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A SPACE FOR THOSE MEMORIES: THE CULTURAL MEMOIRS OF EAVAN BOLAND
AND DOIREANN NÍ GHRÍOFA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY
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ABSTRACT

A SPACE FOR THOSE MEMORIES: THE CULTURAL MEMOIRS OF EAVAN BOLAND

AND DOIREANN NÍ GHRÍOFA

BY KATHERINE KING

This thesis argues that the memoirs *Object Lessons* (1995) by Eavan Boland and *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020) by Doireann Ní Ghríofa epitomize how the memoir genre may record cultural memory as well as personal memory. Irish poets Boland and Ní Ghríofa highlight the ways in which the past permeates the present in depicting the repetitions and resonances between the lives of cultural predecessors, specifically the Irish women that came before them, and their own. They identify with these women on the basis of shared gender and national identity and construct attachments to these women through sparse or general historical records, oral storytelling, and personal writing and bolster them through fictionalization informed by their own experiences as Irish women writers. Boland and Ní Ghríofa predicate these relationships on the long-lasting, often traumatic reckoning between Irish conceptions of gender and nation. The relationship between these poets and their cultural ancestors is one grounded in *postmemory*, an understanding of cultural trauma as an inheritable, affective knowledge, passed through storytelling, that can be felt nearly as deeply as one's own memories. Both of these memoirs probe the convergences and conflicts between women, literature, and history in Ireland, and, as Boland and Ní Ghríofa reach back into the past to make sense of their present moment, each sketches the Irish woman as uniquely positioned to reshape visions of the past by writing of the lived experience of themselves and their forebears.

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For Finnegan—

baby brother, sweet fair-haired child,

live and laugh and love and leave.

“Precious are the dead that lie there, every stone over them speaks of such burning life in the past, of such passionate faith in their work, their truth, their struggle and their science, that I know I shall fall on the ground and kiss those stones and weep over them; though I'm convinced in my heart that it's long been nothing but a graveyard.”

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

“Now to make the dead speak we have to give them space in our own bodies and minds, carry them inside us like the unborn.”

- Maria Stepanova, In Memory of Memory

“Glimmerings are what the soul's composed of. / Fogged-up challenges, far conscience-glitters / and hang-dog, half-truth earnest of true love. / And a whole late-flooding thaw of ancestors.”

- Seamus Heaney, Station Island

Preface

Following the example of my primary sources, I feel it is only appropriate to insert an autobiographical portion into this thesis. Some might call this self-indulgent, and, to a point, it is. However, this thesis is, like *Object Lessons* and *A Ghost in the Throat*, ultimately an effort to understand my own affective experience through literature, history, and the interaction between the two. So, bear with me; let us call this a stab at cultural memoir.

This topic—cultural memory in the autobiographical works of two Irish poets—came to me in a roundabout way, but one which actually makes a good deal of sense when you look at it from a meta- level. Though I'm sure it is more gnarled than I consciously comprehend, I am choosing here to trace it to my grandfather Martin (Marty for short, though I dubbed him Goodad when I first began to chatter). Marty and Melene, his second partner and my bonus grandma, moved to Jackson, Wyoming when I was a kid. I have fond memories of waking up to homemade sourdough and preserves, plunking around in the snow all day, and coming home for hot chocolate by the wood stove and a night of watching people read and, if I asked nicely, being read to. When I started to read myself, I pulled whatever I could off of their shelves, even if I had no idea what to make of their contents. Noticing my burgeoning interest in reading, these grandparents began to gift me one or two books on each birthday, often from their own collection. None of these books were Irish, but two were Russian. These gifted copies of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Anna Karenina* sparked an interest in Russian literature which I've carried into adulthood, and my grandfather's love of reading has played a significant role in my choosing to study English at the college level and pursue a career in publishing. Marty once told my dad, and my dad once told me, that, when he was growing up in South Boston, his mother—Catherine King, who I am named for—used to sing him songs in Irish, a language that,

though culturally his, he did not and would never learn to speak. I also do not speak Irish, but I did spend the fall studying at Trinity College Dublin. Even though his family was from Galway, I like to think that counts for something.

I spotted *A Ghost in the Throat* during a slow spring afternoon spent daydreaming behind the register of the Culver City bookstore where I worked, only weeks after accepting my visiting student offer from TCD, and bought it. I had decided to write my departmental honors thesis on an Irish book, figuring that, since I would probably get little thesis work accomplished while abroad, I could at least soak some things up in my courses and daily life living in Ireland. As a history minor and fan of all books invested in exploring feminism and the spaces between conventional genres, I found it fascinating and decided to write my thesis on the book. In October, after I was somewhat settled in Dublin, my friend Phoebe and I took an impromptu trip to Cork. I feel it is necessary to note here that Phoebe and I were randomly placed in the same flat, and the first time we met we had a two-hour conversation in which we learned that we had 1) both worked in bookstores and 2) were both huge Dostoevsky fans. We were fast friends, and, together in Cork, at the register of another bookstore (Vibes & Scribes), this time on the customer side, I picked up a flier for the IndieCork Film Festival. *Aisling Trí Néallaibh: Clouded Reveries*, a film about Ní Ghríofa, was set to close the festival, complete with a Q&A with Ní Ghríofa and director Ciara Nic Chormaic. I had no idea this film was even being made, which shows you just how focused I was on this thesis (I had been very busy wandering around the Trinity campus looking pale and despondent, Sally Rooney style, and developing a taste for Guinness). But, in the name of my thesis, Phoebe and I decided to skip our afternoon train back to Dublin. Instead, we spent the day visiting Blarney Castle, kissing the famous stone, and getting absolutely sopping wet looking at mushrooms on the grounds. We showed up at the

screening exhausted, damp, and anxious about catching the last bus back to Dublin, which was departing shortly after the screening was set to end. During the film, which I very much enjoyed, I furiously took blind notes in a tiny Blarney Castle-themed notebook I had bought earlier that day. The film ended, the Q&A began, and the clock ticked. The moment the moderator called for questions, I shot my hand up, announced I was writing my thesis on her book, and then blurted out a long and incoherent question that I no longer remember. Ní Ghríofa paused and then responded, “Is that the title of your thesis?” The audience and I laughed together, and she then provided a measured, thoughtful answer to my question before inviting me to speak with her after the event ended. But still, the clock ticked. Scrambled from this very weird day and, on a general life level, scrambled from a very weird year, I for some reason thought it was appropriate to ask an award-winning poet for an interview by hurriedly scrawling my email and an apology on a sheet of my paper—which was, unfortunately, printed with a drawing of the castle—and asking Phoebe to hand it to the people this poet had been sitting next to before we awkwardly ducked out of the theater mid-Q&A (I was too nervous; thank you dear Phoebe). We made the bus, and, to my surprise, I woke up the next day to an email from Ní Ghríofa. I would like to extend a sincere thank you to Doireann for her beautiful work, for not ghosting me (no pun intended) after my odd behavior, for taking the time to let me interview her via Zoom, and for being an all-around incredibly kind and accommodating person.

Object Lessons was a later addition, and a simpler story, but one that also involves randomly picking something up in a bookstore: I wanted to read some of Boland’s prose, and a worn copy of *Object Lessons* was the only option The Last Bookshop had in stock that December afternoon. It took me about five pages before I realized it was a perfect primary source to couple with *A Ghost in the Throat* for a thesis on cultural memory and women’s writing

in Ireland. *Historians* is actually the first book I bought in Dublin (at Books Upstairs, duh), so I feel quite pleased about my return to Boland.

Here is where things become, maybe, more self-indulgent, but where my Irish grandparent-gifted interest in Russian literature intersects with writing on memory and my time in Ireland and, thus, finally becomes relevant (thank you for your patience). A friend gave me a copy of Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory* as a going-away present before dropping me off at LAX, and it was this book that sharpened the half-formed musings on memory that had begun to swirl as I set off for my semester in Dublin. Adorning the title page was a scribbled "I hope this book will be a valuable companion as you discover new places and new things about yourself." It was, and I really did. Below are some examples of things I learned while discovering new places—the memories I made while thinking about memory, along with ancestry, culture, nation, identification, attachment, femininity, bodily intelligence, lamentation, desire, synchronicity, serendipity, and sublimity, to name a few.

In the town my grandma's parents are from, outside of Rome, a bomb landed outside a church and did not explode, and it's hailed as a miracle (there's even a plaque). Sometimes a shaman is just some guy in a t-shirt. I love fresh figs, and whole-milk dairy, and beer, and I can drink black coffee just fine. I am lucky, or, maybe, I am looked after. Ireland loves Garth Brooks. I can make a home anywhere. Cold, damp weather and a couple of cigarettes a week are enough to give me chronic postnasal drip. There is an appeal to a curly mullet. I can walk for a very long time if I am listening to the right music. I would like to be a stone archway covered in moss and ivy in the next life. When I send someone a postcard, they might not send one back, and that is alright. There are people I could love deeply everywhere, and I will never meet most of them, so

I should consider the ones I do find by chance as precious gems and love them extra deeply. In the Czech Republic, a vodka soda is called a “Skinny Bitch.” Living somewhere can actually make me worse at doing that particular accent. Cathedrals rarely lose their awe-factor. Kebabs are great until they aren’t. The world is very small, or, maybe, Ireland is just very small. Running for the bus is a lot more glamorous when it comes at the end of a quest or journey of sorts. Never trust a guy who goes by “Beans.” It is possible to not discover that a friend’s mom is an exotic animal trainer until you’ve known her for four months. I have low blood pressure. Dutch flight attendants are kind enough to despondent 20-something-year-old women to break small rules, but upright enough not to break big rules. I like techno. I can sleep a lot less than I think. Things might not happen for any objective reason, but they do happen, and, when they begin to dance in time with one another right in front of my nose, it’s rude not to clap.

Boland and Ní Ghríofa as Cultural Memoirists

Lucy Collins posits that the work of contemporary Irish women poets is profoundly concerned with personal and cultural tensions between the past and present and, therefore, with memory (1). This reflects the Irish nation's preoccupation with interpreting and, through these efforts at understanding, repeatedly reviving the past, but, more pertinently, it reflects recent efforts by repressed groups to recover the voices of those who have been written out of prevailing national narratives. Irish women poets have devoted their lives to what poet Rita Dove once called "language at its most distilled and most powerful" within a culture which many recognize as, first, historically concerned with language and, second, only recently concerned with women's use of it (Streitfeld). These poets place their own feminine identities in conversation with their nation, which formed its identity through the marginalization of women, and the treasured figure of the Irish writer. By dwelling on the past, its influence on the present, and its implications for the future, these women endeavor to conceptualize a contemporary feminine identity in Ireland (Collins 8).

The work of Irish poets Eavan Boland (1944-2020) and Doireann Ní Ghríofa (1981-) exemplifies this theme. Though these explorations guide much of their poetry, it is their autobiographical prose which this thesis focuses on. Collins argues that more experimental texts are uniquely equipped to challenge the division between private and public forms of memory (16). The *cultural memoir*, termed by Margo Jefferson, is a form which is decidedly experimental, in that it does not fit neatly into an established genre. Jefferson regards the memoir as a vessel for cultural memory; intimately grappling with the multi-layered individual identity of the author, any memoir necessarily engages with the cultures associated with their various identities (and, in turn, the historical processes which have shaped these cultures). Jefferson

explains that though a memoir dramatizes a particular individual through memory—always fictionalization, to some extent—this person is always “shaped by and responding to” their cultural context. Memoirs which openly reach into cultural criticism self-consciously explore the way in which the individual author may “embody” a larger culture, becoming “more collage than portraiture and . . . polyphonic rather than monophonic” (Jefferson). Boland and Ní Ghríofa harness this cultural memoir form to grapple with their relationship to Irish history and, in doing so, to invite examination of how cultural memory works to construct identity in the Irish context.

Eavan Boland’s investigation of Irish history and identity, most notably the ways in which these changing ideas have impacted the lives of women, is central to her literary legacy. Collins writes that Boland’s “interrogation of the place of the woman poet in the Irish literary tradition” is “foundational” to modern investigations of the intersection between femininity and writing in Ireland (4). Boland’s 1995 book *Object Lessons* confronts these intersections head-on: in her preface, she states that her aim in writing this book was “to clarify the mystery of being a poet in the puzzle of time and sexuality and nationhood.” In working to negotiate between each component of her identity as an Irish woman writer, Boland creates a intensely personal and public work, one that invests itself in the quotidian clockwork of a household and the sweeping tilts of a nation in “turnings and returnings”—“An ordinary suburb . . . will show itself once, twice, then disappear and come back. The Dublin hills will change color in the distance, and change once more” (*Object* xiii). This nonlinear, even recursive reading and rereading of Boland’s own life and ancestors familial and cultural captures the mutable quality of cultural memory. Boland recounts the events which formed her as a person and poet in her own lifetime, but also expands the constraints of the traditional memoir to encompass events that, while

preceding her birth, played roles she paints as equally formative. As a result, *Object Lessons* exists as a text ripe for analysis as a cultural memoir.

Doireann Ní Ghríofa's 2020 book *A Ghost in the Throat* exhibits an especially powerful resonance with the propositions regarding women, writing, and the Irish past Boland's work puts forth.¹ Ní Ghríofa has garnered considerable popular attention over the last decade for her poetry, but her most successful work thus far is *Ghost*, her prose debut. Much like *Object Lessons*, this book sketches out a woman's present and past in vivid, nonlinear vignettes. Despite *Ghost* following many of the key genre conventions of a memoir, it is rarely referred to as one; the publisher instead describes it as "a fluid hybrid of essay and autofiction" (Tramp). All credit is due to the flickering figure who shares the spotlight with Ní Ghríofa: Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, eighteenth-century Irish noblewoman and poet. Ní Ghríofa not only dedicates entire chapters to sketching out her visions of Ní Chonaill's days—tapestries of archival material, hearsay, and imagination—but refracts each of her own experiences— childhood pretend play, to adolescent rebellion, to the trials and joys of motherhood, all running alongside a flowing passion for storytelling—through her investment in this woman she never met. This "obsession," in Ní Ghríofa's words, stems from a deep appreciation for her masterwork *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, part of the Irish funeral lament tradition *caoineadh*, which Ní Chonaill composed and performed over the corpse of her murdered husband (*Ghost* 70). This multiplicity of perspectives is suggested by the very title of the book: two voices occupy the same space (or, perhaps, one voice overtakes the other, and the narratives of the dead drown out those of the living). The opening to the first chapter, "1. A female text," realizes this implication: "This is a female text, which is also a caoineadh: a dirge and a drudge-song, an anthem of praise, a chant and a keen, a

¹ Ní Ghríofa includes Boland's 2011 book *A Journey with Two Maps* in the "further reading" section.

lament and an echo, a chorus and a hymn. Join in” (Ní Ghríofa 4). In these lines, Ní Ghríofa emphasizes the array of genres the book simultaneously encompasses as a sort of contemporary *caoineadh*. At the same time, Ní Ghríofa’s invitation to the reader to lend their own voice to this text opens it up to a collective. It is this temporally flexible, “polyphonic” quality, to revisit Jefferson’s language, which grants this book its powers of genre-defiance and its kinship with *Object Lessons*.

Much of the impact of Boland’s prose comes from her meticulous attention to the ins and outs of her own life as an Irish woman and writer, and one would be remiss not to acknowledge her influence on the recent surge in Irish women “combining memoir, trauma, and the female experience in equal parts” to explore their identities through autobiographical writing (Barros-del Río 1).² During our interview, Ní Ghríofa acknowledged the deep influence Boland has had on women writers of her generation.

When I imagine my literary heroes, it's like she's a giant. She's like a statue... like that kind of marble with quartz running through it, so it almost gleams. She's really significant to me and my work, and when I came to trying to teach myself to write, I read her poems a lot. I think, like an awful lot of people of my generation, I took inspiration from how she communicates something that kind of shimmers, in a powerful way, just beyond the quotidian and the domestic. That sense of being on the brink of suburbia and there being this vastness of humanity distilled into a single moment. The shimmering power of that. It's so crystalline—it appears so simple on the surface, but there is such huge depth within this (4:27-5:47).

² Along with *Ghost*, the 2019 books *Notes to Self* by Emilie Pine and *Constellations: Reflections from Life* by Sinéad Gleeson exemplify this trend.

Ireland saw drastic political and social change from 1995 to 2020, as the country made some of its most significant bounds away from Catholic conservatism and towards liberal secularism.

While the cultural climate Boland wrote in differs from that Ní Ghríofa writes in today, this generational difference serves to amplify the concerns which have remained constant (Collins 219).

Object Lessons and *A Ghost in the Throat* share a concern with those single moments of vast humanity, to rephrase Ní Ghríofa, which have been lost to time. Each of these books exists as a massive effort to bottle and preserve one's own moments, as is definitional of autobiographical work. However, the inclusion of moments that are not one's own attempts to unbury and provide space for the fading experiences of the dead, pushing these books firmly into the realm of cultural memoir. Both writers demonstrate how one's lived experience and resulting beliefs encourage a process of identification, attachment, and group identity formation which solidifies into shared understandings of the past. In that these texts are simultaneously archives and agents of the cultural memory of Irish women, they are valuable tools to illuminate the point at which memory becomes history.

Ireland and Cultural Memory

Scholarship on Irish memory began to accumulate in earnest at the turn of this century, a decades-long delay from the boom in writing on the relationship between memory and historiography associated with *nouvelle histoire* scholars Pierre Nora and Jacques Le Goff. Despite this, history and memory—variously defined and portrayed as either overlapping or oppositional, depending on the scholarship—now dominate Irish studies, alongside connected terms such as ancestry and tradition (Frawley xiv). Oona Frawley notes that writing that engages with Irish culture so frequently characterizes the past as having a “presence” and “hold” in the present that this emphasis on history and memory has become tightly knit into understandings of Irishness; an especially pertinent example is the notion of the Irish having a so-called “long memory” (xvi). This stereotype, however generalizing, suggests that there is a fundamental link between the dominant perception of Irish identity and, in the words of W.B. Yeats, “dreaming back” (He 36). The rise of memory studies has offered a route to understanding the importance of the past in Ireland (Collins 2).

It is indisputable that references to Irish culture and Irish people in the singular puts one in danger of reducing the diversity in lived experience of all those who have called the island home. That being said, getting at the roots of conventional representations of the country and its citizens allows us to analyze the rippling impact of nationalism in Ireland, specifically its momentous influence on the writing and rewriting of Irish history. Ian McBride asserts that “In Ireland, as is well known, the interpretation of the past has always been at the heart of national conflict” (1). Declan Kiberd argues that, in the early 20th century, the revolutionary generation took this interpretation to a point of “reinventing the Irish past”—cultural leaders chiseled out and erected an image of Ireland and Irishness in opposition to British identity, an effort which

helped to smooth regional and class differences and unite those who identified with the former against British colonialism (1; 7). The nationalist interpretation of the island's history which emerged was premised on lush myths of a Gaelic golden age, ripped from the indigenous population by the 12th-century Norman invasion and followed by centuries of oppression under British colonialism. The string of passionate but failed uprisings during the colonial period provided martyrs to this history, and the achievement of liberty, made all the more precious by the acute suffering that preceded it, supported a narrative that an independent Ireland had been fated to rise out of the rubble (McBride 2). The Irish War of Independence culminated in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, which stalwartly prized and projected its own versions of this history through the public commemoration of Republican heroes and key events. David Fitzpatrick writes that the Free State and each Irish government that has followed has utilized commemoration to demarcate the boundaries of Irish identity, which has historically encouraged its citizens to conform to "their place" in a "venerable" cultural tradition (186). The governments of the 20th century used this vision of Irish culture as historic and monolithic, replete with sturdy, time-tested traits that had naturally rendered the formation of an independent republic inevitable, to marginalize all those who did not fall in line with conservative Catholic norms. The Irish state has begun to validate nonconformity and admit to previously buried wrongdoings over the most recent couple of decades, but this long manipulation of myth to suit political aims—of choosing what is remembered and forgotten on a national scale—demands examinations of cultural memory in the Irish context, especially when reflections of it deviate from national memory (Pine 158-9).

Waxing and waning support for nationalist narratives, and thus the multiplication and fluctuation of interpretations of Irish history, has relied on what is remembered on a cultural

level: what is celebrated, raged over, mourned, and revived, again and again, through active attention. The idea of cultural memory grew out of Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory, but the former term reflects that memories can only become collective through cultural mediation—when, as Astrid Erll explains, “symbolic artefacts... create communality across both space and time.” Which artifacts those in power privilege, and, moreso, what they are said to symbolize, determines how the culture at large views itself in relation to the past. The dominant understanding of history at any given time is therefore the result of an intricate, ongoing interplay of remembering and forgetting, much determined by what is routinely commemorated (Erll 1). Fitzpatrick proposes that the Irish have a sort of “commemorative expertise,” one which many scholars agree sets Ireland apart from other nations (185). The Irish state and many of its citizens have a reputation for commemorating dates and figures through physical and temporal sites of remembrance (e.g. statues and anniversaries). In choosing what to commemorate, especially collectively, groups affirm and express their fidelity to particular interpretations of the past and hence their present values, allegiances, and self-interpretation (McBride 2).

Fitzpatrick notes that “There are close parallels and multiple connections between ceremonial and literary commemoration” (185). The context of cultural memory supports this claim: literature, as media, can act as a tool to pull meaning from the past and convey particular historical narratives through cultural networks. Erll argues that, in its ability to point public attention towards “forgotten” topics, media can not only expand what is remembered, but influence what connotations and implications become associated with this content in the public eye. In this way, literature which digs through the past layers memory—it prompts cultural remembering while inscribing itself into history, beckoning future literature to do the same. This conceptualization of remembering as an “active engagement with the past” rather than an

incidental cognitive quirk emphasizes the importance of storytelling in cultural memory at large. It is stories about the past which determine the shape cultural memory takes at any moment; those that clash compete for enough traction to “overwrite” obsolete narratives and become ingrained as household knowledge (Erl1 2). Often, the stories which prevail are those which mesh with contemporary issues; in the words of Richard Rose, “Ireland is almost a land without history, because the troubles of the past are relived as contemporary events” (McBride 2). Collins notes that, while cultural memory studies often focus on texts such as letters and diaries, literature can present “specific insights into how cultural memory is produced and understood” in Ireland (3).

The precarity latent in the idea of Irish history has been the subject of extensive commentary, much of which confronts how negotiation between the past and present has constructed Irish identity. Kiberd contends that the work of the writers and artists who spearheaded the “poets’ rebellion” of 1916 embraced identity as flexible and even contradictory (1). The Free State which rose from this revolutionary period did not espouse these ideas, instead enforcing conservative social norms and censoring media which did not align with these values (Meaney 180). Irish cultural memory at this time was generally aligned with state-supported nationalist narratives which emphasized a shared history and excluded “disruptive” voices (Collins 8). However, Kiberd maintains that, though it chafed against the “singular versions of identity” defended by the state which their efforts helped to deliver, the poet-rebels’ vision of the Irish as a “hybrid people” of “multiple selfhood” has survived (7). Much of the body of Irish literature produced over the past century interrogates how interpretations of history shape identity, sharpening the global, multidisciplinary attention to memory and the process of memorialization through the 20th and, now, the 21st century. The work of modernist giant James

Joyce is perhaps best known for capturing this Irish reckoning with memory (Frawley xxiv). In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus despairs that “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (Joyce 28). This line reflects the fact that, no matter how the constitution of cultural memory shifts, the recollection of trauma has always been central to conceptualizing Irish history. Scholars have suggested that this is, perhaps, why the past looms so large in Irish culture—shared trauma summons historical narratives which help to form and maintain nation states (Collins 7). Frawley argues that this practice of reviving cultural traumas contains a “sense... of battling against specters, that, if brought to light, would vanish” (xv). This implies that carving out spaces to recognize trauma can expiate the sins of the dead, freeing the living from the limbo of held and repeated traumatization and enabling social progress. Literature which engages with the Irish past, in standing among the varied media actively forging cultural memory, must process trauma in order to produce identity formations.

Frawley argues that, while Irish memory is in fact “long” in the sense that the past is so often invoked and shuffled through for guidance in the present, it may also be simultaneously “short,” in that particular strains of lived experience, those dates and figures not commemorated, often seem to have been forgotten entirely (xviii). She stresses that cultural memory displays “a cyclical patterning that sees ebbs and flows” in what is remembered and forgotten; nothing about it is static, and what artifacts appear largest now, to use Erll’s term, are not those that did a decade ago or will a decade from now (xxi). Yet, if we were to take a spotlight to each victory and trauma routinely remembered on a cultural level over the past century in Ireland, the light leaking through the lacunae speckling the official record would form its own pattern—the absence of those swept to the side of this history, and thus all practices which incriminate the project of Ireland, become increasingly difficult to ignore. It is crucial to identify trends of

identity-based marginalization in this selective neglect of Ireland's past and parse through their implications for its future. Seeking out narratives which confront the disparities glaring from within Irish cultural memory, and even work to unbury forgotten narratives, allows us to do so.

The writing of Irish women about Irish women epitomizes this concept. The gendered traumas experienced by Irish women did not begin to significantly mold narratives of national memory until the late 20th century (Pine 158). This was largely due to the influence of nationalist gender norms, which stood as major roadblocks to women seeking to share stories which did not flatter these conventions. However, the past few decades have seen a dramatic, ever-increasing uptick in art that addresses the lives of Irish women since the colonial period. By recognizing and recounting these traumas through media, these artists, along with activists, have made breakthroughs in the public remembrance of state and social wrongs against Irish women. In this way, the cultural memory of Irish women has worked its way into the broader Irish cultural memory it is subcultural to and was once almost absent from, not least through the efforts of women writers such as Boland and Ní Ghríofa. These authors intimately engage with Ireland's amnesiac muting of women who did not conform and, in doing so, offer impressions of what it means to be Irish, women, and writers, all at once.

“A Female Text”

Object Lessons and *A Ghost in the Throat* center feminine identity and its complex relationship with literary production, particularly in Ireland. These authors approach this dynamic from disparate angles. Boland presents the nationalist vision of woman and writer as incongruous; though she disproves this belief through memoir, through both the act of reminiscing on her growth as a writer and the act of writing the book itself, she maintains that the historical male domination of poetry forms a present and unshakeable “dilemma” with which women poets must learn to live (*Object* 239). Ní Ghríofa embraces the existence of a so-called “female text” and contends that it has always existed, but has been obscured by male narratives. Boland and Ní Ghríofa both claim that womanhood, though flexible and multifaceted, contains unique joys and traumas which open an individual up to privileged knowledge of great literary value.

Boland begins *Object Lessons* by stressing the tensions between the identities of woman and writer in Ireland.

I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self-reflective individualism. Both states were necessary—that much the culture conceded—but they were oil and water and could not be mixed (*Object* xi).

Her use of past tense, taken alongside her distinguished career, suggests that these conditions shifted between her writing her earliest poetry as a teenager and writing this book. However, the excerpt stresses that Boland’s career was born out of an atmosphere of cultural antagonism towards any overlap of womanhood and authorhood. The felt disconnect this created between her

identity and artistic desires presented her with a dramatic internal conflict she worked to make sense of throughout her career. The first chapter of Ní Ghríofa's *Ghost*, "1. a female text," offers an alternative attitude towards this cultural climate by introducing and drumming on a phrase which depicts these identities as combined, rather than separate. The first line of the book is "THIS IS A FEMALE TEXT," a proclamation of female authorship. The five short paragraphs which follow each begin with this same line, but in normal typeface—they stand as slightly-hushed echoes of the initial statement (*Ghost* 3-4). This line reappears only once outside of this introduction, as the final line of the book, italicized (282). The initial emphasis and final restatement of "This is a female text" suggests that we may read it as a thesis statement, especially as, taking the formally linked first paragraphs as a kind of introduction, each chapter of *Ghost* that follows works to prove this argument to the reader with personal anecdotes, pieced-together accounts of Ní Chonail's life, and contemplation on womanhood and women's place in history, a concept which she recognizes does not equal the past. Through the strategic repetition of this phrase, Ní Ghríofa burnishes the assertion that not only is this book a "female text," but that such a thing can actually exist.

The context of 20th-century Irish nationalism and its consequences for women is crucial to understanding that the representations of femininity Boland and Ní Ghríofa provide are products of this context, rather than sweeping and exclusionary universal claims. The establishment and maintenance of strict gender roles was crucial to the formation of an independent Irish identity. Leela Gandhi suggests that colonialism may be read as a "struggle between competing masculinities" which prompts a repercussive bolstering of conservative gender norms, as the men of colonized groups seek to reaffirm their masculinity within the context of emasculatory dispossession of feminized colonial land (98-9). Visions of Irish

masculinity and Irish nationhood are tightly linked, so much so that a threat to one is effectively a threat to the other. Sarah E. McKibben argues that the “endangered masculinity” of colonial incursion led to a backlash of support for traditional gender roles in Ireland; in this way, women doubly suffered as subjects of both colonialism and patriarchy (1-3; 11). The Irish state encoded these social norms into its 1937 constitution, which established Ireland as an independent republic. In Article 41.2.1 of the document, “the State recognises the Family as “ a moral institution” and “the necessary basis of social order... indispensable to the welfare of the Nation.” The “constitution” of this idealized nuclear family, which the state “guarantees to protect” is explicitly gendered: “the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved” and vows to “ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home” (Government of Ireland). This language, in the constitution to this day, considers women first as domestic laborers bound by duty to the nation, reflecting Boland’s mention of “collective nurture.”

This idealized nationalist vision of women as mothers, which stems from conservative Catholic views, is gender essentialist. This ideology insists that biology defines and limits identity and rejects the nuanced, flexible understandings of gender associated with third-wave and intersectional feminism. This mentality accounts for the gendered traumas imposed upon women and queer people by Irish patriarchy, which was not hospitable to the “self-reflective individualism” of these groups.³ The Irish Free State, influenced by the Catholic Church, widely utilized censorship and institutionalization to enforce adherence to conservative social norms and

³ This is not to disregard the gendered traumas of straight, cisgender men in Ireland; patriarchy harms all. However, this group is not at nearly as high of a risk of disempowerment for expressing one’s sexuality or gender identity.

protect its projected national identity. As a result, many Irish women who strayed from the behavioral limits set by their society were silenced and even met with oppressive force (Meaney 180).

Yet, women still strayed; some of these women were those who braved the daunting task of muddling the “oil and water” of woman and writer, like Boland herself. In the first half of the century, women could typically only achieve popular success as writers if they had access to financial security as members of the bourgeois or elite classes and wrote texts that seemed reasonably aligned with nationalist values (Meaney 180-1). However, these women questioned and worked to navigate the apparent contradictions between their gender and national identities even before the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s (93-4).⁴ As the century progressed and Irish conservatism slackened, the group of Irish women writers who pried into the dissident capabilities of literature gained in number and strength. Yet, the obstacles Ireland’s women have faced have shaped its present culture, particularly for the women that call it home today. Because these oppressive social conditions did at one point thrive in Ireland, they have had an immense impact on the artistic developments of Boland’s generation and those they influenced in turn.

When we spoke, Ní Ghríofa recognized that there has been change: life as an Irish woman in the twenty-first century is a life with far more access to opportunity than the eighteenth century in which Eibhlin Ní Chonaille lived or even the twentieth century in which she was born.

I can't imagine an Irish woman who would say... that it's not nightmarish to look back at how it has historically been for Irish women to live their lives in Ireland, even in very recent history. You know, I was born in 1981. My first child was born out of wedlock. If I

⁴ Note that articulations of these contradictions did not gain popular traction until this period.

had been born a couple of decades earlier, that would have been a very, very different experience. That history doesn't even feel like history—that history feels so close. I still pass the Magdalen laundries in Cork all the time... It's impossible to look back and not feel it's actually fortunate to have been—despite all the huge problems that we have in Ireland at the moment—to be born into this time. Even with the horrors of climate change and what the coming decades are going to bring as an Irish woman, this, by comparison, is quite a good time to have been born into. We have a lot more freedom (35:30-37:59).

Ní Ghríofa's reference to the Magdalen laundries calls up one of the most infamous controversies regarding gender-based violence in Ireland in the last thirty years. In 20th-century Ireland, these laundries were Catholic church-run institutions which housed women considered promiscuous or otherwise transgressive, along with illegitimate, abandoned, or orphaned children. These institutions ostensibly sought to rehabilitate their wards, but, in practice, served as a tool to socially spurn and punish those that threatened narratives of Irish normalcy. These so-called “fallen women” defied both the mantras of Catholic sexual conservatism and the idealization of the nuclear family, and their society punished them for it (Smith 15-7). As an unmarried mother, Ní Ghríofa could have been subjected to the unchecked incarceration, forced labor, and abuse which went on in the laundries, the last of which did not close until 1996.

The work of Boland and Ní Ghríofa examines gendered trauma of the past and present and, in displaying their identification with and attachment to the victims of this trauma, forge notions of some ahistorical Irish feminine identity. Though neither author delineates their intended audience, the content of each book focuses on characteristics and experiences that the authors suggest Irish women have in common. This group can be viewed as an “intimate public,” conceptualized by Lauren Berlant as a group of strangers who are “marked by a commonly lived

history.” The assumption of shared knowledge and opinions leads to affective identifications and attachments, followed by the shaping and reshaping of collective identity through media. Berlant contends that U.S. women’s culture emerged through media which assumed intimacy between women on the basis of feminine identity, despite other differences in lived experience (viii). Much of this media, they stress, focuses on “complaint”—of lamenting women’s role as “the intimately disappointed” (1). Indeed, Emilie Pine argues that, as such atrocities have come to light, Irish femininity and trauma have become joined in the public eye, a reversal of “the rosy and glowing vision of traditional Ireland” (Pine 167). Ní Ghríofa feels this viscerally, suggesting that this trauma still looms in the present: “This is a female text, written in the twenty-first century. How late it is. How much has changed. How little” (*Ghost* 4). She elaborated on this in our interview.

... so much of Irish history feels nightmarish because of the body I was born into. When I look back, I’m looking at the ways in which ordinary people, ordinary women, were suppressed and treated so poorly and so often were broken by Ireland (37:04-37:35).

Ní Ghríofa here displays an empathetic link based in identity. Even though she herself did not face this particular trauma, she recognizes that it was foisted upon those that identified or were identified as women in Ireland based on a physical makeup which she shares.

Amid recent waves of trans-exclusionary radical “feminism,” it is vital to specify that, while these texts investigate femininity, they do not seek to define or limit it. Instead, they resolutely push back against any sort of simplification of feminine identity, challenging the gender essentialism celebrated in conservative Ireland. Boland mourns that women have been objectified as poetic motifs in service of the nation: “Once the idea of a nation influences the perception of a woman, then that woman is suddenly and inevitably simplified. She can no

longer have complex feelings and aspirations. She becomes the passive projection of a national idea” (*Object* 136). This discomfort with a nationally-sanctioned singularity of womanhood inherently pushes back against the gender exclusionism of the nation, encouraging varieties of feminine identity which are dynamic, elaborate, and active. Similarly, despite all of the connections Ní Ghríofa draws between herself and Ní Chonail, “echoes of her life in the life I know,” she acknowledges that there are key differences beyond shared femininity (*Ghost* 91-2). “I envied her home and wondered how many servants it took to keep it all going,” she writes, “how many shadow-women doing their shadow-work, the kind of shadow-women I come from.” (17). In claiming a kinship with Ní Chonail’s servants, Ní Ghríofa exposes a class difference which complicates any notion of a singular feminine experience. In her words, *Ghost* is the product of a “limited worldview”— “though her book is “a female text,” it is “not *the* female text.” Instead, it displays the lived experience of an individual, who is, in this case, a white, cisgender Irish woman raising small children (Ní Ghríofa, IndieCork). Neither claims that their way—living as cisgender Irish women who partner with men, mother children, and develop careers as writers—is the only way to be a woman. Each demonstrates their way, a way which they show is similar to other Irish women who came before them, and, as one way of living as a person in the world, is worthy of documentation and discourse.

Berlant argues that media of female complaint, though critical of systems which enact harm, fails to move past political ambivalence because of its investments in stereotypes of femininity (2). Boland and Ní Ghríofa incorporate discussion of their experience with roles traditionally connected with femininity— such as maternal, domestic, and emotional labor—as well as how their bodies inform their identities and relationship to these roles. However, the primary purpose of these explorations is not to glorify one lifestyle, but to construct attachments

across time. The Irish women these authors write of lived in a culture which constrained them to these roles because of their bodies. Because of the privileges of their own eras, Boland and Ní Ghríofa may *choose* to take on these roles along with others, namely that of the writer, and use this new freedom to take on the distinctly political act of remolding cultural memory.

Both authors discuss literary predecessors, but, for the most part, do not draw in critical theory in a scholarly fashion. That being said, both books directly quote seminal feminist essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” by writer Hélène Cixous. In quoting Cixous, these authors both display an investment in Cixous’s concept of “écriture féminine,” or women’s writing.

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement (Cixous 876).

In this essay, Cixous argues that working in traditional and conventional forms, created and governed by men, only strengthens patriarchal structures. Instead, women must grasp the “discourse of man” and “explode it, turn it around, and seize it” by injecting their writing with their own identities (876). “Censor the body,” she writes, “and you censor breath and speech at the same time (880). Maggie Berg argues that the emphasis on the feminine body and femininity as a quality in the work of poststructuralist feminist writers—particularly Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Cixous—is not “dangerously essentialist,” as some have argued (50). On the other hand, these writers wrote of the body as a means by which to reclaim power. It is the body, which patriarchy works to reduce women to, which is the grounds for gendered subjugation (70). Rather than solidify notions of the feminine body and consciousness as they had been linguistically constructed in a patriarchal society, these thinkers instead wish to expand these

notions (53). Cixous underlines that a feminine body may take many forms: “Each body distributes in its own special way, without model or norm, the nonfinite and changing totality of its desires.” She urges women to write about their unique bodies, which patriarchy has sought to co-opt and regulate in various ways, and thus reconceive themselves through language. In doing so, they may challenge the objectification, shaming, and exploitation of women and capture both literary and bodily autonomy through the radical political power of writing. Cixous argues that women who wish to have children should not repress this desire out of fear of contributing to their own subjugation. She notes that the desire to mother can be a strength, one that, “just like the desire to write,” is “a desire to live self from within” (Cixous 892). In this, Cixous argues that motherhood may grant one unique perspective on creating and sharing life which holds a fundamental link with writing. Boland and Ní Ghríofa take on this challenge, primarily drawing from their experiences with motherhood. These authors route through the Irish nationalist glorification of the maternal body in order to repossess their own bodies and those of the women who lacked the privilege to themselves, condemning misogynistic subjugation and championing an expansive power based in their identification with the feminine.

Boland posits that becoming aware of the dissonance between the linguistically-constructed identities of Irish woman and Irish writer as a young adult caused her to view her body as an obstacle to artistic creation. She illustrates this through descriptions of estrangement from her own body, which she portrays as hindering her ability to enrich her nation through art.

The cost was to the poet like myself, whose mind was welcome in the tradition, but whose body was a strange and unrecorded part of it. Not strange and unrecorded, that is, if you were the object of the poem...But unrecorded if, like me, the body you had was drawing you to the life you would lead (*Object* 110).

This depiction of “mind” and “body” as distinct contests the patriarchal reduction of women to their bodies, one Boland argues Irish literature has perpetuated. Boland’s investment in this tradition, which she believes lacks records of bodies similar to hers engaged in artistic creation, clashes with her desire to create, pointedly characterized as a bodily drive. She captures this limbo with language of alienation from her own body—it appears suddenly “strange.”

Elsewhere, she intensifies this effect by describing a desire to leave her body entirely in order to contribute to her country through writing.

I was ready to weep or sing or recite in the cause of Ireland. To do any of that, however...
I would have to give up the body and spirit of a woman. If I chose to keep them, then my
tears would dry out, my mouth would close, my words would disappear (66-7).

This passage powerfully conveys Boland’s sense of doom when considering her position; the final sentence is conditional, but both Boland and the reader know that giving up “the body and spirit of a woman” is impossible. Boland, convinced that those perceived as women could not achieve literary success and would thus not be heard by their society, portrays the feminine body as a sentencing which slowly paralyzes one’s capacity for communication. She asserts that, in writing poetry, she was “engaged in a power of language which rebuffed the truth of her life,” a realization that moves her to see herself “shriveled and discounted,” “as if I had stepped outside my body” (114). In this way, she argues that, in solely pinning women to domestic labor, the language of the nation—whether literary or constitutional—left women in some way incapacitated, powerless to change their position.

However, for Boland, motherhood helped to shift this outlook. She describes the maternal body as granting her an astonishing advantage in her poetic pursuits, a view which supports the resonances Cixous suggests exist between motherhood and writing.

As my children woke, as they slept, a visionary landscape scrolled around me. It was not made by my children, although the bright digits of their gloves and their plastic mugs littered it. It was made by my body. As I moved through a world of small tasks and almost endless routines, the red mug and the blue glove crept out of their skins... They were annunciations of what my body had created... I saw them with my body. And the sight of my body was clear and different and intense... And for some reason, although it was a radical difference in my life, I trusted this way of seeing. I believed what was seen. It was—at certain definable moments in that ordinary world—that I felt I stood in the place of myth and lyric and vision (*Object* 219).

Rather than view her world, her body, and the relationship between the two with distrust, from some vague estranged space, mind and body here become united. She sees a landscape “made” by her body, her children and all of the domestic features she mentally connects to them, “with” her body. These reminders of the creative capabilities of her body, which she had once considered a hindrance to creation, grants her new perspective, a novel “way of seeing.” The “place of myth and lyric and vision” is, without a doubt, her national literature—Boland uses the phrases “Irish myth,” “Irish lyric,” and “vision of Ireland” elsewhere when discussing Irish prose, poetry, and song (104-5; 39). With this in mind, it seems that she now feels she can stand, a verb which implies physical action, within the tradition of which she once believed her body to be “a strange and unrecorded part of.” Through motherhood, Boland is able to figuratively re-enter her body, now able to trust its influence on her artistic creation.

This influence has allowed Boland to connect with others who, like herself, have sought to see their lives highlighted in literature. Boland's "visionary landscape... of small tasks and almost endless routines" echoes in Ní Ghríofa's own: "Every morning of mine is much the same... I feed our sons, then fill the dishwasher, pick up toys, clean spills," and so on and so forth (*Ghost* 5). Ní Ghríofa commented on how her own identity as a mother helped form her attachment to Boland's work.

All the poems where she is so beautifully painting moments of motherhood—I really enjoyed those as well at different points of my life and I felt very seen by them. There's a sense of permission-giving in that. I'm very conscious that any female poet in Ireland would have a sense of her in this way... I think that's really a testament to her power as a writer and the endurance of that power (Interview 8:28-9:22).

Boland raises this same idea of permission-giving in *Object Lessons*, with the help of Cixous. She follows an account of her conversations with an old woman from Achill, a rural island off the west coast of Ireland, with the Cixous quote "I have been amazed, more than once, by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own, which she had been secretly haunting since early childhood" (*Object* 125). By including this quote, Boland captures Cixous's concept of women's narratives as life-holding and life-giving; the woman contained a "world" which she "gave," a word which evokes bodily transfer, to Boland. Women expressing their inner worlds through words—which can take many forms, including oral storytelling and critical theory—here appear as a sort of nourishment, one which can inspire the women who receive it to analyze, interpret, and pass on their own worlds (which is, essentially, what Boland does in this memoir). However, the Achill woman's narrative is colored by furtiveness; she enjoys her inner life "secretly." This is an approach sculpted by the social marginalization which largely barred Irish

women from the literary canon. In addition, the use of “haunting” calls up the afterlife, implying that this world is not identical to the woman’s waking life or even her lifespan. By writing of the Achill woman and her world of memories, Boland gives each an afterlife through literary memorialization.

Ní Ghríofa writes extensively on the nourishment the bodies and stories of women can provide throughout *Ghost*. She revels in the pursuit of donating her time and energy for the benefit of others (*Ghost* 119). In the chapter “a liquid echo,” she writes that “In choosing to carry a pregnancy, a woman gives of her body with a selflessness so ordinary that it goes unnoticed, even by herself... Sometimes a female body serves another by effecting a theft upon itself” (35). This vision of the maternal body as self-sacrificing forms a key component in her identification with Ní Choinall: “I was startled to find Eibhlín Dubh pregnant again with her third child, just as I was... I could almost imagine her lullaby-hum” (17). Ní Ghríofa uses this vision to weave together themes of physical and literary nourishment. “Milk was inextricable from my labours,” she writes, “my body responded to my daughter’s hunger with a rush of milk, and then my mind responded to the milk by rushing back to the scattered jigsaw of Eibhlín Dubh’s days” (119). Elsewhere, she directly refers to her milk as “a pale text” (54). This mental association stems from a routine she adopted when, pained at the notion that prematurely born infants were in need of breast milk, she began to donate her excess milk to a charity bank.

...today, as on so many other days, I pick up my scruffy photocopy of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, inviting the voice of another woman to haunt my throat a while. This is how I fill the only small silence in my day, by turning up the volume of her voice and combining it with the wheeze-whirr of my pump, until I hear nothing beyond it. In the margin, my pencil enters a dialogue with many previous versions of myself, a changeable

record of thought in which each question mark asks about the life of the poet who composed the *Caoineadh*, but never questions my own. Minutes later, I startle back to find the pump brimming with pale, warm liquid (10).

In the only “silence” of her day, which is in itself “small,” she endures the discomfort of the pump and, through reciting excerpts of the *Caoineadh*, allows Ní Chonail to “haunt” her throat. This routine is driven by both feelings of duty and secret pleasure at the chance to use her resources to serve those who cannot serve themselves (here, the dead and infants). Even though Ní Ghríofa is technically the one speaking, she refers to the recitations as “her voice.” She characterizes her body as a conduit, able to reinvigorate the dead and nurse the young through paralleled acts of service. Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh argues that breastmilk—a motif which runs through the book and a symbol, for Ní Ghríofa, of shared experience and identity—provides this author a tether with which to pull the hazy narratives of women of the past into the present (36). The capabilities of her maternal body allows her the space to take in literature, specifically an autobiographical text orally composed and passed down by women, while contributing to its legacy through her own written investigations. Though it is Ní Chonail’s voice which surges through her, Ní Ghríofa still affirms that she is engaged in “dialogue.”⁵ She is involved in a cross-temporal conversation between women, including “previous versions of herself.” The subject of this writing is Ní Chonail, and it does seem that Ní Ghríofa uses the harmonic hum of the kean and the pump to drown out thoughts about her own life and thus all possibility of self-doubt. However, it is worth recognizing that it is her own body which leads her to identify with Ní Chonail and grants her the space and perspective to develop these attachments and

⁵ Note that she still slightly deflects agency by making her “pencil” the subject of the sentence, layering this denial of the self.

eventually take an analytical eye to her own life. This will lead her to write her own “female text;” in the closing to the book, she promises, “This time, I won’t let myself begin by writing Hoover or Sheets or Mop or Pump. Instead, I’ll think of new words, and then I’ll follow them” (282).

Ní Ghríofa deepens her explorations of the relationship between the body and writing by inscribing a line from the *Caoineadh* into her bodily narrative, with explicit reference to Cixous.

I wanted to leave a message for the strangers who would be the last to touch me. In choosing white ink for my tattoo, I thought of the milk bank. I thought of the *Caoineadh* emerging from a sequence of pale throats. I thought of all the absent texts composed by women, those works of literature never transcribed or translated. I thought of Hélène Cixous: ‘there is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink.’ I knew then that I must choose the words of Eibhlín Dubh. The fragment I chose occurs when she wakes suddenly from a dream in which a prophetic vision is revealed to her, ‘Is aisling trí néallaibh,’ which I translate as ‘such clouded reveries.’ (*Ghost* 113-114).

Ní Ghríofa focuses on the bodies and maternities of herself and women of the past: the excerpt features references to her soon-to-be-tattooed body (which she has just donated for college-level educational use), the “pale throats” of the women who orally carried *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, and breast milk. Cixous’s comparison of women’s writing to mother’s milk is especially apt here, and is likely a core reason why milk is given such attention in this book. Citing this description of women’s writing as “white ink” portrays storytelling as breast milk, a nourishing act of bodily transfer, but also as a faint medium of communication, a sort of secret,

subtle, or at the very least unconventional message. In this way, Ní Ghríofa depicts the bodies and narratives of herself and her cultural ancestors as forming a historical throughline—each repetition of body, act, and story preserving a tradition of life and art and, in this way, extending life. Ní Ghríofa plans to mark her body with the words of Ní Chonaill, an act of embodied memorialization which will be witnessed and, ideally, remembered by a younger generation. The *Caoineadh* enables the traumatic memories of one woman to travel from body to body, whether haunting throat, skin, or memory.

Boland's portrait of the identities of woman and writer as "almost magnetically opposed" slyly suggests a fundamental attraction that can prevail, but only if some key action is taken—if something is manipulated, flipped, subverted. She argues that "women have destiny in the form," but "Not because they are women." Shifting to addressing women as a collective, she writes that "Our suffering" and "collective silence" is not powerful enough in itself to confer literary success. It is the special ability of those newly integrated into the canon and cultural memory to "discover the deepest possibilities and subversions" within literature; "By this equation, women should break down barriers in poetry in the same way that poetry will break the silence of women... it is important not to mistake the easy answer for the long haul." Boland uses language of action: women must discover, break, and haul to impact their culture, a notion which corresponds with Erll's note that "Fighting about memory is one way of keeping it alive" (2). Ireland has seen how reshapings of cultural memory by marginalized groups can encourage change, as the expansion of social justice campaigns urged on reparative readings of the past. In fact, it was advocacy groups and artists who, after years of commemoration through activism and art, were finally able to push the Irish state to acknowledge the abuses suffered by victims of the Magdalen laundries (Smith 346-7). *Object Lessons* and *Ghost* are exercises in testing how Irish

women may have a hand in this fight through their art. Writing about these particular experiences, which for so long went unrecognized, allows them to take on reparative work: to celebrate the vital labor and reclaim the bodies these women could not. These authors move past complaint by repeatedly drawing attention to the power structures responsible for gendered traumas, harnessing the capacity of writing to inform, empower, and disrupt. The deep empathetic connections the trauma they highlight encourages appeals to those affected, adjacent, and allied and works to broaden cultural notions of who women were and are.

“Turnings and Returnings”

Marianne Hirsch’s theory of “postmemory” is useful for exploring cultural memoirs as vessels for the traumas of cultural ancestors.⁶ Hirsch conceptualizes postmemory as “a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” between an individual and “those who came before.” This affective transfer of traumatic experience is enabled through narratives, whether these take shape through autobiographical accounts or fictional interpretations and are transmitted orally, in writing, or through visual art. Though this transfer is sometimes more potent when there is a familial connection, it is primarily reliant on identification and attachment, and, ultimately, shared culture. After all, it is culture which, as theories of cultural memory demonstrate, exposes a person to the “stories, images, and behaviors” which Hirsch argues form the nucleus of postmemory. These influences allow a person who did not live through particular traumatic events to feel them so intensely that they “seem to constitute memories in their own right.” The dissonance which can be caused by these whispers of memory, which can strike at emotion and evade logic, may push those who wish to confront and interpret these felt cultural traumas to flesh them out through “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch *Generation* 5-6). In that it may spark or strengthen an art-impulse, postmemory is both begotten by and begetter of the narratives which shape a culture’s collective memory and influence its dominant historical record.

Hirsch has directly extended her theory of postmemory to gendered trauma in Ireland. The majority of work on this theory, by Hirsch and the scholars she has influenced, addresses the massive cultural trauma of the Holocaust and its resonating impact on Jewish communities, but Hirsch has made clear that she wishes other communities to adopt this theoretical framework to

⁶ In this case of our primary texts, these cultural traumas are primarily those of Irish women specifically.

understand their own historical traumas and the way they influence their art. In her forward to the book *Legacies of the Magdalen Laundries*, entitled “Memory, violence, and the body,” Hirsch uses the centennial commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising as a springboard to investigate how memory has layered and shifted to form popular conceptions of Irish identity in the 21st century. This forward acknowledges that memories of colonial and postcolonial trauma are a key determinant factor in Irish identity, and rightfully so, but Hirsch challenges how dominant these memories have been in shaping the institutionalized historical record. In particular, she addresses the reason that she visited Dublin in 2016; she was not there to commemorate the centennial of the Rising, but for a conference held to commemorate the twenty-year anniversary of the closing of the last Magdalen laundry. The centennial had nearly smothered efforts to publicly commemorate the suffering of Irish women under misogynistic state practices, an effect which Hirsch argues exemplified the historical smothering of gendered trauma both in memory studies generally and in the Irish context specifically. She argues that “visceral memories of gendered violence... continue to linger in the very bodies of descendants, haunting their present” and urges us, as readers, to acknowledge and amplify these stories so that “gendered postmemory, viscerally circulating through women’s bodies, [may] be mobilised in the cause of restorative justice” (“Foreword” xv-xvi). Hirsch here stresses that postmemory is a profoundly affective and therefore bodily experience, which further supports the insistence in *A Ghost in the Throat* and *Object Lessons* that the complexities and forces of Irish women’s bodies, from pain to desire, are not to be simplified or ignored any longer.

Boland and Ní Ghríofa use literature to demand that the traumas of the women who came before them are remembered. An especially potent way with which they accomplish this is through an immersive form of fictionalized biography, in which these authors dedicate their own

days to resurrecting the largely-unrecorded days of women they feel bound to. This dedication is based in attachments kindled by women's personal narratives, each of which is passed between women orally until it is interpreted and recorded—albeit in a plurally-mediated and fundamentally altered form—in writing. After reigniting her teenage fascination with the *Caoineadh*, Ní Ghríofa finds herself disappointed that such little archival information specific to Ní Chonaill exists. What records she can find are obscured by “a masculine shadow,” particularly those of her husband Art O’Leary, the subject of her lament, and her nephew Daniel O’Connell, the famed revolutionary. In response, Ní Ghríofa takes on an abstract and formidable challenge.

Perhaps I could honour Eibhlín Dubh’s life by building a truer image of her days,
gathering every fact we hold to create a kaleidoscope, a spill of distinct moments,
fractured but vivid. Once this thought comes to me, my heart grows quick. *I could donate
my days to finding hers*, I tell myself, *I could do that, and I will.*

This “fractured but vivid” “kaleidoscope” is one which welds together bits of historical record and imagination— “an unscientific mishmash of daydream and fact” (*Ghost* 70). Ní Ghríofa here displays an emotional and imaginative investment in the life of Ní Chonaill, which she comes to first and foremost through her interaction with the *Caoineadh*. The process of attachment depicted in *Ghost* supports Rita Felski’s contention that art is capable of facilitating deeply powerful attachments through attunement, identification, and, finally, interpretation (Felski viii-xiii). Ní Ghríofa first feels drawn to the *Caoineadh*, identifies with its speaker through its content and context, and then interprets both this art through her own writing to form conclusions about her own identity. Her affective response to the mediated memories of the dead and subsequent literary recreation and exploration epitomizes Hirsch’s concept of “postmemorial

work,” which “strives to reactivate and re-embody” cultural memory alongside and through personal memory (*Generation 33*).

Boland takes on postmemorial work both with her own family members and strangers, and, in doing so, cross-temporally combines the experiences of women in order to further understand the links between gender, nation, and memory in Ireland. In an especially striking instance of this, she recounts her mother relaying her own mother’s life story.

It was a short conversation. My mother spoke only rarely about the past. It was, in its way, a small piece of an oral tradition, told in a summer dusk and in a halting way. Of a woman she could not remember... There was nothing heroic in her account, and she offered no meanings. Instead she did what innumerable human beings have done with their children: She told me what had happened (*Object 67-8*).

Boland identifies this story, albeit “short” and “halting,” as part of a larger, even universal oral tradition of passing the past. However, Boland describes her mother’s approach to oral storytelling as neither “heroic” or didactic, a sharp contrast with the ethos of the masculine bardic tradition, the oral tradition which Boland identifies as having had the most significant and sustained impact on Irish poetry (190-1). Instead, the tradition present in this exchange connects women, ones who identify with “an Irishness which was not bardic or historic but full of silences” (114). The silences Boland speaks of refer to the erasure of women’s stories from the Irish canon and historical record. She acknowledges this in the statement “My grandmother lived outside history. And she died there.” However, Boland here displays women using their voices to share the stories of other women, even if these stories are fragmented and gapped because of this erasure or the faults of personal memory. As her mother does not have personal memories of her own mother, the story she tells is necessarily a patchwork of the stories of others. Boland picks

up and continues the work of preserving this narrative and mending its tears by sharing some of the biographical details of her grandmother's life which she learned from her mother. In addition, prompted by "wonder," she expands and shades in this life story through the inclusion of historical context and, of note, through imaginative fictionalizations. "Imagine the scene," she prompts us, encouraging her reader to invest in a project she herself feels a bodily presence in: "Three-quarters of a century on, I lifted my head, I looked up" (68).

Postmemory's close ties to bodily experience are especially relevant to these texts' investments in "a feminist mode of knowing [the] past." Hirsch posits that feminist postmemorial work, specifically that which involves a transfer of affect and information between women, often embraces "embodied" knowledge which prioritizes care and connectedness and can therefore constitute "a reparative ethical and political act of solidarity" in its attention to forgotten experiences (*Generation* 98-9). Notably, the narratives which Boland and Ní Ghríofa construct their imaginings of the past off of are all orally born—from originally orally composed and transmitted literature like the *Caoineadh* to stories they are told by older women. The focus on oral narratives—which, following Walter Ong's seminal scholarship on orality, literacy, and the junctures between the two, we may acknowledge as an art form—has a pointed relevance to our discussion of memory and women (136). Adriana Cavarero observes that the vocal has been traditionally associated with women. She identifies this stereotype as a manifestation of misogynistic reductions of women to the body and argues that it has been used to depict women as outsiders to the sphere of the semantic, a notion bolstered by the philosophical tradition of separating speech from the voice itself. However, Cavarero works to reclaim the voice as a manifestation of individuality, a vehicle for connection, and thus a feminist source of power (6-9). She does this partly through discussion of the mythic figure of Echo. Echo represents the

association, and even reduction, between women and the voice—she becomes only voice, cursed to repeat the words of others. Hirsch dips into the idea of repetition as an affliction through reference to what Toni Morrison terms “rememory,” distinguished from postmemory in that it is “a memory that, communicated through bodily symptoms, becomes a form of repetition and reenactment” rather than “one that works through indirection and multiple mediation.” She argues that women are at a greater risk of reenacting the traumas of their mothers and other familial or cultural ancestors “Because of a bodily closeness that is reinforced by cultural expectations” (*Generation* 82-7).

Cavarero agrees that repetition points to the relationship between mother and child, but argues that, rather than placing an individual in a sort of powerless purgatory, the imperfectness of these repetitions and the rhythmic resonance they create instead emphasizes the relationality and plurality of speech. She proposes that texts that “employ experimental techniques,” such as the nonlinear and genre-blending elements of the memoirs in question, often embrace repetition as a means by which to “dissolve[] the semantic register” and regress to the repetitive nature of an infant’s call-and-response with their mother. She goes on to cite the writing of both Beckett—an undeniable influence on all writers invested in the Irish tradition—and Cixous as examples. Of the latter, she argues that Cixous, along with Julia Kristeva, use repetition to free “the maternal, rhythmic voice of the mother, which precedes and exceeds the system of logos.” Repetition is, of course, highly mnemonically important, and is what deepens and sustains existence in individual and collective memory. Its strategic use can sharpen texts highly concerned with memory, and this becomes especially true when pointedly used to deviate from and challenge masculinist literary traditions. In this case, this tool becomes “more than babble; it becomes resonance, music, and acoustic relation.” This harnessing of repetition defies “the

erasure of the voice” by patriarchy, which, according to its view of the voice as feminine, facilitates the erasure of women which Boland and Ní Ghríofa lament. Instead, it becomes a source of pleasure and connection. The uniqueness of each voice proclaims the individuality of the self, but the repetition of the same words, sounds, and actions illustrates connection: “Resonance, daughter of invocation, links the two voices in the form of a rhythmic bond” (Cavarero 168-172).

The word invocation calls up ritual, which is, like routine and tradition, dependent on repetition. Caoineadh demonstrates how orality and vocality is a tradition which has and may continue to serve Irish women. This was a central part of Irish life for hundreds of years, first recorded in the eighth century and persisting, though in a much-diminished state, into the twentieth century. Like in most societies, these rituals of lamentation and their oral reproductions were almost always the undertakings of women (Lysaght 65). Knowing this, Ní Ghríofa argues that caoineadh is one sort of female text; though classifying oral performance as text is contentious, Ní Ghríofa’s use of the word text is highly flexible, spanning from book to breast milk. Ní Éigeartaigh argues that Ní Ghríofa uses the genre to seek “voices and presence” in “liminal spaces” and “lacunae,” and, through this engagement with an obscured tradition, shift her own understanding of “grief and invisibility” from “trauma” to “a specifically female narrative of empowerment” (34). Each *bean chaointe*, or keening woman, achieved this through vocalization (38). Ní Ghríofa and Boland both process and transform gender trauma through writing rather than vocalization, but their description of their narratives as nurtured and birthed by their bodies, along with their frequent references to orality, suggests that these acts run parallel. Of *Ghost*, Ní Ghríofa writes, “My mind holds it close, and it grows, tender and slow” before it is “lifted to another consciousness by the ordinary wonder of type. Ordinary, too, the

ricochet of thought that swoops, now, from my body to yours” (*Ghost* 3-4). Though the medium of transmission differs between her book and the *Caoineadh* in its original form, this ricochet of thought” is “ordinary.” In this, she posits that there is a tradition of women memorializing the dead through a chain of narratives, each inspired by the ones which precede it. Each link in this chain is progress, in that it prolongs the tradition, but, in its reliance on memory—in the influences it pulls from the past and its preservation of the lives of forebears—it also drives the past into this future; reinvigorated through inheritance, it is a “continuum” (Ní Éigearthaigh 34).

Ní Éigearthaigh draws from Felski, Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida to argue that feminist portrayals of time as cyclical push against the linear views of time used to uphold the patriarchal notion that dominant historical narratives are authoritative and unimpeachable. In other words, these portrayals support arguments that cultural memory is a constant revisiting of the past and refashioning of history; they portray cyclicity as capable of transmuting the raw affective material of trauma into stories, which can, in turn, encourage personal transcendence and cultural transformation. In literature, these ideas manifest in rituals, routines, and traditions, as we have already spoken of, along with inheritances, repetitions, resonances, echoes, mirrorings, and, in Boland’s words, the “turnings and returnings” of nonlinear timelines (*Object* xiii). Each of these elements appear in each book, from a line level to a thematic level, and dispute linear understandings of time and hyper-individual theories of memory within and between the lives of women. One clever instance of repetition is that of the word “tick” throughout *Ghost*. Ní Ghríofa first uses this in reference to her routine of checking off household chores: “shopping list after completed shopping list – tick, tick, tick” (*Ghost* 32). This use of onomatopoeia summons the vocality of caoineadh, which expanded beyond language; nonlexical exclamations expressing grief were crucial parts of these performances (Lysaght 71). In addition, “tick” also evokes the

sound of a clock or metronome, and, as she completes each task, time does tick on. The “tick” is both an erasure—the crossing-out of a chore and the disappearance of an evanescent moment—and a distinction—a line drawn and moment marked with sound. Each tick records existence; it memorializes the transient. Echo, as Cavarero argues, also extends the momentary, even if just by a few moments. Ní Ghríofa shares a memory of a childhood habit of rolling in the grass to create a “nest” for herself.

I made an invisibility of myself there, neatly concealed in a room made by female labour and repetition, an echo-imprint of my small existence. It felt like it belonged to me, that hollow, it felt new, and yet, as my body pressed into that ground, it also felt very old.

There were others there too, unseen but present all around me (*Ghost* 212).

She takes comfort within this personal routine and in the knowledge that this land, which now boasts this “echo-imprint” of herself, has held generations of her family. She imagines her act of creation, though belonging to her, as just one part of a continuation of the life lived by these ancestors in this same space, an idea which speaks to the idea of combined individual and collective authorship we have henceforth discussed. Boland expresses this same sentiment.

But just occasionally, standing there and breathing in the heavy musks of rose beds and buddleias, I would feel an older and less temporary connection to the moment. Then I would feel all the sweet, unliterate melancholy of women who must have stood as I did, throughout continents and centuries, feeling the timelessness of that particular instant and the cruel time underneath its surface (*Object* 168).

As Ní Ghríofa does, Boland imagines and compares herself to the dead, questioning to what degree she mirrors the women she thinks back to. She feels especially connected to the past

through this imaginative projection, able to “feel” the “melancholy” of not just Irish women who have stood where she is, “breathing in” the same fragrances, but to all women who have pondered the “timelessness” and “cruel time” of their own moment, who have attempted cross-temporal identification and acknowledged its limits. This idea also appears in both texts in connections between mirrors and mother-daughter relationships. Boland quotes Paula Meehan’s poem “The Pattern,” which Meehan wrote about her mother: “Did her mirror tell what mine tells me?” (196). Ní Ghríofa writes, “In the mirror that holds both of us, my dark hair shadows her fair, and there, I observe her reflected scowl at her mother” (*Ghost* 132). Much like an echo, mirroring represents a sort of repetition which, though it reveals similarities, is imperfect and troubled.

However, both authors do portray narratives, though also impossible to exactly repeat, as a means to pass along feelings and knowledge similar enough to inspire strong bonds. Ní Éigeartaigh deepens her commentary on Ní Ghríofa’s defiance of patriarchal timelines by pointing our attention to one of the most stirring fictional projections of a memory in *Ghost*: the moment Ní Chonail begins her lament, accompanied only by “a crumpled old hag.”

“Who is this crumpled bystander? To me, this elderly stranger sometimes feels like a manifestation of Eibhlín herself...She watches her own young self falling, howling over Art’s corpse until those vowels falter and begin to take form as words, words that somehow summon the voice of her mother, and her mother’s mother, a whole chorus of female voices from her throat, all articulating the pain of this moment, all hand in hand in hand, all hovering in the rapture of those old words. Some alchemy turns this private moment public, turns a raw sound into articulation, into art (*Ghost* 150-1).

Of the female-authored elegy, Mellor writes that “grief is a never-ending emotion,” and, in grieving loved ones, women “bear their dead in verbal acts of continual remembrance and love.” (Mellor 4; 18). This excerpt demonstrates this vision of grief as atemporal and suggests that this quality allows those reeling from the trauma of loss to construct deep affective interpersonal bonds across time, through narratives. Words, here, can summon the dead, and, in doing so, offer comfort in solidarity. We see the private rapidly become public through art, as voices and hands multiply and intertwine suddenly, as if by reflex.

The mysterious old woman is not only Eibhlín Dubh’s older self, however. She is also you, and she is me. We are both bound in that peculiar figure too; we peer through her eyes, we are wrapped in her dark cloak. We bend together to spread it over Art’s body. We give of ourselves to shelter him. We stand with her to grieve him. This stranger holds all of us. I will not allow Eibhlín Dubh to suffer this alone, nor will you. Let us step in and stand with her. We cannot permit reason to intrude upon this moment. Do not deny us this (151).

Ní Éigearthaigh argues that, based on Derrida’s theory of hauntology, which posits that “ghosts function as acts of repetition” which prop “all metanarratives... eternally open for revision and critique,” this moment of intense grief and its connective capabilities collapse time and dissolve individuality, enshrining this memory as an “endless cycle of repetition” (45). She draws the reader into a community which she also claims—a collective which acts with precision and strength and without hesitation and warns against attempts at invalidation or interference by a patriarchal authority which defers to conventional “reason” and dispossessive strategies. Ní Ghríofa builds out her views on memory as collective, inherited, and ineffable in our interview.

I think that, at a human level, having that sense of collective memory, or shared memory, or that sense of a line of inheritance and inherited trauma and memory, as much as it can bring pain in one way, it also counterintuitively makes me feel much less alone, because I feel myself so small and just one in a long line of people who have experienced loss... Just that instinctual understanding that has moved through generations based on memories that may no longer be told or articulated sometimes, but it's somehow within us, at a bone level. That immediate sense of recognition of a passion or of a behavior that we can't always—it's a hunch, isn't it?... I just knew. I don't think that's always an I in that, it's more *we* just knew, and the *we*—a lot of those other people within that we are invisible and gone. It seems as though it's just one person, but, in fact, there's a big line of people standing behind each of us... For me, within my own individual humanity, and I don't know that I fully believe in individuality, but as a single human body or single mouth speaking now, I really feel a sense of openness to others. That is a really huge part of my work, and my aim and mission is to honor those others... I feel that's what all my writing is trying to do, is make a space for those memories (27:58-31:25).

The “mysterious old woman” she describes as a symbol for feminine solidarity is mirrored in Boland’s Achill woman. Boland introduces the woman, the first to tell her stories of the famine, by highlighting the vividness and faultiness of memory: “I can see her still,” she writes, “perhaps this is one image that has become all the images I have of her.” Still, she goes on to analyze her memory, aware of its shortcomings.

“Memory is treacherous. It confers meanings which are not apparent at the time. I want to say that I understood this woman as emblem and instance of everything I am about to propose. Of course I did not. Yet even then I sensed a power in the encounter. I knew,

without having words for it, that she came from a past which affected me... when she gestured towards that shore which had stones as outlines and monuments of a desperate people, what was she pointing at? A history? A nation? Her memories or mine?" (*Object* 125).

Boland admits that the connections she felt to the past in that moment defied explanation, but were powerful and affecting nonetheless—so much so that history, nation, and the memories of the two women all blur into one another. As the woman affects Boland, the past affects the present. Boland uses this memory to reshape understandings “about poetry, about nationalism, about the difficulties for a woman poet within a constraining national tradition” for both herself and readers, but admits that “Perhaps the argument itself is nothing more than a way of revisiting the cold lights of that western evening and the force of that woman’s conversation” (126). Interpreting this encounter is an attempt at a sensual, forceful form of time travel back to the moment in which, through oral narrative, she committed this cultural trauma to memory.

Boland writes about women and Irish poetry throughout *Object Lessons*, but did not write on caoineadh until two years later. Her article “Daughters of Colony” builds upon scholar Angela Bourke’s article on the *Caoineadh* to argue for postcolonial, feminist readings of Irish literature. To do so, she relies on a personal account of a story passing between women: it is the life story of an Irish woman who faced layered traumas inflicted by colonial and patriarchal powers, told by this woman to Boland’s mother, and then by her mother to Boland.

Everything gone but the words in which to tell the terrible story. Everything gone but that air, and space into which the words carried their freight. Years later, when the details were long gone, my mother’s tone stayed with me as a sort of contagion. The odd eruption of that grief into an achieved, modern life went on troubling me. It was not just

the story. It was the fact that my mother had come into a sophisticated, twentieth-century life, charged in some subtle way—and all unsuspected by me—with the darkneses of another century. In that garden room, its domesticated aspect of flowers and a river distance, her voice took on a misery I could not read. I did not know this side of her (“Daughters” 11).

Boland writes that it was “As if these old sorrows belonged to me as well as to her,” a firm signaling of inherited trauma which is passed through the voice—through the words which ripple the air between two bodies. She uses these autobiographical sections to emphasize that the *Caoineadh* came into existence and has persisted only through a plurality of voices, specifically those of women. Her language depicts the passing down of one woman’s traumatic memories—which is, in part, what oral transmission of lament texts achieves—in a manner which supports Hirsch’s theories on traumatic memory transfer and focuses on the importance of the oral repetition of these narratives. With these memories comes the affective impact of inherited trauma. However, the lack of cultural visibility given to narratives of this kind—the same systems which appropriated and misrepresented the *Caoineadh* for their own purposes—caused her to nearly forget this story which once impacted her so.

Memory, after all, is a maker of the past. But, ironically, it needs a concept of the past with which to work. The concept of the past—even then, even in Dublin where I was a young writer—was a narrative of concealed power. This story had no place there. It would be years before I could ask myself the question: What if the attempt to construct a past, like the events and oppressions that provoked it, became another act of power, just as likely to overlook the inconvenient and powerless truth?” (14).

In asking this question, Boland extends the exploration of cultural memory and women's narratives she delves into in *Object Lessons*. As in this book, and as in *Ghost*, Boland portrays the tradition of passing stories such as these, memories of cultural ancestors, as a means to connect with others, gather power together, and protect against marginalization.

Think of my story... as a thread. A slender, awkwardly held cable. There will be times, hours, years when I hardly know I have it in my hand. Then I will sit down to write a poem and find myself faced with the far more difficult task of constructing myself as a poet. I will feel the thread tug in my hand. I will go, as I ask the reader to go now, to where it leads (14).

Ní Ghríofa supports the connections Boland draws between women, storytelling, and cultural memory by depicting caoineadh as a form of handed-down feminine knowledge that, though concentrated around the memories of Ní Chonail, has remained a collectively authored female text through its continuing resonance. She also employs thread as a metaphor for a remembered story in speaking of Norrie Singleton, a woman with “encyclopaedic knowledge of song and story” who was the first to transcribe the *Caoineadh*.

People travelled from afar to sit and watch her eyelids drop as she sought the thread with which to begin, and they stayed for hours, listening to her voice, enchanted... We cannot know from whose mouths the echoes of our lives will chime. Norrie is the source and the surface from which Eibhlín Dubh's voice reverberates to us (*Ghost* 190-1).

She picks up the narrative thread, stored within her, and spins it, extending its life and reshaping it so it may persist, in some form, in a rapidly-changing age. Though we cannot get at the original voice, we may experience an echo, a reverberation, distinguished and further extended by Ní Ghríofa's own discussion of the *Caoineadh* and its long and complex history. She bears

upon the dually personal and communal nature of cultural traditions of trauma-processing and group catharsis such as caoineadh through this discussion of memory and orality as means of connection. Each *bean chaointe* composed the “text” of their performance over the body of the deceased, extempore. This woman determined the exact cadence and content at her improvisational whim, but, as a distinct genre and tradition, each performance shared compositional elements—notably *Rosc* metre, as well as many themes, motifs, and phrases—and included the vocal support of other women (Lysaght 71). Angela Bourke emphasizes caoineadh as a tradition of oral and bodily performance, reasoning that analyses of specific caoineadh “texts” as pieces of literature generally prioritize individual over collective authorship and align themselves with misogynistic, elitist, and colonialist narratives. She specifically focuses on the scholarly trend of portraying Ní Chonaill, an educated Anglo-Irish aristocrat, as bearing more artistic talent than women of the Irish peasantry with whom caoineadh was primarily associated. This is often the line of reasoning used to explain why the *Caoineadh* is one of the only surviving “texts” in existence (Bourke 144). Patricia Lysaght proposes an alternative reason for this which resonates with Bourke’s arguments: caoineadh was not seen as literature, but as a sacred act which facilitated the transition of the deceased to the afterlife and the recovery of their community. All surviving print records of caoineadh were captured and preserved by chance, through memory, reproduction, and, eventually, transcription. Patriarchy, colonial forces, and the Catholic Church, all of which distrusted the power this ancestral tradition conferred on Irish women, troubled this process and eventually hastened the disappearance of the practice of caoineadh (Lysaght 68-9). Bourke argues that, though each of the texts that mediate a caoineadh performance “represent the voices of individual women,” disregarding the tradition which shaped the *Caoineadh* disregards those who influenced and carried her work. “Rather than show

her as a brilliant exponent of a verbal art practiced by many women,” Bourke writes, “literary sources present Eibhlín Ní Chonaille as unique: the exception who proves the rule that great poets are not women” (Bourke 144-5).

James Ward argues that memory is vital for Irish performance culture, and, vice versa, performance is vital for Irish cultural memory (Ward 149). The dependence of oral traditions on memory indicates that each *bean chaointe* left their original mark upon the tradition, both in incorporating their unique memories of the deceased, of whom they were usually close to in life, and in remembering and including various conventional elements of *caoineadh* (Lysaght 71-2). The same can be said for the women who committed specific *caoineadh* “texts” to memory and reproduced them orally. In his book *Researches in the South of Ireland*, nineteenth century Anglo-Irish antiquary Thomas Crofton Croker expresses a frustration with the “wild and inarticulate uproar as a chorus” which accompanies laments at wakes, and, seeking to transcribe the words of a lament, “procured an elderly woman” accustomed to “subsisting on charity” to recite some for him. He marvels at the memory and translation skills of this illiterate woman, yet ultimately concludes that the transcriptions “will doubtless appear to the English reader odd combinations of the sublime and vulgar” (Croker 173-4). Croker’s description highlights the importance of the women who memorized individual laments, while also illustrating the condescending view that those not entrenched in Irish cultural customs of the sort took to *caoineadh* and the lower-class women who primarily carried the tradition. His desire to single out one voice, translate, and transcribe some version of the lament supports Bourke’s assertion that those with privilege, and thus those invested in private ownership, are often invested in an individualist notion of authorship which privileges writing above orality and conforms to their cultural systems (145-6). As a performance first and foremost, any written record of *caoineadh* is

just that, record. All but the words of one voice—the bodily movements, the intermingling cries of mourners, the texture of the scene—are lost, and even those, mediated through so many bodies and translated between languages, are fundamentally changed (Ó Coileáin 103-4). However, that any record has made it into the cultural memory at all is evidence of the capacity of the voice, as a signal of embodied knowledge, to preserve tradition by enabling the memories of one to pass down through the bodies of others.

“We yield to our present, but we choose our past,” Boland writes, “In a defeated country like Ireland we choose it over and over again, relentlessly, obsessively” (*Object* 163). What past is chosen is a responsibility of great gravity, determining “the women who had survived. And those who had not” (67). Guy Beiner argues that “dormant memories can be rejuvenated,” often through the resurrection of traditions which, though no longer actively contributed to, survive through documentation—“This revival is another form of postmemory” (302). Narelle McCoy supports this assertion by suggesting that caoineadh has re-emerged as a “de-ritualised” art form. Though McCoy specifically addresses music, her comment that “the echoes of this powerful vocal expression continue to resonate in the voices of Irish women” rings true (120-3). Boland, Ní Ghríofa, and each woman who contributed to the caoineadh tradition have taken on the responsibility of speaking for the dead, using their bodies and the art of storytelling to paradoxically allow the dead to remain on earth through memorialization. For each *bean chaointe*, the act of keening was “a private journey through the grief and mourning process...and a public journey in her symbolic role as agent of transition and incorporation” (Lysaght 72). Though Boland and Ní Ghríofa’s efforts manifest in writing, and not performance, they still adopt a dually personal and political role by using their own bodies and lived experiences to draw connections between themselves and cultural ancestors and, extrapolating from these

affective connections, comment on large-scale power structures and systems of thought. These texts align memory and women's bodies as allowing for the preservation and reproduction of culture and feed into the cultural tradition, represented by *caoineadh*, of women as stewards of memory who may revive and pass on narratives, memorializing the dead while processing trauma and facilitating progress.

Conclusion

To Joyce, behemoth of his cultural canon, Irish history is a nightmare. To what extent do Boland and Ní Ghríofa concur?

Boland takes the nightmare in stride, affirming this label, to some degree, by positing that nationalism was “inevitable in the Irish context, a necessary hallucination within Joyce’s nightmare of history.” She places blame for the complications in the relationship between Irish women and literature on Irish poets, specifically their dogged reliance on gendered tropes. “I knew that the women of the Irish past were defeated,” she writes, “What I objected to was that Irish poetry should defeat them twice.” Though these tropes originated from nationalist sentiment, writers “allowed those fictions to edit ideas of womanhood and modes of remembrance” (*Object* 137). The issue is not that history is a nightmare, for Boland, but that this nightmare has been made recurrent—empowered to haunt, possess, and even hinder—through literature.

Postmemorial literature has shown us that attempts to vent cultural traumas, to exorcise them through writing, can instead, for better or worse, carve them deeper into the cultural fabric. An oft-repeated phrase in *Ghost* is the line from the caoineadh Ní Ghríofa has permanently inscribed, in white ink, on her own body: *aisling trí néallaibh*, such clouded reveries. *Ghost* focuses so closely on Ní Ghríofa’s romantic daydreams of the past—the “dreaming back,” to revisit Yeats’ words, she has engaged in her entire life—that the contrast between nightmare and reverie appears quite striking. In our interview, Ní Ghríofa expanded upon her vision of history using the charged space between these words.

When I look towards history, I do have the real sense of reverie, and it being like a dream. But for Irish women, it's a nightmare as much as a dream. And yes, even within a nightmare there are small moments of joy and humanity, and there's love, and I think sketching any life or any world as being all black and white is an error. There's always nuance...and finding the texture of those days and their sorrows and rages and the distinctness of people's particular desires is what I wish to do. I can't or don't always succeed in that, but that is, I think, the essence of what I want to achieve (Interview 39:15-40:26).

Ní Ghríofa sees history not “purely as a happy dream that I can zip in and out of,” but as something “fraught,” a space of in-betweens and ambivalences (40:34-40:40). This portrayal of the past deeply resonates with the strain of literary commemoration featured in both of these books: alternating acts of artistic capture and analysis. This strategy is perhaps best conveyed by the phrase *Object Lessons* itself. Recording personal and cultural memories, and the ways in which they nourish and echo one another, appears as a sort of trinket-treasuring. These poets’ dedication to studying the past and its impact on the present evokes Simone Weil’s promise that “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer” (117). Sharing these memories through literature, already shaped by tradition, renders this group prayer—a repeated communal act of question and answer which knocks at the door between life and death. The act of memorialization, though past-focused, inherently expresses a desire to learn, grow, and choose a path forward. Boland argues that the stewards of Irish literary commemoration mismanaged this momentous responsibility for far too long. Though the stories of the dead seem to possess and reanimate through these authors, this is a mutual haunting—Boland, Ní Ghríofa, and their readers are all-too-present in these revivals of experience. In taking on postmemorial work, artists assume

the lofty responsibility of speaking for the dead. They must attempt to strike a balance: between telling the story of another with as much richness and faithfulness as one can and appropriating that story for one's own purposes, between lifting up the life of another and letting it displace one's own. As the tides of cultural memory continue to shift, more rapidly by the day, those who devote themselves to the privilege, burden, and sacrifice of speaking for the dead must take extra care to approach this task with respect, above all.

There's so much nuance and so much care required, because you don't want to return to someone, to try to communicate something of their lives, and end up causing further harm... You want to be able to carry something of someone's lived days with a fidelity that honors them. It's important to have that at the forefront of one's mind, until you go into... flow, and it's like a whirlwind. Something else takes over then, which is mysterious again when you're writing about the past and putting yourself in service to someone who is long gone. I mean, what is that moment, in that case? Is that other people coming back and making their own will felt? If the person who is existing in the present feels completely absent, well, who is there then and who is making it? Is it them, if there's not an element of conscious creation, or is there something else that storms in? I don't know (Interview 40:44-42:06).

I will borrow Boland's caveat that, "an argument like mine must contain too many imponderables to admit of any practical focus" (*Object* 126). After all, working with memory means working with lack—gaps, silences, and losses. But uncertainty, while a shifty, anxious thing, is not a gap, silence, or loss. It is a conversation between each voice that has breached our days and a superabundance of answers. Felski argues that art's importance lies in its ability to "create, or cocreate, enduring ties" (1). Cultural memoir demonstrates that, though we might

perform individuality, we are amalgams—nodes on a great relational web, with tethers mystified but unstrained by time. *Object Lessons* and *A Ghost in the Throat* are projects in mapping identity and connectedness through literary self-portraits, lit and shadowed by the past. In calling their readers to do the same, Boland and Ní Ghríofa encourage community-building and progress through a praxis of remembering. They do not seek to overthrow the dead, but to honor their gifts, together: “In one another,” writes Cixous, “we will never be lacking” (893).

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