

PART(S) (W)HOLE:
Manifestations of Shame in Lesbian Poetry from
Ireland and New Zealand since 1982

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abstract

This creative/critical PhD examines the work of lesbian poets from Ireland and Aotearoa/New Zealand in order to demonstrate the creative energy made possible by their shared experience of and response to shame.

The creative part of the PhD comprises a poetry collection, *Small Town Quare*, and a solo piece of poet's theatre, *Catlicks*. In these creative works, I reflect on and respond to my own experiences of shame as an Irish-New Zealand lesbian poet.

The critical part of the thesis pinpoints how four other lesbian poets, two each from Ireland and Aotearoa/New Zealand, explore and respond to shame in their work. I argue against universalist readings of their poetry and, instead, show the importance of attending to their particular lesbian experiences of and responses to shame. While Mary Dorsey's work has been read in universalizing ways, I show how she writes against normative notions of the lyric tradition and strives to find a place for her antinormative desires in poetry. Her poetry is therefore most fruitfully read for its engagement with the particularities of lesbian experience, including those of shame. Similarly, I read Heather McPherson's poetry for the experience of shame that hides under the cover of her rage, which is politicised by her lesbian feminist reorientation and bolstered by a community of like-minded women. In reading Cherry Smyth's poetry, I show how experiences of shame in her work extend beyond her sexuality and intertwine with questions of home and identity that emerge from her Northern Irish upbringing and diasporic life in England. Rhian Gallagher's lesbian love poems cascade over the boundaries of private and public spheres to show how environment structures intimacy through the revealing and concealing poetics of shame. Finally, the exegesis explores how my own creative practice builds on and responds to the work of these four poets. In the exegesis, I break down the processes of my one-woman show *Catlicks* and full-length poetry collection *Small Town Quare* to show how shame intercepts and invigorates my creative process.

The creative/critical structure of this PhD is intended to interconnect the personal and creative elements of shame to show how it manifests in the lives and poetry of lesbian women.

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a note to the reader

There are multiple pathways of reading available to you from here: straight (follow the rules of academic reading), or more playful (have sideways relations to the rules). Serious reading in this thesis would take the following pathway: introduction, critical chapters, exegesis, *Catlicks*, *Small Town Quare*, conclusion. Multiple playful pathways are also available, such as: introduction, exegesis, *Catlicks*, critical chapters, *Small Town Quare*, conclusion. Or you could alternate your reading between the critical chapters and parts of the creative work. You are free to choose your own orientation point(s).

Link to *Catlicks*: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jg4Q_WT2L1II7SI-rjOenRELMHwnrSQO/view?usp=sharing

I take part, I see and hear the whole.

Walt Whitman, Section 33, *Song of Myself*

Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love.

Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*

Shame distinguishes the queer from the normal, not because there is anything inherently shameful about having deviant desire or engaging in deviant acts, but because shame adheres to (or is supposed to adhere to) any position of social alienation or nonconformity. Shame thus seems especially useful to a radical queer politics for three main reasons: (1) it has the potential to organize a discourse of queer counter publicity, as opposed to the mainstream discourse of pride; (2) it provides the basis for a collective queer identity, spanning difference in age, race, gender, ability, and sexual practice; and (3) it redirects attention away from internal antagonisms with the gay community to a more relevant divide that is, between heteronormative and queer sectors of society.

Jennifer Moon, "Gay Shame and the Politics of Identity"

0 / introduction

Maps

A guest on a podcast I listen to has no sense of direction so she buys a compass. The compass has a smashed face. She does not know how to use it but wears it around her neck regardless and feels less lost. I contemplate getting a compass tattooed on my hand. My tattoo artist tells me that it is difficult to get a round shape on a hand. I get a heart between my breasts instead. The edges bleed. The edges of this thesis bleed, blur, move between close reading, theory, poetry and play to pose a series of questions: How does the lesbian body speak, move, live, love in lyric poetry? Does lesbian poetry belong in the lyric tradition? Is the state of being a lesbian poet outside of the lyric experience? How does shame manifest in the poetry of lesbians from Ireland and Aotearoa/New Zealand? The drive of reorientation, to break free from heteropatriarchal normativity, encouraged all the poets in this thesis to contemplate these questions. Reorientation to lesbianism allowed us all to objectively gaze at the shame internalised through systems of heteropatriarchal oppression. In society and in lyric poetry, shame similarly manifests in the body (form), movement (rhythm), desire (I/you), and deviance (irregularity). All the poets in this thesis have used shame as a creative tool to search for a common language with other lesbian poets, to install ourselves into a tradition that has questioned the confines of both the patriarchy and lyric poetry, particularly since the rise of second-wave feminism.

In 1982, the first poetry collection was published by an out lesbian in both Ireland and Aotearoa/New Zealand, by Mary Dorcey and Heather McPherson respectively. Cherry Smyth (Northern Ireland) and Rhian Gallagher (New Zealand) both published their first collections in the early 2000s when they were both living in London. Smyth still lives in London, whereas Gallagher returned to Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2006 after 18 years. I chose Dorcey, McPherson, Smyth and Gallagher to represent the intergenerational framework of lesbianism within this thesis and the connections between Ireland and Aotearoa/New Zealand. My voice, creatively, represents the millennial generation, born after second-wave feminism and maturing in the afterglow of queer theory. I decided on poets from Ireland and Aotearoa/New Zealand because of multiple crossovers:

1. Parallel timelines for the publishing of out lesbian poets (later than other Anglo countries such as the US or UK);

2. Similar sized, relatively socially conservative societies that underwent dramatic social change over the last 40 years;
3. A common tendency for lesbian poets to look and move overseas to places (especially London) in which it was easier to find community and avoid prejudice;
4. A somewhat shared experience of British colonialism that complicates this appeal of the metropolis;
5. My position as an Irish, Aotearoa/NZ based poet.

All four poets reoriented away from heterosexuality causing them to strive towards a lesbian lyric voice and to physically travel to find that voice, that multifarious subjectivity. I had to leave Ireland to find that voice and Aotearoa/New Zealand poetry was pivotal in that discovery. This is a story shared by many queers and writers historically in Aotearoa and Ireland with both countries, in many ways, isolated and insular. These poets troubled my mind to think intergenerationally, to consider beyond the page, beyond the truth of an autobiographical 'I' or lyric 'I,' to think of the gestures and orientations that come to represent the contemporary lesbian poet and question their relation to past generations.

Every poet in this thesis shares a lesbian worldview, feminist politics, and expresses with lyrical exposure to playfully court shame. I chose these poets because I believe there is not enough, if anything, critically written about each of them. I want to give them my attention, the kind of attention often lacking regarding the work of lesbian poets living on the fringes of world poetry. I predominantly chose earlier poems (barring 'Gaze' by Gallagher) because these poems speak to an earlier, more nascent experience of lesbianism that speaks to my experience as it stands at this time. All four poets work within the tradition of lyric poetry with a distinctly lesbian language and a queer subjective fluidity. They represent a lesbian lyric voice that seeks to use shame as a tactic of exposure. They reveal themselves and seek out shame in the lyric as a mechanism of freedom. All four poets share a preoccupation with the ways shame manifests in their lives, their movements, their bodies, their relationships, their futures, their lyrics.

Creating this thesis has made me consider my queer objection to normativity and how before my sexual reorientation, I always felt out of place within the desires of those around me. Queer, performativity and shame are linked as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued in *Tendencies* that 'queer' doesn't just signify homosexual but, "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be*

made) to signify monolithically” (1993, 8). Unlike my friends and family, I had no desire to build a house, buy a house, have a child, a corporate career, or even to drive a car. My dad and I have discussed how many Irish people have a complicated relationship to house/land ownership because of intergenerational trauma related to *an Gorta Mór* (the Great Famine) and colonisation. My antinormative desires are often met with other people’s idea of what it means to be mature, to grow up. Some thought, or hoped, I would grow out of not desiring normativity, believing that succumbing to normativity equates to maturity. I see in universalist readings of queer poetry this same desire for maturity, a desire to approach poetry without confronting childish affects like shame or rage, or sexual explicitness. There exists a disavowal of the playfulness open to us all when considering the possibilities of rebelling against what is expected. A queer life is one that offers a critique of the existing forms of family and kinship, of ways of moving and acting in the world. The diasporic body is one that is always coming home, always disorientated, always choosing between family and kinship, always changing. I want to draw attention towards the bodies of Dorcey, McPherson, Smyth, and Gallagher, towards their bodies of work.

As much as shame seeks to avert itself—there is no feeling more painful—shame seeks to confess. To be heard, to be borne by another, to find a witness—shame seeks to be allowed the very conditions denied it in its rupture—recognition by another. For shame arises from a failure to be recognised (Biddle 1997, 227).

At the beginning, I unconsciously used the term confessional as a descriptor for the work of poets in this thesis. This thesis is not about condemnation or about seeking absolution. In the introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, Juliana Spahr writes that the word lyric refers to, “to interiority and/or intimate speech that avoids confession, clear speech, or common sense. . . the avoidance of linear narrative development of meditative confessionalism, and of singular voice” (Spahr 2002, 2). Rachel Zucker claims Confessionalistic poetry “attempts to transcend the personal” not due to embarrassment but, “in the service of larger subjects, subjects that are not limited to particularities of the poet’s life” (Zucker 2014, n.p.). I am inherently interested in this thesis in the particularities of the poet’s life. That these writers are lesbians is crucial to their creative development. I find that people seem to be under the impression that the representation of a queer sexuality in a writer’s biography automatically detracts from their technical skill. On the contrary, this identity is important to their achievements within the

dominant culture of their generation. The focus here is on shame, on the way in which poets write about manifestations of shame in their work because of their lived experiences as lesbian women. Shame in this sense motivates creative work to the extent of opening a dialogue with that shame, and challenging societal conventions which are dominated by heteropatriarchal constraints. Shame, according to Kaye Mitchell, is an emotion of self-assessment, “a culturally pervasive affect with particular pertinence for understanding contemporary constructions of gendered subjectivity, expressions and experiences of sexual desire, the complexities of embodiment, and social processes of ‘othering’” (2020, 1). Dorsey, McPherson, Smyth, and Gallagher use the constraints of shame to expand the space of the page to allow others to feel seen, recognised. These poets provide a mirroring of experience, a feeling of sameness that fills voids of shame in my personhood and poetry. These voids of difference made me feel ashamed, made me feel out of place, disorientated, homeless. When I came out, my mother said to my brother that it was sad. He asked her what she meant by that and she said being gay was such a lonely life. It is this presumed shame, isolation and difference that I am attempting to push back against and to revalue in this thesis, to draw strength from a shared poetics of shame. These poets come from opposite ends of the world and yet share in a commonality *because* of lesbianism. Without shame as a creative common denominator in the lesbian lyric language examined in this project, I would not have gained the erotic energy to create and collaborate in this lesbian language expansion.

eyes

Lyric shame is a shameful identification with the poetic genre of the lyric, with the expression of the lyric ‘I.’ Gillian White argues that the lyric mode is adopted by people following a personal shift, a willingness to share the personal, a want to share embarrassment/shame. The lyric is unforgiving, there is no room to hide within its frame, its economy, its body. What is “ashamed to speak” is not the poet ashamed of exposure but, “a poem ashamedly entangled in an identification of ‘writing’ with ‘speech’ that has described but also informed conventions of first-person poetic practice and lyric reading since the early nineteenth century” (2014, 10). The life of a lesbian poet involves exposure, on and off the page. We must come out continuously following our personal shift, our reorientation to lesbianism. The predominant shameful feelings in this project revolve around the lyric ‘I,’ around assumed gender and sexuality in poetry. With Carmen Maria Machado, I want to

expose the holes in lesbian representation in literary criticism, especially regarding non-US based older poets and question:

What is the topography of these holes? Where do the lacunae live? How do we move toward wholeness? How do we do right by the wronged people of the past without physical evidence of their suffering? How do we direct our record keeping toward justice? (2020, 3–4).

Again, and again, the lesbian poets in this thesis trouble the question of orientation. How they move becomes how they move on the page becomes how their poetry moves in the world becomes, too often, silence. Acknowledging historical and contemporary manifestations of shame in lesbian poetry allows acknowledgment of the topography of lesbian life. Shame directs attention towards the holes in literary representation, towards “the people who have no mythologies, no goddesses powerful and hidden, to call on” (Nestle 1987, 13). While the influence of a wider tradition of lesbian feminist poets remains crucial, this thesis focuses on Ireland and Aotearoa/New Zealand to question how lesbian poetry works on the fringes of the world, in two insular colonised islands, in the two countries where I have so far spent my life. Mary Dorsey, Heather McPherson, Cherry Smyth, and Rhian Gallagher, all engage with the fluidity of subjectivity in their expression of the lyric ‘I.’ They express both the private individualised sense of lesbian identity and personal shame, while expanding their bodies outwards to write collectives of shame, engraving the feminist mantra “the personal is political” in every lyrical movement.

If the personal is political, the more personal is historical. The more personal demands attention be paid to how we fill our days and nights as we participate in any given economic systems, how our flesh survives under different political systems (Nestle 1987, xvi).

Every poem in this thesis is a challenge to the assumed voice of lyric poetry, the assumed experiential viewpoint of the poet, and the tendency towards sameness in universalist readings that seek to exclude queer voices under the premise of heteronormative assimilation. This viewpoint of this thesis is undeniably Western, white, colonised, feminist and politicised. All the poets present a challenge to normativity based on reorientation and an embracing of deviant desires deemed shameful under heteropatriarchy.

poets

In chapter 1 I begin with Mary Dorcey's 'Night' and 'Daughter' to question universalist readings of lyric poetry, the lyric shame of Dorcey's centring of self over an imaginary daughter, and the risky shameful business of self-exposure. Dorcey's lesbian feminist politics informed her poetry, seeking to politicise the personal, to seek attention for her otherness in a climate of repressive silence poetically and culturally. Dorcey encouraged others to *Move Into The Space Cleared By Our Mothers* (Dorcey 1990). Dorcey's shame lyrically exposes 'you' as a woman, questioning the tradition of lyric poetry and heterosexual reading practices. Lesbian poetry can challenge normativity to show a future where queer bodies can succeed outside of heteropatriarchal practices.

I demand attention in chapter 2 with Heather McPherson for the bodies of silenced women and document the ways a lesbian body moves and gestures, privately and publicly, as a direct result of societal shame. McPherson uses her rage in 'for her thirtysixth year, a breakout' to counter the affective complacency expected of women poets, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, unveiling her personal archive from within the memory space of abuse. In 'stein songs for the blue house,' she spirals out into lesbian spirituality and collectivism, forming queer kinships, connecting women's bodies through gesture. McPherson's poetry is informed by the consciousness raising of second wave feminism and she plays with the lesbian lyric's ability to express both a singular and collective 'I,' both viewpoints inhabiting moments of personal and social shame. If you move against culturally assigned modes of meaning and knowing then you gesture ever closer to shame.

In chapter 3, I build on thinking about shameful gestures towards belonging and the shame of the impossible return home with Cherry Smyth's poem 'Coming Home.' This chapter considers that if orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, "then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (Ahmed 2006, 1). Smyth fluctuates between Northern Ireland and London, between the distance and freedom of queer forms of kinship. A queer lesbian feminist identity orientates her differently when she is at home; changing what she directs her attention towards, exposing her difference as a result of leaving. Within 'Coming Home,' Smyth lyrically and physically tongues her words around colonisation and shame, both state, and familial, to "insist that desire is forged in the crucible of history, community, and nation" (Weiss quoted in Rodríguez 2014, 20). Her nostalgic expression of loss and displacement makes everything long distance in a sideways direction towards and away from home, ebbing

and flowing, “mourning for the impossibility of mythical return” (Boym 2001, 8). The who and what of Smyth’s poems are shamefully outside the lines of cultural expectation in 1990s Northern Ireland.

I close the critical archive of lesbian lyric shame with Rhian Gallagher’s love poems in chapter 4. Gallagher’s love poems are crucial depictions of shame in spheres of lesbian intimacy. She turns inside/out in ‘Embrace,’ queering New York’s geography through a lesbian love affair moving slick through time and space. Gallagher’s embrace creates intimacies that “bear a necessary relation to a counterpublic—an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 558). Gallagher consciously expands and contracts intimacy from outside into the domestic space in ‘Gaze,’ allowing the embodiment of lesbian desire to steam the windows. Gallagher is witnessed in ‘Embrace,’ becomes the witness in ‘Gaze,’ seeking recognition for the shameful deviations of lesbian love.

The exegesis bridges the gap between the parts of the critical and the parts of the creative. In the exegesis I explain the ways that shame influenced my creative practice and how the influence of Dorsey, McPherson, Smyth, and Gallagher can be felt, read, and heard.

bodies

In 2015 Robyn Weigman and Elizabeth A. Wilson edited a volume of the *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* devoted to queer theory and antinormativity, asking in the first line of their introduction, “Can queer theorizing proceed without a primary commitment to antinormativity?” (1). I am more concerned about whether queer bodies can proceed without antinormativity with the shame that has emerged around the term lesbian. In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson writes about Judith Butler’s disappointment in the commodification of her lesbian identity after the release of *Gender Trouble*:

. . . the simple fact that she’s [Butler] a lesbian is so blinding for some, that whatever words come out of her mouth, whatever ideas spout from her head—certain listeners hear only one thing: *lesbian, lesbian, lesbian*. It’s a quick step from there to discounting the lesbian (Nelson 2015, 67).

While this thesis does seek to interconnect themes in lesbian lyric poetry across lines of geography and generation, I hope it also shows the vastness of difference and the individuality in approach and concerns of lesbianism and the ways shame manifests. The

figure of the lesbian is often discounted into silence to become a haunting, a ghostly presence. Terry Castle argues that the literary history of lesbian is “a history of derealisation” (1993, 34). Emma Donoghue questions the intersection of sexism and homophobia blatant in the lack of legal status accorded to lesbian existence:

At least the boys had their Oscar Wildes and their sodomy trials, some proof of the existence of their (as it were) forebears: it seemed at first glance, in contrast, that lesbian history was one long silence, because it lacked the biographies of famous individuals as well as the ‘hard evidence’ of legally recorded sex acts (2007, 16).

Donoghue is calling for what José Esteban Muñoz terms queer evidence, “an evidence that has been queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof” (2009, 65). This thesis attempts to create a critical creative queer archive with a deliberate centring of lesbian experience, as “shame is a certain kind of attention (or inattention) that one gives to the self” (Phillips 2019, 39). Close reading provides one type of attention that homes in on the manifestations of shame in each poem investigated here with theory exploring what Katherine Bond Stockton calls “sideways” relations, “relations that grow along parallel lines rather than upwards and onward” (quoted in Halberstam 2011, 72–73). In this thesis, I bring together queer, affect, literary, and feminist theory to convey that even though elements of universalism exist in the lesbian lived poetic experience, that universalism lives and belongs in a queer space outside of heteropatriarchal normativity.

masks

The creative section of my PhD project is made up of two parts, my one-woman play *Catlicks* and my poetry collection *Small Town Quare*. In *Catlicks*, my poem ‘anseo’ reiterates into a performance about growing up queer and working-class in Ireland. I attempt to bring my memories of childhood shames in rural Ireland to the stage in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I have deployed the term ‘Quare’ in conversation with Noreen Giffney who writes that, “the word quare, which means odd, strange or eccentric, perfectly captures the difference in the way we practise Queer Theory in Ireland from the hegemonic bloc and thus, it is not easily subsumable under some globalizing framework” (2007, 276). Quare enables a way of thinking about sexual shame with a specific ethnic inflection. In *Small Town Quare* I question my body, where it belongs, how it speaks, and moves, the ways in which I have been misinterpreted, the consequences of those misinterpretations, and how they manifest in

what shames or interests my lyric expression. I anxiously sew buttons on the body, fade out to poison, become killable and restore. My diasporic dyke body strays, repeats, mutates, and reproduces. I move from Ireland to Aotearoa/New Zealand and memories multiply across space as my reorientated body lyrics lesbian. I creatively carve my own *cumha* (nostalgia) by questioning the reliability of my memories. I wonder my name, my future, my various orientations. I misguide, become misguided, look for an addressee, “for memorable signs, desperately misreading them” (Boym 2001, 8). I build a history, maybe. I unravel contracts of love in all its forms; scale the bones of my affairs, stew them in ‘soup.’ I transform into a piece of sushi, a snow monkey, a gremlin. ‘You’ becomes a collective of shame, ‘I’ reads every situation intimate. The ‘I’ in the critical section is just as ‘Fly-By-Night’ as the ‘I’ in the creative. The power of a critical creative project ignites in the playful fluidity of subjectivity woven between the critical and creative, a weave I explore and expand on in the exegesis of the creative project that concludes the critical part of this thesis.

1 / mary dorcey

space

As women, we have been denied the right to speak . . . As Irish, our language has been devalued and marginalized by the colonisers from a culture, which has always sought by various means to appropriate Ireland and the Irish. As Irish women, we are thus doubly damned, doubly silenced.

Ailbhe Smyth, *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing*

Mary Dorcey (1950) was the first out lesbian published in Ireland. She was involved in the Irish Women's Rights Movement within which she "attained a measure of fame and was invited to speak at several events, one of which *The Irish Times* reported, revealing Dorcey's name. This was 1972, and [she] was vilified in the media, her family humiliated, and her actions condemned publicly by her own parish priest" (Atfield 2017, 6). That same year, Dorcey sought to publish her first book of poems, *Kindling*, but all copies were confiscated by the special branch, the Special Detective Unit of An Garda Síochána, and the entire first edition was destroyed (referenced in Dorcey and McAuliffe 2020). Ten years later, in 1982, *Kindling* was finally published by the London-based women's liberation publishing and printing group Onlywomen Press. In 1990, Dorcey won the Rooney Prize for Literature with her short story collection *A Noise from the Woodshed* (Onlywomen Press 1989) and a year later she published the collection of poems *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* with the Irish press Salmon Poetry. By 1992, twenty years after being publicly vilified, Dorcey had become an "almost unimaginable phenomenon, an Irish lesbian whose fiction and poetry, though manifestly 'out,' are praised and published in Ireland" (Quinn 1992, 227).

Dorcey's 1991 collection, *Moving*, is divided into two sections, the second of which is made up of fourteen of the twenty-four poems published in *Kindling*. This section is called 'From *Kindling*,' playing on the image of the phoenix, as the poems rise from the ashes, or kindling, of their banned predecessor. By 1990, Dorcey's poems and stories had "been represented in fifteen anthologies from publishers including Virago, Pergamon Press and Oxford University Press" (Dorcey and Archer 1990, 21). Yet not everyone seems to have felt the effects of the "phenomenon." In an article for *The Irish Times* Francine Cunningham referred to Dorcey as the "author of the *novel* 'Kindling'" (1989; emphasis added) and in

June 1990, Arminta Wallace commented in an interview with the author that having now won the Rooney Prize, “Mary Dorcey is poised to reach a much larger mainstream audience.” Only once Dorcey had been legitimised by the media and the literary prize elite did critics consider her worthy of a larger audience.

As Dorcey moved from the margins to the mainstream, her lesbian identity was both celebrated and elided. In 1982 the London edition of *Kindling* was published and the first line of Dorcey’s biographical note on the back reads, “Irish feminist, Mary Dorcey gives us poems that are intense, accurate and witty.” *Moving* is endorsed by the scholar Victor Luftig and the second line of her biographical note reads, “Her work expresses Irish, feminist and lesbian concerns in a way that highlights the universality of human experience.” Dorcey is rebranded as not personally and primarily having the identity “Irish feminist,” but as a poet who expresses concerns about being “Irish, feminist, and lesbian.” This involves a subtle depletion of the once “accurate” poet to one of “universality.” The phrase “universality of human experience” creates an effect of erasure on the identity politics of the beginning, as the republication of the poems “from” *Kindling* could suggest the desire to erase the original publication with a small London-based feminist press while *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* was published with a larger mainstream Irish poetry publishing house. This same erasure is reflected in the previous ignoring of Dorcey’s work as an activist in the 70s and 80s, and then celebration of her work once it was legitimised by The Rooney Prize in the 90s. Such universalist readings persist in more recent scholarship on Dorcey’s work. Rose Atfield, for instance, reads Dorcey’s poetry as implying that the poet’s task “is to universalize these [women’s] experiences, to render them manageable for herself and others and to evoke compassion for those in such deteriorating circumstances” (2007, 11). Why are the private lives of lesbian poets read universally rather than celebrated for their difference? A universal reading of the private movements of lesbianism from the sexual to contemplating conception, reinforces social othering of lesbianism as a deviance, a moral flaw in character. Universalist readings interrupt anti-normative poetic responses.

I will read Dorcey’s work not with a view to universalising the lesbian experience but in order to illuminate the ways in which her poetry looks in different directions and disorientates heteronormative ways of being in the world. I read Dorcey’s work here not in order to emphasize her universality but rather to queer images of the same, to regenerate and disorientate by highlighting shameful aspects of failure. I found Dorcey’s work when I was disoriented, in a process of reorientation away from heterosexuality. Fintan Walsh writes that “a queer life’s disoriented and disorienting aspects are virtues, insofar as they allow queers to

dip and dive from the punishing inevitabilities of being found, named and located” (2016, 140). Dorcey compels us to “look in or for different directions” through her ability to evoke her queer desire in the movement of hair in lovemaking and in the conception of a daughter.

inside/out

In ‘Night’ Dorcey battles manageable compassion with questions of silence, privacy, shame and exposure. She objectifies her lover under her stringent gaze. While at one level she unashamedly basks in the sexual pleasure she derives from looking, in transforming sexual pleasure into lyrical pleasure, she provokes a blush of shame at the exposure of the desire and love between these two women. Shame allows Dorcey to embody antinormative desires as a form of sexual politics that can point to “new corporeal connection” in her poetry, demanding the reader go beyond a universalist reading (Probyn 2000, 128).

In ‘Night’ Dorcey emphasizes how histories of sexuality and shame go hand in hand in Irish culture. Dorcey’s decision to “to live [work and write] in Ireland . . . a refusal to be banished, a refusal to see Irish in the limited terms of the Ancient Order of Hibernia or traditional Ireland” (quoted in Atfield 2007, 12). The two short stanzas of the poem reveal some of the internalised and cultural shame that Dorcey had to face in order to refuse that very same shame.

I remember your neck, its strength
and the sweetness of the skin at your throat.
I remember your hair, long, in our way
drawing it back from my mouth.
How my hands slid the low plain of your back
thrown by the sudden flaunt of your loins.
I remember your voice,
the first low break
and at last the long flight
loosing us to darkness.
And your lips along my shoulder,
more sure, even than i had imagined,
how i guarded their track.

I ask you then

what am i to do with all these memories
heavy and full?
Hold them, quiet, between my two hands,
as i would if i could again
your hard breasts?

‘Night’ is an example of a queer narrative not geographically anchored but sprawling in and out of time and place, blurring the borders between private and public, inside and outside, “charting the pains and pleasures of staying and leaving home . . . motivated both by desires to escape oppressive situations, and by more benevolent yearnings for adventure” (Walsh 2016, 103). Dorcey’s ‘Night’ embodies both an internalised and an assumed shame, wooing the reader towards the final questioning stanza. The poem is alive with sexual politics and possibility with the I/eye of the first stanza showing the capacity of two women’s bodies to extend a poem beyond the page towards an embodied reading even when Dorcey’s gaze doesn’t extend lower than her lover’s breasts.

I remember your neck, its strength
and the sweetness of the skin at your throat.

Dorcey’s careful word choice is defiant in ‘Night.’ She opens the poem with a description of her lover’s ‘throat’ as strong and sweet, setting the centrality of communication and letting the reader know that even though the language of this poem reads simply, it will not be ‘quiet.’ Dorcey says in one interview that the challenge facing her as a lesbian writer is at once political and technical: “how to write about a subject that is daily life ‘for her’ but a totally strange territory for most readers” (quoted in Quinn 1992, 227). Dorcey acknowledges that she is not exclusively writing for a lesbian audience. But at the same time acknowledges that the experience is not universal but personal for her. Dorcey politicises the personal by prioritising the subjectivity of her “daily life” as a lesbian feminist.

I remember your hair, long, in our way
drawing it back from my mouth.
How my hands slid the low plain of your back
thrown by the sudden flaunt of your loins.
I remember your voice,
the first low break
and at last the long flight

loosing us to darkness.

Here the 'plain' language of the poem attempts to 'break' through by sensuously describing her lover's body. In the first stanza, the words 'flaunt' and 'loosing' each expand Dorcey's voice, flaunting its defiance. The speaker is 'drawing' out their lover in words, with a 'long' 'flaunt' of female physical characteristics, setting them free (loosing) 'to darkness' while also metaphorically bringing this sensuous meaning to light by making it public. There is a friction in the poem between the private space of the body and the public space of the poem which is displaced in this stanza as we move around the lover's body with lines breaking on 'throat,' 'mouth,' 'back' and 'loins.'

And your lips along my shoulder,
more sure, even than i had imagined,
how i guarded their track.

This 'long flight' about the body signifies what is felt in the repetition of 'I remember.' How the speaker had 'imagined' this moment 'more sure, even than i had imagined' and now she is re-remembering the moment that the fantasy was fulfilled as well as her imagined fantasy of the moment. The speaker has endured a 'long flight' through memory and now the memories are 'heavy and full:'

I ask you then
what am i to do with all these memories
heavy and full?

In 'Night,' Dorcey uses the power of the erotic to communicate the internalised shame of expressing the joy of her lesbian sexuality, and also the powerful refusal of that shame in the exposure of that very sexuality through an intimate private moment. Dorcey plays with the contradiction between a collective and private act in Ireland, "what is prohibited on paper is embraced in private. What is frowned on as a collective act is forgiven in the individual" (Dorcey and Archer 1990, 21). She manipulates time and space with the poem's language so we are caught in a queer temporal space heightened by her unforeseen line breaks. This manipulation is queered by Dorcey in the confusion of 'your'— 'your neck/hair/voice/lips' of first stanza — and 'you'—the opening you of stanza two 'I ask you then' returns to the you of stanza 1 with 'your hard breasts.' Just as in shame, "other becomes self, past becomes present" (Collins 64, 2017). Dorcey challenges the reader, as it becomes apparent that the

‘heavy and full’ image is supposed to insinuate breasts. But instead of allowing the reader to imagine for themselves, she holds the breasts shamelessly and explicitly in her hands as a question:

Hold them, quiet, between my two hands,
as i would if i could again
your hard breasts?

Dorcey offers this image of lesbian eroticism as a source of information, to unleash the erotic power of this act against oppression against normativity. Dorcey engages with Audre Lorde, expressing the erotic in her poetry as a sharing of joy, “whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (1984, 56). Dorcey’s shameless offering and questioning recount of these memories manipulates space, making the private public and the individual choice part of the collective consciousness. ‘Night’ embodies the historical moment of 1970s Ireland where silence and repression through state and church institutionalism dominated the collective consciousness. It also evokes the intimate moment between these two women, the moment of prior imagining, and the moment of remembering all those things while writing. The poem is a layered habitus of manipulated time.

This layered time is matched by Dorcey’s use of punctuated interruption as a syntactic and erotic device:

I remember your hair, long, in our way
drawing it back from my mouth.

‘Long’ and ‘quiet’ distinctly interrupt the first and second stanza, lying between two commas. The hair must be ‘long’ and the memories must be ‘quiet.’ Together these words interrupt the poem and the ‘long’ ‘quiet’ surrounding the poetic display of lesbian sexuality, especially in the Irish poetic tradition. The punctuation interrupts the sentence like a strand of hair, ‘drawing’ out the sexual tension. Dorcey’s poem shows us how hair can be used metonymically to suggest “concealment tangled with unconcealment” (Collins 2017, 62). Hair is both a synecdoche and a metonymy for the body because it both is and is not part of the body, it both is and is not alive. Hair gets in the way of and so distances us from the body, concealing it. But hair is also a frequently sexualized part of the body, so that at the same time, hair reveals the body, making it visible and visceral. ‘Night’ draws an analogy between

the way in which the hair both conceals and reveals the body and the way in which the lyric utterance stands in for the body of the writer, revealing and concealing her.

Dorcey connects the shame of revealing the body to the shame or embarrassment often associated with the lyric. There is lyric shame intertwined with introducing hair into the poem because Dorcey is not just conjuring the image of hair, but the “body without a body” that is both hair and the poem (White 2014, 4). Dorcey conjures shame by writing multiple bodies into the poem. We glimpse not only the lover’s but the speaker’s body— ‘my mouth,’ ‘my hands,’ ‘my shoulder.’ By extension, we also glimpse the reader, who is placed in the position of the seducer, gazing and eroticizing the lover, ‘thrown by sudden flaunt’ of the lover’s body, by a ‘low break’ in ‘loosing’ ‘darkness.’ The ‘long flight’ across the lover’s body is ‘more’ ‘than’ ‘imagined.’ By bringing the reader into this act of looking and touching, Dorcey disestablishes the position of the reader as the supposedly objective witness, the position required to shame another.

Through this shifting poetics of shame, of concealing and revealing, Dorcey, like the other lesbian poets in this thesis, challenges heteronormative assumptions about what makes a lyric poem, queering it by letting the ‘hair, long,’ get in the way. The lover’s hair in the speaker’s mouth pauses their lovemaking, intensifying the sexually intimate moment with shame. Like finding a hair in your food, you become suddenly aware of the process of eating, and of the preparation of food and everything that is ingested in that process that could be concealed but for the revelation of the hair. The lover’s hair has none of the ‘sweetness’ of her skin, the speaker does not want to taste it, ‘drawing it back from my mouth.’ To ingest the lover’s ‘long’ hair may cause the speaker to choke and be unable to speak. The speaker is suddenly aware of their two bodies as separate, as a self and an other, and the intimate relations of shame that are mixed up in the act of sex. Her lover’s hair acts as a boundary between them, it guards ‘their track.’ This feeds into the tangled relationship lesbians have with their hair. In the queer podcast *Nancy*, episode seven is entirely devoted to the lesbian presenter Kathy Tu’s decision to cut her long hair.¹ It’s a common narrative among lesbians as it is entrenched in concealing and revealing. Cutting my hair short (as a lesbian) felt like a step towards concealing myself from unwanted male attention and revealing myself to other queer women. A queer friend of mine has waist length hair that she loves. She asks me, how can she let other queer women know she is queer without cutting her long hair? Her long hair interrupts her queer identity as the ‘hair, long,’ interrupts the first stanza of ‘Night’ with

¹ <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/nancy-podcast-episode-6-butch-hair>

Dorcey revealing the lover by ‘drawing’ the hair away from her mouth, allowing her to continue to make love, to write, to free her mouth to communicate. The interruption also hints at the gender of ‘you’ which is confirmed as a woman in the final lines with ‘breasts.’

Just as my long-haired queer friend might be mistaken for being straight, so ‘Night’ plays with the possibility of being mistaken for a straight poem. In the manipulation of private and the public in ‘Night,’ there is a sense of a struggle within the poet. The poet’s sense of shame keeps her ‘quiet.’ By writing ‘all these memories’ we are made aware of the existence of many memories like this one that may remain unspoken and unwritten. The collective space of the page becomes a public sphere once published thus interrupting her private life. But why are we given this memory and not others? In the end Dorcey seems to be seeking permission by choosing to end the poem on a question to release these memories into the world starting with ‘Night’ as a challenge to society’s manageable compassion. There is a blurring of worlds, of the concealed and revealed, of the private and public, of the poet and the lyric ‘I.’ We return to Dorcey’s words that lesbian poets “either have a secret life or a notorious one.” We get a sense of the silence and shame that surrounded the publication of *Kindling* because of Dorcey’s stature as an outspoken lesbian feminist and the interrupted sense of abjection revealed in ‘Night.’

The New Zealand poet Janet Charman explains her use of the lower case i in her poem ‘a writing exercise,’ *‘for me it represents / ideographically / the interrupted narratives of women’s lives’* (2017, 61; italics in original). ‘Night’ is an example of such an ‘interrupted narrative’ as Dorcey’s memory of a night with her lover in the first stanza, ‘And your lips along my shoulder, / more sure, even than i had imagined, / how i guarded their track’ is constantly interrupted, by the past, the present, the Other, the self, and by the questioning in the final stanza. Dorcey is doubly silenced and distanced from her memories by her belief in the desire of others for her to keep quiet, ‘I ask you then,’ and a conflict of desire within herself for silence, a ‘heavy and full’ desire for a private life. The line breaks ‘flaunt’ the insubordination of the final question. Dorcey interrupts herself in the phrasing of the question in such a way that she answers her critics by making them aware that she will not remain ‘quiet’ about her desires, she will not be shamed into silence, and she would proudly do it all again as she does in the poem by conjuring the memory of her lover intimately in the first stanza, ‘the sweetness of the skin,’ and questioningly in the second, ‘your hard breasts?’ Instead of making lesbianism universal, Dorcey flaunts her queerness with its unmanageable hairy mix of shame and desire.

fruit

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing.

1 Timothy 2:11–15

Dorcey was once a famous, outspoken, political, lesbian feminist, and in recent years is quieter. Her more recent poems are concerned primarily with her relationship with her mother, caring for her and contemplating the aging female body.² Yet her queer poems continue to challenge expectations about what constitutes a poet, a lyric subject, a lyric poem through the subject matter of the lived lesbian experience. The reality is that a lesbian life is outside of the temporal boundaries of heteronormativity. One way lesbian life queers those boundaries is through its queering of heteronormative notions of family and intergenerational relation. Dorcey connects this queering of heteronormativity to childlessness and the future in her poem ‘Daughter.’ She thinks about the future, revealing antinormative intimacies making public a private moment of imagining. Dorcey addresses her lyrical ‘daughter’ in an apostrophe to the child she will never have.

In ‘Daughter,’ Dorcey chooses to publicly insist on her right to exist as a childless lesbian woman rather than ‘bear’ a daughter into a world of ‘flame’ and ‘scorched earth.’ Dorcey’s decision to centralise her own existence as a lesbian woman illuminates her struggle for space in a body dispossessed, doubly silenced. In doing so, Dorcey refuses the “silence in full submission” taught to her as a Catholic, she refuses the surrounding heterosexual environment; she basks in the shame of her deviant choice to birth a poem and not a child.

I feel in mine
your small, hot hand.
I see your green eyes
lighting already
with my mother’s far away look

² Dorcey’s third collection *Like Joy In Season, Like Sorrow* (2001, Salmon Poetry) charts the changing relationship between aging parents and those who care for them.

'Daughter' becomes a self-conscious experience, an experience of shame and the queer art of failure (Halberstam 2011) to live up to the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) by playing with the particular way in which the sexual orientation of her lesbian body makes biological reproduction a possibility depending on the gender of the lips, 'and the kisses / that might have made you / from my lover's warm, dark lips.' It is the view of many critics of the lyric that "it is the supposed centrality and authority given to 'self' in conventional lyric writing . . . that makes it shameful" (White 2014, 28). Shame is used in this lyric by Dorcey to bring attention to a colonised and marginalised self that historically has been devoid of attention, in both the public sphere and within the body of lyric poetry. The lesbian body in Ireland is doubly silenced. Irish lesbians face a level of homelessness within their bodies and society that Dorcey articulates through the image of an imagined daughter. She queers the construct of the Irish mother. One of the many crimes against nature, and Catholicism, is deciding to be a childless woman. If as women we are not fulfilling our reproductive birth right, we are immediately outside of the universal and cannot be "saved by childbearing."

A woman's body is far from a private domain. So why should the concerns of lesbian bodies remain private? Dorcey enters her lesbian body and its reproductive concerns into a dialogue with women's domestic poetry. The personal is political in all of Dorcey's poetry and in 'Daughter' she illuminates the shameful interior dialogues of a lesbian mind. In openly admitting and writing her desire for a childless future, Dorcey both evokes and manages to take a step away from the societal shame. She uses the lyric's capacity to create space for wonder and possibility. Even if you don't have something, be that a child or something else, you can have it within the rooms of the lyric, you can express the interiors of your shame, you can leak shame out onto the page and pass it on to readers. I am reminded often when thinking about shame of the words of Audre Lorde, "the strength of women lies in recognising differences between us as creative, and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but which are now ours to alter" (Lorde 1984, 131). In writing against the compulsory, Dorcey seeks to build community, to celebrate the occasional future of the queer, of the Irish lesbian feminist:

Occasionally I write about the future, imagining something. I did that with ‘Daughter’ for instance . . . I don’t have a daughter but I imagined my daughter. I could see her; I could feel her. So, I wrote a poem for the daughter I don’t have (Dorcey 2015).³

Dorcey uses the word “occasionally” in regards to writing about the future, a purely counterfactual future like the final phrase in ‘Night,’ ‘as i would if i could.’ The present or past preferential treatment of time is common in lyric poetry, according to Jonathan Culler, “fiction is about what happened next; lyric is about what happens now” (2015, 226). It is a continuous now that is expressed by Dorcey in her choice to begin the poem with ‘And.’

And you my daughter
who I will not know —
I feel in mine
your small, hot hand.

‘And’ gives the poem the aura of a last will and testament with a dictated tone to these first two lines of ‘Daughter.’ The first lines of ‘Daughter’ could express an intended inversion of genders and generations in response to the last stanza of Dylan Thomas’s ‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.’⁴ There is an inversion of knowing as Dorcey uses Thomas’s elegy for his father as a way to express the grief of not knowing her daughter, ‘who I will not know.’ ‘Daughter’ then becomes a way of plastering the cracks of the lesbian archive. The experience of losing a parent is one familiar to many readers, Dorcey takes this familiarity and queers it, she moves against the universalist experience of motherhood and grief. The poem is imbued with carnal hermeneutics that lives in the senses, and specifically the flesh, of the words. Dorcey reaches out from the poem to hold ‘your’ hand. In relation to Aristotle’s claim that touch is the universal sense, Richard Kearney states that, “one cannot live without sensing, one cannot exist as soul without flesh, and every sense requires the ability to be touched—at whatever the distance—by what one senses (through eye, ear, nose, or tongue)” (2015, 106). The emotionally touching quality of the poem is the inaccessibility of this touch, the loss of something that was never a thing in the first place, the fact that Dorcey’s daughter

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mpbdv_vZXMA&t=102s

⁴ And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
(‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,’ Thomas 1952)

never existed, ensuring the essence of the poem is both embodied and disembodied. Engaging in touch means that we are engaging in the risky bodily business of loss, of mourning, of grief. 'Daughter' forces the reader to question, "what *makes for a grievable life?*" (Butler 2003, 10; italics in original). A non-existent daughter alive only as a lyric apostrophe?

Perhaps not when stated so simply, but when Dorcey continues in this first stanza to question inheritance, and intergenerational matrilineal lineage, the daughter becomes increasingly real, and therefore, increasingly *grievable*. There is a complicated comparison between 'Night' and 'Daughter,' between the kind of love that did exist and was lost, and an imagined love that never existed but still creates a feeling of loss and disorientation.

Beginning the poem with 'And' also makes the reader aware that the concerns conveyed in the poem are ongoing, they extend off the page and into the future with the poet, as the imaginary apostrophe of the daughter remains forever within the confines of the poem as implicitly expressed by Dorcey.

Apostrophe treats the subject's relation to the world as a specular relationship, a relation between subjects, and it has a highly optative character, expressing wishes, requests, demands that whatever it addresses do something for you or refrain from doing what it usually does (Culler 2015, 229).

Dorcey queers motherhood and inheritance by exposing in the first two lines the dispossession of both those things, 'And you my daughter / who I will not know.' Choosing to begin this apostrophe on the exposure of dispossession immediately signals shame, as "shame is indeed a special instance of exposedness and dispossession" (Kumar 2009, 348). If a person is seen to be unrelated to the heteropatriarchal biosocial environment that surrounds them, then they are immediately conceived of as outside of, or on the boundary between. It becomes a challenge to be conceived of as legitimate in that otherness without the premise that queer people are striving in some way to be like heterosexual people. There is the sense that everything should be addressed as a mutual concern as if straight and queer people have the same lived experience. The poem toys with the false universalism of the experience and viewpoint of a mother. Dorcey's lesbian future imagined mother uses the constructs of domesticity to imagine, 'talks,' 'breakfast,' but in the end she must 'leave' the daughter as the world is not wide enough for the speaker to force the image of the daughter into reality, 'not yet / wide enough for me.'

I see your green eyes

lighting already
with my mother's far away look,
and the kisses
that might have made you
from my lover's warm, dark lips
smiling from yours —
made for kisses.

The swift object changes in this section, from grandmother to lover to daughter, reads as an act of rebellion against compulsory heterosexuality. Dorcey aligns herself with thinkers like Shane Phelan who writes against Freudian thought about how lesbians never turn their back on their mothers, their first love, and that this love enables lesbians, “to resist the imperatives of male, oedipal society” (1993, 772). In these last lines of the first stanza, we are made aware of the reproductive impossibility of this intergenerational lineage, and that her particular (lesbian) relationship will never naturally produce a daughter. Yet in this lyric, a daughter is produced, and herein lays the reproductive performative potential of queer poetry to resist male oedipal society and compulsory heterosexuality. The repetition of ‘kisses’ in such a short sequence repeats the touch of lips from grandmother to daughter creating a bloodline, a carnal poetics.

Throughout ‘Daughter’ I am reminded of the work of Jose Esteban Muñoz, and in particular, when he writes of a future queer utopian hermeneutic world. Muñoz describes this as a world queer in its relational social formations, a world where we look beyond the here and now, attempting “to wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold, to know our queerness as a belonging in particularity that is not dictated or organized around the spirit of political impasse that characterizes the present” (2009, 28). Queer futurity in ‘Daughter’ is a temporality deeply embodied in the flesh. The possibility in ‘Daughter’ is the intergenerational inheritance Dorcey bestows on her ‘daughter.’ She believes the world to not be ‘wide enough for me.’ The use of the lyric ‘I’ throughout keeps the experience in the singular. Dorcey is not writing from a collective perspective, she is not saying this is the opinion of all lesbians. When lesbian or queer or women writers speak from the ‘I’ they are rarely granted the anonymity of being referred to as the speaker, and especially when critics seek to universalise their concerns. There is both a general and particular appeal to Dorcey’s work, the particularity of Dorcey’s lesbian experience is connected to her body, and her body

of work as a lesbian feminist. When contextualising at poetry readings and in interviews, Dorcey is overtly, unapologetically, shamelessly lesbian:

I think I can safely say, and I do say, that I was the first Irish woman to put the word lesbian to my name, and to my family name (Dorcey and McAuliffe 2020, n.p.).

Dorcey seeks to challenge the mantle of subject in lyric poetry, as do all the lesbian poets in this thesis. ‘Daughter’ questions subjectivity by queering the experience of motherhood, by questioning the confines of what it means to be a *real* mother. Tortured mother-daughter relationships are well documented in literature, and Dorcey conveys elements of that in her imagined relationship. Dorcey and her ‘daughter’ ‘threaten’ and ‘curse’ one another with words that are ‘angry’ and ‘loving.’ The daughter threatens to displace Dorcey, to curse her the way that the surrounding biosocial environment does. In Dorcey’s poetic tradition as a matrilineal poet, which can be read in the countless poems in her collections that surround the figure of the mother, we read her preference for what she can see, her ‘mother’s far away look,’ rather than the future uncertainty of what might be, or dwelling in an imagined past of what wasn’t: ‘we have no time for that.’ This is not a case of laying blame on biosocial constraints on lesbian women but rather alludes to the metaphorical figure of the child and what that child represents. Many queer people choose a queer life with the specific intention of foregoing compliance with the patriarchal heteronorms of the biosocial such as bearing children. As in the words of Michel Foucault: “I think that what most bothers those who are not gay about gayness is the gay life-style, not sex acts themselves . . . It is the prospect that gays will create as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships that many people cannot tolerate” (Foucault quoted in Bersani 2010, 38–39). The queer ecology of our lived experience influences our perceptions, experiences and constitution in the world. Leaning into shame, Dorcey writes to show readers that she will not ‘bear’ to be merely tolerated.

Dorcey uses the erotic in the second stanza to question the tension present in mother/daughter relationships. She anticipates a queer futurity that, “is instead a future being within the present that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination. It is a being in, toward, and for futurity” (Esteban Muñoz 2009, 91). Dorcey becomes speculative and opens out to the horizon of a queer future.

My little daughter
what times we shall have —
what talks.

I would hold up the stars
to keep from burning you
quiet the sea
to keep from waking you

In the use of ‘I would’ Dorcey expresses a desire, a maternal call to her daughter saying I would if I could, but I can’t, a desire again reminiscent of the closing lines of ‘Night.’ There exists impossibility in the hyperbole of these lines, as no one can hold up the stars, or the quiet the sky. The speculation in this stanza is all the more poignant given that Dorcey has already revealed in the first two lines that she ‘will not know’ her daughter casting a vatic ‘ring structure’ over the poem — “The question of the poem’s own ritualistic character as spell or chant, confirmed by various forms of repetitions, including metrical patterns, and what is called ‘ring structure,’ the return at the end of the request of the beginning . . . [the] poem is optative articulating desire” (Culler 2015, 16). Dorcey does not make a request at the beginning of ‘Daughter’ but works backwards from the beginning to create a looking sideways to the future in the world of the poem, as she similarly does in ‘Night.’

Dorcey draws us into envisaging a future daughter as if she *will* exist. She is, despite herself, writing the daughter into existence with her sentence construction with, ‘who I will not know’ in the first stanza, the repetition of ‘I would’ twice in the second stanza, from ‘you will not’ to ‘we will not’ in the third, then building towards the crescendo of abandonment in the fourth stanza with ‘I will bequeath you.’ Dorcey breaks that trance of existence in the final two stanzas with a turn to and repetition of the affirmative ‘I will leave you’ in the second last stanza. The repetition of ‘I will leave you’ at the beginning of the last stanza brings us back to the first word of the poem ‘And.’ By ending the poem on this refrain the poem sounds epistolary, giving the sense that the (be)longing narrative approaches closure with this salutation of sorts. Dorcey uses the ritualistic magic of the lyric apostrophe by acknowledging that it is only in words that this ‘daughter’ would ever find space in the world as, “ritualistic events, precisely because they are eminently seductive, are not quite respectable and can prove embarrassing” (Culler 2015, 351). There is a slight embarrassment with this acknowledgement: the daughter addressed in Dorcey’s poem is a verbal construct, an apostrophe to the child she will never meet. Dorcey allows this dispossession but will not allow the daughter to ‘shrink’ her existence and she rejects the “primal relation” of the apostrophe to displace her (referenced in Johnson 1986). She will not allow herself to be consumed, which can be read in the affirmative repetition of ‘I will leave you.’ Dorcey

depicts a cyclical period of fecund gestation to ‘shrinking’ barren infertility while the daughter grows ‘high and lovely’ from her ‘hide.’

In the retrospective chronology of the poem ‘Daughter,’ the past becomes disorientated, and in the process, the daughter ingested:

I would eat you for breakfast
all your fat, buttery flesh
thighs and arms
toast and honey.

The lyric subject, the ‘I’ of the poem, imagines eating the object, the daughter, by the close of the second stanza with four stanzas remaining. Dorcey first imagines that she has a daughter, then imagines a future within which she would ingest this imaginary daughter. Dorcey engages with a queer temporality, or queer time, which for Jack Halberstam is, “the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility” (Halberstam in Dinshaw et al., 2007, 182). Dorcey allows room for the maternal desire of ingestion; she ingests the imaginary, and then mourns the imaginary consumption. The bloodline, the intergenerational premise of the poem is again disrupted with Dorcey juxtaposing the daughter’s ‘thighs and arms’ with ‘toast and honey,’ so the daughter becomes like food, a sustenance, a lyric imaginary for the purpose of feeding the poet. The daughter’s purpose as an apostrophe is to enlarge the presence of the lyric ‘I,’ to draw further attention to Dorcey’s body as one outside of the traditional/universal confines of reproduction.

In the third stanza, Dorcey uses the descriptive ‘little’ for the daughter to further the process of diminishment:

My little daughter —
you will not have the chance
to jail me with your tenderness
grow high and lovely
from my shrinking hide.

Dorcey’s deliberate diminishment of her ‘little daughter’ allows room for women who do not want to sacrifice their lives for the sake of a daughter. She shows a failure of maternal instinct. Jack Halberstam writes, “if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is

easier in the long run and offers different rewards” (2011, 3). Dorcey’s failure to live up to heterosexual conceptualization of womanhood and motherhood offers her the reward of this poem. She is rewarded queerly, outside of the straight time of the here and now which she acknowledges at the close of the third stanza on the two lines, ‘my darling / we have no time for that.’ In straight time, the ‘daughter’ cannot be acknowledged as a thing imagined because as Muñoz writes, “Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overtly and subsidized acts of reproduction” (2009, 21–22). Dorcey is actively representing the dispossession of the female body as reproductive, ‘My little daughter / you will not have the chance / to jail me with your tenderness.’ The ‘little daughter’ represents the constraints of the reproductive environment. Dorcey is in conversation with Donna Haraway when she writes that we must find another way of orientating ourselves, besides towards the reproduction of “all the world in the deadly image of the Same” (Haraway 2004, 66). Childless lesbians are not the same; they are not a universal image. Yet this is not a simple poetics of individualism. By claiming her identity as an autonomous woman outside of the universal, Dorcey is further entrenching herself in the particularities of the queer community and appealing to her already existing daughters, the next generation of lesbian writers in the queer community, her *real* daughters.

[The child] embodies a fantasy unable to withstand the queerness of queer sexualities precisely insofar as it promises the perpetuation of the same, the return, by way of the future, to an imaginary past (Edelman 1998, 25).

Dorcey changes the address of the last three stanzas from the daughter ‘And you my daughter,’ ‘My little daughter,’ ‘My little daughter,’ to the lyric ‘I,’ ‘I will bequeath you,’ ‘I will leave you,’ and ‘I will leave you.’ This movement from ‘bequeath’ to ‘leave’ signals a finality as we return, in the fashion of the ring structure, to the language of legality dictated at the beginning. The reader is made aware in the fourth stanza that the daughter’s inheritance is ‘little:’

I will bequeath you
little—
some words
angry, loving, careful
set down to make a space for you.

I will leave you
flowers and flame
scorched earth, black water
blue skies, laughter
hungry children
women working, loving
fire and ice
bombs and books.

Dorcey is disparaging towards the power of her poem as substantial inheritance, as only ‘some words’— in comparison to the ‘flowers and flame / scorched earth, black water / blue skies, laughter / hungry children / women working, loving / fire and ice — / bombs and books’ left to the daughter in the next stanza by the tradition of lyric poetry. The use of the term ‘fire and ice’ could be read as a reference to the Robert Frost poem of the same name published in 1920. In this poem Frost likens fire with desire and ice with hate. The astronomer Harlow Shapley claims to have inspired the poem and that it is a commentary on the end of the world, about whether the sun will explode and incinerate the Earth, or the Earth will somehow escape this fate only to end up slowly freezing in deep space (referenced in Fagan 2007). ‘Some words’ are bequeathed to the daughter, passed on to her ‘to make a space.’ Whereas the litany of ‘flowers and flame . . .’ signals that the daughter is moving away, leaving the tangible real world outside of the poem, and becoming, or caused to remain, more and more in the ‘angry, loving, careful’ flesh of the poem. Dorcey calls on the universal concerns of bringing a child into such a hostile world. Many people battle with these questions of sustainability and social responsibility. The universal appeal of this stanza feels deliberate as Dorcey broadens the intimate sphere out with images of ‘hungry children,’ ‘women working’ and ‘fire and ice.’

I will leave you my daughter
this whole wide world
that was not yet
wide enough for me
to bear you into.

In the final stanza of ‘Daughter’ Dorcey takes leave of the poem ‘to make a space’ for future generations of lesbian poets to have and write about their daughters, and to take up physical

space in the world.⁵ She gives over the task of clearing space to the next generation, as she can no longer ‘bear’ the daughter into the ‘whole wide world.’ Dorcey plays with the concept of responsibility and the structures of power inherent in society, in poetic form, and pivotally, in the relationship between a mother and daughter. On one line, Dorcey ‘will bequeath’ in obeisance to this imagined daughter while on the next revealing that what she has to give, her power in society, is very ‘little.’ In the final stanza this is explained further as she seems to take on the responsibility of the ‘whole wide world’ and its inability to create space, writing on one line that the world is not ‘wide enough for me,’ for Dorcey as a lesbian woman without a daughter, let alone as a lesbian woman *bearing* a daughter. The use of the verb ‘to bear’ carries the weight of this complicated feeling of loss for something that the speaker never had or something that the speaker in the poem feels a responsibility not to have, challenging conceptions of tolerance. It is most clearly in this toing and froing of orientation and responsibility that ‘*Daughter*’ becomes a poem with queer ecological concerns. As the task of a queer ecology “is to probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution” (Erikson and Mortimer-Sandilands 2010, 5), I use the terms nature and environment in their biosocial sense, in the way that Dorcey writes against what is deemed natural behaviour in the social environment of Ireland in the 1980s and early 1990, keeping in mind that Homosexual Law Reform did not occur in Ireland until 1993.

Dorcey says she wrote the poem for “the daughter I don’t have.” This is an expression of choice while also acknowledging that this choice is constrained by the failure of her lesbian body to live up to heteronormative or universal constructs of the surrounding biosocial environment. The visual terrain of the heteronormative world of motherhood is exclusionary in what it deems as the universal experience and what are deemed crimes against this natural environment. In the words of Judith Butler, “The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine” (2003, 15). The queer futurity presented in ‘*Daughter*’ understands this flux of possession and dispossession from the beginning. ‘*Daughter*’ shows Dorcey’s understanding of her body as a social phenomenon. From ‘*Night*’ to ‘*Daughter*’ we move between the individual and collective experience, we move from intimacy to abandonment, from personal struggles with shame to social ones. The lesbian lyric differs in its concerns from (straight)

⁵ Irish lesbian poet Liz Quirke’s 2018 book *The Road, Slowly* (Salmon Poetry) is one contemporary example of a poetry collection about non-biological motherhood.

women's poetry precisely because of this fraught struggle over the right to express a lesbian body as outside of the public dimension of a woman's body. Dorcey exposes herself and her failures and shame as an Irish lesbian woman living an intersectional existence.

In Chapter 2, I build on these considerations of universalism in lyric poetry with New Zealand poet Heather McPherson. McPherson delves into her own individual experience of domestic violence and sexual abuse, exposing her vulnerability through rage. The collective lesbian feminist experience is expressed through gesture, and dance. The body in chapter 2 spiral dances in and out of the past, risking social ostracism to create a space for bodies that have reorientated away from the universal experience, bodies isolated and shamed for their difference.

2 / heather mcpherson

melodrama

A woman like that is not a woman, quite.

Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems*

In 1982, with the release of *A Figurehead: A Face*, Heather McPherson (1942 – 2017)

became the first out lesbian in Aotearoa/New Zealand to publish a poetry collection.

McPherson was involved in the Women's Liberation Movement and was a founding member of the feminist literary and arts journal *Spiral* and the Women's Gallery in Wellington. In a one-paragraph review of McPherson's first collection in *Landfall*, Trevor James writes:

Heather McPherson's *A Figurehead: A Face* is avowedly written from a feminist viewpoint. Her sense of engagement with this is almost overwhelming. This may detract from the poems as art, they may lack the Olympian objectivity or unity that is often preferred, yet they have the capacity to lacerate (1983, 220).

The language of James's review voices how a feminist viewpoint was thought of at the time as "overwhelming," because of its "sense of engagement," but was also seen as lacking in "preferred" "objectivity." In other words, James is claiming that the subjectivity of a lesbian feminist and the clarity of language used by McPherson to depict the personal conditions of her life is *underwhelming* even as he ends his review on the poems' capacity to lacerate. Poetry written with a feminist viewpoint is not considered in this review from 1983 to be artful.

McPherson's *A Figurehead: A Face* pushes against criticisms to reveal by writing in explicit detail, the material conditions, the reality, of lesbian feminism both individually and collectively. McPherson chooses to expose herself in opposition to the often preferred normative, masculine subjectivity prevailing at the time in the lyric tradition—a subjectivity that James mistakenly takes to be objectivity. The back cover of McPherson's first collection appears not with endorsements but with a three-line bio, the last line of which reads explicitly, "Heather is a lesbian feminist and lives in Christchurch with her son." The worlds of sexuality, politics and domesticity converge unashamedly on the cover and throughout the book. One domain of McPherson's life does not silence the other; all are intertwined, and the

poems in *A Figurehead: A Face* embody this crucial convergence. McPherson chose to open her first collection with a short introduction:

Seven years ago [1975] when as a writer with a fairly traditional style I changed my political commitment and lifestyle, I felt initially stranded in a kind of 'poetic homelessness.' On the one hand I wanted to make a new start, to clear out the 'patriarchy in the head;' on the other hand I wanted to redefine such emotionally charged concepts as 'woman' and 'lesbian' with their pejorative accretions (1982, 3).

This introduction orientates the collection through a lesbian viewpoint with McPherson calling lesbianism a "political commitment" as well as a "lifestyle" and both of these reorientations lead her to question the negative connotations created in society around language. She is attempting to "clear out the 'patriarchy'" not just from her own life, but also from the poetic tradition to create a home for lesbians in poetry where they can have full representation by a lesbian, both positive and negative. In this chapter I will begin with McPherson's 'for her thirtysixth year, a breakout' to show first how McPherson thought about this clearing in terms of her relationship to her (heterosexual) past and the domestic relationships and abuses that caused her to feel shame for her sexual orientation. This examination of her personal history becomes collective in 'stein songs for the blue house' where we can see how a lesbian lifestyle becomes a political and social issue, with McPherson's songs encouraging lesbians to gather and create community outside of heteronormativity.

At the National Women's Studies Association Conference in Storrs, Connecticut in 1981, Audre Lorde presented her keynote speech, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." Lorde tells of responding to a white woman's question, "[a]re you going to do anything with how we can deal directly with *our* anger?" with the question "[h]ow do you use *your* rage?" (Lorde 1984, 125). In her answer, Lorde suggests that each woman needs to own her own rage and its contexts of power and powerlessness. In 'for her thirtysixth year, a breakout,' McPherson expresses her rage through the repeated phrase 'This is the rage.' She owns *her* rage to break free of the 'entombed' affective complacency expected of women poets.

Yet McPherson's open expression of rage in the poem is also a means of masking her shame following Andrew P. Morrison's belief that under an expression of rage lies a feeling of shame, "a feeling that reflects a sense of failure or inadequacy so intolerable that it leads to a flailing out, an attempt to rid the self of the despised subjective experience" (1989, 13–14).

McPherson's sense of failure is both within herself and outside of herself. Her poetry expresses a sense at having been failed by the patriarchal society, at being overlooked because of her insistence on highlighting the importance of her intersectional identity as a woman, a lesbian, a single mother, a beneficiary, an artist, and a writer.

A key factor in choosing McPherson for this work is her openness with regards to class, which is a key aspect of her intersectional identity. McPherson began and ended her life on the benefit (referenced in McLeod 2018). When Anna Burns won the Man Booker Prize in 2018 for her novel *Milkman* about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, she was celebrated for acknowledging her years receiving social welfare. In a move like the change in reception to Dorsey's writing before and after the Rooney Prize in Chapter 1, Burns's acknowledgment is legitimised and accepted because of the prestige of the Man Booker, it is authenticated by the institution. McPherson received no such legitimisation.

I was never allowed to discuss class at home because it was such an innate source of shame. When I was a year and a half, I lived with my parents and older brother in a house my parents had recently bought. My dad ran a successful painting and decorating company and my mum had just given up her job at an electrical shop, where she had worked since she left school as a teenager. Then my dad had a car accident and became a quadriplegic, disabled from the neck down. He spent the next six months in Dublin while we were in West Cork. When I was nearly five, we moved into a council house, a bungalow. Our two-storey inaccessible house became the property of the council in some exchange I do not understand. We were sent to school on the bus with all the other children from council houses. Years later I came across newspaper clippings from the time my dad was in hospital. His friends organised a fundraiser for us. Inside a toy post office, I found food stamps, scribbled all over. My mother gave them to me to play with rather than face the shame of claiming them. Our neighbour worked for a charity that organised Christmas hampers for families in need and tried for years to give my mother one. I only find, or am told, snippets. My dad recounts comedic tales about his time in hospital, the same practised stories. We reoriented to working class. My brother and I grew up working class, and for my parents that is the greatest shame, and our greatest silence. I find liberation in McPherson's work, in her performativity of class shamelessness. McPherson opened a space in my creative work where I could examine my troubled relationship to class, and how my investigations might cause further shame and harm to my parents. But shame allows for a letting go if you lean into it enough. McPherson leans in with abandon. Like my dad's stories, McPherson's poems are a result of a practice, a feminist reorientation, a raised consciousness. Shame in lesbian poetry then becomes a

managed affect. In ‘for her thirtysixth year, a breakout’ McPherson manages shame by hiding it under rage, an affect expected of a lesbian feminist. She caricatures herself, taking on the character of angry feminist in order to think about why that rage is manifesting, digging into the holes to find shame at the root. This poem is an expedition into how formational familial manifestations of shame mutate and make the lyric persona aware of greater institutional oppressions. This chapter explores how lesbian poetry can challenge how these manifestations cause feelings of shame, and how to take those feelings and reorient them to allow critical and creative connection.

McPherson began publishing in the 1970s and reading her poetry today I feel the weight of all that has not changed. The literary canon, traditionally heteronormative and patriarchal, is being challenged but I am still stopped while making coffee in our department kitchen and asked if there is really enough written about or by Heather McPherson to justify her inclusion in a PhD thesis. People are uncomfortable with the heightened emotion expressed by some feminist lesbians, and this feeling of discomfort and shame is exactly why studying the poetics of Dorsey, McPherson, Smyth, and Gallagher is important. It is not a case of undoing demarcations, but of questioning the ways they bring shame onto the lesbian body, onto both personhood and poetics, and ensuring that shame does not become silence.

manhole

Two of the biggest factors in the lives of women poets have been powerlessness and isolation in a man-made world. Shared powerlessness can sometimes become a kind of strength.

Heather McPherson, “The Poet’s Choice”

It would be easy to read the three-page ‘for her thirtysixth year, a breakout’ with its seventeen instances of ‘rage’ as, in James’ *Landfall* review as, “overwhelming.” I agree entirely that it is overwhelming, in the sense that the poem is excessively emotional. It is melodramatic, it states ‘over and over’ the rage of women in order to fill the many holes that exist in the social consciousness of our ‘man-made world.’ McPherson calls women poets together so that the isolation that we feel can become a strengthening “shared powerlessness:”

This is the rage of a burning woman

this is the year of her rising

This is the rage of a woman
who did thirtysix years time

in a coffin-brake

McPherson's 'for her thirtysixth year, a breakout' epitomises the melodramatic convergence of queer and camp through "exaggerated discourse and heightened emotion" (Kapurch 2015, 439). Melodrama, like hysteria, was a "feminine" crime "of passion" particularly in the nineteenth century (referenced in Harris 1988). McPherson makes a gesture towards that in the sentence that breaks over the second couplet of the poem and the fifth line, 'This is the rage of a woman / who did thirtysix years time / in a coffin-brake.' The inclusion of the word 'brake,' a nineteenth century carriage, alongside coffin alludes to the constraint of such affective demarcations on the lives of women. McPherson is also referencing her discovery of feminism and her lesbian reorientation, both of which lead her to feel adrift in "a poetic homelessness" after thirty-six years of heteronormative socialisation.

In order to 'brake' out of the 'coffin,' McPherson exaggerates and anthropomorphises the domestic in her poetry to move the lived lesbian experience beyond the margins and beyond the constructions of compulsory heterosexuality. She exaggerates the everyday social gestures of a lesbian woman's life, in order to make that life both larger and smaller than it seems. She uses the refrain 'This is rage' to affectively explore her marginal life, building stanza after the stanza this feeling of excess that is 'breaking,' 'tossing,' 'crumpling,' and 'filling' her days. The centrality of the domestic in these gestures is evident in the comparison of a woman to 'a torn singlet' and 'old clothespeg' in the first section of 'for her thirtysixth year, a breakout' in the fifth and sixth stanza. The destruction of domestic integers means the woman, the 'old clothespeg,' begins her release from 'the manhole' of the male supremacist structure through to the complexities of her feminist awakening. Feminism is the first reorientation point in this thesis. I discovered feminism in 2010 during my MA in sociology through, among others, *The Guerrilla Girls*, Virginia Woolf, Carol Gilligan, and Pedro Almodóvar. It was then that feminism became relevant to my life. It was then I began to understand oppression as systemic and institutional. McPherson express a similar personal feminist revolution in 1970s Aotearoa/New Zealand:

I had so thoroughly wished to share the genius and beauty of language, that to be reminded I was a woman with a role which in most eyes meant cleaning up, stitching

up, totting up, and being available to look after the men, his genius, and his children, sent me into poetic depression for a while (McPherson 1982, n.p.).

The poetry of Anne Sexton (1928–1979) used camp exaggeration as an excuse note, “allowing her to smuggle supposedly trivial female concerns and influences into the predominately male, ‘high art’ world of poetry” (Pollard 2006, 19). In ‘for her thirtysixth year, a breakout’ McPherson mimics the structure and intention of Sexton’s ‘Her Kind,’ where Sexton “puts on three costumes in three verses — witch, housewife and adulteress” (2006, 4–5). McPherson’s ‘for her thirtysixth year, a breakout’ diverges from Sexton’s strict composition of three stanzas of seven lines: its three sections sprawl over three pages, the first section comprising nine stanzas, the second eleven, and the third seven. The roles of the witch, housewife and adulteress blur and transgress the boundaries created by the asterisks which form the illusion that the three sections are separate from each other.⁶

This is the rage of a woman woken out of a box
broken out of nails, bars, tight forms
breaking into a new improbable image
tossing off that hunched apologetic loiterer on the edge
crumpling that skin, a torn singlet
for hotwater cupboard rags
filling her lungs with air

Sexton’s repeated anaphora ‘I have been her kind’ becomes McPherson’s ‘This is the rage’ which is repeated ten times throughout the poem. The rhythmic waves of the poem combine with this repetition to become a chant-like manifesto, a call to [nude] arms for women: ‘This is the rage of a woman with a millennium to disturb.’ McPherson encapsulates the affective change as a result of second wave feminism in women’s lyric poetry (particularly lyrics focused on the domestic). The lyric moves from confessional and towards lyric shame. The absolution sought under the confines of the confessional is no longer required of the reading

⁶ I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.
(‘Her Kind,’ Sexton 1981)

experience, as the poet and the lyric are not seeking absolution. Lesbian and feminist poets appeal to the shameful narcissism inherent in the lyric 'I,' not to expel all shame, but to expose the idea that it is narcissistic or shameful to draw attention to the colonised, marginalised, lesbian body.

In the first section 'This is the rage' is repeated six times and directly followed each time by 'of a.' Besides the first line 'This is the rage of a burning woman,' the remaining instances are 'of a woman.' There is no mention of 'woman' without 'rage' in this section. The connective tissue between them could be viewed as protective or defensive. Clinical psychologist Gershen Kaufman formulates rage as a form of protection of the self against shame: "Rage functions as a defence against shame. The cyclical fuelling and inflation of rage insulates the self, actively keeping others away while creating a protective cover" (1989, 97). This sense of self-protection continues in the stanza where the 'woman' disappears and becomes metonymically mentioned only in terms of what she is connected to, 'with little ambition,' 'with one great love,' 'with one great cause,' and 'with one vast sensitivity and a wardrobe of contradictions.' The insistent repetition of 'with' and excessive descriptors of 'great' and 'many' and 'vast' all depict the liberated feminist woman's expression of desires as exaggerated, over the top, hysterical, camp displays rather than as expressions of rage that has culminated from a life of closeted shame. McPherson refers to the constraints of the lyric form as 'tight forms / breaking.' Adrienne Rich addresses the constraints of formalism which she refers to as part of a strategy in her writing in the 1950s and 1960s: "like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle material I couldn't pick up bare-handed" (1979, 40–41). McPherson's work is reminiscent of Rich's 'Planetarium,' where the woman takes shape after reorienting towards lesbianism and feminism.⁷ Rich's 'instrument in the shape / of a woman' is 'woken out of a box' in McPherson's hands. McPherson finds relief from strict form, acknowledging the long continuum of lesbian/women's lyric poetry that existed before her from Sexton to Adrienne Rich to, as I shall expand upon later in the chapter, Gertrude Stein.

McPherson's use of the term 'manhole' becomes more significant as the poem expands. In the second section, she refers to 'pothole eye,' and in the third, 'a crazy

⁷ I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind.
(*'Planetarium,'* Rich 1971)

blowhole.’ Through the repetition of ‘hole’ in three compound words and the use of these three alternative depictions of enclosures, McPherson moves the poem along so that the woman/women involved can be seen to be moving out from under the ground, out from under the “protective cover” of rage. Her consciousness was raised through feminism in order to engage with the rage of her repressed shame. She moved out of the entrapping ‘box’ and ‘grating’ of a restrictive patriarchal society. Each section also includes an italicized couplet. In this first section, it reads:

*What should I do with this rage
swelling in my belly, a red fist?*

This is the first instance of ‘I’ in the poem. We are momentarily given a glimpse into the mind of the poet and the collective weight of expressions of rage, ‘a red fist.’ In the introduction to Judy Grahn’s *The Work of a Common Woman* in 1977, Adrienne Rich writes:

The necessity of poetry has to be stated over and over, but only to those who have reason to fear its power, or those who still believe that language is ‘only words’ and that an old language is good enough for our descriptions of the world we are trying to transform (Rich in Grahn 1978, 21).

McPherson uses self-insertion to write herself pregnant with rage, the ‘red fist’ inside her belly representative of her newly acquired feminism. The woman in this section previously operated out of ‘fear and love and duty’ before ‘pain broke crockery at her head.’ Imagery of release or of breaking appear first in the title and then leak throughout the poem as ‘a breakout,’ ‘coffin-brake,’ ‘broke crockery.’ McPherson’s lyric ‘I’ outwardly breaks open as a result of the violence she experienced under men, personally and socially. She expresses this through the repetitive use of the word rage. This repetitive rage is a cover under which McPherson hides shame. She deflects shame by insisting on rage, by becoming the persona the reader expects: the angry radical lesbian feminist. All of McPherson’s poetry reads as if written for an audience, she is always addressing someone. Whether through italicised self-insertion, or through apostrophe, she finds an audience.

pothole

‘This is the rage’ is absent from the second section of the poem which opens on the line ‘This woman finds a lineage of survivors.’ The second stanza extends the matriarchal lineage McPherson seeks to voice:

Who sometimes imagined glories more vast than could be seen
standing on country roads late at night
urging visions from the dark hills
whose bulk is more mysterious than sky
whose outline nudges a solid memory of one immoveable time

She moves from using domestic imagery traditionally associated with women’s poetry to imagery of the natural world most associated with the masculine poetic sublime. The “common” language is challenged throughout and influenced not just by Judy Grahn but also Adrienne Rich, who in ‘Twenty-One Love Poems’ compares a woman’s body to ‘volcanoes’ (1973). ‘One immoveable time’ calls forth Rich’s notion of a lesbian continuum: “I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman's life throughout history—of woman-identified experience” (1980, 648–49). The continuum of lesbianism comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. In 2018, New Zealand author and close friend of McPherson, Aorewa McLeod wrote an article in dedication to her friend. In this text McLeod refers to *A Figurehead: A Face* as “the first overtly lesbian poems published in New Zealand,” and also comments on McPherson’s avid reading of feminist literature from the United States:

Heather, solo mother of a young son, in her early thirties, living on a benefit, was a founding member of the Christchurch women’s artist and writers’ group in 1975, absorbing the new feminist ideas and theory coming from the States (McLeod 2018, 75).

McLeod writes that McPherson often went to Christchurch to visit the grave of New Zealand lesbian poet Ursula Bethell and that McPherson saw “herself less as an innovator, [more] as part of a lesbian women’s poetic tradition” (2018, 78). The lesbian women’s poetic tradition for McPherson was a combination of national and international influences; it was, as I will expand upon with Cherry Smyth in Chapter 3, a state of being.

The presence of death steps closer to the foreground of the poem with the mention of ‘morepork.’

Those women startling at a white space on the fence
a morepork that flies off
one legend says to death

those women turning back to a flaked verandah
to face the photographer unsmiling
from the folds of gathered gowns

It is believed in Māori legend, the ‘one legend’ referred to above, that if a morepork, or ruru, sits conspicuously near or enters a house then there will be a death in the family.⁸ The feeling of looking into the past through photographs merges with the recurrent imagery of death, to reiterate the presence of ‘one immovable time’ and McPherson’s intention of contributing to a poetics of lesbian women’s experience, to “[t]hink of the deprivation of women living for centuries without a poetry which spoke of women together, of women alone, of women as anything but the fantasies of men” (Rich quoted in Grahn 1978, 9). The woman is referred to as ‘a hung cushion’ using the metonymic displacement of women as domestic as inside, and men as outside, like the ‘tentative young man,’ who ‘swells in an office bowl.’ Death is ever present in the poem with violent imagery throughout; ‘coffin-brake,’ ‘pain broke crokery,’ ‘old hands hurt,’ ‘to be pummelled,’ ‘knowing suicides,’ ‘hands around her throat,’ ‘kill themselves.’ Intergenerational trauma leaks out of the sepia photographs, rising to meet the speaker, reminding her of loved ones, ‘worn and wrung / in wars, in kitchens, in machinery – / who’d dreamt and scrubbed.’ The speaker finds ‘a lineage of survivors’ who ‘face the photographer unsmiling / from the folds of gathered gowns.’ This photograph makes the speaker aware of how the situation of women has not progressed in the time since this photograph. She is facing the same oppressions as those her ancestors, and the choices they faced, death or survival, are the same choices the speaker faces.

McPherson begins both the sixth and eighth stanza of the second section with the phrase, ‘Only to rise knotted,’ returning the reader to the gendered trap of the domestic by invoking images of ropes, escapism, and hair. Hair imagery runs throughout this section from

⁸ https://www.wingspan.co.nz/maori_mythology_and_the_ruru_morepork.html
<https://teara.govt.nz/en/nga-manu-birds/page-3>

'long unplaited hair' to 'rage curls down' to 'rise knotted.' Like Dorsey, McPherson uses hair to both reveal her desire to escape while attempting to overcome years of concealing her lesbianism. The reader becomes ingrained into the speaker's domestic life, becoming both the captor keeping her trapped in domestic abuse and a fellow celebrant in her escape. She encourages the reader to reject the idea that they are merely a 'hunched apologetic loiterer' but that they too can come 'to life outside' the constraints of heteronormativity and the lyric. Engaging with a mode of reading that continually questions the presence of narratives of normalisation and of seeming pride in participation can invite readers, "to think of lyric as a reading practice as much as a writing practice in which the ostensibly 'shameful' attributes of the mode (e.g., an egotistical, asocial inwardness) are replaced by a collaborative effort on the part of reader and writer to overcome 'loneliness'" (Lerner 2017, n.p.). McPherson does not just engage with the reader but constantly pays homage and collaborates with her feminist and poetic foremothers. McPherson's poem rebirths this young lesbian woman, this woman who has grown sideways outside of acceptable sociability and lathers her in rage.

Here for a moment the rage withers

Here for a moment the rage curls down

Women have consistently been "embedded in the corporate units of institutional domains that distribute resources" and have "a long biography of shame experiences in those domains" (Turner 2007, 109). As a result of this inequality, shame can become repressed by these institutionalised forms of hegemonic power and flare into rage directed predominantly at the culture and structures of the society that has historically repressed them. The woman/women in 'for her thirtysixth year, a breakout' move(s) from under the 'protective covering' of rage under the 'manhole,' of the first section to the 'pothole' of feminist exposure in the second, and towards the teetering 'lip of a crazy blowhole' in the third.

blowhole

'This is the rage' reappears in the third and final section with the continuation of the imagery of death and hair combining to convey a woman (in the singular) on the edge of 'irrevocable change.' The intermittent rushing force of the blowhole swells to tempt the woman over the edge, 'the lip of a crazy blowhole.' McPherson addresses the unquestioned patriarchal domination of women's lives, and of her own life before feminism when she says, "I was

thirty-one when I was struck by feminism . . . To learn that, like Athena, my whole political framework was the product of male supremacist structure, was initially as devastating as liberating” (McPherson 1982, n.p.). The panoptical, self-regulation of society becomes, ‘the rage at waste / at paralysis, at despair.’ The woman loses face; she hangs her head in the face of the patriarchy, ‘would not face the suits that made her so.’ Kaufman (1989) writes that the individual whose head hangs, or eyes lower, or averts their gaze, however briefly, is directly communicating shame. The speaker averts her eyes, ‘would not face,’ because of the violence preceding, the ‘hands around her throat,’ causing her to walk ‘timidly’ afterwards. The repressed, averted shame of McPherson’s woman transmutes into intense rage, and this rage has to be stated over and over in order to have any residual effect.

The woman in McPherson’s poem attempts to ingest her former heterosexual self ‘in swallows.’ The process is not fatal in the poem but transformative as ‘the rage,’ ‘dances, dances / till armpits flower blades.’ McPherson’s amatory poetics works to uncover the queer erotics behind the everyday concerns of women’s lives. By the penultimate stanza rage flowers and becomes ‘ecliptic.’ The poem ends on an italicized couplet, ‘*This is the rage that simmers / behind irrevocable change.*’

McPherson’s work always brings to mind for me Audre Lorde, and the erotic:

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference (Lorde 1984, 56).

In ‘for her thirtysixth year, a breakout’ we experience the conversion of the grief of the lived experience of reorientation away from heteronormativity into rage and a queer erotic of melodrama. In ‘stein songs for the blue house’ this rage and melodrama becomes a celebratory erotic of hysteria. The ‘opening and blooming’ blue house exudes the power of the erotic as the bodies share the space. In the words of Gertrude Stein in her poem ‘ROOMS’, ‘Is there pleasure when there is passage, there is when every room is open’ (2007, 25). The personal and the political are intertwined in McPherson’s work in poetic enactments that gesture towards new ways of imagining subjectivity and, as we will see in ‘stein songs for the blue house,’ relationality expressed through queer erotic language and movement.

hysteria

Did that mean shame, it meant memory.

Gertrude Stein, 'ROOMS'

In the below extract from the catalogue for the Women's Gallery Opening Show (Jan. 21st – Feb. 29th 1980), the collective of which McPherson was a member, the necessity of separatism for their process is explained:

This means that we need to withdraw and gain confirmation from each other before we are ready to announce our insights to the 'outside world', i.e. our culture, which despite the changes that have taken place, is still undoubtedly male dominated. Hence at certain key moments men may be excluded from some events . . . because we need to draw on the special advantages of being exclusively among women . . . This separatism is not an end in itself, it is simply part of the process. The process is one of self-discovery, of building our tradition by going back to the roots of experience. In the end we hope to redefine not only what is female but also what is the human experience (*Opening Show* 1980, n.p.)

McPherson depicts this redefining of the human experience in 'stein songs for the blue house' by creating a female-centred public sphere. This is achieved through setting ('the blue house'), through language experiments that connect her to a lesbian continuum (Rich 1980), through the separatism of the event, and doubling of presence required by the reader to share in this lyric performance. In McPherson's introduction to *A Figurehead: A Face* she describes her experiments with language as influenced by Gertrude Stein. 'stein songs for the blue house,' is the most obvious example of these experiments.⁹

The Blue House was a house on the corner of Trafalgar Street and Devon Street in Christchurch where "writers/artists/lesbians lived" and "there was a dancing party there most Friday and Saturday nights" (Evans et. al. 1988, 266; index entry). The word 'songs' in the title gives the feeling of these sections as occurring on separate occasions and the musicality of the poetic composition, so the sections operate like birdsong forming sequences to attract

⁹ "Yes I do some [language experiments]. Under Stein's influence. Then I found that I was no longer so accessible to the women around me and this modified my approach, perhaps it was obscuring something which should be made clear. I wanted to try to bring together the connections of a women's heritage, of a spirituality, of women's relationships in this enormously long context, you know, that in fact, whatever lesbianism was, it was also a culmination of very long herstory" (McPherson in Evans et. al. 1988, 40).

companions or potential partners illuminating the intoxicating sexual freedom of these parties. The parties release the women from ‘the stiff spine’ and ‘old overcoats’ in a striptease of ‘shedding,’ ‘undoing,’ ‘wheeling,’ ‘snapping,’ ‘uncracking’ and suggestive line endings, exclamations of ‘o alive.’

mothering

It seemed I had to reject everything that had gone before and start again in a new culture with a new language that wasn’t even made. It took a while to recover.
Recover? No, that’s the wrong word. Reorientate, pick up and go on. Changed.

McPherson, “A Poet’s Choice”

The first section represents the external, exterior, public face of the (women’s) ‘movement.’ The women are summoned inside. The voice is collective, is of ‘daughter,’ ‘sister,’ ‘women.’ The poem opens on an apostrophe with the line, ‘O daughter o sister sweet mothering muddlefoot.’ This cry returns us to McPherson’s dedication in her introduction, “to the friends and foremothers who have shared a similar process.” This process that McPherson refers to is one of reorientation. McPherson changed direction, detaching from the heterosexual world to become “reoriented.” ‘stein songs for the blue house’ begins where ‘for her thirtysixth year, a breakout’ left off, at the reorientation point ‘*behind irrevocable change.*’ This reorientation involves a queer viewpoint or a queering of viewpoint, what Sara Ahmed refers to as “the disorientation of encountering the world differently” (2006, 20). The maternal cry of ‘mothering muddlefoot’ alludes to the apostrophe’s ability to literalise the birth of her lesbian life. Barbara Johnson asks, “if apostrophe is said to involve language’s capacity to give life and human form to something dead or inanimate, what happens when those questions are literalized?” (1986, 32). McPherson has broken out of heterosexuality, and attempts to animate this experience through the language of apostrophe. McPherson uses the cry of apostrophe and the abstraction of word dissociation and displacement in her language, to find, and demand a place, not for just her subjectivity but the subjectivity of women collectively. There is a direct relationship between the poetry of Mary Dorsey and Heather McPherson in their call to the maternal divine through apostrophe. McPherson grieves her heterosexual self through celebrating abandoning it. The poem becomes both a birth and a (funeral) wake in a cyclical lyric bind.

McPherson's work pulses with the woman-centred collective energy of the women's movement of the 1970s and 80s creating a contagiousness and interest that mediates the reading process. Feminist theorists such as Elaine Showalter stimulated "hysterical reading" in the early 90s: "The *true* feminist reading is 'hysterical reading,' one which acknowledges both the presence of the uncanny and which associates it with the hysterical and feminine" (Showalter 1993, 30; italics in original). In my reading I will endeavour to draw on the hysterical to acknowledge and associate that which speaks to the maternal, the feminine, and the shameful. Acknowledging these often-concealed elements allows for a reading that returns to the bodies of the women alive in this poem.

O daughter o sister sweet mothering muddlefoot

The 'muddlefoot' of the opening apostrophe creates a layering of feminine presence — daughter with sister with mother. In her article "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" Barbara Johnson argues:

If apostrophe is structured like demand, and if demand articulates the primal relation to the mother as a relation to the Other, then lyric poetry itself – summed up in the figure of apostrophe – comes to look like the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry, 'Mama!' (1986, 38).

McPherson's shameful primal relation to the women of the blue house reorientates from daughter to sister metonymically becoming 'mothering.' The language of hysteria returns to the etymological womb to erotically expand the space of the poem. The poem's uncanny opening apostrophe widens out the world of 'stein songs for the blue house' with the reoccurring *o*: the 'O daughter, o sister' apostrophe; double *o* words ('room,' 'tanglefoot,' 'blood,' 'loosing,' 'floorboards,' 'blooming,' 'blooms,' 'rooms,' 'moon') as openings and the invitations to 'pull,' 'plug,' 'roll,' and 'turn' the body inside/out, to dive into the holes, to (re)penetrate the maternal womb. In McPherson's 'stein songs for the blue house' this maternal cry is celebratory rather than desperate and the search for 'mothering' or 'muddlefoot' intentionally confused. McPherson is not attempting to replace a daughter with a sister with a mother, but rather seeks to extend and explore these relationships from both inside and outside the blue house, or inside/out heteronormativity.

The musicality of the second stanza sounds a sexualised welcome that moves the body of the poem around the physical space from the 'door' to the 'jug' to the 'rug' to the 'gram.'

pull back the door Glad
plug in the jug Kit
roll up the rug Susie
turn up the gram Mill

This stanza is a subversion of Paul Simon's song '50 Ways to Leave Your Lover' released in 1975. McPherson makes an invitational call to the women around her to take responsibility for certain tasks, to make preparations for other women to join them. McPherson rewrites Simon's rhyming lyrics of abandonment.¹⁰ The speaker in Simon's song is getting advice from a woman on how to leave his lover, how to be free. The man is given permission to leave the relationship and be alleviated of responsibility. The speaker in McPherson's poem is delegating responsibility, moving with the woman around her into the possibility of the night, 'shake out the night's hide for sound to pour out.' This directly contrasts the advice in Simon's song where the woman advises the speaker to sleep through the night rather than embrace it, 'she said why don't we both just sleep on it tonight.' Simon's deference to the woman in his song takes the image of the liberated woman of 1970s second-wave feminism and adopts it as justification for male abandonment. Simon's song is the perfect example of man's desire to maintain power but without responsibility. The women summoned each other women to the blue house to share in the raised collective consciousness resulting from the women's movement with the intention of escaping, if only for the night, the inherent oppressions in the surrounding patriarchal heteronormative society. The play on Simon's song also alludes to the possibility that many women left male lovers at home in order to seek out women lovers, and to seek reassurance from these women that this abandonment was justified.

The subjectivity we interact with on the page in 'stein songs for the blue house' is lyric in the fact of it being, as Jonathan Culler describes the lyric, "a representation of the action of a fictional speaker . . . the lyric is spoken by a persona, whose situation and motivation one need to reconstruct . . . The reader looks for a speaker" (2015, 2). McPherson ensures that the bodies of the women remain present with the active movement in the language of the continuous present tense, 'spreading,' 'heading,' 'shedding,' 'laughing,'

¹⁰ You just slip out the back, Jack
Make a new plan, Stan
You don't need to be coy, Roy
Just get yourself free.

(Paul Simon, 1975, '50 Ways to Leave Your Lover')

‘wheeling,’ etc. The poem is distinctly in the present tense but as a recording of a moment it becomes “something other than performance” (Phelan 1993, 146). Within this (be)coming of something other, a liminal space is created wherein the women can ‘release’ from the expectations of their gender. In part (i) the lyric ‘I’ of the poem disappears into a dancing collective mass, and it is not until part (ii) that ‘I’ emerges. As readers, we move between being involved in the collective movement of dancers towards an individual dance. McPherson writes in such a way that the reader feels part of the collective (w)hole of the global movement of feminism, while also acknowledging the journey of the individual in the pursuit of a feminist life.

shake out night’s hide for sound to pour out

McPherson coaxes us, as did Mary Dorsey, to embrace night. The freedom of Dorsey’s ‘loosing’ ‘darkness’ for the lovers in ‘Night’ (1982, 35) becomes a porous ‘hide’ in McPherson’s ode to spiral dancing. ‘Hide’ denotes both skin and a secret hiding place wherein night becomes a place where the women can shake out concealment and silence, and pour themselves into one another under the cover of the blue house.

address

Could anyone any one love anyone any one?
Any one anyone love one for loving any one
Love one and love one another an other like birth?

The second section (ii) of ‘stein songs for the blue house’ opens by addressing questions of acceptability. The repetitive questioning of these first few lines with the same few words conjoining and disrupting enlivens the restriction felt in the pleasure of new found lesbian love, even if these moments are only momentary; they may occur ‘In dancing in changing of partners.’ This section is internal, interior, private, and intimate. The movement in ‘the blue house’ works differently from ‘Night,’ as McPherson moves from outside in. ‘I’ appears once, crucially placed alongside ‘join,’ which is repeated but then juxtaposed by ‘cloister.’

release o increase
me go under go higher go wanting o wanting come
in till I join you in more till you join me o

cloister the join –

(10)

Woman is portrayed both as instrument, ‘the guitarist softens the strum,’ and foliage, ‘foliage under / a breast dip where breaker change role.’ Throughout her first collection *A Figurehead: A Face* McPherson frequently uses imagery that connects her poetry to the Wicca tradition of feminist modern witchcraft. This connection is most obviously felt in ‘stein songs for the blue house’ in the language emblematic of spiral dancing, “the turning spiral that whirls us in and out of existence” (Starhawk 1999, 39). Ethan Doyle White writes of how Wicca “found a comfortable bedfellow in the form of 1960s counter-culture and came to be championed by those sectors of the women’s and gay liberation movements which were seeking a spiritual escape from Christian hegemony” (2016, 2). McPherson confirms this in an interview for *A Women’s Picture Book* when she explains how lesbianism changed her attitude, along with others, to ritualistic spirituality:

We had been brought up in the church, most of us . . . Talking one night we admitted we enjoyed ritual and the kind of bonding that comes from shared spirituality . . . Emotional with sexual with spiritual. And once we started the hunt a lot of material came our way (1988, 36–38).

In part (i) of ‘stein songs for the blue house’ McPherson ends on the image of ‘a dancing red moon.’ In part (ii) the clutch of a red fist ‘stifles luminous.’ We are momentarily returned to the ‘red fist’ of ‘for her thirtysixth year, a breakout.’ McPherson again calls on the common language of Judy Grahn’s ‘red, red hands’ (1978, 25) now more explicitly Wiccan and sexual in intention. This “most privatised aspect of ourselves, our sex lives,” has often as Amber Hollibaugh claims, been “dead-ended into silence within the feminist movement” (2000, 63). All the poets in my thesis attempt to undo, to queer, this silence. In Dorcey’s ‘Night,’ Smyth’s ‘Coming Home,’ and Gallagher’s ‘Embrace,’ the exterior life of the interior lived experience is expressed, is reoriented inside out.

The collective subjectivity in ‘stein songs for the blue house’ ties in with the philosophy of community participation and involvement that was central to McPherson’s life, to the Blue House, *Spiral*, and The Women’s Gallery. Everyday life, and affect is expressed by McPherson through a sexualised language, a language sharing in the bodies that ‘half search half grasp unclasp and gone.’ Our emotional openness and addressability can make language feel something other than hurtful or shameful. Language can be a sexualised, erotic

sharing of roles and rules. Our addressability can make language a summoning, an opening, and a celebration of new possibilities so ‘any one any one anyone might be a one.’

Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this (Rankine 2014, 49; italics in original).

The constant addressability of dykeness and queerness had to be learnt through my lesbian foremothers, as McPherson learnt from Gertrude Stein, Ursula Bethell, and others. I did not learn the language from my family, my culture, or my education. There is no app on my phone from which I can learn to construct myself as a lesbian. I learn through my foremothers how to write a critical/creative poetics of feminist lesbianism, of working-class dykeness. Having been raised (/razed) and educated under Catholicism, I often miss the ritual and bonding of shared spirituality. However, the constant failings of the church, its abuses, and dismissiveness of women and queers makes institutionalized spirituality an impossibility for me. This disconnect from the predominant spiritual culture of Ireland also brings about questions of place and where as a queer migrant I call home and what it means to always (be)coming home. I have found sanctuary, a summoning, in the queer language of identity, especially in the word dyke. For me, dyke expresses my lesbianism, my butchness, my working-class origins and connects me to my lesbian feminist foremothers who reclaimed the word and created a company of radical hysteria and disorientation that I am proudly a part of:

The first time I was called a faggot I was too young to understand the ranks I just joined. The amazing company I was now in. I was a long way from reclaiming it. It hurt. I denied it. That hurt worse. I think that’s why I’m so loud about it now. I know that no pain inflicted on me because of who I am will compare to the pain of hiding who I am (Klass 2018, n.p.).

I’ve spoken on the phone or gone for coffee with a number of women who were Heather’s friends. I find it very hard to present those interactions in critical form. But one thing I noted after speaking to all of them was how in some way they felt forgotten, or out of place, out of time:

Identifying as a lesbian, I have not only felt misplaced, I have also felt inappropriate; place functions as a ‘moral geography’ and it is used to demarcate or mark those who belong from those who do not (Cresswell quoted in Heddon 2008, 111–12).

Lesbianism functions as its own culture within the broader rainbow community of queerness. Queerness has undergone swathes of social change and is constantly challenged from within and without. Place within the lesbian community is often dictated by the young, the outspoken. At one time in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Heather McPherson and the friends I have spoken to were those radicals, changing the face of literature and art through feminism. Some of these women have become homeless in the poetic tradition, just as some lesbian bodies have become homeless in the tradition of pride. Lesbians are often those bodies that the Pride movement is ashamed of because lesbianism is a herstory fraught with horizontal oppressions due to the intersection of social divisions. McPherson writes from the intersection of multiple social divisions. Her poetry strives to show the reader that privilege exists and is unequally distributed or disavowed. This homelessness, this “gay shame” (Halperin and Traub 2009), can illuminate creative passageways that open wounds in the lesbian poet so that previously unimagined space becomes possible. In the physical blue house and McPherson’s poetic archive, women sought to make a place and a home outside of the heteropatriarchy. In the next chapter, we will see how Cherry Smyth finds a state in lesbianism while battling with concepts of nationalism as she arrives ‘home’ to Northern Ireland from London.

3 / *cherry smyth*

coming

Certainly addressing themes of queer desire in the queer body are central to my earlier poetry collections but belonging, the fear of being rendered ‘homeless,’ and the historical context of sectarianism, mistrust of difference, have guided my need to write throughout my work.

Emer Lyons and Cherry Smyth, “In Conversation: Emer Lyons and Cherry Smyth”

Cherry Smyth was born in 1960 in Ballymoney, County Antrim in Northern Ireland. Smyth was raised Protestant and has lived in London since the 1980s. She began publishing in the 1990s and her first collection of poetry was published in 2001 from Lagan Press in Belfast. Smyth grew up in a country wrought by battles over identity, British or Irish, Protestant or Catholic, and so over belonging. These questions have been complicated further by her lesbian identity and her life lived outside the island of Ireland (in London) so that Smyth and her work occupy multiple boundaries of belonging. As a queer Irish woman living in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I often feel the boundaries of belonging and home becoming more a memory or an impossible reality. Questions of home in poetry require a constant questioning of the ambiguity between the imagined, and the real. Cherry Smyth found strength in the intersection of her sexuality and political identity:

My coming out as a lesbian paralleled and informed my emergence as a post-prod Nationalist. Common sexuality allowed me to identify with Republican lesbians and gay men in a new way, just as feminism had given me the opportunity to forge new links with women across different backgrounds of class, nationality and race (1995, 224).

A process of reorientation based on feminism and/or lesbianism is one that all the poets in my thesis write of as occurring in their lives. Smyth’s lesbianism empowers her with an intersectional queer feeling of nationhood, one based not just on nation but also on sexuality.

In January 2017 I visited the Ulster Museum in Belfast, which was showing an exhibition on the Troubles in Northern Ireland. On the wall large letters spelled out a sentence that resonates with me still: “While we have a shared past, we do not have a shared memory.” Over the course of the few weeks I was at home in Ireland, I repeated the phrase to many,

including my aunt as we discussed familial memory. This was a fervent topic at the time as my paternal family began the search for their grandmother's death certificate and grave. The, to this day, inconclusive search means that my father and his siblings do not have a claim to their mother's family home. As older relations die so too does the memory of their grandmother. This experience made me consider how easily intergenerational trauma becomes repressed when memories (especially maternal memories) are silenced.

Smyth changed direction by detaching from the heterosexual world. She became in Sara Ahmed's words "reoriented" which leads Ahmed to wonder about home, "and how much 'feeling at home,' or knowing which way we are facing, is about the making of worlds" (Ahmed 2006, 20). I return to questions of home constantly as for me, and for many queer people, home can invoke isolating feelings of shame, of "[re]entering a closet of furtive whispers and private pain" (Aguilar-San Juan 1998, 267). Home is a concept that is further complicated in Ireland by religion. It impacted the bonds of kinship available to me as a child in rural West Cork where we are not afflicted with the sectarian violence that remains a constant in Northern Ireland. Sectarian divides in Northern Ireland have for decades stimulated civil unrest. Political discord permeates daily lived experience in the six counties. Smyth's choice to live as a queer woman in London troubles her Republicanism, her place in Ireland and at 'home.'

In 2008 Iris Robinson, a former Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MLA and MP in Northern Ireland made a series of, by now infamous, statements about homosexuality suggesting that homosexuals could be "cured" with psychiatric treatment and promoting the services of a "very nice" psychiatrist she knew who could help to "re-orientate" homosexuals back to heterosexuality (Young quoted in Duggan 2012). Robinson's statements promote the belief that she is facing the right way and that in turn there is a right way to be orientated towards. This chapter is concerned with the process of reorientation and the shame and/or shamelessness involved in being disorientated, or in other words, homeless, and the reflective ways lesbian poets look to reorientate. In 'Coming Home' Smyth displays the complicated internalisation of what it means to really *be* Irish, and how speaking about one's heritage with pride is complicated by a fraught diasporic and queer existence.

visibility

If you're gay, first they try to tell you that it's really not true, then they spend years trying to change you. You just have to hate yourself more than straight folks do. Everything that comes at you tells you it's sick, wrong, perverted, demented. You never get reinforced.

Amber L. Hollibaugh, *Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*

Cherry Smyth's poem 'Coming Home' was originally published in 1993 and appeared as part of her first collection *When The Lights Go Up* in 2001.¹¹ 1993 was the height of "lesbian chic." The term was coined after k.d. lang appeared in May of 1993 on the cover of *New York Magazine* with the heading, "Lesbian chic: The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women." The following month, *Newsweek* ran a "lesbian issue" which "presented lesbianism to its presumptively straight readership as an interesting but deeply problematic phenomenon" (Halperin 1995, 49). In the United States, Dorothy Allison was one of the most prominent lesbian writers to achieve increased visibility as she moved from small lesbian publishing networks to major presses and gained the ability to earn a living from her writing (see Cvetkovich 2003). In Ireland, Mary Dorcey won the Rooney Prize in 1990 for her short story collection *A Noise from the Woodshed*, and like Allison, moved from a small lesbian publishing press, Onlywomen Press (based in the UK) which published both her short story collection and her first poetry collection *Kindling* (1982), to one of Ireland's major presses, Salmon Poetry. In December 1992, the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, invited 34 delegates from the gay and lesbian community to Áras an Uachtaráin. Mary Holland reported for *The Irish Times* that:

. . . about half of the 34 people said that they did not want, could not afford, to be identified. What a reproach to the rest of us. That the guests of the President should feel that they had to conceal a meeting which, for the overwhelming majority of people in Ireland, would be something to talk about with pride (1992, 12).

Holland insinuates that the queer community should feel pride at this invitation to be seen at last by heterosexual society, and that queer people are not like the "majority." Similar meetings occurred in the United States and some wondered at the expense of this visibility, "The good news is, We finally exist to people other than ourselves. The bad news is on what terms?" (Hollibaugh 2000, 178). Others, like the actor Harvey Fierstein, saw the increased

¹¹ All quotations from 'Coming Home' reflect the poem as published in *When the Lights Go Up* (2001), 20.

visibility of the queer community as an achievement after existing for so long without it: “Visibility at any cost. I’d rather have negative than nothing” (quoted in *The Celluloid Closet*, 1995).

The nineties also saw the emergence of a Queer revolution in language, theory, and politics. In 1992 Cherry Smyth published her pamphlet *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*. Within, she queries what queer means and what it has to offer the lesbian community, “Despite reservations I and other lesbians, gay men and queers have expressed, queer politics offers a radical reclamation of the past and urgent questioning of the present” (1992, 59–60). In order to negotiate this complex field of reclamation and visibility, Smyth turned to writing: “I wrote at first to be seen. Be heard. I was very conscious of giving the state of being an Irish lesbian a presence. It was a way of writing myself into language, into love, into being” (Smyth in Brown 2002, 268). It should be noted that Smyth specifically identifies herself as Irish, and above calls being an “Irish lesbian” a state, re-establishing her queer nationality. As well as a reorientation based on feminism and/or lesbianism, all the poets in this thesis also express a difficulty with language, a search and desire to queer language. Smyth’s intersectional queerness bleeds into this search for a language that can articulate the state of being an Irish lesbian, the state of wanting visibility but being conscious of the complications of all forms of nationality. Smyth’s reluctance to claim a Northern Irish nationality, and her “post-prod” Nationalism, all highlight her consciousness of colonisation. She is conscious of her state as a colonised Protestant Northern Irish woman: considered a coloniser by Catholics in Northern Ireland and contrary to the ideal in Irish literary and social identity, one that is Catholic, heterosexual and from the Republic. Smyth never learnt Irish at school in Northern Ireland under the UK education system. In the Republic, I couldn’t enter university without Irish and another European language. But these stipulations did not create swathes of native Irish speakers. The shame of not grasping my own language lives in every misplaced *fada*. This disconnect from the Irish language, from the Irish nation, from a shared past, are all failings in a common pride that leads to those questioning the constraints of the shared memory of a culture becoming the shamed and silenced other of that culture. Smyth is in danger of becoming one of the silenced because of the differences in her Irishness from the traditional image that still prevails in people’s minds. The longer I live away from Ireland the more I feel like an imposter in any public, creative, and literary discourses about the country. While at the same time I become more and more conscious of my place in the culture of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Queer language practices, politics, and lived experiences allow Smyth to speak and write from outside a language of belonging that adheres to strict binaries

of nationhood. In Smyth's work the concept of home grows sideways. In her poem 'Coming Home,' Smyth develops a queer language in the way she questions Irish identity and the performativity of an Irish self that occurs when she returns to her familial childhood home in Northern Ireland from her queer home of London. A queer language exposes, questions, and lives between ambiguous temporalities.

By exposing what is seriously wrong in a culture, what's been silenced, and to reveal this to others, can provoke disapproval and censure. The deep taboos around sexual abuse, abortion and queer sexuality have taken decades to shift, especially in Northern Ireland where colonialist damage continues to endure and divide (Lyons and Smyth 2020, n.p.).

The lesbian experience is centralised as the primary point of view in the all the poems in this thesis in order to show the nationhood of lesbianism that exists in the poetry of lesbians. Coming out, like coming home, is a constant process of reconstitution.

Coming home is like dying
and coming back from the dead all at once.
Time stops and time begins again where it left off—
leaving at eighteen. Here, time isn't pressing to go somewhere,
the last call, the last tube. Instead it can sit
and watch the waves rolling, behind the raindrops running,
being blown or flung or just clinging to the windowpane.

Smyth's poem associates 'home' with a different time zone where time stops and starts 'where it left off,' and she becomes her past self again at, 'eighteen.' Her present self becomes disorientated and disappears into this past self of a rural Northern Irish Protestant girl in contrast to the urban dwelling queer woman she feels was left, or had to be left, behind in London. This continuous sense of time and of shifts in the spatial are intertwined and woven into the stanza with the use of the present participle in words like 'leaving,' 'pressing,' 'rolling,' 'running,' and 'clinging.' As in McPherson's work, the language keeps us moving, in direct contrast to the stasis implied by the association of returning home with death in the opening lines.

Smyth writes of a choice between dying or coming back from death alluding to the sameness in returning home, the self 'at eighteen' waiting like a shell to begin 'again where it left off.' Smyth questions her relationship to time when she is in London rushing for 'the last

call,' or running for 'the last tube.' This repetition of 'the last' shows the reader that there is something to be missed, and that perhaps, what is to be missed at home is the 'pressing' urgency of time in London. The poet seems uneasy with the view from where she sits, in her direction away from London and towards the 'waves rolling.' The waves and rain are beyond her control unlike her ability to be on time or to miss something dictated by a schedule like 'the last tube.' Smyth is prescriptive in her treatment of time, she witnesses rather than participates, 'it can sit,' be 'blown or flung,' or just cling. In the witnessing she begins to mimic the slow, steady pace of home in her language as 'rolling,' and 'running,' slow to 'clinging.' In part, Smyth's lesbian identity dis-identifies her from a shared collective time at home in Northern Ireland, creating a disorientation between Smyth and her parents in the poem ensuring Smyth never arrives home.

self

Smyth's constant coming home requires her to perform differently, to misrecognise herself, her identity and to question her sense of belonging. In belonging we can begin to capture:

. . . more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than positing of identity as a stable state (Probyn 1996, 19).

Belonging also suggests permission to belong and the exclusion from belonging, both of which create a sense of yearning or longing. This yearning can be felt in the continuous sense of time in Smyth's use of verbs and the simple present and also in the ambivalent sense of self expressed in the second stanza and the beginning of the third stanza where Smyth fluctuates between a desire for attachment and intimacy and a desire for distance and anonymity. This ambivalence is what keeps Smyth coming home. She is "not quite here" (Muñoz 2010, 21) in either Northern Ireland or London; she never arrives in either place.

I see the sea from the house.
The dark blue rim at the edge of the sky
is the circle round your iris,
flecked with yellow like marram grass.

I unpack clothes smelling of London.
Lulled by the tease of familiar voices
I still yearn for the anonymity of the city,

peace to read, think, eat, not eat, to swear,
clutter, clatter, stay in bed all day with the one I love
and talk about her openly.

Directed towards the sea, Smyth refers to the presence of a 'you' in the phrase, 'the circle round your iris.' The reader could think that here she is referring to a lover, but then why does she continue in the next stanza to refer to 'the one I love / and talk about her openly.' This movement from 'your' to 'her' eliminates the lover as 'your' and we see the poet herself written of in the second person reflected back to us against the windowpane. Smyth splits herself into multiple persons, the person speaking, the person reflected in the window, the person she was at eighteen, and also, in the next stanza, her mother as a reflection of a potential future self that she seeks to escape. Smyth writes of her battle with subjectivity and the concept of a fixed notion of self:

I do wrestle with the question of subjectivity. I am less interested in creating a coherent self across time than in showing a shifting, contextual, contingent self. I like the idea of drawing the reader into a critical intimacy between our respective subject-selves. I interrogate the self through the work (Smyth in Brown 2002, 268).

Smyth expresses this shifting sense of self in how she chooses to structure the poem, moving back and forth between Ireland and England from 'I unpack clothes smelling of London,' to 'Lulled by the tease of familiar voices.' London is both a city of anonymity and intimacy. To lie in bed with one's lover is not to be anonymous but to be known ('stay in bed all day with the one I love') whereas in Ireland things are both 'familiar' and the cause of feelings of 'anonymity' because she cannot find the space to talk about her lover 'openly.'

In 'Coming Home' Smyth couples the shame of not belonging with her troubled notions of a fixed self. Shame unsettles the self and allows for the possibility of change, change as an ongoing process. Shame allows Smyth to explore the disorientation of perception that is part of the politics of queerness as a lived state of being. According to Probyn, to consider shame "is to recognize that the reduction of interest that prompts shame is always incomplete. As such, shame promises a return of interest, joy, and connection" (2005, xiii). The real and imagined home of Ireland battles with the desires of queers who want to live elsewhere, to

‘talk’ ‘openly,’ but interest in that imagined home of Ireland is always incomplete, complicated by pride and shame. In queerness, we are always shifting, always becoming, always questioning what it means to *really* belong. Belonging is a concept that is unsettled beyond queerness for those of us who are both queer and members of the Irish diaspora. Smyth quotes Fintan O’Toole in her 1995 article “Keeping it Close: Experiencing Emigration in England:” “Ireland is a diaspora, and as such is both a real place and a remembered place, both the far west of Europe and the home back east of the Irish-American. Ireland is something that often happens elsewhere” (222).

Family engulfs me.

I search their eyes for myself,

see only the nice wee girl they want, not the proud woman I am.

The tragic banality of my mother’s days consumes me.

Concern, grim imaginings, laundry worries.

The battle between feelings of pride and shame is expressed throughout ‘Coming Home.’ I feel it is most blatant in the beginning lines of the fourth stanza, (Is this ‘nice wee girl’ the same one we saw reflected in the window?). In this instance Smyth’s desire to see herself reflected in the eyes of her family demonstrates the shameful “immensity of human need” (Burrus 2008, 48). The expression ‘proud woman’ directly contrasts with the memory of the ‘nice wee girl,’ giving the sense that the memory of this girl, the infrequent you in the poem, is one that involves shame. Home is where ‘time begins again,’ where the poet is the ‘nice wee girl’ of eighteen. The engulfing feeling of family becomes a powerful tool of regression. Like Smyth, I often feel myself regress when I return home. I am never entirely present, always coming. My mother’s voice follows me every time I leave the house asking when I will be coming home.

imagination

When you soak a child in shame, they cannot develop the neurological pathways that carry thought . . . you know, carry thoughts of self-worth. They can't do that. Self-hatred is only ever a seed planted from outside in. But when you do that to a child, it becomes a weed so thick, and it grows so fast, the child doesn't know any different.

Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*

From the first line, 'Coming home is like dying,' Smyth starts the poem from a state beyond feeling, a deathly state we can only imagine. Throughout she drifts through time and space but there is only one distinct section that offers a full regression into childhood memory and imagination.

My childhood was full of light.
Daz-white fluorescent gleaming on formica,

Frenchtoast for tea on Saturday night,
when the whirl of Doctor Who sent us flying behind chairs,
greetin' and gurnin'. And then we'd queue up to slide down
the smooth, dark wood of the banisters,
hands and thighs warmed and squeaking like mice.

In Smyth's depiction of childhood, she incorporates tangible facts with the use of specific names for products, food, and television programmes; 'Daz-white,' 'formica,' 'Frenchtoast,' and 'Doctor Who.' The memory comes alive with imagination propelling the body in 'the whirl' of movement that sends the children 'flying.' Smyth's use of the words 'greetin'' and 'gurnin'' are unusual in the sense that they both express a form of communication. People meet each other or make themselves known through greeting. Gurning is a distorted facial expression, meaning to literally *make* a face. When the children are flying in their imagination, they are not themselves, they are making themselves known in an alternative expressive reality. Smyth does not enter into this world alone, she is part of a familial 'us' that creates an imaginative realm, a realm created by the contagiousness and playfulness of childhood.

By omitting the g ending, or g dropping, of 'greetin'' and 'gurnin',' the reader hears the colloquial quality of speech used within the memory. Smyth is showing a different self, a younger self that sounded like they were from somewhere and therefore belonged

somewhere. The phrase ‘greetin’ and ‘gurnin’ is itself a colloquialism in Northern Ireland which means to excessively complain.¹² This past self in the memory that dropped their g’s, had a voice ‘familiar’ with colloquialisms, a voice not so adaptable to the ‘anonymity’ of London. The change of texture in Smyth’s voice after emigrating from Ireland to England has caused her to feel silenced and ashamed: “At times, when I’ve gone back to Ireland, I’ve felt an uncomfortable embarrassment when people think I’m English, which undermines my right to speak as an Irish lesbian” (1995, 232). This embarrassment may have darkened the present for Smyth as she says in the poem, ‘My childhood was full of light,’ making the continuous process of coming home, impossible. We become aware of the infiltration of English life—the life that would later infiltrate Smyth’s way of speaking—into Northern Irish childhood through programmes like the BBC’s *Doctor Who*. The ‘whirl’ and ‘flying’ in *Doctor Who*’s world of nomadic existence with the possibility of sudden appearance and disappearance reflects the speaker’s relationship to coming home and the reality of being home. In childhood the surrounding ‘British’ sensibility would have been porous, escapable, ‘full of light’ whereas time and distance provided Smyth with “an uncomfortable embarrassment” of being conflated with the coloniser, disrupting her ability to ever come home.

There is solace to be found in the body and the erotic, in the warm ‘hands and thighs’ that slide and squeak, along with the ‘gurnin’ facial expressions, giving this sequence a sexualised quality that veers against “an ontology of origins” and queers “the nostalgic line” (Probyn 1996, 117). This is not to say that Smyth pathologises memories in the poem to justify her present queerness as the following stanza unearths her femme origins in the form of, ‘teenage jewellery with broken fasteners,’ and ‘rusty hairclips in drawers reeking of cheap perfume.’ She refuses to represent the popularised narrative of childhood progression from tomboy to lesbian— “I became a lesbian feminist, a queer dyke, a femme top. I refused the fixity of the identity I had been expected to conform to with a vengeance” (Smyth 1995, 222). Smyth refuses the expectation to conform to either a queer notion of self (homonormativity), or a heteronormative identity, while expressing how the playfulness of childhood offers a strangeness that refuses the fixity of adult identity.

¹² I owe thanks here to Dr. Neil Vallely.

nostalgia

Emigration teaches you of reinvention and loss as you move between nostalgia and disdain.

Cherry Smyth, *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards the Twenty-first Century*

In this section I move from, or more accurately between, considerations of imagination and nostalgia. In Svetlana Boym's article "Estrangement as a Lifestyle," she writes about two types of nostalgia, *nostos* and *algia*, both of which feature in Smyth's writing. Smyth carefully manipulates the line breaks in the title 'Coming Home' to stress *nostos* (home) and *algia* (longing). *Nostos* is "reconstructive and collective," the nostalgia of the 'familiar voices,' while *algia* does not pretend to rebuild a mythical home, it is "ironic, fragmentary, and singular," it yearns for 'anonymity' (1996, 512).

It becomes more difficult to retain an 'authentic' identity the longer we stay away and the more idiomatic language and cultural gestures we shed. Many of us perceive Ireland as home when we're in England and yet when we return, England becomes the place we want to be (Smyth 1995, 228).

Smyth uses the continuous present in the title of the poem as if she is eternally 'coming home,' with the sexual connotations of the word 'coming' hanging over the poem from the beginning. Smyth expresses longing in the present tense of 'I still yearn' at the end of the second stanza for the 'peace' of the third. Within this third stanza the speaker is sexualised, 'stay in bed with the one I love,' and desexualised, 'The spinster is come home.' The term spinster is used to code Smyth's lesbian body as heterosexual. (Better a sexless spinster than a sexually active lesbian). The use of words like engulfs, consume, command and desperate in the fourth stanza overwhelm the speaker and the mother's voice takes over for three lines, ending on the question, 'Would you look at the state of this place?' disrupting the speaker's earlier desire to 'clutter' in peace.

Smyth only uses 'me' when referring to her family, and in particular, her mother; 'Family engulfs me,' 'The tragic banality of my mother's days consumes me,' 'She commands me to affirm her martyrdom,' 'My mother desperate to know me,' and finally, 'Saying goodbye made me want to weep.' She looks to her 'mother's face' for orientation. She searches her mother for 'pieces' of home.

I look at my mother's face for the first time

since I arrived, as she futters away in the kitchen.

A tired, sighing mouth, once full-lipped,
her cheeks have sunk into mid-life hollows
as her children grew up and away.

I steal pieces of her past when she's off-guard
and hoard them for when she's no longer there to ask.

The word 'futters' is used in a colloquial sense to mean to busy oneself but the archaic meaning of the word is to perform intercourse, it comes from the French word *foutre* (Williams 1994, 538). Smyth queers the order of things with her chosen line structure by placing, 'I look at my mother's face for the first time,' directly preceding the line 'as she futters away.' She embeds the stanza with the sexual and the erotic, audible from the 'sighing' 'full-lipped' 'mouth.' Smyth regularly reminds the reader of female sexual desire ('stay in bed all day,' 'tossing, turning, and touching'), an often-forgotten thing, especially in terms of lesbian sexuality which unlike male homosexuality was never criminalised, and therefore never seen, like the desexualised 'spinster.' Smyth takes risks in representations of sexuality:

I take risks in my writing and teaching around sexual representation and believe that women could have less repressed attitudes to their bodies and their desires if there were more spaces to present diverse images and texts (Smyth 1992, n.p.).

In the sixth stanza Smyth begins to think about the future, a time when her mother may 'no longer be there.' For the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, queer futurity is a "realm of potential that must be called upon" and that is "not quite here" (2010, 21).¹³ Smyth enters the realm of "not quite here" in order to access her mother's past, a past her mother only shares when she is 'off-guard.' She calls on futurity's potential to get to know something hidden about her, which in turn Smyth hides: 'hoard them.' Smyth creates a poetics of forgetting and remembering as she stores her mother's past inside her for the future, as there are no details given about the 'pieces' in this poem. She represses it down inside herself, becoming the parts of her mother that will one day 'no longer be there.' The reader is made aware that Smyth did not seek this information from her father. It is her mother's lineage that she fears will be forgotten. Forgotten history is an area that women and queer people are

¹³ I see the concept of "not quite here" used to the fullness of queer capacity in the TV show *Stranger Things* and alternative realm of "The Upside Down."

sensitive to as so much of our history has been written out, or over, or misrecognised or destroyed.

shame

Smyth uses a TVAM announcement overheard on the morning of her 'leave-taking' to display the disrespectful ways Northern Ireland is addressed by the English media.

TVAM announced that 'a man was shot dead last night
In Mag-here-a, on the shores of Lough Nee.'
Ahoghill, Aghadowey, Magherafelt—
The sticky place names of the North

get caught in an English throat.
Old meaningless conjectures women out of lost tongues,
evolving Irish-Anglo non-senses.
They call us British, stamp out our language,
undermine our culture, swallow our pride.

This section of 'Coming Home' captures the turbulence between a shared history and a shared memory, and it is one of the two references in the poem to pride. I am reminded of David Halperin when he writes, "Gay pride does not even make sense without some reference to the shame of being gay" (2009, 3). In much the same way, it could be said that pride in being Irish does not make sense without reference to the shame of being Irish, a shame that Smyth argues here is a result of colonisation. In reference to Puerto Ricans' situation as a colonised people, the filmmaker, scholar and writer Frances Negrón-Muntaner suggests that colonisation "creates a state of inferiority internalized as shame, particularly manifested in the diaspora" and that individuals constantly try to displace this shame by articulating discourses of pride (quoted in La Fountain-Stokes 2011, 62). Shame in the Irish diaspora is a result of an internal judgement, a judgement against the self that sees the self as bad, defective, or weak, as a result of having left Ireland, for choosing to live in the tradition of racism in London that imagines Irish as inferior.

They call us British, stamp put our language,
undermine our culture, swallow our pride.

Incessant boat people are we,
forced from Larene to Stranraer, Belfast to Liverpool,

Dun Laoghaire-Fishguard, Limerick-Quebec.
Pale with separation we drag slowly
with suitcase and memories to other lands.

Shame plays out this weakness in the face and body, it arises in Smyth's negative view of the diasporic self as a weak 'pale' being that can merely 'drag' a suitcase, and therefore a negative view of herself. But she expresses it through the point of view of others with the use of they, 'They call us British,' showing the narrative as beyond the control of the diasporic or colonial subject, and displaying herself as disempowered through the domination of a colonial voice that refuses to say or spell correctly the place names of Northern Ireland. The inner workings of the performativity in 'Coming Home' operate in both a contagious and volatile way as Smyth moves from childhood memory and memorabilia ['goodies, / photos, pencil-written stories,'] to death ['TVAM announced that 'a man was shot dead last night.']] Through her display of a disempowered, disorientated self that performs at differing levels of subjective and objective states, Smyth acknowledges the volatile reality of a life lived in Northern Ireland:

'See you soon,' I lied, guilty and relieved to part.
'If there's anything you need, wee pet,' he said.
'Be sure and let us know you arrived safely now,' she said.

One instance of the contagiousness of shame can be read in the last stanza above, in the dialogue performed by Smyth and her parents as she prepares to leave. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner considers shame as the basis for a "special kind of sociability" and a relation to others that "begins in an acknowledgement of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself" (1999, 35–36). Warner is writing with the queer community in mind, but I can see evidence of this special sociability in this conversation. Shame spreads between Smyth and her parents like a contagion as shame is itself a form of communication that lives in the face and body—"Blazons of shame, the 'fallen face' with eyes down and head averted—and to a lesser extent, the blush—are semaphores of trouble and at the same time desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge" (Sedgwick 1993, 5). We can't see the body language of this conversation but in Smyth's choice of sparse reply from her parents', 'he said' 'she said,' we can begin to imagine it. Smyth focuses throughout the poem on the gaze,

particularly between herself and her mother, in the first part of the poem: ‘your iris;’ ‘I search their eyes;’ ‘I look at my mother’s face.’ Only in reference to herself in the second person, does she use simile to make a comparison, ‘your iris / flecked with yellow like marram grass.’ She queers the poetic blazon¹⁴ with shame, by cataloguing her own physical attributes. Smyth, both with herself and with her parents, deconstructs and constructs the interpersonal bridge to become a collective in shame.

Shame is a bad feeling attaching to what one is: one therefore *is something*, in experiencing shame. The place of identity, the structure “identity,” marked by shame’s threshold between sociability and introversion, may be established and naturalized in the first instance *through shame* (Sedgwick 1993, 12; italics in original).

The threshold between Smyth and her parents is marked throughout the poem but the speaker desires introversion more than sociability, ‘peace to read, think, eat, not eat.’ Smyth is more a witness than a social participant in her parent’s life while at home, she searches, ‘their eyes,’ her ‘mother’s face,’ ‘this house,’ ‘the attic.’ In this lack of interaction with her parents, Smyth displays a deep connection to place rather than people; it is the house she considers her ‘memory bank.’

By contrast, the speaker is alienated from her parents and this alienation is a central source of guilt and shame. The speaker feels guilty at lying about seeing her parents ‘soon’ when she tells the reader she feels ‘relieved to part.’ She is ‘relieved to part’ because of the shame felt at home, her inability to talk openly about her lover, or connect with her mother who is ‘desperate to know’ her ‘but unable to know how to ask.’ Her father speaks for the first time, ‘If there’s anything you need, wee pet,’ offering to help her only once she is ‘leave-taking.’ Both of her parents feel a distance from the speaker because of her lesbianism and her lived experience in London rather than Ireland, whereas the speaker feels a distance from her parents because of her dwindling Irish accent, and the discord between their emotional availability. The speaker openly weeps as they say goodbye (‘made me want to weep. I did’) but also expresses fear at the thought of her parent’s tears: ‘My fear was not of losing them rather how to stop their tears / if they should let them fall.’ The speaker fears that if her parents allow themselves to feel the grief of parting, the grief of their distance, that she will never be able to leave for London. In order to fulfil the ritualistic cyclical progression of the

¹⁴ [Blazon: French for “coat-of-arms” or “shield.” A literary blazon \(or blason\) catalogues the physical attributes of a subject, usually female.](#)

lyric, the speaker must, as in the title of the poem, be always coming home and never arriving.

Smyth's feelings of exile and alienation transmute throughout the poem. For instance, even when she is weeping, she feels fear not sadness ('relieved to part') and this fear is 'not of losing them' but of them crying. The Irish writer Brian Dillon expresses a similar shame at witnessing his mother's grief in his memoir *In the Dark Room: A Journey in Memory*. He remains with his back to his mother as he listens to her crying:

And I cannot tear myself from this spot and turn towards her to acknowledge her suffering – a movement which would be so alien, so unthinkably intimate that it would surely thrust us both into an atmosphere even more confusing than that which already hovers like a black fog between us (2005, 23).

The threshold of shame between the speaker and her parents becomes an irreconcilable distance, a coming, not being, not returning. The speaker herself is allowed to display grief; she feels capable of expressing but not witnessing grief.

exile

The expression of loss is unifying. It creates an intimation of homeland wherever I am. It's warm. I'm sullen. It becomes cold. I recover the private world by making it nameable. It may try to shut me out, but I come back to expose its secrets, mess its symmetry and their fantasy images of what constitutes family, Irishness and Ireland. I insist on belonging where I have not always been wanted. "It's all very well," my mother once said, "doing those things in England, so long as you don't do them here. The ill feelings run too deep."

Cherry Smyth, *Into the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*

When Smyth is referring to the English as a people, she uses the word 'they:' 'They call us British.' When she is referring to her parents, she uses them, 'My fear was not of losing them.' The way in which she uses the third person plural in reference to both England and her parents could be read as a conflation of two modes of colonisation, state and familial. The speaker is trapped between trying to escape these two modes of colonisation, and the shame felt at desiring escape. The speaker is bound up in the pride and shame, as these two moments

of colonisation correlate with the two mentions of pride in the poem. The first mention, 'proud woman,' is a reaction to the engulfing, or colonising, feeling of family, 'Family engulfs me.' The second, 'swallow our pride,' is a reaction to the undermining attitude of English towards Northern Irish culture, 'They call us British, stamp out our language.' Both instances create moments of volatility and a distinct feeling of anger. These feelings of anger, however, are short-lived and what follows on are feelings of alienation or exile. In the first instance from her mother, 'the tragic banality of my mother's days consumes me,' and in the second from her parents, 'emptiness deepened in the night. / Gossip ran out by Ballymena.'

Smyth writes of this longing for the physical place of home: "There is also a restlessness in my work, the longing for home, and the love of the beauty of the coastal landscape which made me feel rooted in the North" (Smyth quoted in Brown 2002, 272). Smyth uses the act of clearing out her material belongings from the house to express the lack of belonging that she feels, 'Once I've emptied all the cupboards, / taken the last box from the attic, / will there be anything more to come back for?' In this clearing she seems to be displacing herself from her home in Northern Ireland and making herself anonymous there, as anonymous as she feels in London. This active untethering of possessions seems to overcome her inability to 'sit still' when she returns home. If her childhood home becomes as strange to her as her created home in London then she will be able at last to 'relax' as both places will resemble each other in some small way. Smyth begins to embrace the 'rolling' movement of her home in between Northern Ireland and London and she is able to settle into the home that lies embedded in her skin and embrace the perpetual state of *coming*.

I will never find home on the mountains. This I know. Rather home starts here in my body, in all that lies imbedded beneath my skin (Clare 2015, 10).

*afterwardness*¹⁵

you can't make homes out of human beings / someone should have already told you that.

Warsan Shire, 'for women who are 'difficult' to love'

Smyth is not alone among Irish lesbian poets in 'Coming Home.' The second poem in Mary Dorsey's collection *Kindling* is entitled 'Coming Home,' and it begins, 'Coming home / the streets seem more narrow than ever' (1982, 8). When Dorsey republished a number of poems from *Kindling* at the end of her first collection with Salmon Poetry, *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* in 1991, 'Coming Home' was not one of them. In Sarah Clancy's 2014 collection *The Truth & Other Stories*, her poem 'Homecoming Queen' gives a slightly different take. Clancy accompanies her lover as she returns home, the poem beginning with an ellipsis, '. . .in your humpy pine-lined hometown, / I am damaged goods.' All three poets begin with creative distancing; the streets are 'more narrow,' (Dorsey), and the speaker feels like 'dying' (Smyth) or 'damaged goods' (Clancy). Yet, the titles of the poems include either coming/homecoming, suggesting a return will happen again, that these negative feelings will be forgotten.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* Jack Halberstam makes a claim that forgetting for women and queer people can be useful as it disrupts the smooth operation of the normal and the ordinary while he also questions why women and queer people should have to learn to forget. He sees the de-linking of the process of generation from the historical process as a queer project:

We may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and unusable pasts (Halberstam 2011, 70).

Smyth's 'Coming Home' attempts (unsuccessfully) to become unfettered by memory toying with imagined and real concepts of home, and what it means to feel out of place, disorientated and homeless in both instances. Smyth's complicated national identity encourages her to try and accept her diasporic existence as a part of her queer post-prod

¹⁵ A concept that Derrida deemed to "govern the whole of Freud's thought:" *Nachträglichkeit*, loosely translated by a range of critics as "deferred effect," "belated understanding," "retro-causality," and "afterwardness:" a "deferred action," whereby events from the past acquire meaning only when read through their future consequences (Bond Stockton 2009, 14).

republicanism, ‘incessant boat people are we.’ The poem’s final words, ‘yet never still,’ captures the ambiguity of her remaining tethered to memories and traditions connected to home in Ireland while she is never at home.

I was hoping to find in Smyth a justification for the homelessness I so often feel and hoping that my lesbian reorientation could be pinpointed as the cause. I aligned forgetting with repression and imagination, to create a nostalgia that disorientated me. In this disorientation I found community in the body of lesbian lyric work, in the bodies of lesbians. Sally Munt writes that unexamined shame, “can incite a wilful disintegration of collectivity, it can cause fragmentation, splitting and dissolution in all levels of the social body, the community, and within the psyche itself” (Munt 2007, 26). Unlike Warsan Shire, I believe a great capacity of queerness is in the potential to make homes out of human beings. Smyth captures the community/collectivity/kinship available to lesbians through examining shame as a homecoming, otherness, a remembering, a coming and a constant process of reorientation in the final lines of the poem:

Memories of Ireland

are ice and sunlight which falls down an escalator.

Always in the same place, yet never still.

Forming and losing bonds of kinship alter the way the body moves in the world and on the page. The process of leaving and returning alters not just familial bonds but also the bonds of queer love. In the next chapter, I will explore how Rhian Gallagher is also concerned with the diasporic body’s search for home in other places and in the bodies of her lovers, in a complex interplay of identity, desire and shame.

4 / *rhian gallagher*

embrace

Lyons: In ‘Embrace’ it’s your lover making all the moves—she embraces you, she moves into you—so there’s almost this kind of coyness in it, in you.

Gallagher: I wrote the poem though.

Rhian Gallagher and Emer Lyons, Personal Correspondence

Rhian Gallagher was born in 1961 and raised Catholic in Timaru, on the South Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Gallagher returned to Timaru in 2006 after eighteen years in London. Being socialised and educated through a Catholic lens has impacted how I read and write poetry and I believe the same to be true of Gallagher’s work. If the bible is one of the first books you read or hear read, then narrative becomes a stronghold in your literary craft. If you are socialised into an environment with more rules than liberties, then form becomes a safe haven. If you learn prayers and hymns by rote from birth both repeated multiple times a day, then a compulsion towards an oral vernacular tradition, towards a song-like rhythm, and towards repetition cannot help but seep into your poetics. I believe a religious upbringing alters a poet’s way of being and knowing in the world regardless of whether they are still practicing. My own poetry circles back to Catholicism with feverish regularity. Elements of my indoctrination can be found in the comfort I find in form, in my ease with oral poetic presentation, in my reliance on song-like sonic patterning and narrative arcs, and in my confessional language. Religious indoctrination also frequents Dorsey, Smyth and McPherson’s work in their search for alternatives, addressing sectarian violence and challenging Catholicism.¹⁶

The lyric appears an obvious choice of poetic expression for Gallagher, and for myself, as it provides a framework from within which we can examine how our sense of self and our bodies, both social and poetic, develop outside of the indoctrination of Catholic and heteropatriarchal ideology while also acknowledging the ways in which that ideology remains internalised, how lesbians remain part(s) of the (w)hole. The lesbian lyric offers a

¹⁶ See McPherson’s ‘A New Year Company,’ *A Figurehead: A Face* (1982, 11); Smyth’s ‘The Roadside,’ *When The Lights Go Up* (2001, 14); Dorsey’s ‘Come Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear,’ from *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* (1991, 64).

new testament to lesbian love and the body with a view to undoing the historical narratives of elimination, and lesbian cultural and poetic erasure.

Since global lockdowns began worldwide in March 2020, I have thought often of the act of the embrace and the gaze, they have become the two intimate interactions that I express missing the most. Positive recognition, a touch or look, is a potent liberator of shame. I find Rhian Gallagher's work to have the capacity to embody recognition using reoccurring imagery, location, and the body, expanding the sphere of the lesbian love poem inside out.

messy stories

'Embrace' appeared in Gallagher's first collection *Salt Water Creek*, which was published by Enitharmon in 2003 while Gallagher was living and working in London. The poem won third place in the 2001 National Poetry Competition run by the Poetry Society in the UK. Besides meaning to hold someone, embrace also means to accept something willingly or enthusiastically. Gallagher plays with the social unacceptability of lesbianism in the poem and the reluctance within the speaker to accept—or embrace—her lover's embrace as a result of internalising societal shame.

Unshowered, wresting with the sea still on our skin
when she catches me, mid-room, with a kiss.
Not a passing glance of lips, but her intended
till I press back against the wall
laughing, in a body-search pose
as ready as her to forget about dinner.

Once, in our first months, we headed down Christopher Street
starch wafting from an open laundry, the sound of a press
squeezing a line along a sleeve. We slipped
across the West Side Highway, out on the pier
pressing our faces to the fence to catch an air of sea,
distant Liberty. Winter sun pouring its heart out
over the Hudson, she stepped into me –
the cold became a memory
smudged under our winter coats.

Two guys stood on the far side of the pier
looking baffled, how long they'd been there
god knows. Gulping, knees undone, we surfaced like swimmers
and almost ran back up Christopher Street
laughing. We'd been gone an hour, the night had come
there were shelves of lights up and down the tall streets,
she was all over me. Everything had turned on.

The title 'Embrace' is a play on subversion of acceptability and attempts to complicate heterosexual relational constructs. I will go on to explain in more detail how hesitancy can be read throughout the three stanzas as the speaker regards the body of her lover who makes all the first moves: 'she catches me,' 'she stepped into me,' 'she was all over me.' Ann Cvetkovich's argues that:

Allowing a place for trauma within sexuality is consistent with efforts to keep sexuality queer, to maintain a place for shame and perversion within public discourses of sexuality rather than purging them of their messiness in order to make them acceptable (Cvetkovich 2003, 63).

Geraldine Pratt highlights the importance of these messy stories since they reveal categories as "relational constructs" with "[c]omplex geographies . . . woven throughout" (quoted in Wang 2014, 94). 'Embrace' is a messy story situated in New York but also within the complex geography of a relationship that moves from the domestic to the sea. Gallagher has made no attempt to purge the poem of its queerness as the lovers kiss in two separate stanzas laughing off the male gaze's attempt to sexualise ('two guys').

Gallagher uses specific locations, seasons, and time. The second and third stanza take place in the space of 'an hour' within which the 'winter sun' turns into 'the night.' The second stanza begins on the phrase 'Once, in our first months,' flashing the reader back into an hour-long memory from a different time. In the second stanza the lovers 'headed down Christopher Street,' 'slipped / across the West Side Highway,' 'to catch an air of sea, / distant Liberty,' 'over the Hudson.' The geography is specific to the New York City urban landscape. To read 'Embrace' in isolation from the rest of *Salt Water Creek* could depict Gallagher as a poet of queer metronormativity, a poet who prioritises the urban over the rural and thus reinforces, according to Jack Halberstam, the dominant "story of migration from 'country' to 'town' . . . a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of

tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” (2005, 36–37). This narrative implies that the only means of achieving queer community, happiness, and open existence is via an urban lifestyle, inherently devaluing rural existence by way of stereotypes concerning urban and rural ways of life. While ‘Embrace’ certainly engages in the liberation of the urban, it does so without devaluing the rural. Still, Gallagher writes about rural Aotearoa/New Zealand life in *Salt Water Creek* from the urban distance of London, and arguably collaborates with Spivak who claims that, “even when rural queer lives are being represented, they are always portrayed under metronormative terms” (quoted in Wang 2014, 94). Many lesbians prioritise the metro/urban landscape as often it is associated with sexual freedoms. Christopher street is especially important as it was the location of The Stonewall Inn (51-53 Christopher Street), the site of the 1969 riots that launched the gay rights movement and therefore a site of queer collective memory. When the lovers traverse Christopher street, they are manipulating time, converting, “historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time” (Freeman 2010, 3-4). The two female protagonists are inserted at ground zero of a historical ‘sea change’ in a struggle for recognition that goes beyond a personal lyric context.

‘Embrace’ is written with an ‘intended’ messy non-chronology, the first stanza temporally after the second and third.¹⁷ I see the use of this retrospective temporality as a reflection of the author’s changing relationship to passion. Dodie Bellamy argues that:

Passion in writing or art—or in a lover—can make you overlook a lot of flaws. Passion is underrated. I think we should all produce work with the urgency of outsider artists, panting and jerking off to our kinky private obsessions (2008, 18).

There is the distinct sense in this poem that “a lot of flaws” are overlooked and we, as readers, are being shown an idealised ‘memory’ of the relationship. Gallagher’s title challenges us to accept, to embrace willingly, this portrayal. In my close reading of ‘Embrace’ I will argue that Gallagher calls on the passion of the erotic and place, in the vein of 1970s lesbian feminist poets such as Audre Lorde and Judy Grahn, “jerking off” to the honeymoon period of her once relationship. The poem is embodied with passion, collaborating with Bellamy by using different definitions of the word embrace to challenge

¹⁷ This approach to the creation of lesbian love poetry seems to be undergoing a revival with Kae Tempest’s collection *Running Upon The Wires* (Picador Poetry, 2018) also written with a non-chronological narrative arc to detail a break-up with the collection opening at the end of the relationship and ending at the beginning.

individual and societal shame, embedding urgency in the short space of the poem that a longer period of time plays out in. The sudden passionate movements are captured in the lovers through words like ‘wrestling,’ ‘catches,’ ‘gulping.’

erotic

The sea remains on the two ‘unshowered’ bodies pauses their movement in the first line, creating a stillness that provides a contrast to the movement of the lover as she ‘catches’ the speaker ‘against the wall’ ‘in a body-search pose.’

Unshowered, wrestling with the sea still on our skin
when she catches me, mid-room, with a kiss.
Not a passing glance of lips, but her intended
till I press back against the wall
laughing, in a body-search pose
as ready as her to forget about dinner.

The imagery of the female bodies as unclean goes against what Ariel Levy calls ‘raunch culture’ in which she sees the sexual objectification of women being sold commercially as empowerment. Levy uses a 1967 interview between the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci and Hugh Hefner to display societal discomfort with the unclean woman. Hefner explains that he chose the rabbit as the symbol for this empire because, “it’s a fresh animal, shy, vivacious, jumping—sexy . . . The *Playboy* girl has no lace, no underwear, she is naked, well-washed with soap and water, and she is happy” (Levy 2005, 57–58). A women’s body is depicted by Hefner as something to be enjoyed only when clean. The two lovers shared ‘intended’ ‘kiss’ shows the shamelessness of their unwashed love, the queer messiness of their societally unacceptable embrace that would be considered dirty by some, and not in a sexual way. Gallagher empowers the women in the first stanza by presenting them as unclean with sexual desire and agency.

The lover’s unshowered bodies are covered with the emissions of ‘the sea’ and ‘skin,’ viscerally experiencing embodied sexual desire. In ‘Embrace’ Gallagher calls on the power of the erotic as expressed by Lorde (1984) who believes that for women the erotic has been suppressed because it is a source of power and information. The intertwining forces of

commercialism and sexual objectification have led to further suppression of this erotic power. We are flooded with imagery of clean, frolicking, mindless bunnies rather than erotic, intentional women. The consensual power-play between the lovers in the first stanza of 'Embrace' is signalled in phrases such as 'her intended,' 'I press back,' and 'as ready as her.' The lovers are 'wrestling' both 'with the sea' and with each other, in a playful, 'laughing,' erotic exchange. Embodiment is evident in the sense of movement from the expansive space of 'mid-room' to the intimate periphery 'against the wall.' The response of the speaker to her lover's 'intended' kiss by splaying herself in front of the reader, and her lover, 'in a body-search pose,' is suggestive of letting go of the bodily autonomy, of the self and an embracing of the other. Gallagher's bodily exposure invites the embrace of the reader to search her body, and the body of the poem, as they entwine to become inseparable.

place

Predominantly, my interest in this reading of Gallagher's poetry revolves around the gaze of the reader and the poet. As the poems I consider in this chapter are written by Gallagher, a lesbian woman, about her lovers who are also women, how does that impact the way in which the poems are read? I am a lesbian reader and therefore it could be argued that my gaze cooperates with the interior gaze of the poem rather than challenges it. I wonder if the erotic power of these poems can be co-opted to become commercialised objects and the women within them sexually objectified? I will later consider the intrusion of the 'Two guys' at the beginning of stanza three as an anticipation of the question of the male reader. But as these poems are not constructed for the straight male gaze then I believe they present a queer challenge to what Erica Jong refers to as the "smoke screen" of sexual freedom (quoted in Levy 2005, 195). Gallagher presents an opportunity for the true expression of erotic power and sexual freedom using the reoccurring imagery of the sea as a metaphor— 'with the sea,' 'an air of sea,' 'surfaced like swimmers.'

Once, in our first months, we headed down Christopher Street
starch wafting from an open laundry, the sound of a press
squeezing a line along a sleeve. We slipped
across the West Side Highway, out on the pier
pressing our faces to the fence to catch an air of sea,
distant Liberty. Winter sun pouring its heart out

over the Hudson, she stepped into me –
the cold became a memory
smudged under our winter coats.

The restricted confines of the room where the speaker was caught in the first stanza opens out to the expansiveness of New York City and the sea in the second stanza as if in the ‘first months’ of the relationship the lovers embraced more of the space around, and between them, which later became pressed ‘against the wall.’ How these two women embrace space, and what they see, is specific to their lesbian lived experience. Sexual freedom is stimulated by recognition and misrecognition in ‘Embrace,’ as the erotic is “firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde 1984, 53). The speaker battles with her interiorised resistance to her lover’s embrace representing a struggle for mutual recognition. The creative power of misrecognition in ‘Embrace’ becomes a ‘smudged’ ‘memory’ or a messy story of misremembering/misrecognition. I firmly believe in the power of creative misremembering, as it encourages writers to question what they recognise to be true, and what they misrecognise purposefully in order to further creative intention. An acceptance of the jumbled chronology of memory and the messiness of remembering can form succinct lyrics.

The very specific naming of locations in ‘Embrace’ makes the relationship of place and time more stable and significant. We move out from the intimate, domesticated sphere of the ‘mid-room’ and into the public space of ‘Christopher Street,’ ‘West Side Highway,’ ‘Liberty,’ and ‘the Hudson.’ The distinct placement of ‘in our first months’ between two commas disrupts the first line and indicates the importance of this time in the relationship between the lovers. The commas also highlight the slant rhyme of ‘once’ and ‘months’ which reinforces the temporal tension between the immediate moment and extended temporality of the relationship. The expanse of the sea could be read as alternative public sphere in which lesbians can operate outside of the heteropatriarchy. In *Stein, Bishop, & Rich: Lyrics of Love, War, & Place* (1997) Margaret Dickie argues that the interest of three lesbian poets, Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Bishop and Adrienne Rich:

. . . proved them to be, in quite different ways, worldly women, circulating in the larger culture outside the woman’s sphere of the domestic and sentimental and outside, too, their own expressions of love and erotic desire (13–14).

Both Bishop and Rich write about the sea and its particular erotic freedoms in poems like ‘At the Fishhouses,’ and ‘Diving into the Wreck,’ which both find knowledge unearthed in the image of the sea. For Bishop, knowledge is derived from the sea’s ‘rocky breasts,’ where Rich searches for names which ‘do not appear.’ Dickie continues to quote Judy Grahn who suggests that “the definition of *place* itself has been central to what we [as lesbians] have done,” acknowledging the naming of place in early feminist works and how that “helped push Lesbianism out into the world, and perceiving ourselves as out of the house, out of confinement. In our lives, we have felt greatly without place, and continually out of place” (Grahn quoted in Dickie 1997, 13–14). Gallagher produces a sense of being out of place through the conscious non-chronological alignment of the poem with the present tense in the first stanza and the past in the second and third, she draws the reader’s attention to this shifting temporality.

‘Embrace’ reads as a memory would with disjointed time and space and the central image of the embrace between the lovers. The two memories are linked through the shared act of embrace. The embrace or the merging of the lovers can be read here as the phenomenological experience of identification which is mirrored in the move towards the plural personal pronoun, we, in the past tense of the second and third stanza. A slight movement away from this experience of identification may be read in the use of the personal pronoun, I, in the first stanza only. This could reflect the speaker’s relative passivity in comparison to the more active role of the lover in the poem. The speaker appears more conscious of her surroundings than the lover, the speaker sees in a way the lover does not. Returning to Bellamy’s idea of passion then, the poem’s phenomenology could relate to the changing power dynamics of the relationship seen in the second stanza (in the ‘first months’ of relationship) where the passionate embrace overcame the cold weather. The embrace in the second stanza becomes a moment of forgetting, ‘the cold became a memory,’ as it did in the first, ‘as ready as her to forget about dinner.’ Both moments of forgetting are stimulated by the actions of the lover, her ‘intended’ kiss, ‘she stepped into me.’ The lover’s differing embrace through the poem shows how the speaker overlooks relationship flaws in moments overcome by the passion expressed by the lover. The lover’s passionate embrace momentarily gives the speaker a sense of place. The embrace is continuous from stanza to stanza but the differing handling of the relationship to the sea shows the difference in the speaker’s willingness to succumb to that embrace. From stanza to stanza we sense the sea change, or the transformation of the speaker, and her relationship with her lover. The sea appears a second time in the poem, this time not on the skin but on the air, ‘an air of sea,’

which can only be caught by the lovers through the structural enclosure of ‘the fence.’ The differing closeness of the lover’s relationship to the sea mirrors the evolving relationship between them. In the past of the second stanza, the sea is fenced off, whereas in the first stanza it is ‘still on our skin.’ In the first stanza the speaker gives herself to her lover after ‘she catches’ her ‘mid-room.’ The lover also makes the initial move in the second stanza, ‘she stepped into me,’ with Gallagher choosing to end the line on a dash, shrouding the embrace and the speaker’s response, under ‘winter coats.’

The shifting temporal sense of being in and out of place is challenged in the second stanza of ‘Embrace.’ The reader is forced to flashback from the fragmented syntax and present tense of the first stanza, ‘she catches me,’ ‘I press back,’ and into the past tense of the second stanza where the plural pronoun ‘we’ is used for the first time, ‘we headed down,’ ‘we slipped.’ The expansion of the sphere from private to public can be felt distinctly in the language Gallagher carefully chooses. She gives a sense that instead of the outside world providing liberating it can feel confining especially if you feel, like a lot of lesbians do, out of place under public scrutiny or out of place even in the urban landscape which is deemed to provide a queer metronormativity for queers to escape the confines of their rural upbringings. The speaker is ‘laughing’ in the boundaries of the room in the first stanza, and the lovers again are laughing in the third stanza as they run away from the outside world and ‘back up Christopher Street.’ The second stanza is devoid of laughter. All the senses are embroiled to give a claustrophobic stiffness to the ‘starch wafting’ around the lovers and the sound of the ‘press’ ‘squeezing.’ The erotic tension between the lovers is mirrored in the city closing in around them, to embrace them as they do each other.

Gallagher creates an intimate public in ‘Embrace’ where at the subjective level ‘the cold became a memory’ as Lauren Berlant writes, intimate publics, “are affectively structured as scenes for identification, reflection, and recognition” (quoted in Ryberg 2013, 148). The surrounding public of New York City provides a landscape of reflection for the speaker to ruminate on those ‘first months.’ The lovers appear empowered in their shared sense of belonging, in the plural we, expressed in the four specific locations used in the stanza, ‘Christopher Street,’ ‘West Side Highway,’ ‘Liberty,’ ‘the Hudson,’ and the two instances of ‘winter,’ expressing a specific time. ‘We’ are firmly situated in this stanza in comparison to the fragmentation of the ‘we’ into ‘I’ and ‘she’ in the first stanza.

the guys

The use of ‘Two guys,’ rather than two men, shows Gallagher’s disregard for their presence. She does not give the ‘guys’ any power by referring to them in this colloquial manner. She places them on ‘the far side of the pier,’ giving them the least amount of physical proximity to the lovers as possible. Marilyn Fyre argues, “what lesbians see is what makes them lesbians” (quoted in Dickie 1997, 88). The phenomenology of the lesbian viewpoint problematizes and disorients heteronormative assumptions. The speaker and her lover see two ‘baffled’ guys that they only notice after a period of time, ‘how long they’d been there / god knows.’

Two guys stood on the far side of the pier
looking baffled, how long they’d been there
god knows. Gulping, knees undone, we surfaced like swimmers
and almost ran back up Christopher Street
laughing. We’d been gone an hour, the night had come
there were shelves of lights up and down the tall streets,
she was all over me. Everything had turned on.

Throughout the three short stanzas of Gallagher’s ‘Embrace’ she consciously pushes against the notion of female passivity. The lovers are constantly on the move, they are active in the room of the first stanza (the lover more so than the speaker) from ‘Christopher Street’ to the ‘Hudson’ in the second, and ‘back up Christopher Street’ in the third. Lesbian subjectivity is prioritised, it is the only subjectivity of the poem and the ‘two guys’ become objects to be overlooked by the ‘laughing’ lovers. ‘Laughing’ is enjambed at the start of a line same as in the first stanza, like an afterthought each time. Sara Ahmed describes shame as an emotion that requires a witness, “shame requires an identification with the other who, as witness, returns the subject to itself” (Ahmed 2004, 106). In the subject/object relationship between the lovers and the imagined view of the ‘two guys’ Gallagher tells us they looked ‘baffled’ while also positioning them ‘on the far side of the pier.’ Realistically, it would have been difficult for the speaker to decipher what the ‘guys’ saw of the embrace in the third stanza. Essentially, we are seeing the imagined view. Gallagher imagines them to be ‘baffled’ and in response the lover’s ‘laughing’ off the shame of exposure. This imagined response shows an element of shame within the speaker, reflected in the hesitation of ‘almost ran back up Christopher Street.’ Here, we can sense a will in the speaker to dispel with ‘almost’ and to

run back to the room of the first stanza. So far, the lover has initiated the active responses and here it seems the lover held the speaker back from running, as if they did not share in the shame of being witnessed.

The reference to the sea in the third stanza is embodied in the phrase, ‘we surfaced like swimmers.’ The embrace between the lovers is like that of the sea, the lovers are under water, they are in a different ecological zone when they kiss, becoming breathless with erotic desire. The reoccurring aquatic imagery starts to represent a search for a common language, reminiscent of the work of lesbian writers Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn, and Dorothy Allison. As Allison puts it,

If we [lesbians] are forced to talk about our lives, our sexuality, and our work only in the language and categories of a society that despises us, eventually we will be unable to speak past our own griefs. We will disappear into those categories. What I have tried to do in my own life is refuse the language and categories that would reduce me to less than my whole complicated experience (quoted in Russo 2001, 131).

Gallagher draws on images of the sea to convey the “whole complicated experience” of lesbianism, by refusing gender ambiguity, normative clean sexy imagery, and the male gaze. The sea becomes an intimate public that reflects back the lesbian body, by depicting the lived lesbian experience as something to wrestle with, only caught in the air, fenced off, and rarely engaged with beyond the surface level. To return to Rich’s words their ‘names do not appear.’ Gallagher illuminates this experience in the last three lines even though ‘night had come,’ the ‘shelves of lights’ capture the speaker’s lover ‘all over me’ ‘up and down the tall streets.’ By ending on the sentence, ‘Everything had turned on,’ Gallagher once again uses the power of the erotic to show that lesbian love poetry no longer has to be censored but reimagined through the embodiment of lesbian representation and the lesbian gaze, both of which are represented in the surrounding lights of New York City illuminating the turned-on couple.

gaze

In reading, and placing, ‘Gaze’ after ‘Embrace’ I want to showcase the different ways in which the lesbian gaze works in poetry. In ‘Embrace,’ Gallagher looks back on a relationship, the lover has active agency and becomes a character of her own, along with the guys, and New York City. These characters all combine to give ‘Embrace’ a distinct geography, and an unfolding plotline, including a flashback, delineating through shifting tense. There is the speaker’s internalised point of view, and the view of the lover and the surrounding cityscape. In both poems the lyric ‘I’ does not appear until the fourth line, and both begin on the image of body and water. In ‘Embrace’ the lovers battle with the sea on their skin; in ‘Gaze’ the lover is ‘wrapped in the shower.’

Morning carries into the room
sounds of you
wrapped in the shower
as I watch the lines re-ink with light,
mountains so close and vast
as the sea is vast.
Ice a-shine with early sun. The view
. . . something to tell you
as I cross the floor, calling your name.
You’re standing, towel at your hair, curtain back,
wet in a gravity of tracks
— shoulder to clavicle;
breasts and belly are a sheen.
I gaze and you
reply to my gaze
as the mountains have never replied
nor the sea.

The momentary slice of life depicted in ‘Gaze’ differs from ‘Embrace.’ The particulars of ‘Gaze’ are less solidified, we are unsure where we are but know it to be ‘morning.’ The body of the speaker’s lesbian lover delicately awakens the speaker’s gaze away from the view outside to carry the poem towards the naked female body inside. There is a tension in both poems between the lesbian body as it operates in the public sphere (outside), and in the

intimate public (inside). The way in which the lesbian body is identified, reflected, and recognised operates differently in both spheres because of the hegemonic gaze operating in the space. In the public sphere lesbians are minority figures dominated by the discursive power practices of the heteropatriarchy whereas in the intimate public of the poem even the form on the page reflects the prioritisation of the lesbian body.

‘Gaze’ featured in Rhian Gallagher’s second collection *Shift* published in 2011 by Auckland University Press after Gallagher returned from the UK to live in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The poem is constructed of five tightly wound sentences across seventeen short lines. This brief poem incorporates the use of repetition in the words ‘you,’ ‘mountains,’ ‘vast,’ ‘sea,’ and ‘gaze,’ which drifts down from the title to appear twice in the body of the poem. Throughout the poem, the body and the landscape are swiftly enjambed, as Gallagher toys with the reader’s conception of what constitutes the body of the poem and the body of her lover as her internal and external gaze drift between the two, connecting her sensual erotic relationship with her lover to nature and creating an eroticism of natural imagery in the poem. Four lines out of seventeen ends on full stops and none of these lines are complete. The dissolving line into line structure and the poem’s narrow shape suggests the shape of the lover’s body and the journey of the speaker’s gaze which moves from the ‘mountains so close and vast’ to wrap her lover ‘wet in a gravity of tracks.’

The sea appears as a simile, as an imagined view to gaze at, and represents the world of the poem formulating in the speaker’s unconscious mind. The mountains are vast *like* the sea that is not physically present in the moment captured in this poem. The truth of the view, of what the speaker can see, is not the only thing that appears in the poem, the poet replaces the real with the poetic, or as Stephanie Burt theorises, that which is *like* the real:

So, poetry replaces the body (*liko*) with something whose form (*liko*) is like it, though not identical to it: more vulnerable, or less subject to decay, or harder to read, or easier to read, or more attractive (more likeable) than what we already have (Burt 2014, n.p.).

When Gallagher writes, ‘Ice a-shine with early sun. The view / . . . something to tell you,’ the ellipsis represents what is not seen in the view, ‘the sea,’ which prompts the speaker to remember ‘something’ to tell her lover. The watery image of the ice shining in the view prompts the speaker to think of her lover in the shower, the lover becomes intimately connected to the imagery of water, the non-existent sea becoming like the body of her lover. The speaker is prompted to cross the physical interior of the poem, a pseudo-domestic space, ‘as I cross the floor.’ I say pseudo, because the space appears to be unfamiliar to the speaker;

it is a liminal or transient space. This space may be home for the lover and the speaker is just visiting, or it may be a room that neither are familiar with, a liminal or transitional space like a hotel room. This can be read in Gallagher's use of generic terms for the interior and exterior space of the poem, 'the room,' 'the shower,' 'the view,' 'the floor.' The two mentions of the sea suggest that the speaker is more accustomed to a view of the sea rather than the mountains which read like unfamiliar terrain. The sea reminds her of an elsewhere, another time and place, which functions as both a real place, and a place in her unconscious. Even though the rhyming couplet ending in 'view' and 'you' is interrupted by the ellipsis, the rhyme scheme allows the poem to flow past the punctuated pause for thought. The view also acts as an excuse to move the speaker's gaze through the physical space of the poem towards the lover in the shower. The speaker's gaze moves from outside in, from the act of viewing something in the range of her vision, to the act of regarding her lover's body: the 'view' becomes *like* 'you.'

The lover enters the poem through sound. First, she 'carries into the room' through the sound of the shower, and secondly when the speaker calls her, 'calling your name.' The lover's name, which we never learn, is the only moment of (reported) speech in the world of the poem. Gallagher moves between the use of metaphor and metonymy as the layered processing of the poem continues to build. The lines of the poem 're-ink' to become the mountains, reminding the speaker of the elsewhere sea, the sea prompts the memory of 'something,' this something becomes the lover's name, and this becomes the image of the lover's 'wet' body. As in 'Embrace,' Gallagher calls on the sea to reflect the lesbian body with sound repeating through 'laughing.' 'Something' in 'Gaze' can be a thing unspecified or unknown while at the same time can also mean a person or thing of consequence. Light 'carries' in 'with early sun' engaging the senses from sound to light.

You're standing, towel at your hair, curtain back,
wet in a gravity of tracks
— shoulder to clavicle;
breasts and belly are a sheen.

The intimate use of 'you' and 'your' in reference to the lover also allows the reader to insert themselves in her place. Gallagher could be addressing the reader, or the poem directly. Her language choice also makes the reader conscious of the poetic form of the lyric by using words like 'clavicle,' a word chosen for its poetic merit, a word rarely spoken off the page. Shoulder to collarbone is not nearly as poetically effective. Using the female body as subject

matter allows for this kind of word play, language can be musical like ‘clavicle,’ or simple and sensuous like, ‘breast and belly.’ Gallagher’s gaze is distinctly feminist, and woman centred, with the erotic communication between nature and the body. In Ben Lerner’s article about the poetry of Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson, he references Gillian White’s theoretical work on lyric shame. Lerner writes that White tries:

... to refocus our attention on lyric as a reading practice, as a way of ‘projecting subjectivity onto poems,’ emphasizing how debates about the status of lyric poetry are in fact organized around a ‘missing lyric object’: an ideal—that is, unreal—poem posited by the readerly assumptions of both defenders and detractors of lyric confessionalism” (Lerner 2017, n.p.).

It could be read that in ‘Gaze’ the sea represents the ‘... something’ missing, or the ideal, and in the last four lines of the poem Gallagher positions the lover’s gaze as this ideal.

I gaze and you
reply to my gaze
as the mountains have never replied
nor the sea.

The replied gaze shows the ‘gravity’ of longing between these two women and of the endless possibilities to ‘re-ink’ new ‘tracks’ using the subject matter of the body and same-sex desire, possibilities never achieved using the natural imagery of ‘the view.’ Elizabeth Grosz builds on the work of Foucault, who describes the body as an inscribed surface of events, to identify the body “as the ‘threshold’ between nature and culture; it is both material body and cultural inscription” (quoted in Brush 1998, 25–26). Gallagher propels the body beyond simple subjectivity into action by writing about the existence of bodies navigating complex desires. Here, we can sense a move away from the sublime metaphorical thinking of traditional lyric poetry and towards a woman-centred intimate epistemology of the body. To incorrectly paraphrase Wordsworth, Gallagher’s love of nature leads her to love of [wo]man.

Sometimes we hold that the self is an autonomous and independent entity, a body and a psyche of measurable dimension, the fixed hub around which our perceptions and relationships orbit. This is consistent with [Harold] Bloom’s notion of the lyric’s function: to enlarge a solitary existence (Baker 2007, 198).

The phenomenology of looking, or seeing, in lesbianism is one of the most powerful and embracing qualities of being a lesbian. The gaze enlarged what I thought of as a solitary existence. I had equated lesbianism with loneliness. When I first came out, the extended, intense, maintained gaze of other lesbian women terrified me. I had never felt seen like that, as is the case for most queer people who are raised in heterosexual familial and societal environments. Their sense of self is not mirrored back to them, and in turn they can develop an incomplete sense of self. Nathanson emphasizes the effects of shame on the sense of self as follows:

Shame is so uncomfortable that it can cause a lingering sense of wariness, of an unwillingness to trust positive affect quite so easily . . . we are forced to know and remember our failures (1992, 210).

I spent years actively avoiding lesbian women. In the silence of what I had *not* been told in my fourteen years of Catholic all-female education about lesbianism or any queer identity, I heard very clearly that my sexuality was something to be ashamed of. I internalised homophobia more than any of my heterosexual friends or family. Shame caused silence whereas sharing my shame about my sexuality has led to community. When I came out to my parents, I cried. They kept asking why I was crying. Something that has propelled my dyke existence is not constitutional reform, not legalisation of same-sex marriage, or societal or familial acceptance; what has settled me is other lesbian women, and in particular the words of lesbian women poets. In reference to Elizabeth Bishop's poetry Margaret Dickie writes that, "Bishop has been able to write a double-voiced discourse that is both disarmingly revelatory about her secret knowledge and most explicit about her open knowledge" (Dickie 1997, 88–89). Gallagher also writes "a double-voiced discourse:" in tone and form she assimilates to the traditionally patriarchal lyric while also providing a powerful process of identification for lesbian readers, the real 'you' she is addressing with her gaze, as "looking directly into the eyes of another person, and holding that gaze, is an intense form of interpersonal communication" (Kaufman 1989, 69–70). Yet, writing in resistance to a system is still a mode of participation within that system:

We must forsake the idea that lesbian sexuality is outside of, or against, or safe from the network of compulsory heterosexuality, bearing in mind Lyotard's warning that being in opposition is one of the modes of participation within a system (Phelan 1993, 776).

Even as lesbian poets like Dorcey, McPherson, Smyth, and Gallagher write same-sex odes to the beloved, or theories of flesh against poetic depictions of the natural world synonymous with lyric poetry, or of eroticism with interchangeable subjects between mother and lover, they are still writing within the tradition of lyric poetry. Gallagher toys with the blazon tradition in ‘Gaze,’ as Smyth did in ‘Coming Home.’ Yet, her lover is not just *like* the mountain or the sea but is superior, ‘as the mountains have never replied / nor the sea.’ Her creation of intimate publics in both poems through identification, reflection, and recognition for Gallagher, her lover, and the reader, ensures that the objectification of the blazon tradition is absent. In one sense, writing with a language of the self, with an epistemology rooted in the body, Gallagher creates space in the lyric for narratives of lesbian life that are often interrupted, distorted, shamed, or silenced. But her lyrics could also be read as acts of assimilation, shrouding female bodies and lesbian lives in a canonical tradition often associated with cis-hetero patriarchy. Dickie considers the creation of a “lesbian public lyric” out of “private passions and needs” and the challenges that lesbian poets like Gallagher may face “in response to a potentially hostile environment” (1997, 197). Gallagher re-inks the imperatives of lyric poetry and challenges the reader’s conceptions of who is behind the ‘I’ and who is the intended ‘you.’

Revealing her private passions in both ‘Embrace’ and ‘Gaze’ Gallagher challenges her patriarchal Catholic indoctrination using the lesbian public lyric.

Taken collectively, the Catholic Church taught young girls like myself to be ashamed of our bodies and of our sexual desires, to submit to male authority despite its cost to our own integrity, and to minimize if not deny our own needs and desires (Russo 2001, 187–88).

Catholicism trained young girls, like Gallagher and me, to confess our impure thoughts to male priests within the confessional. We were literally placed in a dark box devoid of eye-contact to seek absolution for our impurities. One of the most notable characteristics in Gallagher’s poetry is her celebration of women and sexuality, her poetics are rooted in a matriarchal ideology. In ‘Gaze’ Gallagher ends on the image of the sea. The repeated metaphoric use of a body of water is significant in her work. It provides the reader with a ‘vast’ image of a reflected surface, a mirror. This is of particular significance to lesbian readers.

The lesbian woman has an additional devalued part compared to her already devalued heterosexual counterpart—the lesbian part of her identity is entirely unmirrored, creating additional shame on/in her (Gair quoted in Glassgold and Iacenza 1995, 108).

Gallagher contributes to the lesbian public lyric voice, creating a mirror for lesbian readers, and a sense of value and completeness that can often be lacking in the lesbian lived experience. The heteropatriarchy daily strives to further the feminisation of poverty on the bodies of women and lesbians. This poverty leaks into poetry, with the lesbian body disappearing in readings that wantonly abolish it. The poetry community delights in Elizabeth Bishop's rejection of the terms woman and lesbian in terms of her poetry, and in reiterating the supposed heterosexual binaries of Gertrude Stein's lesbian relationship, positioning her as one of the boys.¹⁸ Probing deeper into the erotic in my reading and writing allows for a creative output for the rage, and shame, that comes outside in. In Gallagher's erotic writing, the lesbian body is recognised, admired, embraced.

¹⁸ See for example, Jarraway, David R. 1988. "'O Canada!': The Spectral Lesbian Poetics of Elizabeth Bishop,' *PMLA* 113:243-257; Friedman, Alice T. 2015. 'Queer Old Things: Image, myth, and memory in 20th-century Paris,' *Places Journal* Accessed 11 Nov 2020. <https://doi.org/10.22269/150202>.

5 / *exege-sis*

Why is it easier to speak in terms of the polarity of love and hate than that of love and shame?

Donald L. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and The Birth of The Self*

A lesbian's nearness to social shame is dependent on the ways in which they express love, the bodies they desire, the ways they have sex, and use of the erotic. Lesbian love is a risk, a desired risk. The poles of the erotic, of desire, are what lead lesbians to shame. Shame and love become interconnected with lyric expression, and performance, providing ways to creatively lean into social unacceptability. Once the lesbian poet/performer has leaned into shame, the potential of the lesbian lyric voice emerges, and with it a commonality shared outside of normality. The outsider view opens a world of queer potential. *Catlicks* and *Small Town Quare* both seek to illuminate the ways in which shame is both collective and individual. I wrote these performances and lyrics with shame in mind, I recalled shameful moments, often moments exemplary of orientation away from normative expectation, with the resulting shame causing violent effects on the subjectivity of the lyric 'I,' often causing fracture(s).

Lesbianism allowed me to inhabit queer forms of performance that were unattainable before the process of sexual reorientation. Mary Dorcey speaks of her desire to embody a new form, to reorientate:

I went to this beautiful theatre production, spectacular, and it was crowded with fantastic looking people, beautifully dressed, beautiful bodies, and I thought 'God who are these people?' A lot of them would have been theatre people, and Elizabeth said to me 'Well, of course they're mostly gay.' And right there and then, I thought well if I wasn't gay, I'd want to be (Dorcey and McAuliffe 2020).

The desire, "I'd want to be," that Dorcey expresses is exactly the desire I want to express within this thesis. The desire to be different, to be radical, and that desire comes from a gut feeling, a decision that comes from an orientation point within our bodyminds stimulating the desire for change. Both the critical and creative elements of this thesis are manifestations of desire, and the closeness of desire to shame in the dominant heteropatriarchal environment.

catlicks

What's so shameful about wanting, about desire, about having failed to achieve satisfaction, about experiencing unhappiness?

Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City*

Catlicks attempts to merge desire, misremembering, and forgetting with performance. *Catlicks*'s genesis began in 2017, when I went to the Poetry & the Essay conference at the Victoria University of Wellington with my partner at the time, Robyn Maree Pickens. The conference was a mix of critical and creative presentations. In one of these presentations, Mattie Sempert and Sophie Langley performed a call and response to each other's fragments entitled 'What can the essay do in live, co-composition?' Robyn and I decided (with permission from Sempert and Langley) to attempt to recreate the effect with our own work for the Pride poetry event in April 2018 at the Dunedin Public Library. We created original fragments under the loose theme of pride and decided not to share the fragments in advance. My fragments from that evening became the basis for the script of *Catlicks* and my poem 'anseo.' *Catlicks* mutated through rehearsal to include further works such as 'miracle maker,' and 'white,' with 'white' overlaying a video work Robyn and I made at St. Joseph's Cathedral, a Catholic cathedral in Dunedin. The play features a clip from the sex education film I was shown in primary school, my friend Sarah's voice, a sewing dummy on wheels, and the production team as occasional extras with hi-vis jackets over their stage blacks. I used an intimate process-based method for the play with the seats of the Allen Hall moved to hug the stage, and minimal props. Theatre manager and professional practice fellow Martyn Roberts encouraged me to submit a proposal for the Lunchtime Theatre programme after I performed some of 'anseo' as part of the paper 'Performing Shame,' which I presented at the 2018 Performing Ecologies conference held at the University of Otago. *Catlicks* is the most iterative of my poetic works. The play is an attempt to understand "literary production and reading as a continual process of reframing" (Edmond 2014, 292–93). In the rewrites, rehearsals and movements between critical and creative, the shame within the play's memory has been subjected to reorientation over and over and has in the process become unrecognisable. The sharing of shame through poetry and performance aids the eradication of shame.

small town quare

Quare (Kwār), *n.* 1. Meaning *queer*; also, opp. of *straight*; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes “Black” Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan’s famous play, *The Quare Fellow*.

E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare Studies’ or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I learned from My Grandmother”

Small Town Quare predominantly uses the lyric ‘I’ to express the internalised/personalised experience of shame, to communicate that the experience of shame for queers is different. Queer people internalise the silence made of our identity. Many queers feel *morally*, shamefully, wrong in our ways of *being*, especially those of us who grew up under religious influence. Shame is not one of Sianne Ngai’s “ugly feelings” as she views it as a morally beatific state not suitable for her “amoral” examinations (2005, 6). Shame is useful in this thesis specifically for the way it seems to possess a moral compass. Shame allowed me to recognise diversions, reorientations away from accepted morality, allowing me to lean into unacceptability, and celebrate my camp excessive way of *being*. Chris A. Eng suggests that the eroticization of shame “can refuse the negative moralism attributed to certain acts and desires” (Eng 2020, 111). Shame is eroticised in both the creative elements through gesture; it is alleviated through delving into deviations in language and desire.

In *Small Town Quare*, I strive to create the atmosphere of growing sideways in a small-town environment, and the dislocation of finding yourself an outsider. My way of speaking, my dialect, is now an amalgamation of where I’m from (accent) and alterations I’ve made while travelling, mainly in order to be better understood. I use colloquialisms, ellipses, and elision to voice a diasporic dialect. Language is questioned, and rearranged, in an attempt to speak to the lesbian lyric voice that the critical section seeks to unearth. There are intrusions of *gaeilge* throughout *Small Town Quare*. These express the simplicity of the grasp I have on my own native tongue; it ever so occasionally intrudes on my life. But the more I think about shame, international silence, and colonisation, the closer I move towards the language. I feel I would remain forever homeless without it. The challenge I have faced is trying to be understood in a culture not my own while trying to remain true to the small town that bore me. Constantly people bristle at the fact that I *still* have an accent, as if to belong

somewhere correlates with sounding like you belong there, are from there. The assumption is that I would want to fit in, to sound *like* everyone else, and until I do, I will forever be elsewhere in Aotearoa/NZ.

The longer poems in the collection express blatant desire for communion with others, risking the shame involved in the request for validation, the pain of vulnerability. 'Poison' is an adolescent elegiac lyric where the speaker is collective. This was one of the first poems I worked on for this thesis. I used the form of the golden shovel, created by Terrance Hayes. Gwendolyn Brooks's poem 'We Real Cool' repeats down the right-hand side of the poem, while the meter mimicked Hayes's own golden shovel tribute to Brooks, 'The Golden Shovel.' I called on strict form within this long poem as a distancing constraint. The stanzas were originally long lines of free verse. Once the constraints were in place, I felt better equipped to write from an honest place about the lives of working-class girls in rural Ireland. Intergenerational trauma emerges through alcohol, sexual abuse, and the colonial practices that led to Ireland's problems with alcohol. When I was writing 'Poison' I was undertaking a 365-day alcohol free challenge, a challenge that in the end lasted two and a half years. I eventually abandoned the form's stricture, and Hayes's meter, to form the version in this collection. This version became one of the three poems I called upon to become Otago's 2020 regional slam poetry champion.

lines of desire

In her work, Sara Ahmed uses the term desire lines to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow. Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines that cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire, marking where people have taken different routes to get to this point or that point (Ahmed 2006, 20). Both *Catlicks* and *Small Town Quare* take multiple routes, I embraced deviation and my (morally) shameful desire to follow unofficial paths. The vignettes in *Catlicks* became disorganised and reorganised through rehearsal. In *Small Town Quare* I abandoned sections to show sideways growth, and the messy chronology of life in as a working-class, lesbian woman. "Autotopographic" is the term Deirdre Heddon coins to describe performances which are particularly sensitive to the relationship between autobiography and place. In autotopographic performance the shape and surface of personal

histories and environments are intertwined (Walsh 2016, 75). Experience is mapped out spatially to think of autobiography as cartography of the self. *Catlicks* allowed me to spatially map the autobiographical elements of *Small Town Quare*. Performing, as an actor and as a performance poet, provided further distance from the shame engrained in memories presented in both creative forms.

togetherness

When I began to live as a lesbian, what I needed to know to survive my own despidal, and do my work, was knowledge that was rooted for me in those who had come before me, who I had not acknowledged, in the Black Civil Rights Movement, in the Women's Liberations Movement, in our Gay and Lesbian past.

Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Crime Against Nature*

As a result of reading and engaging with Mary Dorcey's poetry I felt empowered to examine the difference of my desire, especially the desire to not have children evident in 'the children, the children, the children' and 'Return.' In 'expectations' I consider what constitutes normative expectations, while in 'RESTORATION' I admit to missing the comfort of heteronormativity. Probing into my feelings about the future, led to investigations into the past. Spending time with Dorcey's poetry made me think about what I wanted from my future, my writing, whose story was I telling? Who was I to tell it? Where (physically, geographically, the orientation point) was I telling the story from? These questions are brought into greater focus as the orientation points between me and my family change. My poetry attempts to translate the experience of intergenerational trauma ('where are all the wayward children?', 'Winter Wood'), the question of children, of the future for an excessive being grappling to understand being consistently misunderstood. Shameful deviations colour childhood with the young speaker's abhorrence at the thought of becoming a 'Future Country Wife.' Regardless of attempts to deviate, 'words remember to sabotage / causing you to admit / that forever we slid down' ('gremlins'). In my poem 'expectations' I write about having an abortion inspired by 'Daughter' in order to challenge the reader's conception of grief, their expectation of what constitutes a *grievable* experience. Dorcey's changing conception of self in her poetry delicately drifts her body through a constant battle with oppressive forces with a mixture of hopeful questioning and confidence. In *A Book of Silence*, Sara Maitland claims

that it is younger people who are more susceptible to failure in their pursuit of silence, “Most of the things that go horrendously wrong happen to younger adventurers” (2010, 83). I connected my work on Dorsey’s poetry with the pursuit of silence in my life and in my poetry. But that’s not telling the story all the way through. I am loud if I am anything.

Heather McPherson’s poetry picked up my silence and shook it with class consciousness. Her poetry is alive with the loud rage of the younger adventurer. She gave me pause to reconsider the ways I had lived and the experiences that had been resting in my mind. I loved her rage-fuelled rants, my mind aflame with memories I felt too ashamed before to share. I read so much theory, poetry and so many essays from second-wave feminists that I began to envy their struggle. I began to wonder whether I would have been brave enough? I had always believed my lesbianism to be a choice. I engaged in language and form experiments of my own in ‘spit,’ ‘linguistic stripper’ ‘The small i in silence,’ ‘Subject: woman’ and ‘will the sun come out’ as a result of McPherson’s work. These poems drift away from a strict narrative arc to conceive of a different lyric self. I live in a time of multiple choice because generations before me have ensured those choices, fought for them. Would have I remained on course to become a ‘Future Country Wife’ without the words and actions of second wave lesbian feminists? I sometimes worry about the stories I tell in the creative component, about the consequences of my creative work. I have equated expressing my emotional truth with appearing ungrateful. McPherson helped me find ways to express my truth regardless of anyone’s conception of it. Once, the playwright Victor Rodger said to me, speak your truth and people will believe you. Regurgitated personal truths are reiterated as lyrics in *Small Town Quare*, with the speaker’s insistence that ‘*just because I’m telling you the truth . . . doesn’t make it real*’ (‘Theoretical Archaeology’). These poems underscore the shame in my affective and personal experiences in Ireland which became more apparent when I immigrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand. This reorientation allowed me to rework and question the meanings I ascribed to these experiences. There exists in the collection a constant presence of being misunderstood in tone and forms of expressions, with the excessive, foreign body forced to mutate, to fit, and rarely finding accommodation. The speaking voice orientates around the lives and stories of other women in my family, or friends, lovers, neighbours, with memories as ‘colourful things’ but ‘so hazy’ (‘Cork City, 1974’) with the past constantly intruding; ‘but what use in harping back to edgeless past’ (‘driftwood’).

Cherry Smyth’s creative and critical writing has altered my relationship to writing about sex and sexuality. She eroticises moments with such fluidity they can be glossed over.

Her writing has such careful consideration of the parts and the whole in terms of both her poetic form and her identity. She made me think carefully about the intersections of my life and how those intersections continue apace to change. I wrote my ‘coming home’ poem in direct response to Smyth’s poem of the same name. When I was at home in West Cork at the end of 2019, I said to my dad that I had yet to write very many poems directly about Aotearoa/New Zealand, my poems gravitated towards Ireland. He said maybe I would write those poems once I left as if it was inevitable that I would leave. I said the same thing to Cherry as we walked Inchadoney beach a week or so later. She said someone asked Seamus Heaney once why he always wrote about Northern Ireland seeing as he had not lived there in so long and Heaney said it was because Northern Ireland, and his family especially, remained a mystery to him. I find that a beautiful and worthy justification for my own inability to stop frequenting moments of my childhood in Ireland because, like Smyth’s, they were ‘full of light.’ Smyth’s poetry influenced many of the poems about my mother. In ‘CORK CITY, 1974,’ I look at photographs of my mother’s past as we attempt to clear out the house, the photographs forcing me to accept that there will come a time that she will be ‘no longer there.’ I wrote ‘driftwood’ after spending time with Smyth in West Cork. Again, this poem was stimulated by photographs and is indebted to Smyth’s strong aesthetic and visual writing style. My poem ‘soup’ began as a much shorter piece which I extended after feedback received at a writing workshop with Smyth when she was visiting the University of Otago in October 2019. Her work taught me that the spaces the body inhabits are not exterior to the queer body, but an extension, ensuring the migrant body is always coming home, is always out of place, facing in two directions as Sara Ahmed writes, “toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home” (2006, 9–10). The body of the lyric ‘I’ in *Small Town Quare* tries to understand Aotearoa/New Zealand as a migrant, while gesturing always back to Ireland as “the site where practices of recognition and nonrecognition become instantiated” (Rodríguez 2014, 29–30). ‘Fly-By-Night,’ captures the subjective fluidity required of a diasporic body. The speaker looks sideways towards and away from home, depicting the stifling conditions of conventional time, space, personhood, and place for the queer body.

Since reading and writing about Rhian Gallagher’s poems, I find it difficult to write about anything but love. Love is so intricately connected to feelings of shame. I recalled moments that were so much about love and saw how these moments shamed my (self) consciousness. *Small Town Quare* begins with ‘anseo,’ which displays the internalised morality a Catholic culture marks on the body: ‘our bodies tell our minds to be quiet’

(‘anseo’). The poems look at the shame involved in love, in the intimacy gained and lost, and the impact on subjectivity. The collection intentionally follows a messy chronology. The space between ‘I’ and ‘you’ becomes unknowable, and full, ‘*there wasn’t enough room anymore*’ (‘The pieces left after something falls apart’). Mis-directions and reorientations manifest as moments of shame, moments of confusion, of difference, moments that encourage silence, ‘for fear of a slip of the tongue’ (‘linguistic stripper’). The speaker attempts *quare* communication, taking language into the body to understand, ‘I think about how to translate the experience’ (‘Spit’). The poems question the way an outsider’s body moves in a place where the speaker’s past is not shared. The self’s experience is injured through the course of love, through the loss of intimacy between the ‘I’ and ‘you;’ ‘I can’t look at anything / that might hurt to remember’ (‘Somebody killed the cat’). ‘I’ fails at ‘Passing,’ and Spanish class became an eroticization of shame, ‘there was a spanish teacher who always got chalk on the ass of her black shirt’ (‘for a year as a teenager i received anonymous dick pics’).

Shame haunts our every dream of love. The more we wish for communion, so much more are we vulnerable to the painful augmentation of any impediment, however real or fancied. To love grandly is to risk grand pain. Intimacy with the other validates the value to the self, and any impediment to intimacy causes severe injury to self-experience (Nathanson 1992, 251).

All four poets helped me set the scene of this PhD thesis. They each challenged me to think constantly about where I was saying something from, what parts of me were speaking and to whom and about the power in shameful manifestations.

6 / conclusion

Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and — performativity.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*

The concerns of all four poets overlap and intersect with each other and with my own poetry. We all search out the in-between, attempt to achieve lyric self-effacement, become a performance, find states in sexuality and learn a common language through the affective state of shame. Shameful moments of childhood desire, escaping and returning home, and searching for queer kinship are fodder for a politicised queer camp poetics. Shame highlights the moments when we are outside of normalised acceptability. When we blush in these moments, or sweat, or stutter, we can either acknowledge that shame or repress it. The lesbian poet can reorient these moments in the lyric, economise, visualise and publicise the intimacies of vulnerability felt.

I think poetry is a way of carrying grief, but it's also a way of putting it somewhere so I don't always have to heave it onto my back or in my body. The more I put grief in a poem, the more I am able to move freely through the world because I have named it, spoken it, and thrown it out into the sky (Limón 2018).

This thesis argues that for lesbian poets, lyric poetry can be a way of manifesting/carrying shame with its erotic tendencies bridging gaps, filling holes of difference and silence while advocating always for anti-normativity.

I check the bios on each poet's most recently published book. Dorcey's *To Air the Soul, Throw All the Windows Wide* (Salmon Poetry 2016) states on the back that she was "The first Irish woman in history to advocate for LGBT rights, she is a lifelong activist for gay and women's rights." McPherson's posthumously published *This Joyous, Chaotic Place* (Spiral 2018) dedicates the entire back cover to her bio, "Her first book, *A Figurehead: A Face* (Spiral 1982), was Aotearoa New Zealand's first collection of poems by an out lesbian." Smyth's 2019 *Famished* is less explicit, "Cherry Smyth is an Irish writer living in London," followed by publications. Gallagher's *Far-Flung* (AUP 2020) has no personal or identifying details. A friend, and colleague, asks me for a bio so she can introduce me as a guest lecturer on her course. I send my, as of recently, cursory bio: "Emer is a lesbian writer from West

Cork in the last months of a creative/critical PhD at Otago. She has been published worldwide.” She protested at the bio’s lack of specificity, that it didn’t make me seem impressive. It has taken me years to get to the beginning, “is a lesbian.” Dorsey, McPherson, Smyth, and Gallagher helped me get there.

Dorsey voices silent contradictions of public versus private acts of lyric and social importance. She inhabits the in-between space, discovers the self-effacement possible through lyric poetry and shame, creating a space for multiple selves. The interrupted narrative of a lesbian life becomes a cacophony of intimate gestures, creating a poetic bloodline through a carnal poetics. Failure comes alive as apostrophe to challenge our institutions of lyric grieving and the maternal cry of desire is howled for the first time.

The loud rage of class shame is an overwhelming gesture used by McPherson to spotlight the domesticity both positive and negative as deserving of attention in poetry under the confines of heteronormativity. Feminism ignited a fear of the erotic power of feminist poetry and therefore women, especially lesbian woman, the fear of the “red fist” of lesbian feminism, the fist that might dissuade wives from their husbands. Carnal poetics turns on the self, erodes, and doubles in presence, in queer potential. Apostrophe returns the demanding maternal cry, the shameful primal relations of women, ‘spreading’ and queering the space of the lesbian erotic in lyric poetry.

Cherry Smyth remaps home, reorientates again and again. The lesbian becomes a phenomenon, visibility troubled. Smyth searches for a common language to speak from the state of Irish lesbianism. In ‘Coming Home’ Smyth displays the shame of being out of time and place, a longing for place, a yearning for a mythical return. Shame is a nation of contagion between all lesbian poets, attempting to span difference.

Rhian Gallagher writes the temporalities of messy stories. Dirty bodies wrestle the reader’s desire to look away, to look some more. Erotic freedom is embraced, laughed off. Active lesbian speakers create woman-centred intimate publics that swell with recognition. The lyric allows lesbian poets to witness their own exposure through the affective state of shame; the intimacy of the lyric creates a bother about it. I begin and end on the poems of lovers entangled with an embodied epistemology of lesbian poetry.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a sense of disorientation within us all and especially within those of us who live away from home, whether that home is a physical place, people you love, or a combination of the two. But even more than distance from loved ones, I have become more and more conscious of my place as someone not from here. Nine

years after I first emigrated, I am still asked on a weekly basis when I arrived. I have become more and more conscious of my distance from my culture and my ancestry.

Shame is not static. The more I leaned in creatively, the more the affect alleviated, the more I could witness. The more research and reading I did alongside Dorcey, McPherson, Smyth and Gallagher, the more commonalities I found, felt, and the less I felt disorientated. I refer here strictly to my sexual identity. My place in the world remains a disorientation. In the research, the reading, having coffee with Rhian, calling Heather's friends, texting Cherry, watching Mary's interviews, I have searched for the roots of what it means to be an Irish/diasporic lesbian in Aotearoa/New Zealand. My sense of place here is entirely situated in my sexuality, within the state of being an Irish lesbian. I am only Irish outside of Ireland, so this is an impermanent, liminal state. This impermanence is the beauty of creating a project connected to a body in flux, a body always coming home.

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