of the Piano

Clay Darcy

Technological University Dublin

This self-portrait echoes, and pays homage to, the late Sean Keating's work 'Elijah and the Ravens' (1932). Darcy's 'The Year of the Piano' (2024) borrows from Keating's composition to create a work that is centred on the idea of reflection. The painting is both a response to Keating's work and a response to the experiences of the artist in a given year. The painting's subject is depicted startled in a moment of reflection, his right hand held contemplatively to his right ear, his left hand reaching out toward the action of the ravens behind him. The subject's gesture suggests he is reaching out to capture an idea gifted to him by visiting ravens.



The Year of the Piano (Oil on Canvas)

© 2025 Clay Darcy



Reflections on the River Lee

Natasha Dukelow
University College Cork

In this series of images, evening light settles on the River Lee as it winds through the north-eastern part of University College Cork’s (UCC) campus. Taken from the Alumni Bridge, which connects Western Road to the campus through the college gates,¹ they capture the arboreal interplay along the banks of the river. Trees are mirrored on the river’s surface, where the light of a darkening sky and shifting patterns ripple through the reflections. This stretch of the river belongs to one of the two branches that form further upstream, near UCC’s Mardyke Arena. These branches then continue on to surround the central island that the city of Cork is built on. These images, taken on a Samsung S21, were recorded just before 21:00 on an April evening in 2025, respond to the past and reflect on the river’s enduring presence: they act as an engagement that brings the theme “Response: Reflection and Action” to life.

The Lee has its source in the Shehy mountains near Gougane Barra, a place steeped in legend. The National Folklore Collection preserves some charming folkloric stories that recount how the River Lee is said to have received its name. Although there is variation, the common theme is that a lake-dwelling creature, varyingly described as a “large animal”, “serpent”, “snake”, or “a big eel” (The Schools Collection: vol. 348, p. 148; vol. 281, p. 20; vol. 283, p. 437; vol. 378, p. 159; The Main Manuscript Collection, vol. 536, p. 549) was spotted lying in the water, prompting the exclamation “Tá sé in a Luighe”, or a similar phrase.

The eponymous Finbarr of Gougane Barra (*Guagán Barra*, meaning ‘the (rock-)cranny of Barra’; Logainm.ie) also features in these tales and sometimes plays a role in the formation of the river itself. One describes how the people that lived near the lake at Gougane Barra sought out St Finbarr, terrified of the serpent. The story notes that “there was no river flowing out of the lake then”, but when the saint cursed the serpent, it began

¹ UCC’s Heritage Services have compiled several pieces on the different bridges at this site, including images of earlier bridge structures. See the further reading section.

to make its way towards the sea, carving a channel behind it as it went, which allowed the water to run out of the lake and form a river. Upon reaching the sea, the serpent drowned (Schools' Collection, vol. 378, pp. 158–159).

Other tales note that it was the serpent's offence against the saint that led to its banishment. According to one story, the "monster appeared while St. Finbarr was sprinkling a crowd with holy water and snatched the vessel containing it out of the Saint's hand", resulting in the creature's expulsion from the area (Schools' Collection, vol. 341, pp. 591–592). Another tale relates how "for years [the snake] never molested anyone", but this respite ended when it interrupted a mass celebrated by Finbarr,

thrust[ing] his long neck in though an open window in the little church and snatch[ing] the Chalice from the altar. (The School's Collection, vol. 283, p. 437)

The snake retreated and the congregation "pelted the lake with stones", which provoked laughter from the creature. St Finbarr appeared, ringing the altar bell, which drove the snake down the river channel—notably, the river is already seemingly formed in this version and provides escape rather than being created by the serpent. The story ends with the snake emerging onto the riverbank near the mouth of the Lee, where Finbarr killed him, recovered his chalice and built his great monastery at Cork (The Schools' Collection, vol. 283, p. 437).

While reports of lake-dwelling monsters naturally invite scepticism, it is not only the folklore that raises questions of historicity. The very existence of a distinct Finbarr of Cork has also been called into question. Pádraig Ó Riain (1977; 1982; 1985; 1991, 1997) has argued that the figure known as St Finbarr is in fact a manifestation of the cult of St Finnian, the original of which grew up at Movilla in Co. Down before spreading across the island.² However, this interpretation is not universally accepted (e.g. Dumville, 1997) and in the words of Henry Jeffries (2004, p. 9) "the case against the saint's existence is unproven".³

² For further discussion see esp. Ó Riain, 1994, pp. ix–x; 2025, pp. 344–345.

³ For an overview of the scholarly debate, see Jeffries, 2004, pp. 9–14, who ultimately adopts an agnostic position on the matter due to the limited evidence available.

Nonetheless, quite apart from any uncertainty surrounding the existence of a historical St Finbarr of Cork, the narratives associated with his life and cult continue to resonate in the popular imagination. Standing on the banks of the Lee at UCC, one is prompted to reflect not only on the images mirrored on the water's surface, but also on the centuries of stories and tradition that have become intertwined with the river, the city and the university on its banks. UCC's motto, "Where Finbarr taught, let Munster learn", both reflects how deeply these legacies are embedded and stands as a direct response to their influence.



Reflections on the River Lee

©Natasha Dukelow

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- “[The Schools’ Collection, Volume 0281, Page 020](#)” by Dúchas © National Folklore Collection, UCD.
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[“The School’s Collection, Volume 0378, Page 158–159”](#) by Dúchas ©
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Through the Lens of Community: An Annotated Photo Essay of the 2025 Ballydehob Jazz Festival

W. John W. Morrow
University College Cork

The idyllic environment of Ballydehob (Gaeilge: *Béal Átha an Dá Chab*, meaning ‘mouth of the two river fords’), West Cork is the unlikely setting for one of Ireland’s most notable jazz festivals. And the Ballydehob Jazz Festival (BJF) is almost certainly the quirkiest. This tiny and quite lovely village stands on Roaringwater Bay on the Wild Atlantic Way and at the gateway to the Mizen Peninsula. Actors, Jeremy Irons and Sinéad Cusack look on from the towering splendour of Kilcoe Castle. The festival was started by local resident, John Fagan, in 2007, but in more recent times has come under the stewardship of Caroline and Joe O’Leary and a team of amazing community volunteers. The O’ Leary’s run Levis Corner House, a landmark pub and shop on Main Street. Regular gigs are hosted at Levis throughout the year. The couple have deep roots with the music industry and Joe was formerly frontman for the Cork Indie band, Fred.

The festival, now held annually on the May Bank Holiday weekend, has grown to become a milestone event on the Irish popular music landscape and as depicted in the photographs, provides a showcase for national and international jazz. The philosophy underpinning the festival is in part a response to the fractured nature of world politics. Joe O’Leary’s view is that:

With everything going on globally — cruelty, oppression, negativity — it feels more important than ever to gather, celebrate, and share joy. This festival is about freedom of expression, community, and making magic together.¹

What is strikingly evident is a community effort, catalysed by music, that reflects Joe and Caroline’s vision of humanity that is peaceful,

¹ <https://ballydehobjazzfestival.org/about/>.

respectful and inclusive. But that is the BJJ's charm. What is presented is excellent grass roots music that is accessible and fun. The event peaks with a New Orleans funeral style parade on late Sunday afternoon. There are huge ghostly, fantastical puppets, a marching band and every kind of flamboyant costume imaginable. Also, a coffin carried by some scary voodoo/zombie types and led by a spine-chilling marshal. A more eccentric shindig in all of Ireland is hard to imagine and it is tempting to speculate that the voodoo reference is poking fun at the church-led anti-jazz movement of the 1930s.



This scary, spine-chilling marshal leads the New Orleans-style funeral parade for the festival's climax.



Magnificent ghostly puppets and fantastical animals feature in the event's famous New Orleans style funeral parade. Surely the most quirky and fun festival ever!



The horn section of Montpelier-based, Canibal Dandies, power the parade.



The Canibal Dandies drummers provide the beat.



Eccentric revellers.



Room with a view.



London resident, Leonie Evans delivers a set of jazz-influenced, unique, self-penned songs.



Benji Bower, together with his Terra Collective Orchestra present a fabulous concert of jazz-inspired ambient art music.



The iconic twelve-arched railway viaduct crosses the River Bawnakeane at Ballydehob, West Cork. Literal reflections in a serene environment.

