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‘Bubbles of joy’: Moments of Pleasure in recent Northern Irish Culture¹

Caroline Magennis

‘Pleasure can get out of hand’.²

It might be stating the obvious to assert that Irish literary and cultural criticism is in thrall to trauma, violence and a reconsideration of the most contested elements of the past. Critical texts often use psychoanalytic and deconstructive frameworks, including the work of Cathy Caruth and Dominic Le Capra in their analysis.³ There are intellectual and institutional imperatives for this focus, and comparative perspectives are often thought to yield a way out of Irish exceptionalism, but an over-deterministic focus on a painful past has come to dominate criticism on Northern texts. In this age of the academic funding imperative, particularly in the British climate with the impact agenda, many projects have sprung up to discuss ‘dealing with the past’ and the commemoration of violent events.⁴ There is a danger that literature and culture have become used in instrumental ways, to discuss what they can tell us about the politics of the author or a particular historical moment and they are often read as palliatives for perceived ethical gaps in a flawed process. The frustration is palpable and understandable; critics want literature to do things that politicians in Northern Ireland seem unable or unwilling to do. But, quite often in these analyses, literature is not set within its formal contexts and culture is expected to do transformative ethical and political work. This impulse has also led to those texts which are seen to engage most directly with political violence receiving not only disproportionate critical attention, but also being widely taught to ‘sex up’ courses on Northern Irish culture. Through this process, trauma texts come to dominate the focus of Northern Irish literary scholarship, while texts which speak to broader political questions are elided from the cultural landscape. Of course, this goes to the heart of a fundamental issue of academic value: what critical objects are worthy of study and why? What is considered to be a ‘serious’ object of academic inquiry in this area and who gets to speak for these objects?

While a focus on trauma is perhaps natural in this political and social context, it is not sufficient to explain contemporary Northern Irish culture’s engagement with history, politics and sexuality. Consequently, this essay advocates for something of a critical turn – a turn towards representation of pleasure in Northern Irish texts. Moments of pleasure within literature and culture will be examined as a space for exploration and contestation of hegemonic ideas of home, sexuality and political life. However, while undertaking this

reassessment we must be careful not to set up a false dichotomy between a ‘pleasure text’ and a ‘trauma text’: Northern Irish literature and culture has moments of both, often situated side-by-side. The issue here, then, is not with texts but with *readings*, and the aim is not to replicate one over-deterministic critical practice with another. Instead I propose we seek out moments of pleasure and let them stand beside moments of pain, to do justice to the myriad affective states expressed by Northern Irish writers. This essay will consider depictions of pleasure in a selection of recent texts which are written by authors from Northern Ireland and which engage directly with both this geographical context and also with pleasure in the ‘post’-conflict era: Glenn Patterson’s novel *The Rest Just Follows* (2014), Billy Cowan’s play *Still Ill* (2014) and Lucy Caldwell’s short story collection *Multitudes* (2016). The focus will be on the depiction of pleasure, particularly sexual, to see whether these texts offer new ways of being an erotic subject in the changed political climate, or whether the sexual charge still lies in the fissures of unresolved conflict. On this, I follow Laura Frost’s reading of ‘pleasure as a bodily, individual experience that is simultaneously located in a social field as well as, most importantly, a textual one’.⁵ This essay will situate Northern Irish pleasure in its social and textual contexts and suggest that there is a ‘new pleasure’ that has emerged in Northern Irish texts.

Alexander Beaumont discusses how a representational burden was felt on British fiction during the decline of leftist politics in the 1980s as ‘the expectation placed on expressive culture to do the work of political action’. However, he notes that ‘today, the British novel is frequently marked by structures of failed utopianism, frustrated or incomplete experiments and even withdrawal and quietism’.⁶ Beaumont’s identification of the consequences of critical expectations on British fiction can be compared to the current situation in Northern Ireland, and we must guard against the ossifying effects of wanting literature to fit into our critical and political paradigms. The distinction should be drawn between these sort of broad, political utopian projects and the generative possibilities espoused by Eve Sedgwick in her essay, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’ (2003).⁷ As Robyn Wiegman summarises, Sedgwick’s approach to reading and recovering is:

about learning how to build small worlds of sustenance that cultivate a different present and future for the losses one has suffered. You could say that it's about loving what hurts but instead of using that knowledge to prepare for a vigilant stand against repetition, it responds to the future with an affirmative richness.⁸

In what follows I will consider how contemporary Northern Irish culture can create these ‘small worlds of sustenance’ and how writing about the past also has the potential to foreground intimacy in a body of work more normally associated with trauma and violence. In this context the writing of mutually enjoyable intimate encounters, which will be broadly conceived of as ‘pleasures’, has the power to realign traditional cultural narratives of sexuality, family and the domestic. These representations stand against what we might call the ‘melancholic erotic’ in Northern Irish writing: where intimacy is asked to repeatedly stand in for the politics of the Troubles. However, there could be the suggestion that this is merely replacing one set of ossifying representations for another, and expecting the erotic to be a political agent. Instead, we can think of the experiments of pleasure as moments which do not have to stand for anything else but themselves. Pleasure becomes an easy metonym only when it is written in purely orgasmic terms, that is as an end in itself.

Laura Frost notes that ‘in the same way that an orgasm-centred theory of sexuality does not account for vast registers of eroticism, the idea of pleasure as a performance that has ended or a dam that has burst imposes false borders on the experience’⁹. The space between desire and the traditional ideas of satiation (through climax) can be written as an experimental place of connection and collaboration. A criticism aware to the powers of pleasure in Northern Ireland will be alert to the imposition of these ‘false borders’ in more ways than one. This essay will argue that beginning to account for these ‘vast registers of eroticism’ (devoid of false borders) is exceptionally powerful in Northern Ireland if we want to loosen the representational stranglehold on sexuality. These moments cannot be forced to into dominant reading paradigms but can, instead, be aberrations in texts which have been read as straightforwardly political. I want to follow what in *Time Binds* (2010), Elizabeth Freeman describes as ‘the unintelligible or resistant moment’ alongside how Virginia Woolf uses the idea of the ‘moment’ in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), to convey a variety of temporally constrained pleasures.¹⁰ While Woolf’s repeated use of this term varies, it is in her iconic encounter with Sally Seton (‘Only for a moment; but it was enough’) where the moment of pleasure has the sort of power Freeman discusses.¹¹ For Woolf’s characters, these moments are as much about the realisation of pleasure than being lost in a moment, the pleasure is one of recognition. Of course, the spectre of World War One recurs throughout Woolf’s novel, and this pleasure/trauma representational bind is also prevalent in Northern Irish cultural context.

Pleasures may be politically incorrect, we may find pleasure in trauma, the meaning of an event may shift and change over time, what once gave us pleasure may no longer hold appeal, particularly under scrutiny. Lauren Berlant reminds us that, in criticism, there ‘is

nothing more alienating than having one's pleasures disputed by someone with a theory'.¹² Literature and culture are sites where we consume for pleasure but also see pleasure represented. That is, to follow Roland Barthes, both the pleasures *in* the text and the pleasure *of* the text. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) he distinguishes between Plaisir/Pleasure as 'euphoria, fulfilment, comfort' from jouissance/Bliss as 'shock, disturbance, even loss'.¹³ However, this term is also used by French feminist thinkers to unpack what they see as the radical power of female sexuality, such as in Helene Cixous' essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* as 'that sublime affect which shatters or overwhelms the subject's stability in language, identity and therefore also in society. In this conceptualization, women are positioned to generate a radically different kind of language, law and desire'.¹⁴

However, Barthes, Cixous and Kristeva foreground the more extreme sensation rather than explore the symbolic potential of 'euphoria, fulfilment, comfort' to be politically transgressive. To write about bliss can be radical, but to examine everyday intimate life in culture might also reveal a great deal. Frost notes that pleasure is 'semantically unconstrained and apparently ahistorical, although close attention to the way the word is deployed will reveal that one era's pleasure is not the same as another's'.¹⁵ It is this ambivalent historicity of pleasure that I want to draw out: how it lives in the place between cultural construction and 'pure' feeling. One encounter can waver between these modes as we slip in out of our heads and bodies. A 'moment' of pleasure, then, can be powerful indeed, particularly in its relationship to ideas around analysis: we have a developed psycho-critical apparatus to discuss desire and a physiological language for orgasm, but less debated is the broader construction of erotic pleasure with and without the assumed end.

If pleasure is something which is difficult to critically discuss, or resistant, this process is even more fraught in a society where the dominant critical paradigm is the discussion of trauma. The challenge for this criticism is how to attend to the present moment and also gesture towards futurity. This paradox is well expressed by Heather Love in *Feeling Backwards* (2007) where she argues that a 'central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma and violence'.¹⁶ To consider how culture might represent Northern Irish intimate life we can bear Love's ideas about how queer culture responds to its painful past in mind. Culture can respond to this imperative: it can move beyond this paradigm, be haunted by it or develop new forms of writing about intimate life. It is, of course, complex to foreground pleasure while still acknowledging and respecting the years of suffering in Northern Ireland. Ireland North and

South has a complex judicial and cultural relationship to pleasure in addition to the mainstream biopolitics by which populations are managed. Fintan Walsh, for example, notes ‘the centrality of gender and sexual power dynamics to the maintenance of social and political stability in the North’.¹⁷ Indeed, instances of the perceived danger of sexuality are not hard to find in Northern Irish public life, whether the Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign or the recent controversy around Rihanna’s clothing when filming in Clandeboyne.¹⁸ However, this is obviously an over-simplistic stereotypical view of Northern Ireland as a sexually repressed society which does not necessarily map on to either culture or people’s lived experience.

Instead of thinking of all people in Northern Ireland are under the yoke of unassailable prohibition, we can turn instead to cultural representations where sexuality was so often used metonymically for sectarian politics – metonyms where the language of sensuality was not often co-opted. Turning towards pleasure as a critical practice should not negate anyone’s lived experience of violent conflict and the continuing legacy of the conflict. The two ideas do not have to be competing: discussing pleasure in culture does not lessen anyone else’s experience of victimhood, but it does raise some taboo questions about why, politically, pleasure is a taboo. In Northern Irish political discourse the language of desire/want/demand occurs quite frequently, but the language of bliss/satiation/fulfilment is less common. The Good Friday Agreement inaugurated a consociationalist political economy that relies on the tacit agreement that neither community has their political wishes fully satisfied. More so than most political settlements, the terms of Power Sharing in Northern Ireland has relied upon leaders from both communities claiming victory when, in truth, it was impossible to fulfil both national desires concomitantly. The status quo is maintained as long as both parties are satisfied with being dissatisfied. To describe positive, contented feelings, can feel inappropriate to the political moment; to claim that you’re experiencing pleasure can limit your political bargaining in the discourse of truth and reconciliation.

In addition to this frustrated body politic, the language of desire has a complex relationship with religious and national ideologies. The political power of sexuality in the Northern Irish experience has been detailed by Clair Wills, in *Improprieties* (1993). Wills notes that ‘maternal sexuality, prostitution, homosexuality, or simply explicit sex, sex for pleasure and adolescent sex – become ways of questioning the propriety of political processes, nationalist and unionist concepts of community, and the very basis of the idea of home’.¹⁹ When the denial of sexual autonomy and bodily rights is one of the few things

Northern Irish political parties have in common, small worlds of sustenance, small intimacies can be radical. This is not to say that the people of Northern Ireland must ‘fuck for peace’ but rather turn towards cultural representations of sexuality that resist the over-deterministic focus on one type of experience. As critics, we much embrace these improprieties as moments of pleasure that can refute totalising narratives of power and rethink the power of cultural depictions of intimate life.

Literature written during the Troubles used the love plot as a political metonym or used the erotic charge of the conflict in a way which often drew its sexual energy solely from asymmetries of power or the charge of the cross-community taboo. Widows were often fetishized, particularly by men who were implicated in their husband’s deaths, such as Marcella in *Cal* (1983), and female combatants on screen were depicted as highly sexualised, such as Jude in *The Crying Game* (1992). In particular, the novels of Eoin McNamee feature sexual encounters that have a complex relationship with the idea of pleasure, such as the ill-fated brothel in *The Ultras* (2004) or Victor Kelly’s relationships in *Resurrection Man* (1994). While that is in keeping with the highly stylised noir aesthetic of his crime fiction, the representational optics are clear: in these fictions, it is often the historical context that provides the erotic charge for the male subject and presumed reader. When it has occurred, Northern Irish textual pleasure has had a distinct focus on the male orgasm. Women’s writing such as Mary Beckett’s *Give Them Stones* (1987) and Anna Burns’ *No Bones* (2001), often, and for understandable reasons, equate sexuality with forced reproduction, abuse and traumatic pregnancy. This is for understandable reasons as it responds to the legacy of moral conservatism and silence around sexual violence in Northern Ireland.²⁰ But, to draw attention to representation of politically-charged sexuality is a certain kind of exceptionalism which ignores kinship with the exploration of this topic by British authors. For example, the explicit sexuality of Alan Hollinghurst’s novels, such as *The Line of Beauty* (2004), often exists with the spectre of AIDS. Similarly, Jeanette Winterson’s depiction of lesbian sexuality is set against the evangelical community in the North of England in *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985). Compared to Northern Ireland, then, authors from the British mainland are equally engaged in placing pleasure alongside political and social concerns. With this in mind, the analysis that follows will examine the moments of pleasure in three recent Northern Irish texts within their social and representational context.

The interplay of the politics of pleasure is explored in the work of Billy Cowan, a playwright from County Down whose plays have been performed in London, Birmingham and in theatres in Greater Manchester, including in the Contact theatre in Manchester and the

Lowry in Salford. Cowan's play *Still Ill*, follows the return of a gay exile to Strangford to find his brother, Dave, and sister-in-law, Elaine, running a sex shop with proceeds from drug dealing. Elaine claims she bribed the local 'Ulster says No brigade' with pornographic magazines and that 'We're now the sex an' drugs capital of the North. We have swinger nights down at The Oul Cross. And you'll love this... there's even a cruising ground for dirty old queers like yourself'.²¹ In this play, Cowan clearly sets out to excavate the secret pleasure seekers from suburban Northern Ireland and to expose the hypocrisy of the way in which the repression of sexuality is used for political gain. Tommy details his happy, bourgeois queer life in Manchester – he even has an allotment – but cannot resist the lure of his former teenage crush, Gary, and this despite the revelation that Gary is involved with the intimidation of Tommy's brother. Here, the traditional Troubles erotic of the 'sexy hard-man' is queered to the soundtrack of The Smiths, but as Gary sings 'There is a Light That Never Goes Out', Tommy resists this nostalgic imperative: 'The hunger strikes. The bombings. The Riots. The unemployment. Great stuff'.²² The tension in this encounter is between Gary wanting to unravel the minutiae of the past – re-enacting it in their adolescent outdoor adventures – and Tommy wanting to forget the past, a past linked with his mother rejecting him before her death. Finally, the rational, restrained Tommy breaks down his reserve and shares a tactile erotic memory:

I remember you lifting me up and kissing me on the forehead when I agreed that I Know It's Over was a far superior song to There's a Light That Never Goes Out. I remember the reflection of the fire in your pupils and thinking how fucking beautiful you were.²³

It transpires that during that fateful summer that Gary slept with nearly everyone they knew, but it is the legacy of paramilitary gang structures in Northern Ireland, rather than the homosexual love plot, that leads the play to its tragic dénouement.

Cowan's depiction of Northern Irish pleasure is complex, then, and demonstrates the continued hold of the Troubles taboo over the depiction of eroticism in Northern Ireland. Tommy and Gary are each other's fetish: Tommy as the bourgeois queer migrant offers Gary the promise of a different lifestyle while Gary as the queer hard-man allows Tommy to reconcile his sexual awakening in Northern Ireland to the present moment. As noted earlier: it was not that politically transgressive erotic encounters, such as Gary and Tommy's, were not happening but that they were not culturally depicted. Not every Loyalist enforcer was rigidly heterosexual: former UDA hitman Sam 'Skelly' McCrory is now a Gay Rights Campaigner

and Jim ‘Doris Day’ Grey was widely regarded to have been bisexual. However, the taboo over homosexual relationships is strong in both communities. Writing about the Save Ulster from Sodomy (1977) campaign, Sean Brady notes that for Ian Paisley:

Ulster, the hallowed province, had to be made fit for the second coming of Christ, and therefore needed ‘saving’ from sodomy. In a society riven by male-dominated violence and religious conflict, LGBT people at the very least would be wary about exploring their sexuality, and certainly emotions of guilt shaped and directed their lives, freedom of action and sense of agency.²⁴

While conflict taboos are still at the root of sexuality in *Still Ill*, the tension between Tommy and Gary can be read as symptomatic of a wider conflict: those who left Ireland during the Troubles and those who stayed. The story of the Irish homecoming is, of course, common to the point of cliché, but Cowan allows this story of domestic, intimate life to play as a queer melodrama. The pleasures in Cowan’s text contrast strongly with the rest of the narrative: they are punctures and interruptions in an otherwise standard Troubles drama plot about enforcers and conflicts of family loyalties. The queer sex in the play begins aggressively and fits in with traditional representations of sexuality in Northern Irish writing: ‘they start to make passionate, almost violent love’.²⁵ However, this initial violence is transformed into something approaching real intimacy or, at least, as much as the stage allows. The violence of the Troubles keeps intruding after intimate interludes, as public political life steps on private intimacies.

The sexual other that engenders the intimate encounters in the text is the presence of the North of England, through Tommy’s homecoming and the continued references to Steven Morrissey. Specific moments of pleasure (lyrical and acoustic) from Morrissey’s oeuvre are eroticised when Gary uses their adolescent charge in his seduction of Tommy: ‘a few crates a beer, my Smiths CDs and a couple a hundred of condoms’.²⁶ In this sense, Morrissey becomes a way for them to navigate their erotic lives, to make sense of their moments. The play represents a host of small intimacies from play wrestling to playing cards and bawdy jokes (‘Nah, my taste is in your arse’).²⁷ However, these moments of pleasure and queer potential with the narrative do not signal queer futurity. In Cowan’s drama, queer representational politics and the conventions of the Troubles drama intersect: the fatalistic catalyst is the spectre of the Troubles rather than of the AIDS epidemic. The play’s final moments sees the lovers torn apart by the threat of political violence, and an ambiguous,

possibly fatal, conclusion. Tommy's final cry is high melodrama filtered through the language of The Smiths: 'My eyes were closed and all I could see was you [...] It's always been you. [...] Tommy don't walk away! [...] Tommy! To die by yer side...'.²⁸ Before this, Gary had expressed intimacy to Tommy through sexual jokes, but here he expresses a painful vulnerability. This is filtered through that most fatalistic song, 'There is a Light That Never Goes Out', but instead of a double-decker bus, the legacy of the Troubles appears to be the agent that intervenes in intimacy. As we will see in Patterson's work, popular culture can offer a language for intimacy that is otherwise inaccessible in this political context.

Glenn Patterson has represented bodily and emotional intimacy throughout his writing life. His novels are almost exclusively set in Northern Ireland and deal with various periods of history, whether the decades long sweep on *Number 5* (2003), the birth of the Civil Rights movement in *The International* (1999), 19th-century shipbuilding in *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* (2012) and the DeLorean factory in *Gull* (2016). Yet, despite these ambitious engagements with history, all of these novels have been replete with intimate moments. All of these novels, even when they deal with the violence of the Troubles, feature characters who experience pleasurable moments. Patterson also co-wrote the screenplay for the film *Good Vibrations* (2012), one of the most notable expressions of Northern Irish joy on screen. Patterson's body of work, then, allows histories of pleasure and trauma to weave together but his work is often read over-deterministically for what it can tell us about a liberal Protestant tradition of writing²⁹. This, however, is to miss the texture and the complexity of his writing, which treats pleasure with the same narrative power as political violence. *The Rest Just Follows* (2014) deals with a broad swathe of history from the 1970s to the present day and offers a variety of pleasurable encounters. The novel spans the adolescence to middle age of Maxine, St John and Craig and is filled with nostalgic detail, from cigarette brands to fashion and film. Rather than a literary quotation, the title and epigraph is from Tracey Thorn's memoir *Bedsit Disco Queen* (2013) about the nature of adolescent friendship. While diverse sexual encounters are woven throughout the narrative, other connections are also foregrounded. This is not the heightened, politically symbolic coupling of earlier novels but the smaller intimacies of, for example, teeth brushing before sex or tea and biscuits in front of an electric fire. The significant events in the lives of the characters are their relationships, from family illnesses to new parenthood and infidelity.

Patterson's fiction is significant for the representation of the sort of improprieties that Wills saw as being so significant in poetry. But it is not the thrill of transgression but rather the deep ordinariness of sexual life that is remarkable in Patterson's writing. Gay characters

in his novels are not a plot device, or symbolic, rather they are just getting on with their erotic and quotidian lives. This is *plaisir* not *jouissance*. However, his novels are unique in male-authored Northern Irish writing for their representation of potent, active female desire. The adolescent sexuality in *The Rest Just Follows* positively crackles, particularly the sensory stimulation of Maxine's first fashionable haircut. The jukebox in the hairdressers 'was playing a song she had never till that moment heard but would ever associate with that day, that whole period of her life'³⁰. The song is Magazine's 'Shot by both Sides', which in a more traditional Troubles novel would be a loaded reference, but in this case functions as an ironic commentary on the expectations of popular culture references in Northern Irish fiction. Patterson details life in the hairdressers with relish: every song, every outfit and the 'cocktail' made in the hair-washing basin. As the male stylist Max circles Maxine, she takes pleasure in the details of his appearance: 'He wore a T-shirt ripped at the shoulders (his arms looked to have been knotted together from the discarded material) and a pair of red-and-black-striped jeans so tight you could see the shape of him like something on the butchery counter'.³¹ This intimate encounter is full of tactile, aural and visual pleasure, and the intimacy of the moment is carefully constructed: Maxine glimpses a nipple or an Adam's apple or catches Max's scent, she lets him completely reshape her appearance, to her eventual pleasure. It is significant that the last pleasure is Maxine's, as she stands in that iconic hairdressers and relishes her independence.

However, as well as these aesthetic pleasures, the novel also features some connections which also carry the charge of a more well-worn Northern Irish history. Craig, our revisionist historian turned Unionist politician, rolls a joint on RF Foster's book on Lord Randolph Churchill and also takes on his own dead mentor's work as the starting point for his PhD. He begins an affair with his former teacher's partner and this is part of a long tradition of what one might call the 'sexy widow' in Northern Irish fiction, where a young man is sexually initiated by a woman whose partner has died during the troubles. Patterson's language to describe their encounter is similar to Cowan's: 'It was frightening the way they went at one another, scratching and biting [...] and for a long time after they had rolled apart neither of them could bring themselves to speak'.³² This charge of history is further extended in Craig's encounters throughout the novel, with his infidelity to Maxine arising from his speaking engagements at peace-building conferences. However, this is not to say that representing pleasure linked to the Troubles is wrong, or regressive, or that people who experience such pleasures are inapposite. What is significant is that Patterson gives us a range of pleasures and desirous engagements with history: all of his characters suffer missed

connections or loss; they are affected by the political context to a greater or lesser degree, but all of them know intimate connections that cannot be read easily as political metonyms.

As new generations of writers emerge in Northern Ireland, new variants of pleasure have been explored. Lucy Caldwell is the author of three novels, *Where They were Missed* (2006), *The Meeting Point* (2011) and *All the Beggars Riding* (2013), which was chosen for Belfast's and Derry's 'One City One Book' initiative. Her novels, like Patterson's, are often dense with sensuality: *Where they Were Missed* has moments of heady teenage obsession which are observed in careful detail. *All the Beggars Riding* presents a daughter imagining her mother's seduction of her absentee father, right down to the negligee. This novel is deeply concerned with the power of connection and disconnection, and Lara's visceral identification with the city of Belfast as a sensual object is a central narrative catalyst. Under consideration here, though, will be a story from her 2016 collection *Multitudes*. The short story, formally, can be better equipped to consider moments of pleasure, since it does not always have the same narrative baggage as the novel where pleasures can often feel like interludes within the prose. The short story can be read as a self-contained unit, an enclosed structure that can carry the intensity of a pleasurable moment in a manner which would get fatiguing if held over 300 pages.

Lucy Caldwell's short story 'Here We Are' demonstrates both the possibilities of this genre as well as the power of the representation of female desiring subjects. The story centers around two schoolgirls who fall in love after being asked to perform a duet at a school concert. Angie's father is a staunch Unionist counsellor whose opprobrium eventually separates them. However, rather than focus on the ways in which the story carefully traces the structural operations of homophobia, the narrative concentrates on Belfast as a site of pleasure. The title, 'Here We Are' functions as the lovers' refrain, grounding their romance geographically. The city becomes another character in the lovers' tale, providing long walks from Cutters Wharf 'along the Lagan and through the Holylands; Palestine Street, Jerusalem Street, Damascus Street, Cairo Street [...] The tide is turning and a two-person canoe is skimming downriver, slate grey and quicksilver'.³³ The story, then, is replete with Belfast pleasures. Indeed, the narrative's most significant specter is not historical or political but rather an afternoon over coffee in the Other Place on Botanic Avenue where 'I felt as if my blood was singing – that sparks were shooting from me'.³⁴ This encounter is rendered in intimate detail, where the girls imagine an unselfconscious future where they can express their intimate desires.

When our narrator first begins to feel desire for Angie, she is unable to fully express her longing as anything other than a bodily sensation. Their exchanges before their sexual intimacy are fraught with sensual power as Caldwell deftly explores the all-consuming nature of adolescent desire and the power of moments of pleasure. Throughout the story, she represents lesbian sexuality as a joyous, unselfconscious pleasure: ‘We started giggling again, ridiculous bubbles of joy’³⁵. She repeatedly uses words like ‘easy’ and ‘free’, which is directly contrasted with their eventual shaming and break-up. Following the Marriage Equality March, she considers looking up the now-marriage Angela but, walking the streets of East Belfast in her dreams, decides that her desirous memories are enough. These moments are reminiscent of Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton’s carefree adolescent flirtation and are written by Caldwell as snapshots of possibility. Their moments of desire are playful and temporarily unconstrained by political forces. As critics, we do not want to render the pure, unconstrained joy that leaps off the page tawdry with an over-deterministic political reading of the politics of Unionist lesbianism. For Caldwell, pleasure and desire are utopian spaces where experimentation can flourish.

It is clear that, in these fictions published in the 2010s, certain key themes predominate. Adolescent sexual awakenings are set against the morally repressive political regime in Northern Ireland. Queer and non-reproductive sex occurs frequently, and it is difficult to make any one act among many, symbolic of political allegiance. Representations of sensuality, whether interpreted as improprieties or resistant moments, are rampant in recent Northern Irish writing but critical work has yet to catch up with this ‘new pleasure’ or to reclaim the texts from the past’s limiting paradigms. Cowen, Caldwell and Patterson demonstrate, at times, markedly different approaches to the interplay of sexuality and recent history. When set against a cultural and critical climate where sexuality is used in over-deterministic, instrumental ways these representations can challenge representational and interpretive norms. Berlant notes that ‘even if desire fails to find objects adequate to its aim, its errors can still produce pleasure: desire’s fundamental ruthlessness is a source of creativity that produces new optimism, new narratives of possibility, even erotic experimentality’.³⁶ With these directives in mind, we must not treat Northern Irish culture as an instrumental tool to do the ethical work of politicians. Instead we must listen out for small worlds of sustenance these texts contain, be it in new forms, new desires or new pleasures. Our critical work must take on the same impulse as this erotic experimentation.

Notes and References

- ¹ I would like to thank the London Irish Seminar at the Institute for English Studies, Senate House, for inviting me to present this work and to Christopher Vardy and Jane Kilby for their comments on drafts of this piece.
- ² Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 8.
- ³ Recent examples include: Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem's *The Literature of Northern Ireland: Spectral Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Shane Alcobia-Murphy, "'Snared by Words": Trauma and the Shoah in the Poetry of Medbh McGuckian', *Études Irlandaises*, 36-1 (2011), 109-120; and Robert F. Garratt, *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- ⁴ Recent examples include: Bill Rolston, 'Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland: The Current State of Play', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 8 (2013), 143-149; and John D. Brewer and Bernadette C. Hayes, 'Victimhood and Attitudes towards Dealing with the Legacy of a Violent Past: Northern Ireland as a Case Study', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 17.3 (2015), 512-530.
- ⁵ Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure*, p. 25.
- ⁶ Alexander Beaumont, *Contemporary British Fiction and The Cultural Politics Of Disenfranchisement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p. 2.
- ⁷ Eve Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123-153.
- ⁸ Robyn Wiegman, 'The Times We're In: Queer Feminist Criticism And The Reparative "Turn"', *Feminist Theory*, 15 (2014), 11.
- ⁹ Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure*, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke, 2010), p. xvi.
- ¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2000), p. 27.
- ¹² Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), p. 5.
- ¹³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure Of The Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p.19.
- ¹⁴ Berlant, *Desire/Love*, p. 59.
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