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Landscapes, Voices and Corporealities of Excess in the Theatre of Marina Carr

By

Melissa Sihra

Doctor of Philosophy

Trinity College, Dublin, 2002
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Melissa Sihra
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So I left it stirring on the hills
With a fluency
Only water has. And like water, able
To re-define land

Eavan Boland, *White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland*
Introduction
This Ph. D. thesis concerns the plays of contemporary Irish dramatist Marina Carr from 1989-1998. In the first section of this introduction I will contextualise the background, career and plays of Marina Carr within the frameworks of Irish theatre and contemporary society. In so doing, I will consider the defining characteristics of what is known as 'Irish theatre' and the problematic position of women within that tradition. The introduction will consider the ways in which Carr's plays operate within, and contest dominant representation in Irish drama. Finally, I will outline the structure of my thesis, and introduce and contextualise my primary sources and chosen critical methodology, providing a chapter by chapter break-down of my critical approach to the plays. Central to this thesis are the ways in which Carr's dramas renegotiate conventional representations of female subjectivity, landscape, and language through imaginative reconfigurations of corporeality, spatio-temporality and theatrical form, considering ultimately, Carr's political recalcitrance to patriarchal ideologies in an Irish context.

Carr and Contemporary Ireland: Dramatising the 'deterioration of certainty':
Ireland has transformed massively over the past thirty years, most notably in its economic affluence and in the radical deterioration of the once synthetic hegemony of the Catholic Church and nation state. In Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation, Declan Kiberd reflects upon the previous century's emergent 'theocratic state, whose Constitution began with the preamble “In the name of the Most Holy Trinity...”.

Colin Graham makes a similar point in Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture, noting the 'fusion of Catholic and National pride in post independence Ireland' and cites Terence Brown, who notes how the Church 'provided for the needs of the Irish people', winning their 'unswerving loyalty' before using its 'authoritative position in Irish society to preach a sexual morality of severe restrictiveness.'

The impact of this restrictiveness

had further implications for women in Ireland. In “Irish Women Playwrights since 1958”, Anna McMullan considers women’s social reality, citing Mary Daly:

In the 1937 Constitution, the Irish State enforced by law the teachings of the Catholic Church, which emphasised the woman’s duty to uphold the family. Contraception, divorce and abortion were illegal. There was a marriage ban on women working after they married. Single mothers and women living apart from their husbands had no right to social welfare, ‘A subservient role for women was locked into social structures by state services which mirrored the teaching of the male-controlled Catholic Church.’

In the early nineteen nineties the Irish public began to radically interrogate and contest the authority of the Catholic Church, particularly due to the tidal wave of sex-scandal revelations. After two referenda divorce was made legal in 1995, and homosexuality was ‘decriminalised’ in 1993. Abortion remains an illegal act in Ireland, and the vociferous campaigns of pro-life versus pro-choice activists were hotly debated topics on nightly television panels. In the mid nineteen nineties Ireland experienced the phenomenon of reversed migration for the first time in its history, as people from other cultures began to seek employment or political asylum. The sum of all of these factors means that ‘Ireland’ is now a very different entity to the emergent Republic which consumed the cultural nationalists William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory one hundred years earlier.

‘Irish drama’ may be traditionally characterised by its preoccupation with predominantly nationalist, masculinist and colonial and post-colonial explorations of identity, in which the ‘literary’ is privileged over an awareness of physicality, performativity and female subjectivity. In considering these issues of authorship and representation, McMullan writes: ‘During the twentieth century, the staging of the nation’s struggles to define itself

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was primarily in the hands of male authors from W.B. Yeats to Brian Friel. Since the anti-Catholic Penal Codes of the seventeenth century, it had been forbidden to directly refer to, or name, Ireland in ballads, poems and so on. Hence the female personification of the nation began, and flourished as an iconographic trope of cultural and political resistance. The politics of gender representation, sexuality and the body are finally emerging with force and consistency in the critical debates surrounding Irish theatre past and present. In *Seen and Heard: Six New Plays by Irish Women*, Cathy Leeney notes that we must ‘Collectively [...] develop our idea of what Irish theatre is, re-inventing Ireland as beyond the narrowly national to include our connectedness with other times and other places.

As perhaps the only female playwright with such a high public and critical profile, in the Republic of Ireland since Lady Gregory, where, and how does Marina Carr fit into the ever-evolving legacy of Irish theatrical representation and culture? The value in Carr’s work lies not only in the accomplished strength, conviction and originality of her dramatic voice and style, but also in her decentring of masculinist and nationalist discourses in Irish drama. Carr’s plays contest the traditional Irish cultural assumption that ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ are innately linked, and powerfully articulate the rupture or increasing void created by the diminished roles of the traditional hegemonic structures in this country.

There remains a superficial modernity in Ireland – old preoccupations prevail. Irish playwrights tenaciously usurp an imagined, subjective and actual sense of the past through which to articulate and filter the present. Pre-Christian systems of belief, the landscapes of ghosts and the dead, of myth and historical reference are repeatedly evoked

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6 *Aisling* poetry flourished during the Penal Codes, where the female object of desire – *Aisling* (which means ‘Vision’) was a coded metonymic strategy for expressing love of nation.

in the dramatic texts of Gregory, Synge, Yeats, O’Casey, Beckett, Frank McGuinness, Tom Murphy, Tom Kilroy, Brian Friel and Marina Carr. Carr’s dramas operate within a kind of heightened realism, working on mythic, densely metaphoric levels, where lyrical narratives of memory and flashback disrupt temporal and ‘historical’ linearity.

Characteristic of Carr’s work is the representation of individual, familial and religious authority and stability in crisis. Graham identifies that Ireland is presently experiencing ‘[…] gaps in the nation state as it finds itself pulled towards the future, as it settles its nationality into the international.' Throughout the course of this thesis I will identify the ways in which Carr’s plays are products of this precarious cultural moment, articulating and representing ‘the deterioration of certainty.'

**Female Authorship in Modern Irish Theatre:**

Carr is the first female playwright since Lady Gregory to have a major presence and voice in Irish theatre, and yet Lady Gregory has frequently been regarded as being merely a literary appendage to W.B.Yeats’s genius. In *Hegemony and Fantasy: Irish Drama 1899-1949*, Paul Murphy notes: ‘While Yeats’s appreciation of Lady Gregory, manifested in both his poetry and prose, have the effect of eulogizing her, they also have the concomitant effect of mummifying both her plays and her place in history.’ Lady Gregory, who has written some forty-two plays (not including her co-authored works with Yeats), is known primarily for being a formidable theatre manager and nurturer of male playwrights such as Yeats, Synge and O’Casey, and is only now gaining the recognition and acknowledged authorship that her dramatic works deserve. Gregory has been elided from the canon for what were thought to be her second rate peasant dramas and yet the strength, dramatic mastery and assured spareness of plays such as *The Gaol Gate* (1906), *Grania* (1908-9), and one of the most important plays in the Irish canon for its effects on political and cultural nationalism alike, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), reveal a dramatist who has been unfairly excluded from both the theatrical canon and the critical discourse

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8 *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, p. 10.
surrounding that canon. Murphy notes: ‘In spite of the evidence of her skill as a dramatist, Lady Gregory’s plays are hardly ever performed at the Abbey or any other theatre in Dublin or the rest of Ireland. While a great deal of scholarship has been produced about the plays of Yeats and Synge, only a fraction of that amount has been produced about Lady Gregory’s plays.’ Additionally, Murphy rightly argues: ‘The scholarship which focuses primarily on Lady Gregory’s dramatic work tends to be similarly biographical and commemorative, and tends to avoid rigorous examination of the cultural politics of the plays and their relationship to the social context in which they were written.’

Of the collaborations between Yeats and Gregory in the writing of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Colm Tóibín writes: ‘While staying at Coole in the summer of 1901, W.B. Yeats had a dream which became the play Cathleen Ni Houlihan. He dreamed of a scene of domestic harmony being disrupted by a force that could not be resisted. […] Yeats could not write ordinary dialogue. Language for him was full of symbolic resonance; he wanted his words to be charged and electric rather than domestic or realistic. Thus in the days that followed, Lady Gregory wrote his play for him.’ The recuperation of Lady Gregory’s dramatic legacy into the mainframe of critical discourse on Irish drama is beginning to take place with a forthcoming special edition of The Irish University Review which will be dedicated entirely to Gregory’s work. This significant publication, which has recently dedicated editions to playwrights such as Brian Friel and Tom Kilroy, will critically re-position Gregory, both in Ireland and abroad, as a major Irish literary figure in her own right.

There have been a significant number of women writing for the theatre in Ireland throughout the twentieth-century, who were prominent in their time, such as Maud

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11 Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama 1899-1949.
12 Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama 1899-1949.
14 This edition of The Irish University Review will be published in June 2004 to coincide with the centenary of the opening of the Abbey Theatre, which up until now would primarily have been singularly associated with W.B. Yeats. The Irish University Review also published a special issue dedicated to the career of Teresa Deeevy in the 1990's.
Gonne, Christine Packenham, Constance Markievicz, Alice Milligan, Suzanne Day, Geraldine Cummins, Maura Laverty, Teresa Deevy, Máiréad ni Ghráda and Margaretta D’Arcy. Contemporary Irish women writers, such as Edna O’Brien, Jennifer Johnston, and playwrights such as Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Anne Hartigan, Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, Emma Donoghue, Trudy Hayes, Patricia Burke Brogan, Tara Maria Lovett, Paula Meehan, Liz Kuti and Morna Regan have also been produced with some visibility and recognition in recent years. Yet it is important to note that they have, for the most part, remained a considerably critically unmediated minority.

McMullan argues: ‘A study of women’s contribution to Irish theatre therefore involves not only an acknowledgement of the work of individual women in the corpus of Irish drama, but a recognition of the power of patriarchal values in Irish society.’^15 Thus, while a few of the above playwrights have been produced at the National and Gate theatres in Dublin, namely Laverty, O’Brien, Ni Ghráda, and Deevey, (with O’Brien and Ni Ghráda being staged at the Peacock rather than main-stage of the Abbey), they are not considered to be part of the Irish dramatic canon. Not one of the above female playwrights has consistently been produced on the main stages in Ireland in the way that Carr has, arguably more so than even Gregory, thus making Carr the most significant Irish woman playwright that this country has yet seen. In “Women on the Threshold”, Anthony Roche writes:

There have been two productions of Teresa Deevy’s *Katie Roche* since the opening of the new Abbey in 1966. [...] The first, directed by Joe Dowling and with Jeananne Crowley in the title role, was produced on the main Abbey stage in 1975. The second, with Judy Friel directing Dearbhle Crotty, was produced at the Peacock in 1994. When the earlier production appeared, it did so as an isolated incident, since there was virtually no concurrent production of plays by Irish

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women playwrights at the time. Context had not changed utterly by 1994 when Irish women playwrights were (and still are) the exception.16

As an actor working on the premiere production of Carr’s *Low In The Dark* at the Project Theatre in 1989, Sarahjane Scaife recalls: ‘I don’t think I was conscious of it at the time, but retrospectively, the facts of Marina’s sex and youth removed her from the traditional male hierarchy that had been predominant in theatre in Ireland. There were few prominent female playwrights in Ireland at the time. Theatre was run by men for the most part. Plays were directed by men and written by men.’17

While this has been the case in the Republic of Ireland, contemporary Northern Irish theatre has produced a number of high-profile contemporary women playwrights, most notably, Christina Reid, Anne Devlin and Marie Jones. The exclusion of women from independent political self-expression and activism and the overpowering confinement of female subjectivity to the domestic space during the Troubles in Northern Ireland have perhaps been compelling factors in Northern Irish women’s reclamation of the relatively liminal space of theatre in the community, as a means of achieving political representation and agency.18 Anne Devlin feels that ‘all writing is an act of repossession’ which, when regarded within the social and political framework of Northern Ireland, resonates in terms of the visibility and dominance of masculine activity and identity, and the exclusion of the female equivalent.19

Due to the intensely concentrated political struggles in the North of Ireland over the last thirty years, writing has perhaps become a more vital and necessary vessel of female self-

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18 The themes of female objectivity and lack of agency at the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland are a central concern of Anne Devlin’s 1985 drama *Ourselves Alone*.
expression and resistance than in say, less unstable societies. On writing for the theatre, Devlin asserts:

It is a completely different experience for women. I mean, it is marginal for a start. And also, women are still expected to carry the domestic story, and men are expected to carry the epic story, and I do not believe in that. I think there is a way of rewriting this epic, which in my view belongs more to women: they are the creators of life and I think that is very significant.20

A number of theatre companies were founded, north and south of the border, as a corrective measure, to redress the lack of female agency in Irish theatre practice. The now disbanded Belfast based theatre company, Charabanc, was founded in 1983 by actors Marie Jones, Eleanor Methven, Carol Moore, Brenda Winter and Maureen McCauley in response to the lack of women’s roles in Irish theatre. Charabanc is remembered for the energy and creativity of productions such as Lay Up Your Ends in 1983, which centres around the 1911 Linen Mill Strike, and for its commitment to voicing the experiences of women within the diverse communities of Northern Ireland. In terms of the lack of women writing for the theatre, Marie Jones notes: ‘Traditionally, I think women are very private and a play is very public. A novel is a one-to-one experience but if you have an audience looking at your work you are really exposing yourself.’21 Anne Devlin and Christina Reid both left Northern Ireland to make careers writing in England, and the fraught relationship between exile and homeland forms the basis of Devlin’s 1994 drama After Easter. Devlin says: ‘The theatre in the North hasn’t always been particularly respectful towards it writers or a least encouraging, [...] I think women dramatists have particularly suffered in the North.’22

Why is Carr systematically, and increasingly, included in both the critical discourse, and main-stage productivity at the major Irish theatrical venues in the Republic of Ireland,

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20 Anne Devlin, in Theatre Talk, p. 120.
22 Anne Devlin, in Theatre Talk, p. 117.
which consist almost exclusively of male playwrights? Garry Hynes, who directed the world-premieres of Portia Coughlan at the Peacock Theatre (1996), and On Raftery’s Hill for Druid Theatre Company at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway (2000), comments: ‘Marina is one of those people who confidently walks down the road where other people are saying “Don’t even think of going there.” And Marina says “Of course. Let’s go. Of course I’m going there.”’ Devlin comments on the differences between herself and Carr: ‘The reason why Carr is so important is because she is a child of the Republic, if we can put it like that. She is home-grown here and she hasn’t had all this other stuff. Hers is a society that has got on with it. Imaginatively it takes a lot of pressure off her and it is really wonderful to see what she is up to.’

Certainly Carr’s theatre does not comment explicitly on the state of Irish politics, yet it is anything but anachronistic, openly representing the fallacies of the oppressive ideologies upon which modern Irish culture was founded.

In the Program Note for the only production of Carr’s second play, Ullaloo, at the Peacock Theatre in 1991, Tom Mac Intyre intuitively prophesies:

Marina Carr is at the beginning of her career as a playwright […] It makes perfect sense that – with the female energy at last being given room to move in this society – a young female playwright should unhesitatingly set about banishing the taboo successfully imposed by male playwrights (with the connivance of critics, and it must be said, audiences) over a period of up on a hundred years. Cometh the hour, cometh the writer. And – consider – Ms. Carr is, as yet, merely limbering up.

The reasons for Carr’s notable acceptance into mainstream Irish theatrical production may be revealed through an inspection of both the form and content of her work. On the one hand her work moves in radical experimental directions of expression and representation

23 Garry Hynes in Conversation with Cathy Leeney, in Theatre Talk, p. 205.
24 Anne Devlin, in Theatre Talk, p. 122.
while on the other it subtly, and at times explicitly, refers to the theatrical legacies of canonised writers such as J. M. Synge, W.B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett. Carr has forged a poetic dialect for the theatre that is synonymous with her *mise en scenes*, in which resonances of the absurd, the darkly grotesque and the violent, savage, imagery that effervesces in Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) may be found. Carr draws consciously on the well of folklore and myth that similarly engaged Yeats and Lady Gregory, with references to swans, lakes, witches, ghosts and Celtic rituals, in which an implicit awareness of realms of ‘otherness’ is recognisably in keeping with Irish cultural and literary traditions. In the preface to Lady Gregory’s translation of The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster, *Cuchulainn of Muirthemne* (1902), Yeats wrote: ‘I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say that it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland’s gift to the imagination of the world […] It is some hundreds of years old, and age gives language authority.’ Carr is consciously aware of the authority of language, myth and folklore. When asked about the significance of the black swan in *By the Bog of Cats...*, Carr commented: ‘The swan is huge in Irish mythology, from the *Children of Lir*, through to Yeats. I am drawing on that motif in the Irish canon.’

The Irish theatrical tradition is predominantly a literary one: there is a continual emphasis on storytelling and language, as a means not simply to communicate, but to investigate the intricate, mutually dependent processes of memory and identity, revealing the central role language plays in Ireland’s historical and cultural identities. A love of language and storytelling is central to Carr’s aesthetic: ‘It’s a very Irish thing. […] How we tell a story is so important. It’s not the facts you’re looking for, it’s the details, the embellishments.’ The craft of writing plays is a creative journey which Carr notes as

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being: ‘More about things you can’t understand than things you can.’²⁹ Carr comments that the challenge in writing for the theatre remains in finding the ability ‘to express all those fine, delicate things.’³⁰ For Carr: ‘[Theatre] is about the spoken word and conflict. It is about people bouncing off of one another. It is about eliciting the beautiful sentence out of the situation.’³¹

Carr’s plays are grounded in the aesthetic sensibilities of the preceding Irish dramatists. Carr’s early works, Low In The Dark (1989), The Deer’s Surrender (1990) and This Love Thing (1990), are hugely indebted to the absurdist techniques of Samuel Beckett, while her mature plays are a more subtle, and perhaps assured, reference to Beckett’s oeuvre. The resonances of the bleak, spare landscape of By the Bog of Cats...weave a stylistic thread from Yeats’ Purgatory (1939) through to Waiting for Godot (1954). Each one of Carr’s plays possesses absurdist qualities which emerge organically from countless non-contextualised anecdotes, and ebullient, visceral imagery, linking again with Synge’s narratives, through to Beckettian absurdism.³²

McMullan identifies a crucial aspect of Irish theatrical production: ‘While women are involved in a range of theatre practices in Ireland, women remain underrepresented in the profession of Playwrighting.’³³ The fact that there hasn’t been a substantial presence of female playwrights in Ireland has been the topic of much debate and speculation over recent years. An important move to redress the situation came in the form of the now disbanded independent Glasshouse Productions Theatre Company. Founders Caroline Williams, Katy Hayes, Sian Quill and Clare Dowling explain: ‘Glasshouse was a project founded in 1990 to present and promote the work of women in theatre. [It was a] Dublin-based theatre company which produced ten shows between 1990 and 1996 […] and

²⁹ Rage and Reason, p. 148.
³⁰ Marina Carr in Conversation with Melissa Sihra, in Theatre Talk, p. 61.
³¹ Marina Carr, in Theatre Talk, p. 61.
³² There are references to duck eggs, bitten-off noses, gouged-out eyes and so on, that echo the violent and grotesque imagery in the plays of J.M. Synge, and which are absurd in that they are usually presented without any ‘rational’ or logical frame of reference, tracing a recognisable link with Synge and Beckett.
hosted discussions and debates on the role of women in contemporary Irish theatre. In 2001, Williams noted: ‘Almost ten years ago, we asked why more women were not writing for the stage. Today that question is perceived as passé and embarrassing [...] But the facts are that women are still not writing for the Irish stage in any equitable number.’ In a recent essay the founding members collectively note:

This [was] an aesthetic environment, which provided a natural home for feminism. Irish theatre was firmly rooted in realism, and Irish theatre produced ‘intimate plays of Irish life’ [...] The lack of women playwrights meant that women’s stories didn’t get told. Female actors weren’t being given an opportunity to shine in meaty roles. And the scarcity of women producers and directors meant the decision-making process was overwhelmingly male dominated.

Significantly, Glasshouse devised two events and archive projects entitled *There Are No Irish Women Playwrights!* 1 and 2, which were developed to identify new writers and celebrate old. The first event, held at the Project Arts Centre in 1993, offered extracts from new writers such as Marina Carr, Deirdre Hines, Geraldine Aron and Anne Devlin. The second event was a selection of work from 1920 to 1970, ‘from Kate O’Brien to Edna O’Brien.’ The Company was successful in creating a forum for new Irish plays by women and, importantly, for creating a forum for the discussion of those plays. However, after six years of ill-paid playwrighting and production, the founders were compelled to find work elsewhere, and are now successful novelists, journalists and script-writers for television.

Throughout the nineteen-nineties the Abbey Theatre operated a form of ‘positive discrimination’ whereby female authors who submitted unsolicited scripts were automatically invited to discuss a potential reading of the piece. Perhaps, as McMullan

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34 Williams, Caroline, Hayes, Katy, Quill, Sian, & Dowling, Clare, “People in Glasshouse: An Anecdotal History of and Independent Theatre Company”, in *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens*, pp. 132, 134.

35 Dowling, Clare, in *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens*, p. 142.

36 Williams, Hayes, Quill & Dowling, in *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens*, p. 135.

37 Williams, Hayes, Quill & Dowling, in *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens*, p. 141.
implies, the lack of prominent female playwrights in Ireland comes from their tendency to be involved in:

[a] a variety of modes of theatrical authorship, where members of the company and community may have an input into the text through improvisation sessions or collaborative creation. Since the origins of the modern Irish theatre movement, women have been involved in collaborative theatre making. Such working practices in theatre or culture tend not to be recognised according to the traditional criteria of authorship.38

In The Location of Culture, Homi Bhabha asserts: ‘The question of the representation of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority.’39 The notion of ‘authorship’ is fundamentally linked to ‘authority’ in terms of representation, and this must in some way account for ‘the dominance of the male literary writer in Irish culture [being] linked to the Modernist emphasis on the role of the individual artist [...].40 In a recent interview, I asked performer Olwen Fouéré why more women in Ireland are not writing and directing for the theatre. Fouéré’s response again led to the association of women in theatre with artistic collaboration:

Is there something [...] in that whole gender thing which is about the woman being able to keep things fluid, and that things don’t have to become fixed? [...] I am very interested in directing, but that aspect of it does scare me, and it’s possibly significant that with my own work, I always have to have a third person, like a co-director or co-writer, because I don’t trust my own ability to bring it in.”

41 Olwen Fouéré in Conversation with Melissa Sihra, in Theatre Talk, pp. 164-5.
A changing climate with regard to the practice and reception of female authored work is now beginning to occur in this country, as there is an increasing awareness of the ways in which issues of gender intersect with issues of production, politics and representation. The detailed analysis of this dissertation on the plays of Marina Carr will contribute to that changing climate through both the critical consideration of her work, within Irish cultural and theatrical frameworks, and also through an engagement with the politics of representation and authority in broader critical and social contexts. In the introduction to the first ever collection of a selection of plays by Irish women (after Carr's collected plays in 1999), editor Cathy Leeney comments: 'Canons are formed, and we are poorer for them. We have to move on from an idea of Ireland that is requiredly nationalist and masculine.' In accordance with this notion McMullan writes:

[...] the parameters of Irish dramatic authorship are currently being renegotiated.

Traditional issues of identity, politics, authority, dispossession, language and history are being redefined through the re-evaluation of the work of earlier women playwrights including Lady Gregory and Teresa Deevy, and in the work of the current generation of women playwrights.

The politics of gender representation, sexuality and the body are finally emerging with force and consistency in the critical discourse on Irish theatre past and present, counteracting the hegemonic preoccupation with nationalist, colonial and post-colonial masculinist politics. In her essay on selected plays by contemporary Irish women playwrights, McMullan articulates that the women presented in these plays '[...] contrast with the highly feminised images which emerged during the nineteenth century, as women became symbols of a national loss of authority under the imperial rule of England.' Throughout the course of this dissertation I will illustrate the ways in which Carr writes with a keen awareness of the traditions of Irish theatre and history, yet places

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42 Leeney, Cathy, (ed.), *Seen and Heard: Six New Plays by Irish Women*, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001), p. vii. The playwrights included in this collection are: Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Siofra Campbell, Emma Donoghue, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Michelle Reid and Dolores Walshe.
43 McMullan, in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, p. 34.
woman centre-stage, incorporating over one-hundred years of Irish women’s social history and experience.

The ways in which Carr perceives her own position in Irish theatre is also worth discussion. As the most prominent and high profile female playwright in contemporary Irish theatre, Carr does not wish to be singled out on the basis of her biological sex. In a recent discussion she stated: ‘Why is it that you never hear of ‘male playwrights’, only ‘playwrights’, and you constantly hear about ‘female playwrights’ or the lack of them?’

In an interview with Mike Murphy, Carr reveals her position on feminism in relation to (female) authorship:

Mike Murphy: I do not see a feminist line in your writing, despite the fact that your female characters are so strong.

Marina Carr: I think that people are confused by the whole feminist thing. If something isn’t polemical, they tend to thing that it isn’t feminist. Feminism has become a dirty word and people are afraid of it. Women writers are afraid of their work being tagged as ‘feminist’. I don’t set out with a consciously feminist agenda, but I do happen to believe that we’re as equal as the rest, given the world, and how unequal and different everybody is. […] It is very easy to marginalise [women writers] and say that we fulfil a certain quota within the operation of things. Most of the women I write about would be natural feminists, but they would never have read a book on feminism. They would feel their worth, and know their rights, and naturally have a sense of themselves.

The tension that Carr’s experiences as a ‘female playwright’ is articulated by Jill Dolan in The Feminist Spectator as Critic:

Many working women playwrights vehemently resist the feminist appellation, because to survive economically, their plays must be produced widely in

commercial venues. The analogy between feminism and politics is seen as threatening to the universality of their work. Liberal feminist playwrights and critics accept the notion that theatre communicates universally and prefer not to be particularised as women. Their desire to become part of the system that has historically excluded them forces some liberal feminists in theatre to acquiesce to their erasure as women.  

Marina Carr: Background and Plays:

In a recent *Irish Times* feature, Marina Carr is described as ‘the youngest, most accomplished and many would argue the only Irish woman playwright who has made her mark.’ Born in Dublin in 1964, Carr was raised at Pallas Lake near Tullamore, County Offaly, in the Irish Midlands. Of her formative years, Carr comments on the bucolic landscape and remote community that would emerge so assuredly in her mature work in the early nineteen-nineties:

I grew up in the Midlands seven miles outside Tullamore in a place called Gortnamona, which means ‘Field of the Bog’. We lived in the school residence there. My mother was the principal schoolteacher of the local national school. After about ten years we moved to Pallas Lake. My first seven or eight summers were spent running around the fields, eating grass, chasing tractors, picking mushrooms, blackberries, all that stuff. It was quite idyllic for a child. [...] When I was growing up it was quite remote. There was little traffic and there were very few outsiders in the area. It was a close knit community and we knew everyone.

The second eldest of six children, Carr’s mother died when she was seventeen years old, and the loss remains huge: ‘She was a tremendous influence. She was from the West of Ireland and wrote poetry in Irish – none of which was ever published. She played the

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46 Marina Carr in *Reading the Future*, pp. 51-2.
49 *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, p. 45.
violin and the piano at night. [...] We’d be in bed and we’d hear her.⁵⁰ Carr’s sister is artist and poet Deirdre Carr and her father is Donegal playwright and novelist Hugh Carr. As children, Carr remembers: ‘We were taken to see his plays in Dublin. He had one at the Abbey, he had two or three at the Peacock, and he had one at the Gate. Then he had a couple of plays on at the Dublin Theatre Festival. He wrote radio plays for RTÉ and he writes novels and plays now.’⁵¹ One of the most visible themes in Carr’s work is the influence and determinacy of genealogy, displayed in the ways in which characters repeat the actions of their parents. In a recent interview Carr says: ‘I believe so much in the ways in which my parents and grandparents have shaped me. I can almost imagine what my great-grandparents were like because of my grandparents. [...] If you start hunting back, you will find that it is there in the gene-pool, in the blue-print, the hard-wiring.’⁵²

Carr graduated from University College, Dublin, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Philosophy in 1987 and then lived in New York for one year, teaching and writing. On her return to Dublin, Carr enrolled at University College, Dublin, to do a Master of Arts degree on Samuel Beckett – ‘a thesis which has been left aside.’⁵³ In Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness, Anthony Roche writes: ‘Instead, Carr went on to write plays and in so doing managed a more creative play with Beckettian drama that academic procedures would have allowed.’⁵⁴ Carr now lives in Dublin and is married, with two children.

In the introduction to her first collection of plays, which was published by Faber and Faber in 1999, Carr writes:

When I was a scut we built a theatre in our shed; we lay boards across the stacked turf, hung an old blue sheet for a curtain and tied a bicycle lamp to a rafter at the

⁵⁰ Reading The Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy, p. 46.
⁵¹ Reading The Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy, p. 45.
⁵² Marina Carr, Theatre Talk, pp. 59-60.
side of the shed so its light would fall at an angle on the stage. [...] Our dramas were bloody and brutal. Everyone suffered: the least you could hope to get away with was a torturing. And still we all lived happily ever after. [...] We loved the havoc, the badness, the blood spillage and harmony. Ignorantly we had hit upon the first and last principles of dramatic art.\footnote{Carr, Marina, \textit{Plays: One}, (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), pp. ix-x}

Carr remembers when she first started writing: ‘We used to write little plays and put them on. [...] two of my brothers wrote the plays first. Then I wanted to get in on the writing and my brother brought me into a room and said, ‘Sit down there now and write the play.’\footnote{Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy, p. 46.}

Carr has written ten plays to date.\footnote{See Appendix for selected production history.} Her first play, \textit{Ullaloo}, (which was not the first to be produced), had a rehearsed reading with Derek Chapman, Olwen Fouéré and Tom Hickey at the Peacock Theatre, during the 1989 Dublin Theatre Festival. The play subsequently received a full production at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, in 1991 with Olwen Fouéré and Mark Lambert. In a recent interview, Fouéré says: ‘With \textit{Ullaloo} Marina was still experimenting very much with form, and a lot of her influences were more to the fore than her own voice at that point. There was still something extraordinary going on, but there was a layer that needed peeling back.'\footnote{Olwen Fouéré in Conversation with Melissa Sihra, in \textit{Theatre Talk} p. 161.}

\textit{Low In The Dark} is Marina Carr’s second play, and the first to be produced. It was performed by ‘Crooked Sixpence’ Theatre Company in the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, on 24\textsuperscript{th} October 1989, and was directed by Philip Hardy. The play was first published in a collection of new Irish plays, called \textit{The Crack In The Emerald}, in 1990. In the introduction to this volume David Grant comments on ‘the common tendency to exclude women [...] from theatre in Ireland today.’\footnote{The \textit{Crack In The Emerald}, p. vii.} Grant notes that contemporary Irish writers are ‘working mainly in a non-naturalistic style [...] where there has been a recent surge of
experiment [and that *Low In The Dark*] is exemplary of a renewed spirit of formal innovation in Irish theatre [where] the overall effect is of total originality and spontaneity. The subsequent publication of *Low In The Dark* was by Faber and Faber in the 1999 volume *Marina Carr Plays: One*. Carr’s third play, *The Deer’s Surrender*, was performed in Andrew’s Lane Theatre Dublin, in June 1990. *This Love Thing*, Carr’s fourth play, and was staged by Pig’s Back Theatre Company/Tinderbox Theatre Company at the Project Arts Centre in 1991.

*The Mai* is Carr’s fifth play, and was first staged at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, on the 5th October 1994 where it won the award for Best New Irish Play, marking a turning point for Carr in terms of national and international recognition. The production was directed by Brian Brady, with Dearbhle Crotty playing the role of Millie and Olwen Fouéré playing the Mai. In an interview in 1996, Carr says of *The Mai*: ‘It’s not the story, it is how you tell it, the details and images which resonate and define character and plot. I wanted four generations of women. I wanted to see how history repeats itself down the line and how you are shaped out of what has come before you, how you think that you are acting out of character but how it’s determined by your mother and father and their mother and father.’ The *The Mai* was first published by Gallery Press on 31 May, 1995. A revised edition of *The Mai* was published by Faber and Faber in *Marina Carr Plays: One*, in 1999.

Carr’s next play, *Portia Coughlan*, was commissioned by the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin, as part of its centenary celebrations. The commission was entirely paid for by eighty-nine professional, high-profile women who each donated fifty pounds. *Portia Coughlan* was first produced in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, on the 27th March, 1996, where it was directed by Garry Hynes, with Dearbhle Crotty in the eponymous role. After its highly successful run at the Peacock Theatre, *Portia Coughlan* transferred to the main-stage of the Royal Court in London in May 1996. In 1997 Carr was awarded the prestigious Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for *Portia Coughlan*. The play was first

60 *The Crack In The Emerald*, pp. viii-ix.
published by Faber and Faber in 1996 in a collection of new Irish plays called *The Dazzling Dark*, and also in a single edition by Faber and Faber in conjunction with the Royal Court Theatre in 1996. On October 7, 1998, Gallery Press published a revised edition of *Portia Coughlan* and that same edition was included in the 1999 Faber and Faber collection *Marina Carr Plays: One*.

*By the Bog of Cats*... was first produced on the main stage of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1998 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. The production was directed by the Artistic Director of the Abbey, Patrick Mason. The lead role of Hester Swane was written for Olwen Fouéré, for which she won the award for Best Actor, with Tom Hickey as Xavier Cassidy. *By the Bog of Cats*... received its United States premiere in Chicago by Irish Repertory of Chicago, on 31 May, 2001 and was directed by Kay Martinovich. The American production met with rave reviews and was listed in the top twenty best productions of the year by the *Chicago Tribune*. *By the Bog of Cats*... was produced independently again that same year on 6 September, 2001, by the San José Repertory Theatre Company, California. The sell-out production, which had an overall attendance of eighteen thousand people, was directed by Timothy Near with Academy Award winning actress Holly Hunter in the lead role of Hester Swane. *By the Bog of Cats*... was first published by Gallery Press on October 7, 1998, and the same edition was included in the 1999 Faber and Faber volume *Marina Carr Plays: One*.

*On Raftery’s Hill* was commissioned by the Galway-based Druid Theatre Company and was first performed as a Druid/ Royal Court co-production at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway, on the 9th May 2000. It was directed by Garry Hynes and subsequently transferred to the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 4 July 2000. My forthcoming monograph will critique Carr’s early plays, her later plays, her first children’s play, *Meat and Salt*, which is based in part on *King Lear*, and ‘on two stories ‘Cap O’Rushes’ and ‘As Meat Loves Salt’ – a Yiddish story about a Rabbi and his three daughters’, which premiered at the Peacock Theatre in January 2003, and her forthcoming

play on the life of Anton Chekhov, which will premiere at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, in Spring 2004. ⁶²

In addition to her awards for playwrighting Carr was a Hennessy Short Story winner for Grow Mermaid in 1994, which is published by Nick Hern Books. From the period of 1995 – 1996 Carr was Writer-in-Residence at the Abbey Theatre, and in 1996 Carr was also invited to become a life-time member of the prestigious Aosdána. From 1998 – 1999 Carr was Writer-in-Residence at Trinity College, Dublin, and in 1999 she was Writer-in-Residence at Dublin City University. In 1999 Faber and Faber published Carr’s first collection of plays; Marina Carr Plays: One. In March 2001 Carr was awarded the E. M. Forster Award for Literary Achievement from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and in January-May 2003 Carr held the position of Heimbold Chair of Irish Studies at the University of Villanova, Philadelphia.

Thesis: Framework, Critical Approaches:
I began researching and writing this thesis in October 1998, at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, the same month that Marina Carr began her one-year appointment as Writer-In-Residence at Trinity College. In that same month Carr’s new play By the Bog of Cats... received its premiere production on the main-stage of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. The structure of this thesis is based upon Carr’s first (and to date, only) collection of plays – Marina Carr: Plays One, which was published by Faber & Faber in 1999, incorporating the plays from 1989 to October 1998, the month that I started this dissertation.

Carr’s first play, Ullaloo, her third play, The Deer’s Surrender, and This Love Thing remain unpublished. Carr does not stand over these plays and will not grant permission for their production. Due to these factors, and to the scope of this dissertation, I decided early on to omit a critique of them and to focus exclusively on Carr’s mature plays, which continue to be produced, published, performed and translated both nationally and

⁶² Letter from Andrea Ainsworth, Director and Adaptor, Meat and Salt, by Marina Carr, Peacock Theatre,
internationally. The published works that I will not be focusing on in this dissertation are *On Raftery's Hill*, which was first produced in 2000 and *Ariel*, which received its premiere at the Abbey Theatre (main stage) within a month of the submission of this thesis.

While the chronological structure of Carr's first published collection of plays seemed to be a compelling structure for this thesis, the content of the four plays in the collection provided a conceptual chronology that provoked my political and aesthetic response to the works. In 2000 I wrote the first published essay on *By the Bog of Cats...*, in which I quote from an unpublished interview with Carr: 'Repeatedly compelled to the dramatic possibility of the outsider, Carr's depiction of Hester, the Mai and Portia, as women who, Carr notes, "will not bow down [and] will not accept things the way they are", completes what can be regarded as a trilogy.'63 My research throughout 1998 and 1999 led me to believe that these three major works needed to be regarded organically as an on-going and interrelated exploration of the complex changing position and role of woman in Ireland at the end of the twentieth century, in which Carr comments upon a century of women's experience through the embodied histories of her characters. Thus, I increasingly viewed the plays from 1994 – 1998 as an inextricably linked tri-partite excavation of female identity within Irish culture.

Since my essay on *By the Bog of Cats...*, the plays have been considered as a trilogy, both in terms of form and content. In each one of the three plays, the female protagonist commits suicide. Thus the deaths allow for a critical reading of the form as well as the political imperatives of the dramas. In *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, the deaths of the protagonists become apparent in medias res, while in *By the Bog of Cats...*, Hester kills herself at the very end of the play. Whether or not Carr's plays can be considered to be subversive, due to the seeming perpetuation of patriarchal hegemony at the end of the plays, in the death or silencing of the protagonists, is certainly a point to address. In


“Rising Out of the Miasmal Mists: Marina Carr’s Ireland”, Claudia Harris comments: ‘[Carr’s] women characters, given Carr’s gender and youth, are surprisingly limited, damaged women, unable to transcend their circumstances. No feminist in any traditional sense, Carr writes women more problematic that her men; these women are not conquering the world or even surviving for that matter. The central female figures in Carr’s trilogy all commit suicide [...].’

Throughout the course of this thesis, I argue that the plays are subversive due to what I identify as Carr’s radical demythologisation of the traditionally revered role of motherhood in this country, allowing for a contestation of essentialist notions of the so-called ‘maternal instinct’, and the patriarchal assumption that the notions of ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ are innately linked.

On the limited and confining social reality of women in Ireland, McMullan writes:

Irish women come under pressure from both Catholic and Protestant ideologies to retain the domestic role as their primary function. The Reverend Ian Paisley has insisted that the divinely ordained role of a true Protestant woman is to provide service and succour to her husband, while in Catholic iconography, women are offered as role models both the Virgin Mary, infinitely forgiving and supportive, and Mother Ireland, a grieving mother whose land has been plundered and her sons taken. Whether Catholic or Loyalist, the role of the woman is to serve and to suffer. While her image is sublimated, her voice is suppressed.

On all counts, Carr’s plays reveal a crisis, and re-presentation, of patriarchal authority through the explicit vocalisation of discontent and dissent in the central female characters, and the ways in which, according to McMullan, ‘their critique of the lack of accommodation of difference in small town or rural Ireland is powerfully articulated.’

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64 Harris, Claudia, W., “Rising out of the Miasmal Mists: Marina Carr’s Ireland”, in McMullan, Anna, & Leeney, Cathy, (eds.), The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”, (Forthcoming, Dublin: Carysfort Press, June 2003).
65 McMullan, in British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958, p. 111.
Crucially, female subjectivity is afforded the possibility of agency, transcendence and authority in each of the plays in the ways in which the female protagonists (including Curtains in *Low In the Dark*) are empowered through their tenacious command of storytelling, myth and narrative, and the ways in which they move between, or negotiate, the realms of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and the fantastic and the ‘real’.

The central female figures in the plays from 1994 – 1998 have access to sites and spaces of imaginative and non-rational ‘otherness’, be it through myth, folktale or communing with the dead, which offers them a means by which to contest the ontological immobility of their patriarchal relegation in the non-fulfilling roles of wife, daughter and mother. Interestingly, Harris makes the claim that: ‘In the end, both genders are inescapably caught in endless violence, in fated, circumscribed lives, scratching claw marks on the lid.’ Thus, it is not simply Carr’s women who endure subjective confinement, with the men their triumphant aggressors – both genders are shown to have suffered at the restrictive and oppressive hands of the dominant ideologies in this country.

While notably different in style and form from the later plays, *Low In The Dark* is hugely significant to the emergence of the trilogy in that it introduces each of the themes which Carr then goes on to locate and explore within a specifically Irish cultural context. Imperative to any understanding of Carr’s mature plays is an engagement with the thematic preoccupations of *Low In The Dark*, which explicitly de-romanticise the Republican ideological ‘sanctity’ of motherhood, radically displays the absence of paternal investment in the family unit and highlights the exclusionary and misogynist politics of the Catholic Church and its relationship to the female body and subjectivity. Sarahjane Scaife comments:

In *Low In The Dark* many issues are dealt with in a general way that become more personalised in [Carr’s] later work. However, the basic inevitability of human culpability or the human condition remains constant. In *Low In The Dark* we don’t

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67 Harris, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr*: “...before rules was made”.

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feel so tragically about the fate or history of the individual characters because they look and act in an ‘absurd’ way, and display an almost Beckettian appreciation of the humour which is absolutely integral to our human condition.  

Carr’s first play, *Ullaloo*, was also experimental in style, depicting male and female landscapes of love, sex and emotional dependency. In this play, Mac Intyre notes, ‘[Carr] applies herself to her persistent theme – A man, a woman: a woman, a man.’ In *Ullaloo* there are two characters, Tilly and Tomred. Tilly, the woman is, for the most part, immobilised in bed, while Tomred, at the other side of the room, is intent on cajoling his toe-nails to grow longer. While the situation is absurd, the vital ingredients of Carr’s later works are present. Throughout the play the couple repeatedly attempt to define the nature of their relationship, and to ascertain some sense of meaning in their ongoing lives. The private, interior space of the domestic sphere is explored, as both characters speak to each other without being able to connect. The play is a study in co-dependency, intimacy and isolation, where the split stage-space of the man and the woman becomes increasingly claustrophobic. Loneliness, alienation, the fear of death and the need for solace are at the heart of the piece. Tomred says to Tilly in Act One: ‘You’re always undermining what I do.’ Tilly replies: ‘You never do anything to undermine.’ The pair contemplate the passing of their days together, and the approach of death:

**Tomred:** How long are we going to do nothing for?

**Tilly:** You’re only here for a little while, you’ll be dead forever.

The play portrays, at times, a suffocating immobility, where the present is arrested and it seems that the future will never appear. In Act One, Tomred asks the essential questions: ‘Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? Will it ever end, and if so, When?’ His stunted toenails become a desperate cry for action and development: ‘Grow, grow!’, he pleads.

*Scaife, S, “Mutual Beginnings: Marina Carr’s Low In The Dark”, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.

69 Mac Intyre, Tom, Program Note for *Ullaloo*, March 1991.
Mac Intyre notes: ‘What makes this playwright’s work especially exciting is the manner in which she blends boldness [...] with an adventurous approach to form. [...] A large part of the fun in her two recent plays – Low In The Dark and This Love Thing had to do with her healthy willingness to discard traditional forms.’ With the transition from the explicitly absurdist style of Ullaloo and Low In The Dark, and the earlier unpublished plays, Carr moves to the particular, evoking a site which she names as the Midlands of Ireland. Low In the Dark incorporates landscapes of female corporeality which are non-culturally specific, but recognisable nonetheless. The language and action is part of everyday experience in Ireland, but universality allows for the mise en scène to be at one remove. Scaife goes on to identify: [A]ll the other [...] characters had their beginnings in this ‘absurd’ play and are developed further in the later ones. Marina’s sense of fun and the ridiculous have been retained despite the seriousness of the later subject matter.

What I saw as distinct thematic and formal through-lines in the plays from 1989 – 1998, I did not see occurring in On Raftery’s Hill in 2000. As this is not an ‘overview’ of Carr’s work (as would be a monograph), but rather a strategic political critique of the work in which a thesis is offered, I was inclined to contain my study to the collected plays and not to include the 2000 play. With On Raftery’s Hill in 2000, I believe a new trajectory in Carr’s work emerges – that of a centralised exploration of masculinity, through the dominating male subject of Red Raftery. While this is of course also a family drama set in the Midlands of Ireland, the themes and tensions move towards a different form of representation. There are not the avenues of transcendence in this play and there is not a space or site of transformation. This play offers a purgatorial space of arrested development, in which escape, agency, and even death, are completely denied to each of the characters in the Raftery household. There are no realms of ‘extra-territoriality’ in this work but rather, the stultifying perpetuation of a polluted habitual present. In a recent interview I asked Carr about her choices in On Raftery’s Hill:

70 Carr, Marina, Ullaloo, Unpublished Script.
71 Mac Intyre, Tom, Program Note for Ullaloo, March 1991.
72 Scaife, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.
Melissa Sihra: By not bowing to the option of death, the characters are consigned to a kind of purgatorial entrapment and stasis, with no possibility for change or transformation.

Marina Carr: It is worse than death. I always believe that in theatre [...] you have to earn your death. And I don’t think that anyone earned their death in that play. If they had, I would have released them.  

The dramaturgical unity of the deaths of the female protagonists in the trilogy allows for an organic and fluid relationship between the themes and their development. With On Raftery’s Hill, Carr moves, as I note above, towards an exploration of masculine subjectivity. The centrality of the male figure in the drama begins what I identify as a new trilogy, which concerns a tripartite configuration of male protagonists with Red Raftery in On Raftery’s Hill, Fermoy Fitzgerald in Ariel and Anton Chekhov in Chekhov. The front-cover of the Faber & Faber single edition of On Raftery’s Hill depicts the headless torso of a gun-toting male body, whereas the single editions of the plays up until now have exclusively had an image of a woman on the front (the Mai, Portia Coughlan, and a woman with a swan for By the Bog of Cats..., which could denote either Hester or Big Josie).

Critical Framework and Dissertation Outline:
In this thesis I will consider Carr’s strategies of non-realism and the ways in which the plays are recalcitrant to monologic notions of Irish culture, female identity and the body. Carr’s dramas frequently operate on ‘symbolic time’ where the activity on the stage represents alternative temporalities and ontological realms. I will identify the ways in which Carr’s representation of fluid spatio-temporalities, language, and corporeality, and her resistance to classical unities of theatrical form, renegotiates dominant patriarchal discourses of representation and socialisation.

73 Marina Carr, in Theatre Talk, p. 60.
In “Refiguring Linearity” Susan Kozel writes: ‘Linearity and clear narrative structures have been associated with conventional or ‘mainstream’ theatre. Politically they have been associated with totalitarianism or, on the softer side, simple conservatism.’ In considering how Carr theatrically frames and re-negotiates aspects of Irish cultural identity through her re-presentation of landscape, language and corporeality, I will explore the ways in which Carr’s plays achieve transformative possibility through moments and eruptions of ‘excess’ in text and performance. In so doing, this study will consider the tensions and conflicts in the work, as Carr reconfigures dominant or conventional social codes, and forms of representation in Irish theatre. My critique of the plays will identify the significant moments of excess and the multiple and repeated images of Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian conceptualisations of the grotesque body in Carr’s dramas.

Feminist theatre scholar Marjorie Garber notes excess as being ‘that which overflows a boundary.’ ‘Excess’ is officially defined as ‘an overstepping of due limits; of superabundance; of exceeding the proper amount or degree.’ The use of the word ‘proper’ reveals the implicit ideology of this definition, which perpetuates the hegemony of dominant power structures. While this notion of excess is subversive to a degree, it does not re-negotiate the status quo of boundary-systems as it still maintains and acknowledges the preceding boundary dynamic. In this dissertation I wish to consider the condition of excess as being a blurring or intermingling of boundaries, a space between which can radically alter or re-define the fixity of border demarcations, in alignment with Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian carnivalesque theories of the grotesque. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin writes that the grotesque occurs when ‘the borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world [are] boldly infringed.’

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75 Garber, Marjorie, “Dress Codes or the Theatricality of Difference”, in The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance, p. 176.
In Carr’s plays, dramaturgical strategies such as flash-backs, simultaneous playing spaces, symbolic time, dreams, ghosts, monologues and narratives of memory effectively express a poetic and conceptual recalcitrance to realism. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous writes, ‘Without closure, the sense of beginning, middle and end, or a central focus, [Écriture feminine] abandons the hierarchical organising principles of traditional form that served to elide women from discourse.’ Of the grotesque aesthetic, Bakhtin notes: ‘Neither was there the usual static presentation of reality [...] instead the inner movement of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleted character of being.’ In her essay on post-linear form and representation, Kozel writes: ‘[…] Post linear performance is not a negation of narrative. It contains linear narrative, playing with the space, time, and context of narration. Like a flood, post-linear performance ignores the boundaries of the river of theatrical convention [...]’

I will look at the ways in which Mikhail Bakhtin’s imagistic literary and cultural theory of the grotesque body, as outlined in his politicisation of the trope of ‘carnival’ in Rabelais and His World, may be re-appropriated to consider the ways in which Carr’s plays destabilise ‘fixed’ notions of corporeality, gender, space and language in the plays from 1989 – 1998. Kozel asks: ‘In what way is post-linear performance political? It is political by engineering a confrontation between the present and the absent, the visible and the invisible.’ The notion of politics and confrontation is central to Bakhtin’s critical exploration in Rabelais and His World. In his Bakhtinian critique of the plays of Irish dramatist Frank McGuinness, Eamonn Jordan writes: ‘The body is vital to carnival, as it is the source and focus of defiance, particularly as it is the source of suppression and repression.’ Bakhtin’s notion of the Grotesque body, while poetically opposing dominant hegemonic structures of political authoritarianism, (analogised in the ‘closed’,

79 Rabelais and His World.
stable, elevated ‘classical’ body), nevertheless limits the political potential of the grotesque due to the paralysis of structural binarism. In Bakhtin’s case the dominant political structure to which he was actively opposed, and imprisoned for, was that of Russian Stalinism. Bakhtin’s doctoral thesis on Early Modern European carnival and the carnivalesque, entitled *Rabelais and His World*, remained unpublished until the 1960s and was a coded textual resistance to this form of authoritarian dictatorship. The grotesque ‘in opposition’ to the classical thus serves only to affirm both modes of discourse without offering any site of transition or transformation. I will argue that the condition of grotesque excess moves beyond limiting binarism to offer spaces and sites of alterity and transformation.

In “Performing Sexuality in Psychic Space”, Mick Wallis writes that ‘all bodies are culturally inscribed.’ In performance the body carries political signification which is never neutral, and which is always open to re-construction. In Bakhtinian terms the ‘low’ Other, ‘grotesque body’ is the main player in the drama of carnival and the politics of the carnivalesque. The grotesque body transgresses its own limits; it is excessive by its very nature. It is the ‘Other’ within society; the de-centralised collective, opposed politically and semiotically to dominant rhetorics of authority in any given context.

In *Rabelais and His World*, which was first translated into English in 1968, Bakhtin places the grotesque, dis-integrated and de-formed body in opposition to the classical, rational, defined body as a site for interrogating the ideologies of ‘fixed’ hegemonic power structures. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White make the claim that: ‘The ‘grotesque’ [...] designates the marginal, the low and the outside from the perspective of a classical body situated as high, inside and

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84 Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body is not concerned with the individual, but rather, with the ‘body’ or collective mass of the people. Bakhtin writes; ‘[The] grotesque [body]... is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people [...] the material bodily principle is concerned not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed*. *Rabelais and His World*, p.19.
central by virtue of its very exclusions. In the cultural theory of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin considers the ways in which the so-called ‘low’, or grotesque, body troubles the ‘high’, and its stable, rational notion of the world, through symbolic inversion. Barbara Babcock states: ‘Symbolic inversion’ may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political. The drawback here remains in the fact that inversion is only radical up to a point, as it is dependent upon the structural politics of the dominant against which to define itself, thus not necessarily engaging in active subversion.

Bakhtin speaks in very general terms about a singular and ‘universal’ type of grotesque body, eliding factors of gender, class and race, which contribute to radically differentiated constructions of corporeality. Yet his descriptions of the grotesque body are replete with characteristics which have traditionally been coded as feminine, in contrast to the classical body which has been afforded conventionally masculine qualities. One of Bakhtin’s most vivid images of the grotesque body can be found in his description of the Kerch terracotta figurines which represent senile, pregnant hags:

This is typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed.

In The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity, Mary Russo reclaims the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque body in feminist terms, controversially asserting the

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grotesque body as that of the female form (in opposition to the male ‘classical’ body). Russo writes:

It might follow that the expression “female grotesque” threatens to become a tautology, since the female is always defined against the male norm [...] but this is not to posit an exclusive or essential relationship between the terms. While acknowledging the mimetic quality of these terms, it is their long-standing and historically irreversible connection that is at issue for me.

This critique of Carr’s dramas seeks to apply Russo’s notion of the ‘female-grotesque’ but also to expand the potential binarism of this trope by considering the ‘grotesque’ in its fifteenth century semantic context as signifying the more politically radical and transformative notion of intermixing, crossing and boundary destabilisation.

The etymology and historical context of the word grotesque needs also to be clarified as it has come to signify many concepts throughout its semantic history. Russo claims that the term ‘grotesque’ ‘evokes the cave - the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral. As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body.’ The female has traditionally been relegated and confined to what Russo terms ‘this cave of abjection’. The essentialist association of the female body with ‘earthiness’ or ‘primal’ elements can also be linked with Bakhtin’s general notion of ‘de-gradation’ - of a lowering towards the earth.

During the Renaissance the ‘grotesque’ came to light with the discoveries in the fifteenth century, at the excavations in Rome of Nero’s Domus Aurea or Golden Palace opposite the Coliseum, of mysterious drawings combining vegetation and animal and human body parts in intricate, intermingled and fantastical designs. However, many examples of the

89 The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity, p. 12.
90 The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity, p. 1.
'grotto-esque' which pre-date both classical and renaissance Rome are identified by art historians, although the term was not coined until the fifteenth century. Vetruvius' *De Architectura* (c. 27 BC), linked the classical styles of building and adornment with the natural order, and in contrast, pointed to the grotesque details as a repository of unnatural, frivolous and irrational connections between things which, he felt, nature and classical art should keep scrupulously apart. Vetruvius writes in disgust at the desecration of the sanctity of realism in the fantastical drawings discovered at the Domus Aurea:

> On the stucco are monsters rather than definite representations taken from definite things. Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, striped panels with curled leaves and volutes [...] slender stalks with heads of men and animals attached to half the body. *Such things neither are, nor can be, nor have been.*

The vociferous quality of this passage articulates an unequivocal intolerance for any kind of non-naturalistic representation. At this time these hybrid images were considered always and only in relation to classical standards of classical aesthetic perfection, relegated to a primitive 'pagan' imagination, and marginalised as mere fanciful decoration without moral import. In the eighteenth century, where the classical was equated with the natural, the grotesque style was viewed with increasing negativity. For instance, the well-known 'grotesche', that were juxtaposed with Christian art in the Vatican Loggias designed by Raphael and executed by Giovanni da Udine, so infuriated critics, such as John Ruskin, who condemned them as: 'the fruit of great minds *degraded to base objects,*' 'a tissue of *nonsense*’ and ‘an unnatural and *monstrous abortion*'.

Embodying the dominant rational discourse of his day Ruskin elaborates:

> If we can draw the human head perfectly, and are masters of its expression and its beauty, we have no business to cut it off, and hang it up by the hair at the end of a

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91 *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity*, p. 2.
garland. If we can draw the human body in the perfection of its grace and movement, we have no business to take away its limbs, and terminate it with a bunch of flowers.\(^4\)

The grotesque has always played a fundamental role in constituting and affirming the superiority of its dominant ‘other’, that is, the classical and canonical, in its positioning as marginal, unnatural, aberrational, hybrid and exogamic.

By the end of the nineteenth century the term grotesque transformed from being purely a description of an aesthetic genre to become a categorical adjective of experience. In Arthur Conan Doyle’s last adventure of Sherlock Holmes, the detective receives a telegram detailing a “most incredible and grotesque experience”.\(^5\) Romantic and post-Romantic notions of the grotesque link it to the sublime and the uncanny in the writings of Wolfgang Kayser in The Grotesque in Art and Literature and Sigmund Freud’s essay “On the Uncanny” in Art and Literature, both of which shall be applied in the following chapters.

In the twentieth-century, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the comic grotesque draws on François Rabelais and carnival, and in particular, the connection with the grotesque and the lower bodily stratum, and the singularly positive associations with degradation, filth, death and rebirth. Russo states: ‘The discourse of carnival, or more properly, the carnivalesque - much of it in relation to Bakhtin - has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system.’\(^6\) She goes on to claim:

The reintroduction of the body and categories of the body (in the case of carnival, the “grotesque body”) into the realm of what is called the “political” has been a

\(^{93}\) On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature, p. 30.
\(^{94}\) On the Grotesque: Strategies of Art and Literature, p. 31.
central concern of feminism [...] so that the relation between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and womaness [...] might be brought together towards a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity.\(^7\)

For the purposes of this dissertation it is important to contextualise and historicise carnival and the carnivalesque, in order to consider how the notion of the grotesque body may relate to Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian cultural theories of the carnivalesque. The classical body, realised in classical statuary as white, singular, rooted and beautiful, embodies the politics of rationality, closure, stability and all inherent forms of 'high', official masculine culture. In Renaissance statuary the sculpture was always mounted on a plinth and thus, symbolically and actually, elevated, fixed and monumental. Bakhtin states that while ‘the classic canon is clear to us, artistically speaking [...] the grotesque image never had such a canon. It is noncanonical by its very nature.’\(^8\) As represented by Pieter Bruegel and his School, the Flemish painters' contemporaneous depictions of the body were, in contrast, multiple, tumescent, overtly lascivious, exaggerated and highly animated. In *Transgressing the Modern*, John Jervis observes that the ‘[...] grotesque body and its earthy doings are set up in contrast to the [...] prudishness and conservatism of 'high' culture.’\(^9\) The grotesque-body concept is always decentred or off-balance, highly coloured and cacophonous - a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion.

Gradually the protocols of the classical body, that is, the closed, homogenous, centred and symmetrical, came to define the identity of rationalism and Enlightenment thinking. With the so-called 'civilising' age of the Enlightenment and institutionalism came the transformation and to an extent demise of traditional popular carnival indulgence at around the early seventeenth century. Jervis states: 'Although the processes of repression and appropriation do not occur uniformly [carnival] had come to be seen as unruly and

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\(^6\) *The Female Grotesque*, p.54.  
\(^7\) *The Female Grotesque*, p.54.  
\(^8\) *The Female Grotesque*, p. 30.  
incompatible with the norms of civilised behaviour, decency, respectability, and a coherent sense of self-identity.\textsuperscript{100}

Within the collective of carnival, as joyously celebrated by Bakhtin, there exists a by no means comfortably unified body. The position of women within the traditional popular culture of carnival shows that, while inscribed within Bakhtin’s concept of the low-grotesque body of the people, women were lower again, becoming further the focus of displaced abjection, the process whereby so-called ‘low’ social groups turn their figural and actual power, not against those in authority, but against those that are socially even weaker. Evidence from seventeenth century court records supports this contention, indicating how an increase in sexual assaults on women occurred during some of the main festive periods such as May Day and Midsummer. In London, violent assaults on brothels were a standard feature of Shrovetide ‘revelry’.\textsuperscript{101}

In \textit{The Politics and Poetics of Transgression}, Stallybrass and White effectively point out that Bakhtin shifts between two models of the grotesque:

In the first model the grotesque is simply the opposite of the classical. In the second model, the grotesque is formed through a process of hybridisation or inmixing of binary opposites, particularly of high and low, such that there is a heterodox merging of elements usually perceived as incompatible, and this latter version of the grotesque unsettles any fixed binarism. It is this latter notion which is more adequate to thinking [out] the high-low relations.\textsuperscript{102}

As shall be demonstrated in this thesis, Carr negotiates these heterogeneous, unstable sites where fixed demarcations of gender, corporeality, class, spatio-temporality and language are made fluid, ‘leaky’ and blurred, destabilising and problematising the fixed hegemonic criteria of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, solid and fluid, male and female, past and

\textsuperscript{100} Transgressing the Modern, p.23.
\textsuperscript{101} References to this tradition can be found in Sir Thomas Overbury, ‘A Maquerela, in Plaine English a Bawde’, \textit{The Miscellaneous Works of Sir Thomas Overbury}, ed. E. F. Rimbault, (London, 1890).
present and corporeality and incorporeality. In “Gender, Authorship and Performance in Contemporary Irish Women Playwrights”, McMullan writes: ‘[…] there is a growing interest in the perspectives on identity, sexuality and the legacies of myth and history. Irish women playwrights […] contest traditional stereotypes of women as a-sexual self-sacrificing mothers, powerless victims, or sexual comforts. Women are centre-stage, propelling the action, and forcefully articulating their subjectivity and their sexuality. [They] present a range of theatre languages and often exploit the corporeal medium of performance to destabilize traditional concepts of gender.’

Before considering Carr’s plays in the light of excess and its links to Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian theories of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, it is important to clarify that what can be referred to as carnivalesque is not necessarily carnival. Bakhtin claims that carnival does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. He states: ‘Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it. […] While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it.’ Spectacle denotes observation, passivity and distance rather than actual participation. In the twenty-first century much carnival, particularly in Europe, has withdrawn from the world of the social life, and where it has not, it has been transformed into a predominantly consumerist tourist activity.

The processes of repression and appropriation of the carnival did not occur uniformly across Europe, however it would be fair to say that by the 1860s carnival was largely overthrown; banned or transformed into civic parades or trade fairs. With the Enlightenment and the ‘civilising process’, it had come to be seen as unruly and incompatible with the norms of decency, respectability and a coherent sense of self-identity. The carnival of popular European culture cannot now be seen except purely in the context of spectacle, novelty and historical performance. The carnivalesque, on the other hand, as a theoretical model has entered the cultural world of the imagination,

102 The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p. 44.
104 Rabelais and His World, p.7.
becoming increasingly significant in the last twenty years in narrative and fantasy, theatre, cultural and performance studies and literary theory and arts criticism in general.

Carnivals dominated European culture throughout the middle-ages and were short periods of time when the dominant laws, prohibitions and restrictions that determine the structure and order of the ‘ordinary’, that is, the non-carnival, were suspended. In *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Burke states:

Carnival in its widest, most general sense embraced ritual spectacles such as fairs, popular feasts and wakes, processions and competitions, comic shows, mummery and dancing, open-air amusement with costumes and masks, giants, dwarfs, monsters, trained animals and so forth; it included comic verbal compositions (oral and written) such as parodies, travesties and vulgar farce; and it included various genres of ‘Billingsgate’, by which Bakhtin designated curses, oaths, slang, humour, popular tricks and jokes, scatological forms, in fact all the ‘low’ and ‘dirty’ sorts of folk humour.\(^{105}\)

Celebrated most commonly throughout Europe in the period preceding Lent, carnival was frequently inaugurated by ringing the church bells at the wrong time, or changing the hands of the clock. John Jervis states:

It seems to have had a new lease of life in the early modern period, from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth centuries [...] and in addition to carnival itself, the whole of the period between the fixed dates of the Christmas festivities and the moveable date of Easter held a range of saints’ days, rituals, feasts and celebrations, many of which had markedly carnivalesque aspects.\(^{106}\)

Carnival is presented by Bakhtin as a world of topsy-turvy heteroglot exuberance where all is temporarily mixed, hybrid, and official culture is ritually degraded and defiled.

Rabelais and his World draws on traditions such as the popular ‘Feast of Fools’ (Festa Stultorum), the ‘Feast of the Ass’ (which purported to mark the flight of Mary and Joseph to Egypt on an ass where the mock cleric would conduct the service by braying and cursing the congregation) and the ‘Feast of the Circumcision’ where ‘the churchmen appeared at mass, some in female attire, some dressed as clowns or street performers, others with their capes and cassocks inside out, and almost all wearing grotesque false faces’. In addition to reappropriating Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body for the purpose of this study, much of the imagery, motifs and activity associated with traditional popular carnival custom consistently emerge in Carr’s dramas from 1989 - 1998.

The limiting aspect of this ‘non-official’ behaviour is that it is ultimately dependent upon the presiding dominant structures and while inverting them, does not create new ontological modes or permanent alternative political criteria. It would seem then, that the symbolic poetics of carnival are collusive with dominant structures in their offering of temporary reprieve; rendering it a mere authorised ‘vent’ for dissatisfaction. Terry Eagleton points out the glaringly obvious problem posed: ‘Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art.’

However, recent work in the social history of carnival reveals its political dimensions to be more complex than Bakhtinian detractors might suspect. It is interesting to note how frequently violent clashes seemed to coincide with carnival. Le Roy Ladurie’s Carnival in Romans tells of one such incident when the 1580 festival at Romans in France was turned into armed conflict and massacre. He also notes how Jews were often stoned and claims there is evidence that women were frequently raped during carnival festivities. In relation to this Mary Russo states: ‘women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain

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106 Transgressing the Modern, p.15.
public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive - dangerous, and in danger.\textsuperscript{110}

Bob Scribner has shown the importance of popular carnival practices in German Reformation struggles against Catholicism, and Martine Boiteux has detailed the great lengths to which the ecclesiastical powers were prepared to go in Rome in 1634 in order to upstage the regular, popular carnival with a patrician counter-festival which was designed to ‘repress, control and mutilate’ the carnival of the common people. Socio-historical accounts of England reveal evidence of a long battle waged by the state, ecclesiastical and bourgeois authorities, where local festivities are identifiable as sites of resistance. The fact that so many carnivals, fairs, popular games and festivals were controlled and eliminated, such as the Bartholomew Fair, which was finally suppressed in 1855, is indicative of their subversive agency. The 1803, the Society for the Suppression of Vice argued that it would ‘be expedient to suppress all Fairs whatever [...] on the grounds that they were a breeding ground of sedition’.\textsuperscript{111} In terms of the temporary or symbolic agency of carnival celebration, women were not completely excluded. In some areas of Europe, around May and Shrovetide, women were allowed to take revenge on violent husbands at carnival time by ducking them or making them ride an ass. In Society and Culture in Early Modern France, Natalie Davis notes that at carnival time in Nuremberg a woman who was burdened with ‘a wretched dissolute husband’ was granted the right by a temporary female ruler, to ‘beat him until his asshole was roaring’.\textsuperscript{112} Contemporaneously, the carnival at Notting Hill in London is frequently associated with violent outbursts.

Eagleton acknowledges that the political, poetic and theoretical value of carnival lies in its invitation to a ‘temporary retextualisation of social formation that exposes its “fictive” foundations.’\textsuperscript{113} Yet it is Stallybrass and White who identify most articulately the

\textsuperscript{110} The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity, p. 60.
central issues and possibilities offered by carnival theory: 'It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are intrinsically radical or conservative, and that in a particular moment of sharpened political antagonism it may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle.'\textsuperscript{114} They go on to claim:

It is only by completely shifting the grounds of the debate, by transforming the 'problematic' of carnival, that these issues can be resolved [where] the main importance of [Bakhtin's] study [on Rabelais] is its broad development of the 'carnivalesque' into a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the realm of Rabelais studies.\textsuperscript{115}

Carnival, for Bakhtin, is both a populist utopian vision of the world seen from below and a festive critique of the 'high' culture. The carnivalesque is a site of interest to postmodernism due to the fact that, as Bakhtin remarks, it is 'marked by images that are opposed to all that is finished and polished [...] to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.'\textsuperscript{116} In addition, while it may work in terms of inversion or opposites, what Bakhtin denotes as 'the peculiar logic of the “inside out” (a l’\'envers),\textsuperscript{117} the carnivalesque is critically radical when it, according to Stallybrass, 'become[s] enmeshed in an inclusive heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone\textsuperscript{118} which 'generates the possibility of shifting the very terms itself'.\textsuperscript{119} Crucially, Jordan writes:

While postmodernism discusses repetition, and imitation in terms of proliferation and the accumulation of existing images; the playfulness of carnival and the conscious role playing amount to more than imitation. Carnival is both fictive and subversive at once, insisting on simultaneity, particularly as the presence of the

\textsuperscript{114} Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p.19.
\textsuperscript{115} Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p.7.
\textsuperscript{116} Rabelais and His World, p.3.
\textsuperscript{117} Rabelais and His World, p.11.
\textsuperscript{118} Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p.193.
\textsuperscript{119} Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p. 58.
unified subject and concept of a definable present are undermined. The action of carnival extends beyond pretence, beyond the performance, thereby facilitating a collision of worlds.\textsuperscript{120}

In \textit{Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics}, Bakhtin states: 'Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. The behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions [...] defining them totally in non-carnival life, and thus from the vantage point of the noncarnival, life becomes eccentric and inappropriate.'\textsuperscript{121} While Bakhtin's vision of carnival is that of a dynamic which is at odds with official culture, his study on Rabelais is also clearly at odds with official culture. Both Rabelais and Bakhtin were writing at a time of revolution. Bakhtin attempted to evade censorship, execution and the 'spectre haunting modern Russian fiction [...] Stalinism', through his allegorical critique of Rabelais' writings, employing medieval Catholicism in \textit{Rabelais and His World} as a hidden polemic against Stalinism.\textsuperscript{122}

Historicising Bakhtin's courageous carnivalesque politics and narrative of resistance is important. Terry Eagleton correctly accedes that \textit{Rabelais and his World} pits that ‘official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism whose unspoken name is Stalinism against the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic’.\textsuperscript{123} In their study on Bakhtin, Dubravka and Booker note: 'Not only were the works of artists and writers strictly monitored for ideological consistency with the official Party line, but a highly formulaic socialist realism became during this time the only officially sanctioned artistic mode.'\textsuperscript{124} In sentiments that could describe his own motivations, Bakhtin states:

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{The Feast of Famine: The Plays of Frank McGuinness}, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{121} Bakhtin, Mikhail, \textit{Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 123.
\textsuperscript{122} Booker, M, Keith, & Dubravka, Juraga, \textit{Bakhtin, Stalin and Modern Fiction; Carnival, Dialogism and History}, (Westport USA: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. ix.
\textsuperscript{123} Terry, \textit{Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism}, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{124} Booker & Dubravka, p. ix.
'Rabelais' basic goal was to destroy the official picture of events. [...] He summoned all the resources of popular imagery in order to break up official lies and the narrow seriousness dictated by the ruling classes.\textsuperscript{125} Living under a regime that distorted and manipulated history for its own ends, it is not surprising that an intense concern with the notion of history characterises Bakhtin’s entire career. Bakhtin himself described the main thrust of his work as an attempt to create a “historical poetics” in which crucial importance is placed on temporality and issues of historical narrative.\textsuperscript{126}

Chapter One: “Performing Culture: Sex, Selfhood and the Body in \textit{Low In The Dark}”: Chapter one will consider Carr’s 1989 play \textit{Low In The Dark}. Of this work Carr says: ‘This is a play with gender. I was trying to take stereotypes and clichés and have a romp with them.’\textsuperscript{127} I will identify the ways in which the non-linear narrative, rapid scene changes, abstract spatialities and symbolic characterisation of \textit{Low In The Dark} operate within a non-realist, absurdist sensibility, to critique socio-normative assumptions and naturalisations. While the play is not located in an explicitly Irish cultural context, the demythologisations of the roles of motherhood, marriage and the Catholic Church may be read within this social frame. Divorce was not legal in Ireland in 1989, and the rigidity of the social roles and performances which the characters enact and endure in \textit{Low In The Dark} offer an oblique comment on ‘the lack of accommodation of difference’ in the country at this time, and which the next three plays proceed to articulate explicitly.

In ‘playing’ with gendered identity, every day assumptions and essentialisations are objectified in \textit{Low In The Dark} through dramaturgical strategies of defamiliarisation, such as cross-dressing and role-play. The chapter will historicise cross-dressing and the body, considering the cultural anxieties surrounding corporeal sites of indeterminacy, boundary crossing and interchangeability, in relation to dominant patriarchal socio-politics. In \textit{Low In The Dark}, Carr transforms the limiting authority of gender identity by proposing its

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Rabelais and His World}, pp.

\textsuperscript{126} Cited in Booker and Dubravka, p. xi.

\textsuperscript{127} Sihra, Melissa, Unpublished Interview with Marina Carr, 8 February, 1999.
inherent construction and performativity through modes of play and artifice, illusion and meta-theatricality.

In *Low In The Dark* 'performance' can be viewed in terms of its social, corporeal, spatio-temporal and political dimensions. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler states: ‘Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the contexted body, understood in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.’ Throughout *Low In The Dark* Carr reveals, through strategies of meta-theatricality, the ways in which culture and performance are fundamentally related, and considers ‘performativity’ in terms of its social dimensions.

While parody, inversion and role-reversal run throughout *Low In The Dark*, this chapter makes the point that Carr blurs and confuses rigid gendered demarcation by complicating the notion of ‘authenticity’ or originality. In *Low In The Dark* each identity becomes ‘a performance within a performance’, resisting access to the ‘real’ through play. Carr thus destabilises dominant, hegemonically unified representations of gender and corporeality. Through the transformative potential of grotesque excess I shall demonstrate that, in the spirit of Bakhtin’s grotesque intermingling and corporeal blurring, the performative strategies of gender swapping and reversal challenge gender fixity through role-playing, cross-dressing and ‘slipperiness’ of the moments of ‘in-betweeness’ in the action.

My exploration of *Low In The Dark* centres on a historical and theoretical reading of Carr’s theatrical representation of the social constructions of subjectivity, sexuality and corporeality. In *Low In The Dark* Carr displays the ways in which the performing body and the cultural body carries and creates social significations which are never neutral. Through the instances of cross-dressing and role-play Carr reveals ‘the artifice, play, falsehood and illusion of gendered identity.’ I will historicise Carr’s representation of

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129 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. xxii.
the body in relation to western constructions of subjectivity and *bourgeois* ideology. In considering the body politics of *Low In The Dark*, this chapter will refer to Bakhtin’s imagistic concept of the grotesque body, as articulated in *Rabelais and His World*, as a means of critiquing dominant notions of the social body.

This chapter will primarily draw on Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian theories of the grotesque body from *Rabelais and His World* and Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity* (1994) respectively. In terms of considering historical and cultural materialist constructions of corporeality I will refer to Thomas Laqueur’s historical study of the socially and anatomically constructed body in *Making Sex: Body from Greeks to Freud* (1992), and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986). In considering the philosophical concerns of corporeality and performance I will draw on Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). I will also historicise, and consider, the performative and political implications of cross-dressing with reference to feminist performance theorists such as Marjorie Garber, Lesley Ferris and Michelene Wandor. I will frame Carr’s non-realist theatrical strategies in *Low In The Dark* in the light of Martin Esslin’s notion of the *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961).

Chapter Two: “Writing on Water: Reflections of Womanhood in *The Mai*”:

Chapter Two will consider Carr’s 1994 drama *The Mai*, and the ways in which the relationship between space and the body resonate in performance. In considering Carr’s representation of the character of the Mai, I will look at the theatrical *mise-en-scène* and in particular, at the mediating site of the window, which represents the mediating point between the symbolic dialectics of fluid and solid, inside and outside, and excess and containment in the drama. I will consider Victor Turner and Richard Schechner’s notion of the ‘limen’ or threshold, as a symbolic site of ambivalent transformative potential in relation to the Mai’s subjectivity, and draw upon Gaston Bachelard’s reading of spatiality in *The Poetics of Space* (1994).
The bodies of water which Carr depicts in the plays from 1994 – 1998, with lakes, rivers and saturated bog-holes, are symbolically reflective of the central female characters. In *The Mai* the imminent ontological crisis is materialised in the tension between the fixed structure of the house and the potential ‘seepage’, irrecoverability and loss associated with the fluid Owl Lake, *through* the mediating liminal site of the window. In each of the plays from 1994 the central motif of water may be read as a political trope of excess, which can be regarded as a depotentialising force to the solid, the unified and the fixed social structures of the dramas. The recurrent blurring of fixity in the play, through imaginative techniques of ghosts, memory and dream narratives, myth, multiple protagonists and simultaneous and symbolic playing spaces and temporalities, is represented in the resistance to linear narrative, closed form, naturalism, and unified characterisation. In *The Mai*, meta-theatrical strategies of representation compliment the moments of excess and symbolic fluidity in the narrative.

In each one of the plays from 1989 – 1998 Carr renders conventional borders of so-called ‘Realism’ permeable by foregrounding the performative structures of the dramas, where the form and content are reflective of one another. *The Mai* is a memory-play in which the fluid interaction between past and present destabilises any notion of spatio-temporal linearity, and as in *Portia Coughlan*, Carr places the death of the eponymous character in the middle, with Act Three flashing back to events leading up to the death of the Mai. I argue that in each of the plays the ways in which Carr destabilises conventional theatrical structure and unified notions of realism is reflective of the symbolic potential of excess contained in the narratives. In *The Mai*, the relationship between language, place and subjectivity or the body is fluidly performed through the act of storytelling by the narrator Millie, who is present on-stage throughout. In addressing the form and content of Millie’s narrative, I will consider Carr’s representation of memory and corporeality in relation to the four generations of women in the play. This chapter will consider the political potential of non-realism in theatrical representation with reference to the writings of feminist theatre scholar Elaine Aston, and place it within the context of Aristotle’s critique of dramatic form in *Poetics*. In relation to the conflictual politics of the fluid and
the solid in the play, I will draw on Luce Irigaray's essay "The Mechanics of Fluids" from *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

This chapter will consider Carr’s representation of the transitional nature of Irish women’s social history over a one-hundred year period, literally and figuratively embodied through the corporeality of Grandma Fraochlan. In so doing, I will contextualise the play in relation to the recent historiography of scholars such as Mary O’Dowd, Maryann Valiulis and Maria Luddy. In looking at the figure of Grandma Fraochlán I will identify Carr’s first use of idiom and dialect, and the ways in which the Grandmother figures of each of the plays from 1994 embody Bakhtinian notions of carnivalesque *mésalliances*, that is, the breaking of ‘all things that were once self-enclosed or distanced from one another.’ In the chapter I will identify Grandma Fraochlán as a carnivalesque body, inhabiting an ‘extraterritorial’ liminal social, historical and ontological position in the drama. I will argue that Grandma Fraochlán is an excessive, female-grotesque figure in the drama in her capacity as the central corporeal link between past and present, youth and old-age, and birth and death.

**Chapter Three: “Spectral Voices: Self and Other-ness in *Portia Coughlan*”:**

In Chapter Three I shall critique Carr’s 1996 drama *Portia Coughlan*. I will consider the ways in which Carr destabilises classical unities of spatio-temporality and renegotiates conventional notions of language, corporeality, gender, and dominant cultural tropes of Irish landscape. I will consider how Carr’s strategies of the Fantastic, and grotesque excess, destabilise monologic or ‘realist’ form and representation. In particular this chapter will focus on the representation of ghosts as a means of re-imagining the body in performance. Central also to this investigation of *Portia Coughlan* will be the ways in which Carr offers a new form of linguistic expression through the emergence of her Midlands dialect.

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Taking the central image of the Belmont River, and the politics of fluidity, I will apply Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian notions of grotesque excess in order to identify the ways in which Portia Coughlan renders conventional corporeal, spatio-temporal and textual borders and boundaries 'leaky', slippery and overflowing. As in the previous chapters, I will consider the ways in which Carr contests and re-negotiates monological ideological notions of motherhood, the family and ‘woman’ in Portia Coughlan. I will historicise Carr’s depiction of the family and ‘woman’, within the frame of Irish patriarchal structures of property, land-ownership, legitimacy laws and inheritance, and address the inherent conflict between the transformative potential of the fluid, and the politics of (male) containment, in the drama.

While Carr deconstructs essentialist notions of motherhood in Low In The Dark, this is given an explicitly Irish context in The Mai and Portia Coughlan. Maryann Valiulis writes:

The ideal Irish woman then – the self-sacrificing mother whose world was bound by the confines of her home, a woman who was pure, modest, who valued traditional culture, especially that of dress and dance, a woman who inculcated these virtues in her daughters and nationalist ideology in her sons, a woman who knew and accepted her place in society – served the purposes of the ruling Irish male elite.131

This chapter will identify the ways in which Carr’s representation of the family displays a crisis of dominant Republican, nationalist and ecclesiastical ideology through the refusal of the female protagonist to comply with patriarchal modes of objectified social positioning.

131 Valiulis, Maryann, “Neither Feminist Nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman”, in O’Dowd, Mary, & Wichert, Sabine, (eds.), Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Woman’s Status in Church, State and Society. (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University, 1995), p. 178.
I will again apply Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian theories of the grotesque, which I will associate with the notion of excess. In considering the politics of fluidity I shall draw again upon Irigaray’s essay “The Mechanics of Fluids” from This Sex Which Is Not One (1977). I will frame my conception of the transformative potential of excess, within non-realist theatrical strategies, in the light of Lucie Armitt’s study Theorising The Fantastic (1996), Wolfgang Kayser’s The Grotesque In Art and Literature (1981) and Sigmund Freud’s essay “On the Uncanny”, in Art and Literature (1985 edition). In terms of historically contextualising non-Realism in relation to the genre of the Fantastic I will refer to Émile Zola’s 1878 essay “Naturalism In The Theatre”. In looking at Carr’s representation of the ambivalent corporealties of the ghost of Gabriel, and the ‘un-dead’ Portia in Act Three, I will again consider Judith Butler’s philosophical interrogations of the material body. Finally, in relation to my critique of Carr’s grandmother figures in the plays from 1994 – 1998, I will identify the character of Blaize Scully in Portia Coughlan as an excessive and grotesque corporeality in her intermingling of seemingly exclusive categories of corporeality and conventional female subjectivity.

Chapter Four: “Between Purity and Filth: Identity and Abjection in By the Bog of Cats...”:

Chapter Four of this thesis will consider Carr’s 1998 drama By the Bog of Cats..., in which I will critique Carr’s representation of class and gender politics, land ownership and patriarchal systems of endogamy in contemporary Ireland. The chapter will consider the tension between nomadism and the so-called ‘settled-community’, where the central conflict of the play focuses around the opposing politics of mobility and landlessness, and illegitimacy and inheritance. I will identify Hester and Josie Swane as excessive, grotesque corporealities in their in-between status as female Travellers. In being ‘half-settled’, both mother and daughter are socially positioned between hegemonic ‘stability’ and social ex-centricity, marking them as being what Julia Kristeva identifies in The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection: ‘Neither subject nor object.’ In this threshold ontology, I argue that Hester and Josie inhabit an ambivalent site of
transformative potential and abject anomie. My critique will also explore this ambivalent position within the context of Irish Travellers, and their relationship to dominant Irish society.

This chapter will consider as central, Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection as articulated in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (1982). In addition to considering the symbolic hierarchies of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, as enacted in the socio-symbolic practices of endogamy and exogamy, I will identify the construction and maintenance of hegemonic boundaries, borders and hierarchies through the politics of exclusion, legitimacy and the imperative of rejection, as outlined by Kristeva. My critique of the politics of exclusion, as enacted in *By the Bog of Cats...*, shall also apply Judith Butler’s theorisation of corporeality, border and boundary politics and social stratification from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Again this chapter will consider the poetic centrality of water, and the political mechanics of the fluid, in relation to the central female characters, where the indeterminacy of the bogland exposes the fictional stability of the solid. Characteristic of water is its excessive drive to overflow, to transgress demarcated boundaries and to dilute rigid binary logic. The potential of Hester and little Josie to destabilise the fixed, middle-class hegemony of the play lies in their ambivalent fluid, or permeable, ontological positioning between the nomadic and the settled; between the legitimate and the illegitimate. I will also identify the ways in which the dominant patriarchal systematisation is perpetuated and upheld in the drama by both male and female characters.

In considering the Euripidean genesis of *By the Bog of Cats...*, which is a loose reworking of *Medea*, I will identify the ways in which the socio-historical context and content of classical Greek drama is fundamentally linked to Carr’s representation of ‘woman’ in *By the Bog of Cats...*. In critiquing Carr’s depiction of the family and woman in an Irish context I will apply feminist theatre scholar Sue Ellen Case’s seminal essay

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“Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts” (1985). I will also apply feminist theatre scholar Elaine Aston’s study on the objectified position of woman within patriarchal systems of land-ownership, marriage and inheritance as articulated in An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre (1995). I will also socially contextualise the position of women within the Travelling culture in contemporary Ireland.

Finally, this chapter will again consider Carr’s theatrical strategies of non-realism and the ways in which the ‘ghost-body’ challenges fixed notions of corporeality in performance. In looking at Carr’s representation of landscape in By the Bog of Cats... I will identify the symbolic resonances of the regional topography of the Midlands of Ireland. In its resistance to fixity, the in-between status of the black Midlands bog-scape, ‘always shiftin’ and changin’ and coddin’ the eye’ re-negotiates the ‘stability’ of dominant cultural tropes of the romantic, green Irish pastoral scene. In its negative relationality to the East and West, the mid-lands may be regarded as an excessive liminal site of crossing, transition and border destabilisation. I will consider Hester’s negotiation of the surrounding landscape and her refusal to containment within the female domestic sphere of the oikos, keeping in mind the ways in which the relationship between space and the body resonates throughout each of the four chapters.

The conclusion to this thesis will again consider the defining characteristics of Carr’s theatre and the ways in which her plays operate within an Irish theatrical context. My reading of the form and content of Carr’s work will illustrate the ways in which the plays are both firmly inscribed within, and recalcitrant to, dominant forms of authorship in Irish theatre. The conclusion will consider some of the most controversial critical responses to Carr’s plays, and the possible reasons for these reactions. In the light of this, I will consider the notions of artistic and ethical responsibility, cultural ‘acceptability’ and what I consider to be the subversive value of Carr’s work.


Chapter One:

Performing Culture: Sex, Selfhood and the Body in *Low In The Dark*

Some are transformed just once  
And live their whole lives after in that shape.  
Others have a facility  
For changing themselves as they please.  

_Erysichthon, Ted Hughes_
Marina Carr’s second play *Low In The Dark* was first produced by the Crooked Sixpence Theatre Company at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, in 1989. Carr describes this early devised piece as ‘a homage to Beckett’. With its non-linear narrative, rapidly successive scene-changes, abstract, non-culturally specific *mise en scène* and symbolic characterisation, *Low In the Dark* operates within a non-realist, absurdist sensibility. In “Marina Carr’s Unhomely Women”, McMullan writes: ‘[Carr’s] earlier plays are very different in tone and theatrical genre to her more recent ones, though they also raise questions about identity, gender and location.’ Indeed, Carr’s early plays contain all of the themes of her mature works. In the Program Note of *Ullaloo* (1991), Tom Mac Intyre comments: ‘[Carr] has already boldly stated her theme – love, sex, the erotic [...]. Her attitude appears to be – *What else is there to write about?*’

In *Low In The Dark*, Carr employs absurdist performative strategies to destabilise monological representations of corporeality, gender and subjectivity, emphasising the performativity of every day social codes and practices. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin identifies that this style of performance seeks ‘to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed’ so that in effect, there is an integration ‘between the subject-matter and the form.’ The deliberately fractured form, non-linear plot and symbolic characterisation of *Low In the Dark* effectively ‘frames’ the parodic deconstructions of ‘normative’ assumptions and essentialisms which are enacted by the five characters in the play. This study will look at the ways in which Mikhail Bakhtin’s imagistic literary and cultural theory of the grotesque, as outlined in his politicisation of the trope of ‘carnival’ in *Rabelais and His World*, may be reappropriated in terms of ‘excess’ to consider the ways in which *Low In The Dark* explores and destabilises ‘fixed’ assumptions of corporeality, gender and space.

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Each one of Carr’s early dramas employs alternative dramatic structure and form to critique dominant ideologies and social codes of behaviour. In considering the characteristics of absurdist plays Martin Esslin writes:

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterisation and motivation, these are often without recognisable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally resolved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings.\(^5\)

In 1991, Tom Intyre identifies the nascent hallmarks of Carr’s theatre:

*Low In the Dark* and *This Love Thing* had to do with her healthy willingness to discard with traditional forms. *Low In The Dark*, particularly, realised a zany equilibrium from a melange which included slapstick, cartoon, gender-bending, song, dance, storytelling, lyric interlude and ebullient dialogue. […] Watching that play, watching the audiences, it was fascinating to feel in the spectators the excitement of being participants in something now, being in on a piece which stretched them thematically and stylistically as much as modern cinema […]. *Surprise* was one essential flavour, surprise in the composition, surprise in the playing, delighted surprise in the viewers.\(^6\)

*Low In The Dark* encapsulated Crooked Sixpence’s experimental and collaborative artistic remit of ‘workshopping ideas [and] developing ways of working more closely


\(^6\) Mac Intyre, Tom, Program Note of *Ullaloo*. 
together, playing games to break down personal and artistic barriers. Scaife writes about the artistic process which brought about the finished script:

At the end of the first day Marina declared her interest in writing with the group. Her codicil was that she wanted to write from her own premise. She came in the next day with two pages of a play. The setting was a bathroom. This way of working was to become the pattern for the rest of the process. Marina would write at night and come in the next day with a whole new scene. We would play the scene then we would play with it. Afterwards we would all talk about what worked and what didn’t. Marina would then revise what she felt was necessary. [...] even at that early stage in her career Marina was absolutely sure of her theatrical voice.

In Low In The Dark, the blurring and destabilisation of dominant representations and structures of gender, space, language and the body, and the interrogation of reductive binary-structures are achieved through the transformative potential of grotesque excess. Bakhtin writes that the fifteenth-century plastic images of the *grottesca* allowed that: ‘The borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed.’ These fantastic architectural adornments portrayed a radical overflow, or intermingling, and blurring of rigid corporeal boundaries and borders, operating in the same way as Carr’s representations of gendered identity, corporeality and theatrical form in Low In The Dark, which may be viewed as similarly fluid, leaky and permeable.

In the play, Carr’s meta-theatrical and contrasting representations of the body may be viewed as cultural signifiers, where the dynamics of social codification and regulation are

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7 Scaife, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr:* "...before rules was made."

8 Scaife, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr:* "...before rules was made."

9 *Rabelais and His World,* p. 32.

10 In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin notes that the ‘the term grotesque first appeared [...] at the end of the fifteenth century [as a] certain type of Roman ornament, previously unknown. These ornaments were brought to light during the excavation of Titus’ baths and were called *grottesca* from the Latin word *grotta.* [...] They impressed the connoisseurs by the extremely fanciful, free, and playful treatment of plant, animal and human forms. These forms seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other.’, p. 32.
inscribed and enacted. Mary Russo writes in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity*:

The discourse of carnival, or more properly, the carnivalesque - much of it in relation to Bakhtin - has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system. The reintroduction of the body and categories of the body (in the case of carnival, the "grotesque body") into the realm of what is called the "political" has been a central concern of feminism [...] so that the relation between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and womaness [...] might be brought together towards a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity.¹¹

In *Low In The Dark*, Carr presents five symbolic characters, who are initially presented as two ‘males’ called Baxter and Bone, and three ‘females’ called Bender, Binder and Curtains. These characters do not possess second names and are represented as abstract types rather than as ‘recognisable’ individuals.¹² The *mise-en-scène* is divided simply in two with stage left denoting a ‘Bizarre bathroom; bath, toilet and shower, a brush with hat and tails on it, and stage right, ‘The men’s space; tyres, unfinished walls and blocks strewn about.’¹³ Carr’s ironic demarcation of the ‘men’s space’, and the ‘bizarre bathroom’, which denotes the ‘female’ space, sets the stage for the forthcoming deconstructions. Esslin notes that Absurdist theatrical form came about because:

The certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, they have been tested and found wanting, [and] they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. [...] The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the

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¹¹ *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity*, p.54.

¹² Esslin uses the word ‘recognisable’ to denote the characterisation of non-Absurdist theatre. See footnote number five.

¹³ *Plays: One*, p. 5.
inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.\textsuperscript{14}

Each one of Carr’s plays represents sites of tension and critical conflict, where essentialist notions of gender and the body engage in a performative struggle with destabilisations of the same. In \textit{Low In The Dark}, the enigmatic figure of Curtains is the central storyteller. While Curtains’ narrative seems to perpetuate gender binary structure with the fixed demarcation of the ‘woman [who] came up from the south [and] the man from the north’, her tale of polar opposites is ironically resisted or confounded by the denaturalisations of gender performed by the other four characters.\textsuperscript{15} Esslin writes: ‘The element of language still plays an important part [in Absurdist theatre] but what \textit{happens} on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the \textit{words} spoken by the characters.’\textsuperscript{16}

In considering Carr’s absurdist and metatheatrical strategies in \textit{Low In The Dark}, McMullan notes: ‘Gender stereotypes are parodied using highly theatrical and often hilarious strategies of role-play and cross-dressing. The culturally hallowed role of maternity is demystified, as Bender produces babies almost non-stop, and Bone also becomes pregnant.’\textsuperscript{17} With the exception of Curtains, the characters engage in constant role-playing and ‘gender-bending’, challenging the boundaries of gender representation by confusing the fixity of male and female gendered identity. This is particularly pertinent to the ‘male’ characters, Baxter and Bone, who repeatedly impersonate female gendered identity, and are continually feminised. At certain moments in \textit{Low In The Dark}, traditional gender binarism is contested as prescribed gender assignations become fluid and interchangeable rather than simply inverted. As shall be demonstrated, the physicality of the strategies of gender swapping, cross-dressing and role-play in \textit{Low In the Dark} enable a challenge to gender fixity through the rapidity, fluidity and subsequent ‘slipperiness’ of the moments of ‘\textit{in-betweeness}’ in the action.

\textsuperscript{14} Esslin, in \textit{The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama}, pp. 876-7.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{16} Esslin, in \textit{The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama}, p. 878.
Scaife notes how Carr’s experimentation with theatrical form and physicality marked a new stage in Irish theatre practice: ‘Ireland in [the 1980s] was relatively mono-ethnic and in terms of the arts in general and theatre in particular there was little cross disciplinary work. A play was a play, it was strictly word based and the idea of actors being trained in the use of their bodies was just starting.’18 As articulated in the introduction to this thesis, the social body, as a ‘cultural text’, carries political significations which are never neutral, and which are always open to re-construction and re-configuration, particularly in performance. The ‘females’ in the play are the only characters whose gender assignation, or codification, remains ‘stable’ or consistent throughout the drama. The meta-theatrically named Curtains confounds the stability of female gendered identity due to the fact that the audience never actually sees her body. In the stage-directions Carr describes Curtains as being ‘any age, as she is covered from head to toe in heavy, brocaded curtains and rail. Not an inch of her face or body is seen throughout the play.’19 The audience is informed that Curtains is a woman, but no ‘material’ evidence is offered. Thus, the ornate brocaded material which conceals, or ‘curtains’, Curtains, playfully ironically highlights the possible immateriality, or ‘non-gendered-ness’, of her body, becoming a source of empowerment and autonomy for the character.

As well as challenging conventional modes of corporeal representation, Curtains’ ‘meta-corporeality’ suggestively embodies the dynamics of theatrical performance. Opening and closing the action, her heaving curtained ‘materiality’ is a playful referent to traditional proscenium staging. Like Polonius masquerading behind the cloth in *Hamlet*, Curtains is the ‘play within a play’, a screen-scene rich in meta-theatrical potentiality. Her ‘body’ is hidden behind her curtains and invites ‘opening’, evocatively fuelling the suspense of what will happen once the curtains go up. Furthermore, the curtains mark the metaphysical threshold *between* reality and representation in theatre, *between* what the spectator ‘knows’ and what they think they know, where the action of ‘looking’ and being looked-at is essential.

18 Scaife, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr*: “…before rules was made”.
19 *Plays: One*, p. 5.
Removed from the politicised economy of visibility, Curtain’s corporeal ‘absence’ enables her to occupy a position of power - that of the privileged witness. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey writes:

The determining male-gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.20

If dominant ideology equates authority with invisibility, Curtain’s corporeal absence, and ‘her’ access to narrative through story-telling, affords her the autonomous position of active meaning-maker in the play. McMullan notes: ‘[Curtains] refuses to emerge from her veil of curtains. She, however, is also a story-teller, and the play in general, both comments on and subverts women’s exclusion from representation.’21

In Contemporary Irish Drama; From Beckett to McGuinness, Anthony Roche evaluates how ‘Carr raises the issue of on-stage representation of the female body [...] and a keen sense of how that body might be read.’22 Roche notes that ‘Beckett had done something similar by burying Winnie, first up to her waist, where an audience could still see her [...] then up to her neck in sand; he had gone even further in Not I, where only the actress’s mouth is visible as she tells her story over and over [...] but in a significant revision Curtains does not undergo the physical confinement to which Beckett subjects his women characters.’23

At first glance Curtains appears typically objectified; male characters go under her curtains and have sex with her, and she is repeatedly beaten. However Curtains contests

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21 McMullan, in British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958, p. 118.
23 Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness, p. 287.
her seemingly submissive position on a number of counts in the drama. In scene six of Act One Curtains climaxes to orgasm on stage. The stage directions indicate:

*With Baxter underneath her curtains. She begins moving, slowly at first, swaying back and forward. Her breathing becomes audible, the swaying increases in tempo, the breathing increases. The swaying becomes jerky. She is now gasping, and the swaying reaches its height. All the curtains are shaking. Climax. Breathing subsides. The swaying subsides to silence.*

In *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur relates how this action opposes the dominant Eighteenth century medical and ideological opinion which, he notes quoting from a medical journal, saw that “the majority of women are not much troubled with sexual feelings.” Women, it was held, ‘whose reason offered so little to passion, became in some accounts creatures whose whole productive life might be spent anaesthetised to the pleasures of the flesh.’ By the early nineteenth century women were comprehensively desexualised, viewed as objects of passionless impregnation rather than active participants in reproduction. Thus, the observed presence and necessity of the male orgasm and the absence of a female equivalent became not only a fundamental biological signpost of sexual difference but also, of hierarchical subjectivity. The site of the female orgasm was viewed as highly problematical at this time, linked as it was to nymphomania, hysteria and marital distress. Barker-Benfield notes how ‘the result in practice was horrific widespread medical and surgical mutilating intervention, including ovarioto- mies and clitoridectomies, advocated for a range of conditions (from ‘troublesomeness’ to ‘erotic tendencies’).”

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24 *Plays: One*, p. 55.
26 *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, p. 4.
The Enlightenment distinction of ‘gender’, as a discrete social and biological
categorisation of male and female, corresponds with the similarly relatively recent notion
of ‘sexuality’. In Sexuality, Joseph Bristow historicises the semantic and social
development of the notion of ‘sexuality’, citing Jeffrey Weeks: ‘It is vital not to forget
that ‘what we define as “sexuality” is an historical construction’. Warning against the
belief that sexuality refers to an essentially human quality through all time, Weeks claims
that sexuality is a “fictional unity”, that once did not exist, and at some time in the future
may not exist again’. In other words the term sexuality is historically contingent, coming
to prominence at a time when detailed attention was increasingly turned to classifying,
determining, and even producing assorted sexual desires.28

Curtains also displays agency and authority through her command of rhetoric and
narrative. For Carr, storytelling, or a ‘yearning for the bardic’ lies at the core of the Irish
theatrical tradition, and is a central feature of Low In The Dark.29 In the play this oral
pleasure is commanded by the figure of Curtains, who assumes the position of narrator
from the outset, beginning and ending the action with her tale of male and female
incompatibility and loss. While Curtain’s narrative is not a subjective memory like
Millie’s in The Mai, but rather, an atemporal tale of an unnamed ‘man’ and ‘woman’ who
‘before they ever met […] had a dream. […] It was the same dream with this
difference…’, it shares similar resonances.30 Curtains’ epic story charts the couple’s
wanderings in a tragic landscape, where they are exiled from the world, and finally, from
each other. Like the doomed mythic figures Diarmuid and Gráinne, the man and woman
of Curtains’ myth are described as being ‘ashamed, for the man and the woman had
become like two people anywhere, walking low in the dark through a dead universe.
There seemed no reason to go on. There seemed no reason to stop.’31

30 Plays: One, p. 7.
31 Plays: One, p. 59.
Curtain’s tale evocatively echoes Carr’s first play *Ullaloo*, meaning ‘funeral lament’, where Tomred and Tilly, enact the static emotional aporia of Curtains’ unnamed man and woman. In the earlier play, Tilly says: ‘Maybe we should pretend to be dead for a while, we might get on better.’ In Act Two of *Ullaloo*, Tilly says: ‘I wish we were dead’, to which, Tomred replies: ‘I wish we were alive.’ Throughout *Ullaloo*, the two characters attempt to re-connect, and rekindle the beginning of their relationship, as they resign themselves to ‘spending a lifetime together.’ In this early work, Carr observes painful emotional paralysis in the characters’ long-term intimacy. In Act Two, Tilly says to her partner: ‘I know everything that you are going to say, and everything that you are not going to say.’ With pragmatic acceptance, the characters finally acknowledge that they are bound together:

Tilly: I gave you everything.
Tomred: I didn’t want everything.
Tilly: I’m leaving you.
Tomred: No, I’m leaving you!
Tilly: It’s never over.

Charting immobilising intimacy, sterility and the irreconcilable aspects of male and female desire, Curtains’ anachronistic landscape is the nascent topography that Carr localises in the subsequent trilogy. As Curtains nears the end of her story, the audience learns how far apart the woman and man have grown on their journey:

When we spoke, and it wasn’t often, we spoke mostly of the landscape or of food. [...] He no longer had words to describe that landscape and I had not the courage. So we lay there, side by side, like two corpses, horrified at our immobility. And if

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32 Unpublished script of *Ullaloo*.
33 Unpublished script of *Ullaloo*.
34 Unpublished script of *Ullaloo*.
we merged, must’ve been by some accident. No passion there for a long time now. My eyes sought the ceiling above him, while his moved towards the back door.\(^{35}\)

Both *Ullaloo* and *Low In The Dark* end on hopeful notes of possibility. In the final moments of the former play, Tomred says: ‘I wouldn’t have missed this.’ While in *Low In The Dark*, the woman in Curtains’ story entreats the man to stay with her: ‘You’, she said, ‘if you have courage get off your bicycle and come with me.’\(^{36}\)

Each one of Carr’s mature plays depicts similarly emotionally barren landscapes where the central female and male characters are like ‘corpses, horrified at [their] immobility.’ In *Portia Coughlan*, Portia likens her and her husband’s lives to the purgatorial entrapment of living death: ‘I think the pair of us might as well be dead for all the joy we knock out of one another. The kids is asleep, the house creakin’ like a coffin, all them wooden doors and floors. Sometimes I can’t breathe anymore.’\(^{37}\) The opposing forces of the men and women in Carr’s mature works emerge in these early pieces with a notable spare-ness and assurance. Of *Low In The Dark*, Scaife notes: ‘It is in [Curtains’] story as well as in the occasional monologues by other characters that we hear an echo of the minor chord of dread, that is so much a part of the later plays.’\(^{38}\) Scaife continues: ‘In the later plays we can see this divide. The women are obsessed with the artistic or the romantic, the notion of ‘the story’ that is separate from the here and now. The men are preoccupied with the land or the accumulation of money, ‘the wall’. They see the possibility of their redemption through their future achievements or the goals that they hope to fulfil.’\(^{39}\)

As in Beckett’s theatre, the importance of narrative as a point of reference and ontological structure, in the assertion of the self is shown in *Low In The Dark*. In Act Two of *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir seeks consolation from storytelling and ‘talk’ for his feelings of

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35 Plays: One, p. 95.
36 Plays: One, p. 99.
37 Plays: One, p. 207.
38 Scaife, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: ‘...before rules was made.’
39 Scaife, *The Theatre of Marina Carr*: ‘...before rules was made.’.
isolation and anomie, begging Estragon to ‘Say something! [in anguish] say anything at all!’ Throughout the action of *Low In The Dark*, the four characters implore Curtains to continue her story. In scene five of Act One, Bender comes running from the shower: ‘Go back! Go back! This is the part I’ve been waiting for.’ Curtains replies: ‘I’ve just started.’ Bender needs confirmation: ‘Has she, Binder?’ In scene one of Act One Curtains asks Bender and Binder: ‘What about the stories I tell you about the man and the woman?’ Binder replies: ‘I don’t need your stories! I have my own man’, to which Curtains responds: ‘So you don’t want my stories anymore? (Goes to walk off). Bender says ‘No wait! We didn’t say that.’

Curtains’ tale steers the narrative of the play, an act that reclaims the traditionally patriarchal domain of constructing a chronological history. ‘Is everybody comfortable?’ Curtains asks in scene five. Bender responds (*bursting with excitement*): ‘Hurry up! Hurry up!’ Curtains tells her tale: ‘My love,’ the man said to the woman, ‘let’s make hay a stór mo chroi [love of my heart],’ the woman replied. For the woman loved the man and the man loved the woman.’ Bone demands: ‘Go on! Go on!’ Curtains continues: ‘The harvest was done. ‘Let’s walk some more,’ the man said with a hint of contempt in his voice. The woman began to cry.’ Christina Crosby writes of how:

> History is produced as man’s truth […] which in turn requires that ‘women’ be outside history, above, below, or beyond historical and political life. Constructing history as the necessary condition of human life […] ensures that ‘man’ can emerge as an abstraction, can know himself in history - but only if there is something other than history, something intrinsically unhistorical. ‘Women’ are the unhistorical other of history.

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41 *Plays: One*, p. 57.
42 *Plays: One*, p. 12.
43 *Plays: One*, p. 57.
44 *Plays: One*, p. 58.
In Low In The Dark history now becomes herstory, and although Curtain’s narrative is interrupted throughout the drama, she recovers and maintains it, significantly having the first and the last words of the play.

Throughout the drama Carr explores the social and performative strategies of sexual and gendered identity through strategies of cross-dressing and role-play. Theatre remains the ideal mode through which to identify and re-imagine conservative notions of corporeality, sexuality and gender due to its performative nature. Scaife notes how, in performance, ‘The characters represented general patterns of human behaviour and desires. The women represented the presumed female concerns such as reproduction and attracting men, the men the preoccupations of finding, keeping and to some extent understanding their particular women, whilst maintaining their building role with the wall. [...] Throughout the play all the characters were involved in ‘opposite sex’ role play’. In scene three of Act Two the two ‘males’, Baxter and Bone, play at being a heterosexual couple. Bone, who plays the husband, starts the action: ‘Ready’. Baxter does a little walk, then turns. [...] Woman’s voice: ‘Hello, darling.’ They kiss. How was your day?’ Baxter replies: ‘Fine, and yours? Painting your nails again?’ Bone says: ‘Yes, it’s wearing off. Are you hungry?’

In Making Sex, Laqueur identifies the relatively modern construction of gendered identity:

The dominant, though by no means universal, view since the eighteenth century has been that there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are somehow based on these ‘facts’. Biology - the stable, ahistorical, sexed body - is understood to be the epistemic foundation for the prescriptive claims about the social order.

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46 Scaife, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.
47 Plays: One, p. 40.
48 Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, p. 6.
Before this time, Laqueur maintains that, to be a man or a woman was essentially a gender identity based on social rank, rather than being a matter of two totally distinct and biologically separate sexes.

Pre-Enlightenment notions of the body regarded sexuality as a continuum, with no sharp delineations between male and female but rather, as a *variation* of a single, male, type. In other words, ‘there was but one sex whose more perfect exemplars were easily deemed male at birth and whose decidedly less perfect ones were labelled female’.⁴⁹ Men, it was deemed, who associated too closely with women could lose their masculinity and become effeminate; and rapid physical movement could produce a sudden sex change. The vagina, as an inverted penis, did not have a distinctive medical name until the early Eighteenth century, and ovaries, similarly, were referred to by the term also used for testicles, again as though simply a lesser (in)version of the latter. In Laqueur’s study there is an account by Paré and Montaigne of a girl who jumped across a ditch while chasing pigs and developed a penis. It was believed that ‘heat caused the vagina to ‘pop out’ into the penis; one is simply the reversal of the other. A woman was simply a man inside out, so to speak.’⁵⁰

In the Eighteenth century, with its divisive two-sex model, the constructed notion of ‘gender’ became the key signifier of identity and difference. Thus the pre-Enlightenment conception of the body links in with Bakhtin’s notion of *a l’êvers* or ‘inside-out’, so that in fact, the structure of a woman’s body could and was then viewed as a material configuration of Bakhtinian carnival. An early nineteenth century verse reinforces this homology:

Though they of different sexes be,
    Yet on the whole they are the same as we,
    For those that have the strictest searchers been,

⁴⁹ *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, p. 124.
⁵⁰ *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, p. 4.
Find women are but men turned outside in.\textsuperscript{51}

In \textit{Low In The Dark} gendered identity becomes increasingly fluid and interchangeable. The gendered body is de-composed and re-membered continually. With the exception of the symbolic interchangeability of the twins in \textit{Portia Coughlan}, Carr's plays from 1994 - 1998 offer static representations of gender. In \textit{Low In the Dark}, Curtains' narrative of male and female binarism operates as an ironic backdrop to the fluid identities inhabited and performed by Binder, Bender, Baxter and Bones. With the exception of the 'bodyless' Curtains, the characters in \textit{Low In The Dark} engage in incessant role-playing and cross-dressing making it exceptionally difficult for the spectator to confidently ascertain who is who. In scene three of Act One the two 'males', Bone and Baxter, perform the roles of 'husband' and 'wife':

\begin{quote}
Bone: Make it up. Come on.
Baxter: (woman's voice) Do you like my lipstick?
Bone: Yes, I do.
Baxter: And my sock?
Bone: Yes.
Baxter: I want a baby.
Bone: So do I.
Baxter: Will you buy me a present?
Bone: You want to trap me.
Baxter: I need you Bone.
Bone: You don't.
Baxter: Alright, I don't.
Bone: No! You do.
Baxter: I do.
Bone: You don't.
Baxter: I don't.
\end{quote}

Bone: You do!
Baxter: I don't!
Bone: You do!
Baxter: No, you need me!\textsuperscript{52}

In her role as Binder, Scaife recollects:

*Low In The Dark* incorporated [...] fractured characterisation, non-linear plot and non-sequential script. Thus at times for the performer it could be a particular character that you were playing, maybe many different characters, but they each had a sense of logic to them. At times there could be many different stories being told at the same time, with no reference to each other. These parts were most intense when Curtains was present. We would all have our individual lines which had no relation to the other actor’s lines. Each one’s lines had a logical throughline of their own but not to anyone else’s. Whilst concentrating on your own throughline, you also had to watch out for the rapid rhythm that the scene was firing along on and not miss your cue.\textsuperscript{53}

As Scaife notes, at certain moments role-playing assumes with Bender, Binder, Baxter and Bones all involved, engaging in four-way narratives which are snippets of previous conversations, and which are non-relational, thus shattering any semblance of a chronological order and indeed neat binaryism, and doubly subverted by the fact that the narratives are being spoken by characters who are performing cross-genders. What effectively occurs during these moments of performance are instances of ‘slippage’ and indeterminacy, where characters are between identities and narratives and may be regarded as inhabiting excessive liminal positions. Marvin Carlson writes: ‘The concept of the “liminal”, an in-between stage where normal societal organisation disappears, [is]

\textsuperscript{p. 369.}
\textsuperscript{52} Plays: *One*, pp. 41-2.
\textsuperscript{53} Scaife, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr*: “...before rules was made.”

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closely analogous to Bakhtin’s carnival." Carlson goes on to state: ‘Bakhtinian carnivalesque directs our attention to models of transformation and counterproduction, to centres of parody and excess both within the heart of any social system and its margins." The constant slippages, reversals and inversions in *Low In The Dark* remind the audience of the performative nature of social roles, where three dimensions of corporeality are being performed: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. The perpetual displacements constitute a fluidity and multiplicity of identities that suggests an openness to recontextualisation and resignification. Mary Russo notes: ‘The [Bakhtinian] grotesque body was exuberantly and democratically open and inclusive of all possibilities. Boundaries between individuals and society, between genders, between species, and between classes were blurred or brought into crisis in the inversions and hyperbole of carnivalesque representation." If Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body is constituted by that which is multiple, open and ever changing, a body which crosses boundaries by virtue of its resistance to closure, it can be viewed symbolically as constituting that which interrupts any static category, which in this case relates to gender.

In *Low In the Dark* gendered identity is continually parodied as cross-dressed characters inhabit, perform, and *play* with the social and encultured signifiers of conventional gendered identity. The ‘women’, Bender and Binder, are allocated the uniforms and props of their gender: lipstick, handbags, tampons, the pill, necklaces, high heels and scarves while the men are given a Black and Decker D.I.Y. tool kit, bricks, hats and tails. When these articles are handled by the opposite sex their semiotic value and social enculturalisation is re-politicised. In “Cross-dressing and Women’s Theatre”, Lesley Ferris writes:

> Understanding the ambiguities of cross-dressing is essential to understanding the nature of theatre as live performance. A cross-dressed performer – for example, a

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man playing a woman – can be read as a woman or as a disguised male, or as a
man who longs for other men, or as all three. [...] Such a theatrical transformation
can highlight another potentially subversive characteristic of cross-dressing; the
cross-dressed actor reveals that gender is socially constructed.\(^57\)

In *Low In The Dark*, Scaife notes: ‘The knitting of the scarf represented ‘female action’
and it grew longer and longer throughout the play. [...] The lads had a handbag with
various items, for when they played the different women in their respective lives, lipstick
being of paramount importance to both the men and women, like war paint in preparation
for battle.’\(^58\) In scene one of Act Two, Bone, the ‘male’, is now pregnant and roots in
Binder’s handbag: ‘*He produces tampons and goes to put two in his pocket.*’ Binder
‘catches him’ with the tampons and says: ‘Bone, they’re women’s things!’ Bone replies
‘Are they? (*He puts a pill in his mouth).*’\(^59\) Scaife’s documentation of the production
recalls that ‘Marina had had an idea for the play, that she got from the notion that there
was, in some men, a sort of pregnancy envy, that some old bachelors grew humps on their
shoulders a sort of surrogate pregnancy: by the end of the play everyone has been
pregnant except for Curtains.’\(^60\)

As the action unfolds in *Low In The Dark*, a multiplicity of interchangeable gendered
identities ensues, where the pregnant male, Bone, plays a woman, while Baxter plays a
woman and Binder plays a woman. As the dialogue speeds up, the narrative becomes
increasingly fractured and contextually abstracted: Bone says ‘Please, Binder, can I carry
your handbag? Binder replies: ‘First the knitting, now the handbag!’ [...] Baxter (*from
behind the curtains*) Lovely day. Baxter; ‘I hope this weather keeps up.’ Baxter says:
‘How are you doing, Bone?’ Bone replies: ‘Grand and yourself?’ and so on.\(^61\) In the same
act, Bone and Baxter engage in more role-play, incorporating elements of cross-dressing.

\(^{56}\) *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity*, p. 78.
\(^{57}\) Ferris, Lesley, in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, p. 168.
\(^{58}\) Scaife, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr*: “…before rules was made”.
\(^{59}\) *Plays: One*, p. 61.
\(^{60}\) Scaife, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr*: “…before rules was made.”
\(^{61}\) *Plays: One*, p. 61.
In the stage-directions Carr indicates: 'Bone has his arm around Baxter as if they are a married couple. Baxter wears high heels, a woman’s hat, a dress, and a necklace around his neck. He looks pregnant. 62

Traditional gender-specific behaviour is humorously objectified when projected onto the politicised sites of the crossed-bodies; Baxter, in a ‘woman’s voice’ states: ‘You’re marvellous, darling, you really are.’ Bone (pointing to the wall) So you like it?... I think you should do your knitting.’ Baxter: ‘I want to help with the wall!’ Bone: ‘Knit darling, knit!’ Brief tableau of knitting and building.63 With the action of building a wall, this excerpt symbolically displays the binding imprisonment of rigid genderisation. In scene three Baxter and Bone resume their role-play: Bone enters, lays a brick, sits in a deck-chair and starts knitting. Baxter arrives with a necklace around his neck and nail polish in his hand.64 The characters swap the gender-signifying objects back and forth. Baxter (offering the nail polish again): ‘Look, will you do this or won’t you?’ Bone replies: ‘Always the necklace!’ Baxter shouts back: ‘Always the knitting!’ Baxter gives him the nail polish. Bone sits down, takes off a shoe and begins painting his toenails in a female pose.65 Similar to the repetitive actions in Beckett’s Act Without Words 11, Binder poignantly comments in scene five on the vicious-circularity of social behavioural-patterns: ‘I knit, he builds, he builds, he knocks it down and he builds again.’66

In Low In The Dark, the strategies of role-playing, incorporating elements of cross-dressing can, as Michlene Wandor notes, ‘function as an expression of rebellion; a form of witty subversion in which one sex impersonates the other, and by so doing shows up some of the ridiculous constraints which define femininity and masculinity.’67 While they are role-playing, Bone and Baxter switch in and out of their assigned genders and gender performances at various points. Carr ironically directs that the ‘real Baxter erupts out of

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62 Plays: One, p. 16.
63 Plays: One, pp. 16-17.
64 Plays: One, p. 38.
66 Plays: One, p. 53.
the role-play’ switching from ‘a deep man’s voice’ back to ‘a feminine voice’.\textsuperscript{68} This non-realism emphasises the conscious performativity of the enactments, the technique of defamiliarisation highlighting their inanity. In the same scene Baxter, the ‘wife’ says: ‘You’re not earning enough! […] I think you should get another job.’ Bone replies ‘But I’d never see you!’ Baxter (\textit{real voice}) Exactly!’ Bone takes offence; ‘Watch it!’ . Baxter, who plays the \textit{niggling female again}, replies: ‘Is there any point in us going on?’\textsuperscript{69}

In \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity}, Judith Butler states: ‘The appearance of cross-dressed bodies playing with the visible ornaments of gender displaces the inner/outer boundary of the body and exposes the illusion of coherence and unified origin in constructions of gender.’\textsuperscript{70} In scene two Baxter sees that Bone is holding a woman’s earring and a pink sock and asks: ‘Can I, eh, can I try it on? […] How does she walk?’ Bone replies: ‘I haven’t quite mastered it yet, but it’s something like this.’ \textit{Does a female walk. Baxter copies him.}\textsuperscript{71} In the same scene Bone is \textit{back in a female role} and Baxter says: ‘Red’s your colour.’ Bone repeats: ‘Red’s my colour.’ Baxter then says: ‘And sometimes rust’, to which Bone responds: ‘And sometimes rust.’ Highlighting the meaninglessness and interchangeability of the gender identities, Baxter then says: ‘OK, it’s my turn now. (\textit{He takes the necklace, puts the lid on the polish and puts the necklace around his neck.})\textsuperscript{72}

The relationship between clothing, signification and the body is vital. Roland Barthes states: ‘As for the human body, Hegel had already suggested that it was in a relation of signification with clothing; as pure sentience the body cannot signify; clothing guarantees the passage from sentience to meaning; it is we might say, the signified par excellence. But which body is the […] garment […] to signify?’\textsuperscript{73} If gender only exists in

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Plays: One}, pp. 22-3.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 41.
representation, and clothing is the main signifier of the representation, what is under the clothes? Can ‘the body’ be regarded as phantomic, absent or indeed metaphoric?

In addition to the gender crossings there are fissures or moments of non-identification in Low In The Dark as characters visibly change clothes or switch from their performing identity back to their assigned dramatis persona through voice alone, posing the questions ‘what am I?’, ‘what do you think I am?’ and ‘what are you?’. In Transgressing the Modern, Jervis notes that ‘the grotesque body is, among its other characteristics, the body that overflows its boundaries, the body that defies representation.’ In an interview Carr states: ‘Who is male and who is female in Low In The Dark? I don’t know, they are all mixed, one or the other.’ These states of confusion move beyond a mere reversal of everyday categories or mirror-opposites. Inverting the game does not challenge the game itself. What is most disturbing is the pointing out of possibilities that lie beyond the present order altogether, thus questioning the very notion of ‘order’, authenticity or a ‘knowable’, essential self. As Butler provocatively asserts: ‘The imitations [of gendered identity] effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself’. The constant swappings and crossings necessitate the trauma of dislocation: the confusion is experienced by the performers, author and audience alike, provoking a blurring of distinctions between ‘reality’ and representation.

‘General’ identification, that is, identity without gendered connotation is also deliberately confounded in scene two, so that the characters, actors, audience and playwright are once again confused. The stichomythic dialogue ensues as follows:

**Bone:** Hello, Binder.

**Binder:** Hello, Bone.

**Bender:** Hello Bender. Hello, Bender.

*The pace accelerates.*

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74 Transgressing The Modern, p. 27.
75 Carr, Marina, Interview with Melissa Sihra, Trinity College, Dublin, February 25, 1999.
Bone: Binder this is Baxter.
[Significantly] No one looks at anyone.

Binder: Baxter, this is Bone.

Baxter: Binder, this is Bone.

Bone: Baxter, this is Binder.

Binder: Bone, this is Baxter.

Baxter: Bone, this is Binder.

Bender: Bender, this is Bender.77

In this last introduction, the self (Bender) significantly meets the self, implying that self is other, and that a single, ‘stable’ identity is not recognisable or possible even when viewed from within the self. Carr is again stressing plurality, inferring that ‘the self’ or ‘identity’ is always fractured or multiplicit. Jervis interrogates the notion of selfhood: ‘How, indeed, can the self become aware of itself, take itself as object? How can it represent itself to itself?78 The western discourse of subjectivity, to be a ‘self’, is to be distinguished from the other, to be ordered and discrete, secure within these well-defined boundaries of the body. Bender problematically occupies this subject position. In viewing herself as ‘other’, she is outside of herself, shattering the notion of mind-body unity.

Through the figures of Bender and Curtains Carr challenges the autonomous notion of stable ‘selfhood’ afforded to the modern embodied subject, by representing the ‘self’ and the body as entities not as clearly designated as we might often assume. Another type of dialogue with the self enfolds in scene two of Act Two as the ‘women’, Bender and Binder, enact a stereotypical ‘married-life’ scenario amidst vigorous hat-swapping activity. Anthony Roche rightly suggests that Bender and Binder are ‘like female versions of Didi and Gogo, but there is an increased awareness of gender issues, as [Carr’s] version of their hat-swapping indicates in its switching between male and female

78 Transgressing The Modern, p. 46.
voices.' Exasperated from a stalemate discussion about having more children, Binder ‘throws the hat’ to Bender who ‘slams it on her head and takes on a male pose’. Bender then assumes both the male and female personae and engages in a cross-gendered monologue, where the hat is the signifier of difference:

Listen, I have my work. (Takes off the hat.) What about me? (hat back on) Don’t I spend all the time I can with you? (hat off) It’s not enough, I miss you. (hat on) I miss you too. (hat off) That’s a lie. (hat on) It’s not. (hat off) It is. (hat on) It’s not. (hat off) It is. (hat on) It’s not. (hat off) It is. (hat on and off at accelerated speed). ‘Tis, not, ‘tis, not, ‘tisnot, ‘tisnot, etc. (Eventually she throws the hat off.) Ah, go to hell!

The rapid interchange of Bender’s double-gendered monologue makes identification increasingly difficult. Carr presents excessive moments that offer slippery sites of ambiguous gendered signification such as, for instance when Bender physically removes and replaces the item of clothing (the hat). The final resolution in this aporia of signification is to ‘go to hell.’ The moments of ambivalent signification, such as when Bender takes the hat on and off, relates to Barthes notion of the precarious relationship between corporeality, signification (clothing) and selfhood. If the guise of the hat signifies the guise of gender (whichever one), what does the body signify without this apparel?

Bender’s enactment of meeting or acknowledging her-self, ‘Bender this is Bender’, requires the self to stand outside itself, taking itself as ‘other’ while remaining within: becoming actively ‘self’-conscious. The reflexive quality of such notions as ‘myself’, as exclusive of anything else, marks the birth of the world of subjects and objects. This is distinct from the medieval conception of the body which was viewed as a microcosmic symbol of the greater universe, and which had no spatial distinction of ‘within’ and ‘without’.

79 Contemporary Irish Drama; From Beckett to McGuinness, p. 287.
Norbert Elias points out that the pre-modern body had 'nothing that resembles a container, nothing that could justify metaphors like that of the 'inside' of a human being. The intuition of a wall, of something 'inside' man separated from the outside world, however genuine it might be as an intuition, corresponds to nothing in man having the character of a real wall.' The term 'self-consciousness', first used by Samuel Coleridge, along with the modern notion of 'self-control', indicates how the 'self' becomes a noun crucial to the modern sense of agency and an essential attribute of independent selfhood and identity. Thus the character of the modern body is what Elias calls *Homo Clausus*, or 'closed man'. The emphasis on 'man' is crucial here since, although both sexes are affected by these Eighteenth century developments, masculinity is the primary signifier of gender and ontology. The modern *Homo Clausus* is now viewed as armoured and bounded from the world, distinct and defined.

Bakhtin's conception of the open, renewing grotesque body is in stark contrast to this masculine modern body which encompasses the Enlightenment ideal that 'man' or *Homo Clausus* should conform to a standard conceived as universal and uniform. Dorinda Outram articulates the implications of the body politics of this notion of modernity:

*Homo Clausus* legitimated himself by his superiority to the somatic relationships enjoyed by other classes - aristocracy, peasants and workers - and by the other gender [...] display is characterised as aristocratic, emotionality and subjectivity as feminine, physical energy as plebeian.

Carr's depiction in *Low In The Dark* of permeable, amoebic or protean gender-states contests the hegemony of the 'closed man' or *Homo Clausus* discourse, where the

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80 *Plays: One*, p. 66.
excessive and grotesque tendencies of the form and content of the plays confuse monological notions of closure and fixity.

The dialogue of *Low In The Dark* is filled with Bakhtinian images of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body, which according to Bakhtin are ‘such leading themes as copulation, pregnancy, birth, eating, drinking and death’. Bender is Binder’s mother and is first seen in the bath in Act One giving birth for the umpteenth time. Here, mother and daughter enact the stereotype of a ‘long-suffering’ married couple, where the baby’s gender oscillates continually according to the whim of the mother:

Binder: You’ve put on weight!
Bender: That’s the baby.
Binder: You drink too much!
Bender: I don’t drink half enough! I deserve one after that ordeal. [...] Put him in the shower and give him a doll!
Binder: They’re for girl-babies.
Bender: Well then give him a train and give his mother a drink!  

Countless babies of different colour are birthed throughout *Low In The Dark*, which are then flung carelessly to-and-fro. Fluidity, interchangeability and ambivalence are stressed in the stage-directions: *Curtains throws a yellow baby at Bender, and throws a pink one at Binder. [...] The yellow baby is swapped for the pink baby. All three of them are involved in the throwing and the catching.* In scene five of Act One the stage directions indicate:

*Binder goes to the shower, throw three babies on Bender and sits with two, both breast-feeding. Curtains gets up and goes over to the shower. She grabs an armful*  

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84 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 355.
85 *Plays: One*, pp. 8-9.
86 *Plays: One*, p. 52.
of babies, and orchestrates the feeding of the babies. Soundtrack of babies gurgling and crying comes over.\textsuperscript{87}

In the Bakhtinian carnivalesque atmosphere of praise and abuse ambivalence, the babies are thrown about the stage, beaten indiscriminately then fawned upon. In \textit{Rabelais and His World}, Bakhtin writes: ‘In [the carnivalesque] system death is followed by regeneration, by the new year, new youth, and a new spring. Therefore, abuse is followed by praise; they are two aspects of one world, each with its own body.’\textsuperscript{88} Upon throwing one of the many babies, Binder states: ‘He’s a very ugly baby!’ Bender then kisses the baby and gives it to Binder who continues: ‘I think it’s a she. (Throes it in the shower).’\textsuperscript{89}

Intriguing tales about giving birth had an extraordinarily large circulation in early modern England, and were undoubtedly a way of expressing anxieties about reproduction and the regulation of female sexuality. Represented in popular communal forms such as the ballad, the tales frequently encoded the punishment of female insubordination or unruliness. One such popular story, which circulated in a variety of forms throughout the seventeenth century tells of a rich, childless Countess who refused to help a beggar woman and her twin babies, and was punished by being cursed with giving birth to three-hundred and sixty-five babies, one for each day of the year, all in one go.\textsuperscript{90} The subordination of the Countess, who along with all of the children dies, shows a carnivalesque kind of inverted retribution where excessive fertility becomes her penalty. In one version of the story, the Countess, bitter because she is childless (while the beggar woman has twins), justifies her anti-philanthropic stance with accusations of sexual transgression:

\begin{quote}
Thou art some Strumpet sure I know,  
And spend'st thy dayes in shame,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 51.  
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Rabelais and His World}, p. 198.  
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 11.  
And stained sure thy marriage bed
With spots of black defame.⁹¹

In a prose version of the seventeenth century story, Edward Grymston writes: ‘The Countess was delivered of three hundred sixtie and five children, half sons and halfe daughters, the odde one being found a Hermaphrodite, all complete and well fashioned with their little members.’⁹² In *Low In The Dark*, the children’s genders are presented as fluid and continually interchangeable. In the same scene Binder, who is breast-feeding Bender’s baby, declares: ‘It’s a she!’ to which Binder replies: ‘What’ll we call him?’⁹³ That the babies’ gender may change at any given time, a notion that is ironically and playfully naturalised into the narrative, indicates the playful indeterminacy which runs throughout the drama. The androgynous or hermaphrodite body represents a unique version of the grotesque body in which conventional forms of identity are provisionally suspended. Victor Turner identifies masculine-feminine dualities in various representations of deities in ancient cultures. He terms these as “‘threshold persons” inhabiting the border, margin or outskirts of a certain place - or travers[ing] it as they journey to another, often wild, magical, or “topsy-turvy” region of the cosmos’.⁹⁴

Rituals, rites of passage and festivities have long featured as a means of inhabiting liminal sites which blur neatly defined western conceptions of the body through the transformative possibility of play. For instance, the Tewa people of south-western North America took part in a ritual where the young persons were asked: ‘Are you a man?’ to which both males and females would respond “yes”. They were then asked: ‘Are you a woman?’ to which they would also collectively respond ‘yes’. This symbolic process underscores the Tewa People’s celebration of gender as a symbolic, all inclusive and potentially transformative state of liminality, associated with fluidity and metamorphosis.

⁹³ *Plays: One*, p. 9.
In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Europe, hermaphroditism and any hint of androgyny, along with cross-dressing, caused considerable anxiety. This anxiety was because of the danger or threat which appeared to be directed at the ‘normal’ gender hierarchy of society by the act of crossing and impersonation, and also because by making visible the usually invisible assumption that the division of society into two genders, masculine and feminine, is natural and inevitable, it leaves this assumption open to question. A contemporaneous cultural commentator betrays the general anxiety of the day: ‘Our apparel was given us as a signe distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, and therefore to wear the Apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his own kinde.’ From this quotation it is clear to note again, how difference is marked by the primary signifier of the male gender.

The Bakhtinian sensibility of irreverence, which is linked to the subversive potential of laughter, permeates Low in the dark where the babies are given humorously inappropriate or incongruous names. In scene five of Act One Bender says: ‘I know my children! This is the Doctor! Here on my right breast is the Black Sheep! (Points to the yellow one.) On my left, the President! Now, where’s the Pope?’ In “Carnival Pleasures and the Spectre of Misrule”, Jervis recalls how, when Martin Luther burnt the papal bull in 1520, (excommunicating him - an episode that marks the beginning of the Reformation), ‘an impromptu carnival procession began through the streets where an imitation pope was publicly mocked and ridiculed.’ The same political dynamic of resistance through humour operates in Low In The Dark where Bender says: ‘I’ll feed him again. I want him fat and shiny. Holy Father, (bows to the baby) […] We’ll have tea in the palace and I’ll learn Italian and the pair of us side by side, launching crusades, banning divorce, denying evolution, destroying the pill, canonising witches.’

The patriarchal exclusivity of Roman Catholic discourse is emphasised when Carr switches its gender-biased language in Curtains’ story: ‘And they came to a hill where

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96 Transgressing the Modern, p.21.
97 Plays: One, pp. 54-5.
three men were nailing three women on three crosses. 'What have we here,' the man said. 'I want vinegar,' the one on the middle cross yelled. 'Get me vinegar!' Would wine do?' the woman asked. 'Has to be vinegar!' the one on the cross screamed. The one on the right roared, 'WE'LL BE BACK! WE'LL BE BACK!' And the one on the left said, 'Put silk on a man and he's still a goat, put silk on a goat and she's still a woman!' Bender intervenes: 'Oh my God, immaculately receive me, to which Binder adds: 'Conceive me spectacular.' The segment of story concludes with all in unison declaring: In the name of the mother, the daughter and the holy spirit. (*Pause.*) Ah! (*Pause.*) MEN!'98

Carr's humorous and ironic depictions of recognisable stock-character types such as the 'nagging wife' and the disinterested 'hen-pecked' husband, highlight what Jervis identifies as: 'the best-known features of othering discourse, namely the production of stereotypes. [Which] simultaneously generalise, exaggerate and fix certain features of particular individual instances of a category, thereby rendering them necessary, universal and immutable features of the category in question.'99 In scene two of Act One, Baxter, who is playing the 'wife' says to 'husband' Bone (they are both 'males): 'If you did you could have buns every day, and I could knit you a decent scarf.' Bone responds: 'I hate it when you say things like that! You're only trying to upset me. (points to the wall) I do everything to please you!'100

The popular culture of Hollywood, the media and advertising, which offer repeated monological hetero-normative ideals of masculinity and femininity, are similarly parodied, as Bone declares that he desires a Goddess-like lover: 'I want a woman who knows how to love. I want laser beams coming out of her eyes when I enter the room. I want her to knit like one possessed. I want her to cook softly.' Binder equally consumes the impossible ideals of mass culture: 'I want a man who'll wash my underwear, one

98 *Plays: One*, p. 50.
99 *Transgressing the Modern*, p. 8-9.
100 *Plays: One*, p. 18.
who’ll brush my hair, one who’ll talk before, during and after. I want a man who will make other men look mean."\textsuperscript{101}

The modern construct of ‘Romantic love’ with its props of candles, wine and soft music, which is also demythologised in \textit{Portia Coughlan}, is depicted by Carr as not only bland ritual and social drama, but is also given a chilling \textit{peripatetic} sting in the tail. In scene four of Act Two Bender reads to Baxter from a copy of \textit{True Romance} magazine:

Doug moved closer to Sofia, his hot breath on the nape of her tiny neck. He held her tightly in his tanned, hairy, muscular arms. Sofia shrieked! ‘Doug’ she said, ‘I can’t.’ ‘Of course you can’ he murmured, his tongue in her ear. ‘No! Doug! Please, I have leukaemia,’ Sofia gasped. ‘Well I haven’t!’ Doug answered, his fingers travelling down her spine.\textsuperscript{102}

In \textit{Portia Coughlan}, Portia asks her friend Stacia: ‘And what do yees talk about, yourself and Justin, when ye’re be yeerselves? [...] I mean is there any differ sittin’ opposite him with a candle stuck between ye than there would be if ye were at home facin’ one another in armchairs?’\textsuperscript{103} In Act Two of \textit{Low In The Dark}, Bender says \textit{in a feminine, gentle, baby voice}: ‘we could have a little chat and maybe some wine?... Do you like red or white?’ Binder replies: ‘Or blood?’\textsuperscript{104}

The domestic sphere is depicted as a site of danger, anxiety and violence in \textit{Low In The Dark}. As in \textit{Portia Coughlan}, everyday implements are associated with sinister potential, where mundane objects become possible weapons of corporeal mutilation, death and destruction. In scene five of Act One, Binder says: ‘And his Black and Decker! He’d drill the eyes out of my head if I’d let him.’\textsuperscript{105} In \textit{Portia Coughlan} the audience hears that Stacia Doyle, the ‘Cyclops of Coolinarney’, had her ‘eye gouged out’ and Portia makes

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Plays: One}, pp. 206-7.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 53.
negative associations with household objects: ‘When I look at my sons, I see knives and
accidents and terrible mutilations. Their toys is weapons for me to hurt them with, givin’
them a bath is a place where I could drown them.’

Everyday activities are exaggerated in Low In The Dark to magnify the preposterous
banality of naturalised social behaviour. In scene two of Act One Baxter, the ‘male’ who
is playing at being a ‘wife’, says to ‘husband’ Bone in a deadpan tone: ‘I am very happy
with you. I cooked you your favourite [...] Two trays! Twenty-four buns all for you.’
The excess and hyperbole displays the artificiality and ludicrousness of prescribed,
socially codified gendered activity. Baxter then resumes knitting a scarf which Carr notes,
is ‘about twenty feet long’. When Baxter asks Bone to marry him in scene three, he
states his reasoning by adding ‘Because [then] we can hate one another legally.’

In scene three of Act Two, a heavily pregnant ‘male’ Bone sentimentally recalls ‘life
before children’: ‘It was all easier then, I was younger, freer and cheesecake was the
thing.’ The whimsical nature of the dialogue is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde’s The
Importance of Being Earnest which similarly parodies the absurd rigidity of social
etiquette and gender stereotype. In Act Two of Wilde’s play Cecily says to Gwendolen:
‘Cake or bread or butter?’ Gwendolen replies: ‘Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely
seen in the best houses nowadays.’ Now married, there is nothing left for Bone to
negotiate except one ‘bun in the oven’ after the next. In scene four of Act One, Carr
playfully incorporates the image of the bun as a metaphor for reproduction:

Bone: Darling, you know when you make buns?
Bender: ‘I’m pregnant,’ he says...

106 Plays: One, p. 233.
107 Plays: One, p. 18.
108 Plays: One, p. 18.
109 Plays: One, p. 44.
Bone: The temperature has to be just right... Has to be 150 degrees... And you have to pre-heat the oven... For fifteen minutes exactly... Otherwise they don’t taste the way they should.  

Motherhood is a central and ambivalent theme in Carr’s plays. While mother-figures are central to the dramatic drive of the narratives, the naturalised notion of the so-called ‘maternal instinct’ is repeatedly de-mythologised. In Low In The Dark Baxter pronounces that pregnancy is ‘normal.’ The ‘male’ Bone contemplates this essentiality with a hint of doubt: ‘It should be the most natural thing in the world to have a baby.’ When Bone’s baby kicks in the womb he asks his partner: ‘It’s normal isn’t it?’ to which Baxter replies: ‘Is it not?’ The disjointed content of Baxter and Bone’s discussion denaturalises the normative assumptions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth.

Patriarchy is depicted in each of the plays from 1989 - 1998 in a similarly de-romanticised fashion as being in a state of crisis, being either present and ineffectual as in Portia Coughlan, or absent and passive as in The Mai and By the Bog of Cats. Patriarchy is represented as ambiguous and precarious in Act One of Low In The Dark when Bender, who is asked about the paternity of her baby, responds: ‘None of your business! Isn’t it enough that he has a father somewhere [...] somewhere [...]’. She writes a letter to the unknown father: ‘My dearest... My dearest? My dearest man, I am writing to tell you that you have another son...’ Binder asks her where she will send it: ‘Just leave it here. He’ll know it’s for him when he comes.’ Binder (throwing the letter on the floor) He’ll never come, they never do.

Francois Rabelais’s writings are primarily known for their Gargantuan breaches of ‘decorum’ in relation to all things corporeal. In a similar vein the Bakhtinian carnivalesque notion of the grotesque draws upon an emphasis on physical acts, and

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111 Plays: One, p. 47.
112 Plays: One, p. 68.
113 Plays: One, p. 69.
114 Plays: One, p. 11.
bodily functions such as copulation, birth, eating, drinking, death and defecation, where
the body is conceptualised to represent social manners and behaviour, and topographical
and linguistic elements of the world. The grotesque body is synonymous with fertility,
openness, growth, renewal and earthiness. Bakhtin relates the grotesque body to
‘degradation’: ‘To degrade [...] means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the
body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of
defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily
g rave for a new birth.’¹¹⁶ The death-birth ambivalence is central to Bakhtin, Beckett and
Carr. In Waiting for Godot, Pozzo says: ‘One day we were born, one day we shall die, the
same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride of a grave,
the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.’¹¹⁷

While criticised for eliding discourses of women within the symbolic politics of carnival
and the grotesque, Bakhtin describes woman, in one short passage, as being essentially
related to the material bodily lower stratum, which is a crucial aspect of the principle of
carnival: ‘She is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates
simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily
substance to things and destroys; but first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She
is the womb.’¹¹⁸ In scene one of Low In The Dark, Binder says to her mother Bender: ‘I
had a dream last night that your uterus fell out. Bender replies: ‘I dreamt your ovaries
exploded!’ Binder retorts: ‘At least I have ovaries and eggs, lots of eggs, much more than
you because I’m young. I’m in my prime.’¹¹⁹

In early modern Europe the notion that women were an innately disruptive force in
society was grounded in a similar perception of the female body as inherently grotesque.
This perception was related to the female reproductive capacity, stemming from the belief
that possession of a womb made women more prone than men to suffer from hysteria.
The womb was imagined as an unruly sentient creature with an independent existence. If

¹¹⁶ Rabelais and His World, p. 21.
¹¹⁸ Rabelais and His World, p. 240.
the womb became dissatisfied with its usual location, it would wander its owner’s body in search of satisfaction, overpowering the woman’s speech, senses and mental faculties. In *The Wandering Womb*, Lana Thompson writes:

Etymologically, the Greek word for “womb” (*husteros*) meant “latter, lower”, but in its feminine form (*hustera*) came to be applied specifically to the lower part of a woman’s anatomy. Since the wandering of the womb was believed to cause disease in women, “hysteria” became a catch-call for a variety of female illnesses and behaviours.\(^{120}\)

Thus it is shown how the womb is relegated to the somatic politics of the ‘low’, as well as being the active cause of dis-ease and presumed ontological anxiety, relating directly to the cultural politics of female corporeal and subjective regulation.

Explicit references to the female reproductive process populate the narrative of *Low In The Dark*. In Act Two, Bone asks Baxter: ‘You were a caesarean baby?’ Baxter replies: ‘Of course.’ Bone says:

> No wonder you’re so balanced. I was a natural birth. From paradise I came, through the chink, to this galaxy of grief. I’ll never forget it and I’ll never forgive her for it. Purged from the womb, jostled down the long passage, the umbilical cord around my neck, the grunting, the groaning, the blood...\(^{121}\)

The historical elision of an acknowledged, independent biological female body from medical discourses is of immense importance. Thompson notes: ‘[F]or instance it was not until 1928 that a connection between hormones, ovulation and the menstrual cycle was incorporated into scientific discourse.’\(^{122}\) Its alignment with the phases of the moon ensured, particularly from the Romantic era onwards, that the menstrual cycle inhabited a

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\(^{119}\) *Plays: One*, p. 10.

\(^{120}\) Thompson, Lana, *The Wandering Womb*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999), pp. 21-3.

\(^{121}\) *Plays: One*, p. 80.
metaphysical territory, assuring a connection between the female with 'lunacy' and hysteria.

The enigmatic elements of the natural world were associated with a certain concept of womanhood as uncontrollable and unruly, wild and often dangerous. Sally Shuttleworth writes of how 'Menstruation became an obsessive focus of the male imagination, symbolising with its bloody, uncontrollable flow, the dark otherness of womanhood [...] Womanhood itself is thus figured as a form of pathology [...]'. In By the Bog of Cats...

the association of woman with nature, unruliness and disorder is projected onto Hester Swane and her mother Big Josie Swane, who was remembered as 'a harsh auld yoke, [who] came and went like the moon.' Even before this time, the monthly cycle conveniently associated woman with nature as opposed to civility and culture, confirming, as Marina Warner notes: 'the ancient associations of women with Otherness, outsiderdom, with carnality, instinct and passion, as against men, endowed with reason, control and spirituality, who govern and order society.'

Central to Rabelais and His World are images of 'pregnant death' and the aging pregnant, laughing crone as emphasised in the vivid description of the Kerch terracotta figurines, to which each chapter of this thesis will refer. By linking death to regeneration, Bakhtin's motifs of carnival are connected to the Beckettian ambivalence of giving ‘birth astride the grave’. In scene five of Act Two Bone describes giving birth: ‘the groaning, the blood, the shit, the piss, and the first scream, there was the point of no return. A rough start to a rough journey I tell you. I wouldn’t wish life on my worst enemy, I’ll have an abortion.’ In scene five of Act Two, Baxter says: ‘We’re all abortions, some later than others, that’s all. But look on the good side. Life is short, soon we’ll be dead.’

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124 Plays: One, p. 323.
126 Plays: One, p. 80.
127 Plays: One, p. 80.
Bender, who is in her fifties, is described in the *dramatis personae* as attractive but ageing. She frequently gives birth, explicitly linking the motif of womb and tomb. Binder taunts her about her ageing sexuality: ‘(whispers) Menopause, hot flush, empty womb […] The womb will be empty and the tomb will be full!’\(^{128}\) In scene five of Act One, Bender provokes established views on motherhood: ‘I am an artist, a bloody genius in fact! Show me the art that is life! You can travel the whole world and nowhere, nowhere will you find it except in the big stretch-marked belly of a woman.'\(^{129}\) Bakhtin’s multiple references to the ‘life of the belly’ in *Rabelais and His World* are related singularly to the female belly in *Low In The Dark* and are thus linked unequivocally with the biologically female act of child-birth.\(^{130}\)

The immeasurable horde of offspring that both Bender and Binder juggle between them is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s throbbing and ever renewing, collective grotesque body. Bakhtin stresses this aspect of the grotesque body; ‘[It is] the collective ancestral body of the people [...] something universal [...] representing all the people [...] The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people.’\(^{131}\) The babies in *Low In The Dark* form a teeming generic mass, often sharing the same names, so that they cannot be individually differentiated. In scene five of Act One, Bender addresses her children, de-personalising and de-subjectifying them: ‘Now Jonathan, you'll have to wait while Jonathan and Jonathan drink first.’\(^{132}\) In scene one of Act One, Bender says: ‘After the first million you get used to it.’ Binder responds ambivalently: ‘It’s a she!’ To which Bender says: ‘What’ll we call him?’ Binder recommends a boy’s name: ‘Alexander.’ Bender replies: ‘We have an Alexander!’ Binder retorts: ‘There’s no harm in another one.’\(^{133}\) Such seemingly incongruous images of population and growth in *Low In The Dark* combine the foregrounded elements of the hyperbolic, ever generating energy of Bakhtinian grotesque realism.

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\(^{128}\) *Plays: One*, p. 78.
\(^{129}\) *Plays: One*, p. 52.
\(^{130}\) In *Low In The Dark* pregnancy and the word ‘belly’ are linked repeatedly, both in the text and stage directions.
\(^{131}\) *Rabelais and His World*, p.19.
\(^{132}\) *Plays: One*, p. 52.
\(^{133}\) *Plays: One*, p. 9.
Carr imaginatively re-places the traditional matriarchal space of the kitchen with the intimate space of the bathroom in *Low In The Dark*. In scene one of Act One, Binder gets up from the toilet where she has been sitting as if on a throne, and characters sit on the toilet continually, spit into it and at each other, and share baths and bath water. The private space of the bathroom and its associations with water, fluidity, ritual and renewal are linked to female subjectivity in *Low In The Dark*, marking a pattern that Carr develops in her later works, while the men are allocated the structured space with tyres, rims, unfinished walls and blocks strewn about. The link between water and female subjectivity permeates Carr’s trilogy. In *The Mai*, the eponymous character is compelled to Owl Lake, in *Portia Coughlan*, the central female is ontologically reflected in the ever-moving Belmont River, and in *By the Bog of Cats*... Hester is familiar with ‘every barrow and rivulet and bog-hole’ of the bog’s ‘nine-square mile’.

As noted in *Low In The Dark*, the women constantly bathe, share the bath-water and sit on the toilet. How the modern body views ‘uncleanliness’, ‘dirt’ and contamination displays consequences for our understanding of the significance of ‘hygiene’ as a cultural practice which, once again, began as a rational campaign in the Eighteenth century. The terms hygiene and ‘civility’ (which became widespread in the eighteenth century) carry, according to Bryson, ‘the connotation of order based on reason, to which was opposed undisciplined animal instinct and a lawless primitive nature.’ In *The History of Manners* Norbert Elias shows how the social control of body functions such as eating, washing, yawning, spitting, ejecting mucus, fidgeting and passing wind has a complex history. He states: ‘Socially undesirable impulses are [now] more radically repressed. They are associated with [...] shame or guilt, even when one is alone [...] This becomes then a matter of self-control, causing it to appear as the result of [...] free will.’

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134 *Plays: One*, p. 7.
135 *Plays: One*, p. 5.
136 *Plays: One*, p. 314.
manners are connected to the internal construction of the self, these regulations of the body become a site of ideology and subjectivity.

Carr's depictions of taboo-laden bodily functions, where the bathroom replaces the kitchen, focuses on this conditioning, which Elias claims 'gains prominence with the rise of the middle classes', and is thus a product of 'high' or dominant bourgeois culture. Significantly it is Curtains who continually resists corporeal regulations and social grooming rituals. While Curtains is in the bath, Bender offers her some bubble-bath. Curtains does not react, but continues with her story. Bender explains her motivation: 'We all need a good scrub. He gave it to me for [...] He gave it to me for the smell. 'I love the smell of you,' he said, 'after a bath.' Bender then offers Curtains a razor, again to no reaction, and in accordance with Curtains' refusal Binder comments: 'The hairier the better.'

The 'civilising process' of the Enlightenment campaign against filth sought to affirm the superiority, moral as much as bodily, of the bourgeois ruling classes. Chadwick's reforming text, entitled Report [...] on an Inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain (1842) became an instant best-seller. Here, and in countless Victorian reformers, the slum, the labouring poor, the prostitute and the sewer, were recreated for the voyeuristic delight of the bourgeois drawing-room as much as for the urban council chamber. Stallybrass and White rightly claim: 'As the bourgeoisie produced new forms of regulation and prohibition governing their own bodies, they wrote ever more loquaciously of the body of the Other - of the city's 'scum'.

The implications of 'dirt' and 'dirtiness' become ever more politically fraught in certain contexts. Judith Butler notes: 'The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of

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140 Plays: One, p. 33.  
141 The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p. 125.
something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness. In *Low In The Dark*, the relationship between hygiene and dominant ideologies of power is articulated when Bender recounts how her male lover loves the smell of her, *after* she has had a bath, thus in fact stating that he does not like her corporeal odour at all. The modern over-reliance on multiple cleaning products, with a different type for every body part, displays a deep-seated and socially determined discomfort with the biological body. Denoting something as dirty or ‘unhygienic’ becomes another way of constructing a stable embodied self through the relegation of ‘unwholesomeness’ in the other. In his ‘policing’ of the hygiene of the female body, (which is regarded as polluting to the stable, bounded body), the nameless ‘He’ in *Low In The Dark* maintains a historically dominant, ‘clean’, encoded self. The political dynamics of exclusion, expulsion and hierarchical exclusivity shall be further addressed in chapter four in the context of *By the Bog of Cats*....

Carr’s depiction of social practices in *Low In The Dark* interrogates the modern naturalised and socially conditional nature of so-called ‘civilised behaviour’. In the medieval period, for instance, people urinated in public, ate from a common dish, (using their hands invariably, as it was only by the mid-sixteenth century in Germany that it became customary to offer a spoon, and a separate dish). They shared cups and blew their noses with their fingers (since there were no handkerchiefs), while at the same time, using their hands to partake of stews and soups from the common bowl. The humble fork was only brought to Venice in the eleventh century, by a Greek princess, which was regarded, states Elias, ‘as so excessive a sign of refinement that [...] the ecclesiastics [...] called down divine wrath upon her’. The historian Braudel confirms that the fork did not become a general eating utensil in England before 1750. Manners only began to be codified, and the first etiquette books published, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The contrast with the pre-modern body is articulated by the historian Porter:

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142 *Plays: One*, p. 126.
143 *Gender Trouble; Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 132.
Much peasant lore [...] seems to glory in mud, filth and excrement [...] within their value system, dirt (itself, of course, a notably relative phenomenon) was commonly regarded as a form of protective armour for the skin. Whereas contemporary Western society associates ‘cleanliness’ with ‘health’, in traditional peasant culture, health, hygiene, and warmth required a sort of dirty living.\textsuperscript{146}

The power-relations implicit in the politics of hygiene are enacted in scene five of \textit{Low In The Dark} in a sado-masochistic fantasy. The action begins with Curtains running on-stage ‘followed by Bender who is beating her with a carpet-beater’. Carr suggests that ‘Bender is enjoying it. Perhaps Curtains is too.’\textsuperscript{147} The symbiotic tendencies of the dominant and submissive subject are played out in a game of body politics, through the action of eliminating dirt, but it is the initially submissive Curtains who finally gains control:

\textbf{Curtains}: Thanks very much.

\textbf{Bender}: Wait, I’m not finished yet.

\textbf{Curtains}: Ah, I think I’m clean enough.

\textbf{Bender}: No, there’s a bit of dust here!

\textit{She gives her a sudden belt on the spot. Curtains howls.}

\textbf{Curtains}: That’s fine, thank you.

\textit{She puts out a hand for the carpet-beater. Bender belts her hand, and the hand disappears behind her curtains.}

\textbf{Bender}: (still belting her) If you’d just take them off! I could belt you till tomorrow and there’d still be dirt flying!

\textbf{Curtains}: No harm in a bit of dirt.\textsuperscript{148}

This explicit depiction of physical beating in \textit{Low In The Dark}, which is directed at the female-signified persona of Curtains, is implicit of the kinds of retribution that were commonly enacted upon women who were deemed as unruly or who violated the sexual

\textsuperscript{146} Porter cited in \textit{Transgressing the Modern}, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 49.

\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 49.
and social norms of their community. The punishments were initiated primarily as warnings to other potentially transgressive female bodies, inflicted by men whose own masculinity and patriarchal authority were insecure, so that in fact, rather than displaying the complete insubordination of women, it would seem an intense insecurity about female independence was what was actually being revealed.

David Underdown argues that the physical control of women increased dramatically between about 1560 and 1640 in England, which he characterises as 'a period of social disorder in general, and a time of particular concern about the maintenance of patriarchal power relations.' This subordination, in which the (sexualised) display of the nude female body was a key element, incorporating the politics of male scopophilic agency and fetishisation, often took place in the form of spectacular public tortures which included the 'cucking-stool', skimmington rides, charivari or public beatings. A ballad from 1615, called 'The Cucking of a Scold' illustrates one such instance:

Then was the Scold herself,
In a wheelbarrow brought,
Stripped naked to the smock,
As in that case she ought:
Neats tongues about her neck
Were hung in open show;
And thus unto the cucking stool
This famous scold did go.150

The various ways in which the characters relate to their bodies in Low In The Dark caution as to the ways in which our experience of the body is powerfully culturally and politically constructed and inscribed, not least in relation to the management of body boundaries and the physical space around the body. With the ideological evolution of the

The modern body is the evolution of the closed, well-bounded body. The western concept of the body would seem to be a product of the paranoia and taboos that define and stabilise body boundaries, with the orifice being the most significant image of this regulation. Jervis astutely notes that gradually ‘all the body’s products, except tears, have become essentially unmentionable in polite society’. ¹⁵¹

The exchange and permeability of bodily fluids has always been considered as another kind of potentially dangerous, boundary-crossing. Scene four of Act Two of Low In The Dark breaks the symbolic and corporeal boundaries of inner and outer, closed and open and solid and fluid by focusing on a plethora of saliva-ejection. Curtains, who is sitting on the toilet, attempting to conclude her story, is interrupted as Bender spits into the toilet:

Curtains watches her then races to the bath and spits into the bath. Bender spits in the toilet. Curtains spits in the bath, four spits each, tit for tat style. Curtains is back on the toilet. Bender is back in the bath. Both mouths are working furiously to collect spit. They look at one another. Both get up slowly, Bender standing in the bath. They stalk one another, sumo-wrestler style, face to face, then a synchronised spit.¹⁵²

Throughout this action Binder is seen reading the deaths column of a newspaper: ‘Mary Rose Lee, 97, beloved of Jimmy,’ suddenly, in brackets.’ Bender responds: ‘No one dies suddenly at 97! She’s probably been dead for years only Jimmy didn’t notice. […] Or maybe he’s dead too, only they don’t notice because of the upset over Mary Rose. […] Sure they might never have been alive.’¹⁵³ Here again the ambivalent association of organic bodily functions with old-age and death may be linked to Bakhtinian and Beckettian notions of ‘de-gradation’ or a bringing back to the ground.

¹⁵⁰ A Pepysian Garland, pp. 72-77.
¹⁵¹ Transgressing the Modern, p. 36.
¹⁵² Plays: One, pp. 73-74.
Along with the production of the modern Western body, there comes the problematical construction of the modern ‘self’, which, like gendered identity, was not always an ideological ‘given’. As previously mentioned, the production of the modern self evinces notions of an assured inner state. With the rise in importance of manners, ‘good behaviour’ and new regimes of body management in the eighteenth century, came the notion of a ‘civilised’ inner self. By 1700, Cotton Mather, a New England Puritan, articulated that externals only count if they are an adequate reflection of the inner-state. Thus the distinctively spatialised conception of the self and its relation to the body; the inner/outer distinction, appears around this time in the western consciousness. Along with the development of notions of ‘civility’ comes the relatively modern construction of the public/private distinction, the process which Elias notes where ‘the distasteful is removed behind the scenes of social life.’

In Gender Trouble, Butler writes: “reality” is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. Just as no-one is who they seem in Oscar Wilde’s comedy of manners The Importance of Being Earnest, identity is playfully multiplicit in Low In The Dark, as images are reflected and identities mirrored, dis-abling a differentiation between authenticity and myth. In Carr’s comedy of bad manners, essentialist social and cultural myths of sexuality, identity, corporeality and social behaviour are liberally deconstructed in Wildean epigrammatical mode, where the inversions function to ‘expose the tenuousness of gender “reality” in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms.’

Low In The Dark marks the end of Carr’s conscious experimentation with Absurdist techniques of theatrical form. With The Mai, in 1994, Carr moves for the first time into the recognisably Irish landscape of the Midlands, where characters are not presented as abstract types, but rather, as historically individuated beings. Traces of the dialect patterns

153 Plays: One, p. 74.
156 Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, p. xxiv.
157 Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, p. xxiv.
which emerge so intensely in Portia Coughlan, are subtly interwoven into the narrative of The Mai, as Carr's increasingly unique theatrical voice gains assurance. While the style and form of Low In The Dark, Ullaloo, and the other early plays, has now been laid to rest, Carr's subject-matter displays an organic development from play to play. In The Mai, the same concerns with space, identity and the body emerge against the evocative backdrop of Owl Lake. Curtains' story of the 'man and woman [who] had become like two people anywhere, walking low in the dark through a dead universe', echoing the duo Tilly and Tomred in Ullaloo, now reappear in The Mai in the tragic figures of Robert and the Mai, who move 'like sleepwalkers along a precipice', into further realms of alienation and emotional aporia.\(^{158}\)

\(^{158}\) Plays: One, p. 59.
Chapter Two:

Writing On Water: Reflections of Womanhood in *The Mai*

A house that stands in my heart  
My cathedral of silence  
Every morning recaptured in dream  
Every evening abandoned  
A house covered with dawn  
Open the winds of my youth.

*Memories of Summer, Jean Laroche*
In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson writes that, in fantastic literature, ‘indeterminate landscapes [...] are less definable as places than as spaces.’ ¹ The same can be said of the theatrical terrains of Marina Carr’s plays from 1994, where the Midlands of Ireland may be viewed as both topographically and symbolically resonant. Carr notes the poetic potential of this space: ‘It’s no accident that it’s called the Midlands. For me at least it has become a metaphor for the crossroads between the worlds.’² In Carr’s 1994 drama *The Mai*, as in *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998), the symbolic mapping of space on the stage, and the relationship between corporeality and the internal or domestic sphere, and the external landscapes of Owl Lake, the Belmont River and the bogland respectively, are central to an understanding of the ontological representation of the central characters.³ In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes: ‘Philosophers, when confronted with the dialectics of outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being. Thus profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which confers spatiality upon thought.’⁴ The *mise-en-scène* of *The Mai*, which is denoted by the fixed interior of the house, and mediating site of the large bay window, represents the symbolic demarcation between the conflictual political discourses of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, excess and containment, and solid and fluid in the play.

The first lines of the single-set stage directions of *The Mai* indicate: ‘*A room with a huge bay window*’, revealing its centrality and dominance.⁵ Carr’s metatheatrical ‘framing’ of the window is signposted clearly throughout the play, and the ways in which the characters physically interact with it, are emphatically demarcated in the stage-directions. At the very beginning of Act One, we encounter the Mai framed *inside* the window-frame:

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⁵ *Plays: One*, p. 107.
The Mai passes the window, turns to look out on Owl Lake, hears a cello note - decides she is dreaming. She enters the room. [...] Drawn to the window, she looks out at the lake, waiting, watching. She places a few more books, then moves again to the window.  

From this dreamy, impressionistic opening sequence the Mai’s fixation with the site of the window is displayed. The next sequence involving the window reveals her husband Robert lifting ‘The Mai and [carrying] her to a chair by the bay window.’ Similarly, the Mai’s daughter, Millie’s first monologue is framed by a deliberate look through the window ‘out onto Owl Lake’. After Millie’s monologue, Carr directs that the Mai enters ‘wildly happy [...] and moves across to the window.’  

Richard Schechner discusses the symbolic potential of the window-sill, and the space that it encompasses, in Performance Studies:

A limen is a threshold or sill, a thin strip neither inside nor outside a building or room linking one space to another, a passageway between places rather than a place in itself. [...] What is usually just a “go between” becomes the site of the action. And yet this action remains, to use Turner’s phrase “betwixt and between.” It is enlarged in time and space yet retains its peculiar quality of passageway or temporariness. Conceptually, what happens within a liminal time-space is “reinforced”, emphasised.

The window is the dominating feature of The Mai. In “Neither Here Nor There”, Thomas More notes that, ‘A mode of entrance is crucial. A door. A Window. We need a chink in

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6 Plays: One, p. 107.
7 Plays: One, p. 108.
8 Plays: One, p. 110.
9 Plays: One, p. 110.
the otherwise unbroken surface of what we consider real and proper. An excessive site of symbolic and actual transition in the drama, the window embodies the potential to transform or fracture, and also to disrupt or destabilise the rigid structural boundaries and binaries of inner and outer.

In considering the symbolic resonances of the mise-en-scène of Heinrich Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, Wallis and Shepherd write: ‘The living room space […] is a significant setting for two reasons. First, [it is] typically concerned with the problems of the bourgeois family, [and secondly] is it symbolically a trap. […] The audience is never taken anywhere else. There is, then, the basic logic of space at work in the play. There is a single and limiting space from which the protagonist finally breaks free.’ From this reading of the single-set living room, the ambivalent nature of the space is demonstrated, where the domestic territory offers both comfort and security, and also a prominent sense of entrapment and containment, from which escape is equally necessary.

In the foreword to *The Poetics of Space*, John Stilgoe writes: ‘In the house Bachelard discovers a metaphor of humanness […]. Always container, sometimes contained, the house serves Bachelard as the portal to metaphors of imagination.’ Carr’s dramaturgical decision to retain the action within the sphere of the house reflects the constrained psychological recesses of the main characters of the play, Millie and the Mai, fluidly linking dramatic form and ontological representation. The house at Owl Lake becomes simultaneously a hyper-real site of the Mai’s romantic desire and emotional investment, as well as an ambivalent place of refuge and arrested development. As Bachelard notes: ‘A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.’

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13 *The Poetics of Space*, pp. vii-iii.
14 *The Poetics of Space*, p. 47.
In the Bakhtinian politics of the carnivalesque, the site of the window may be regarded as being what Stallybrass and White identify in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* as ‘a catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle’ which challenges the fixity of rigid social and political structure and ideology. Terry Eagleton notes the potential of carnival as being a ‘temporary retextualising of the social formation that exposes its ‘fictive’ foundations.’

While the liminal may be regarded as a purely metaphoric mode of reading space in performance, it nevertheless vitally conceptually maps out what Stallybrass and White note as the ‘symbolic action which is rarely mere play: it articulates cultural and political meanings.’ In *The Mai* the window allows for *visibility*, and transition, between within and without, enabling a reflexive permeability and leakage of the confines of the domestic space into the outside. Bachelard writes that we may read ‘images [for] their ontological value, the dialectics of within and without, which lead to the dialectics of open and closed.’ As shall be demonstrated, the window is a symbolic ‘third space’ of ambivalent trauma and release in the drama, which is fundamental to the relationship between the central characters’ ontology and the external topos.

A window sill, Schechner notes, ‘outlines the emptiness it reinforces.’ In “Women on the Threshold”, Anthony Roche writes: ‘The Mai is most often to be found standing in the window, as much looking in as looking out, not fully contained by the house she has built.’ The spectator’s perspective of the Mai is consistently metatheatrically ‘framed within the frame’ of the window, where the house at Owl Lake marks the ambivalent demarcation between security and containment. Citing Turner, Schechner notes the way

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17 *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 43.
18 *Poetics of Space*, p. xxxix.
19 *Performance Studies*, p. 58.
that behaviour that is ‘ritual [can be] creative, to make the way for new situations, identities, and social realities by means of what Turner called “anti-structure”.\textsuperscript{21}

In the play Carr posits the window as being, on the one hand, a positive metaphor of ‘vision’, expanded horizon and perspective, offering a ‘magnificent view’ of something unseen and fantastic or ‘other’, while on the other, denoting indeterminacy, vulnerability, fracture and crisis in the domestic sphere. The window is the point of fluid interchange between the unquantifiable outside and the domesticated inside, the lacuna at which outsiders can invade, and through which insiders can potentially escape. The anxiety of the window, what Moore refers to as ‘the curse of liminality’, may be noted in its inherent position as the structurally vulnerable point of the building, and as the site of \textit{limited} or ‘framed’, and thus reduced, visibility in addition to its impulse to ‘seepage’, irrecoverability and loss.\textsuperscript{22}

The notion of fluidity, and the potential of transition \textit{between} the spaces of inside and outside in \textit{The Mai}, is vital to the structure of the house at Owl Lake. In Act Two, the Mai says:

This house - these days I think it’s the kind of house you’d see in the corner of a dream - dark, formless, strangely inviting. It’s the kind of house you build to keep out neuroses, stave off nightmares. But they come in anyway with the frost and the draughts and the air bubbles in the radiators. It’s the kind of house you build when you’ve nowhere left to go.\textsuperscript{23}

The symbolic dialectics of the fluid and solid continually come into play with air and water-dependent imagery. Air-bubbles in the internal fluid of the radiators indicate a seepage from the outside to the inside, while the frost denotes a tenacious debilitation of brick and mortar through the irrevocable expansion of fine fissures and visible hairline

\textsuperscript{21}Performance Studies, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{22}Moore, in \textit{Parabola: Myth, Tradition and the Search for Meaning}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{23}Roche, in \textit{Irish University Review}, Spring/Summer, 1995, p. 158.
cracks – denoting the very veins or blood of the house. This ‘bleeding’, or crossing, displays the vulnerability of constructed borders and demarcated boundaries where penetration, invasion, and potential de-construction may render form permanently unstable, marking an ontological transformation. Bachelard writes:

A house is, first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyse rationally. Its prime reality is visible and tangible, made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework. It is dominated by straight lines, the plumb-line having marked it with its discipline and balance. A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as space for [...] intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy.\(^{24}\)

In Brian Friel’s 1990 memory-play *Dancing At Lughnasa*, to which *The Mai* has been compared, the notion of imminent ontological crisis is similarly analogue through the vivid image of the structural destabilisation of the domestic sphere:

**Kate:** You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can – because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can’t be held together much longer. It’s all about to collapse [...]\(^{25}\)

In Friel’s play a small window is a central dramaturgical site, signifying the dialectical tension between the confining space of the Mundy sisters’ kitchen and the limitless outdoors, affording alternative perspectives as well as reduced visibility. As each of the

\(^{24}\) *Poetics of Space*, p. 48.
sisters competes for a view, the domestic enclosure reiterates their ossification in a limiting past, while modernity, hope and possibility are glanced in passing through the window. As the sisters vie for a new perspective through the ‘tiny [cracked] mirror on the wall’, it becomes apparent in the narrative that escape and positive transformation will not be an option.

In an essay entitled ‘The “Mechanics” of Fluids’, Luce Irigaray considers the political relationship between the fluid and the solid and the ‘complicity of long standing between rationality and a mechanics of solids [...]’ The dialectics of fluidity and solidity, and excess and containment, are central to the political and performative interrelationships between place and ontological representation in Carr’s dramas from 1994 - 1998. In its excessive drive to overflow, to transgress demarcated boundaries, the fluid denotes leakage, blurring and dilution, leading to re-definition and permanent transformation. Such permeability can be read as a symbolic and actual political destabilisation of ‘fixity’ and dominant hegemonic structure.

The political tropes of solid and fluid can be related to, but not limited by, Bakhtinian binary notions of the ‘classical’ and the ‘grotesque’ body, the closed and the open and the male and the female. Irigaray convincingly posits that the politics of various [dominant] systems have ‘excluded from their mode of symbolisation certain properties of real fluids. What is left uninterpreted in the economy of fluids – [is] the resistances brought to bear upon solids [...].’ It is clear to see how the fluid, represented metaphorically in Carr’s dramas through the central motif of water, can be read as a political trope of excess, as being that which depotentialises the solid, the unified, the ‘stable’ and the closed rationality of dominant representational and social structure.

26 Friel, Plays: Two, p. 9.
28 This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 109.
As outlined in the Introduction, ‘excess’ is defined in the *Oxford Encyclopaedia* as ‘an
overstepping of due limits; of superabundance; of exceeding the proper amount or
degree’. Yet in determining something as ‘excessive’ according to this hegemonic
definition, affirms something else as being, relationally, ‘normative’ or ‘proper.’ What is
perhaps more useful then, than defining something as ‘excessive’ in opposition to that
which is ‘contained’ or within the limits, is ‘excess’ as a kind of blurring, a potential
intermix *between*, or overflow of, ‘within’ and ‘without’ *vis a vis* closed boundary
systems. Thus, if excess can only exist *vis a vis* containment (as in the Oxford definition),
then the more radical and subversive identity is that which exists *between* inner and outer.
Excess may thus be linked to the post-Bakhtinian feminist reappropriation of the
‘grotesque’ as being that which denotes an intermingling or ‘passing of one form into the
other, in the ever incompletely character of being.’

Irigaray notes the very real material properties, and characteristics of fluids as being
‘internal frictions, pressures, movements […] that is, *their specific dynamics*. The
masses of water which Carr depicts in the plays from 1994 - 1998, with lakes, rivers and
saturated bog-holes, are symbolically reflective of the central female characters. In *Portia
Coughlan*, the river is Portia, as she flirts with the threshold, flowing *between* within and
without, while in *The Mai*, Owl Lake, is a more contained body. In *By the Bog of Cats*..., 
Hester Swane is the underground river of the bogland, ceaselessly in motion and resistant
to harness, while the shifting ground of the bog reflects the unstable social set-up which is
performed upon it. Carr’s teleology of symbolic spatial instability, through the central
‘water-iness’ of the *mise-en-scènes*, and the threshold of the window in *The Mai*, thus
politically and poetically reflects the fallibility and precariousness of the hegemonic
structures depicted in the plays. The water-logged bogland in *By the Bog of Cats*..., 
‘always shiftin’ and changin’ and coddin’ the eye’, is the antithesis of the static, fixed and

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30 In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin writes about the original, fifteenth-century etymology of the word
‘grotesque’ or *grottesca*, as denoting ‘fanciful, free, and playful treatment of plant, animal and human
forms’, p. 32.
31 *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 109.
'stable' land-mass, in the same way that the fluid 'disconcerts any attempt at static identification…' and the way 'the fluid is [...] by nature, unstable.'

Water is linked to the thanatotic drive throughout *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*. Millie’s monologue in Act one, which foretells the death by drowning of The Mai, associates the culmination of Mai’s ontological struggle with a final metaphor of all-consuming wateriness:

[... ] a year and a half later [...] Robert and I drove into town to buy a blue nightgown and a blue bed jacket for The Mai’s waking. [...] In one of those throwaway conversations which only become significant with time, The Mai had said she wanted to be buried in blue. So here we were in a daze fingering sky blues, indigo blues, navy blues, lilac blues, night blues, finally settling on a watery blue silk affair.  

The association of water with death in the play affords a poetic ambivalence, in which the fluid is seen as both destructive, as well as life-giving. In both *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, water is a threshold to the chthonic, a symbolic configuration of the mythological River Styx, and a transitional pathway to the Other-world, or Underworld. Towards the end of Act two Millie says:

I dream of water all the time. I’m floundering off the shore, or bursting towards the surface for air, or wrestling with a black swan trying to drag me under. I have not yet emerged triumphant from those lakes of the night. Sometimes I think I wear Owl Lake like a caul around my chest to protect me from all that is good and hopeful and worth pursuing.

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32 *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 112.
The memory of water is central to Millie’s narrative. Bachelard writes: ‘If we have retained an element of dream in our memories, if we have gone beyond merely assembling exact recollections, bit by bit the house that was lost in the mists of time will appear from out the shadow. [...] It is as though something fluid has collected our memories and we ourselves were dissolved in this fluid of the past.’ In the play, the pervasive presence of water poetically resonates in the final moments, where the closing stage-directions invoke the: sound of water. Silence.

In *The Mai* the relationship between language and place is fluidly performed and perpetuated through the act of storytelling. The ‘magnificent’ view from the window out onto the watery expanse of Owl Lake is never seen, yet it is repeatedly spoken about, giving the audience a powerfully implied image in the mind’s eye. The textually signified, mythopoetic construction is thus presented through the subjective perspectives of the various narratival filters of the characters, most predominantly, that of the narrator, Millie. In Carr’s plays the act of storytelling mythologises the landscape, creating a ‘sense of place’ that constructs an ontological framework against which the speaking subject perpetuates a sense of individual and communal identity. As Carl Taylor suggests in *Sources of the Self*: ‘Nature draws us because it is in some way attuned to our feelings, so that it can reflect and intensify those we already feel or else awaken those which are dormant. Nature is like a great keyboard on which our highest sentiments are played out.’

In *The Mai*, Portia Coughlan and *By the Bog of Cats...*, Carr displays how landscape is invented through storytelling and myth, where place becomes a receptacle or container for individual and cultural memory and identity. Carr’s rendering of an imagistic landscape is imbued with the narrative of history. Rosalind Coward writes: ‘Nature is to be found through a journey inwards, implying a relation of mind, body and outside.’ As in *Portia Poetics of Space*, p. 57.

35 *Poetics of Space*, p. 57.
36 *Plays: One*, p. 186.
Coughlan and By the Bog of Cats..., for Carr it is specifically ‘nature that is invested with memory or nature of character, or associations, faith.’

In “Authentic Reproductions: Marina Carr and the Inevitable”, Clare Wallace writes: ‘The notion of destiny, allusion to myth, folktale and a harsh version of Midland speech permeate Carr’s writing to such a degree that in many respects it hardly seems of the contemporary world [yet] her dramas are still products of the late twentieth and early twenty first century.’ In the Irish tradition of dinnsheanchas, or ‘knowledge of the lore of places’, Owl Lake is imbued with a specific historical folk-memory narrative. In Act One of The Mai, Millie recites the romantic and tragic fable of how Owl Lake came by its feminised appellation: ‘Owl Lake comes from the Irish, loch cailleach oiche, Lake of the Night Hag or Pool of the Dark Witch. The legend goes that Coillte, daughter of the mountain god, Bloom, fell in love with Bláth, Lord of the flowers.’

Millie’s closing monologue of Act One lyrically ‘frames’, just as the window literally frames, the surrounding geographical features: ‘A tremor runs through me when I recall the legend of Owl lake. I knew that story as a child. So did The Mai and Robert. But we were unaffected by it and in our blindness moved along with it like sleepwalkers along a precipice and all around gods and mortals called out for us to change our course, and not listening, we walked on and on.’ In “Playing the Story: Narrative Techniques in The Mai”, Eilis Ni Dhuibhne comments: ‘The telling of [Millie’s] tale, combined with the extraordinary natural beauty of the setting of the play [...] are forces which are crucial in enhancing the play and rendering it memorable and impressive. These forces are the powers of myth, poetic powers which reside in nature, the eternal and the divine [...]’

Through her active storytelling, Millie perpetuates a mythically individuated ‘landscape’

40 Wallace, Clare, “Authentic Reproductions: Marina Carr and the Inevitable”, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made.”
41 Plays: One, p. 147.
42 Plays: One, p. 148.
43 Ni Dhuibhne, Eilis, “Playing the Story: Narrative Techniques in The Mai”, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made.”
in just the same way that Portia Coughlan poetically maps a culturally specific toponymic narrative onto her native topography of the Belmont Valley.

The association of 'selfhood' with nature is considered by the Romantic poet Samuel Coleridge, who sought in nature 'a symbolical language for something within me', and William Wordsworth, who similarly claimed that he 'was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and [he] communed with all that he saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, [his] own immaterial nature.' In Sources of the Self, Taylor adds that our 'relation to nature is predicated on the modern identity.'

Portia Coughlan, The Mai and Millie, and Hester Swane construct and frame a sense of subjectivity within and against the imagined mythic-topoi of Owl Lake, Belmont and the Bog of Cats. The notion of the imaginative transformation of external space, and the projection of selfhood onto 'place', is addressed in Transgressing the Modern where John Jervis cites the Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich: '  "A painter must not paint merely what he sees before him, but also what he sees within himself."' Just as in Portia Coughlan, so too in The Mai, the mythic specificity of the imagined landscape endows the geographical features with an exclusive and constructed textual identity, onto which the central characters map themselves.

The narrative of Coillte and Bláth fictionalises a 'landscape' which is described as being 'the most coveted site in the county.' 'Landscape', that is, material topography framed by literary and mythic allusion, thus becomes an active means of subjective self-definition through its logic of cultural specificity and exclusivity. As in Portia Coughlan and By the Bog of Cats..., Carr presents an excessive 'textual' landscape, between memory and imagination, between the mythic and the topographic 'real', where memory becomes another mid-land or link between past and present, truth and fiction, the real and non-real, and imagined history and actual past event.

44 Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth cited in Transgressing the Modern, p. 150.
45 Sources of the Self, p. 300.
46 Friedrich, Caspar David, cited in Transgressing the Modern, p. 150.
In *The Mai* the central motif of the watery expanse of Owl Lake imagistically reinforces the excessive fluidity of the language, the symbolism and non-realistic structure of the drama. Carr’s use of language, in the plays from 1994 - 1998 moves gracefully between a strongly expressed Midlands dialect, heightened realism, evocative lyricism, contemporary colloquialism, standard English and hiberno-English idioms. The style of *The Mai*, like the structure, is similarly fluid, moving between impressionistic, internal memory-landscapes of orality and storytelling, and realism, always filtered through the metatheatrical lens of Millie’s subjective memory-narrative.

In each one of the plays Carr renders conventional borders of genres of dramatic Realism permeable and precarious by foregrounding the performative structures of dramatic representation. Realism implies (by virtue of difference) something ‘other’ to be ‘non’ or ‘less’ realistic. Realism is thus a subjective political and historically relative term which masks its ideology behind the invisible machinery of dominant hegemony. From *Low In The Dark to By the Bog of Cats*..., the conventional dramatic unities of spatio-temporality, character and corporeality, and the binaries of the solid and fluid, myth and reality, public and private, past and present and human and animal, are presented as interchangeable, permeable, indeterminate, open, ambivalent and unstable. In *The Mai*, Carr’s structural and evocative layering of past and present achieves a sense of ‘meta-temporality’, drawing attention to the operation of memory and complicating the notion of the protagonist or ‘lead character’. *The Mai* represents four generations of women’s voices, where a singular authoritative narrative is denied in favour of plurality and heteroglossia. In *Rage and Reason*, Carr comments: ‘Who is the lead character, is it Grandma Fraochlán is it the Mai or is it Millie? […] I like the ambiguity.’48 This de-unification of subjectivity confounds what Jordan identifies as ‘the repressions of history, the way history blocks, excludes, eliminates woman.’49 In his discussion of subjectivity and historical authority, Jordan cites Sue-Ellen Case’s notion of the ‘collective subject’,

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47 *Plays: One*, p. 111.
which plays against the sense of centred subjectivity which the historical narrative sets in place.  

Present on-stage throughout the action of the play, Millie guides the unfolding narratives of the four generations of women who are conjured-up through her memory, as though ghosts of the past. Roche notes:

In watching [...] Millie in The Mai, one cannot help but recall the narrator Michael in Friel’s Dancing At Lughnasa directly addressing the audience in order to conjure up his five aunts from the nineteen thirties. When Millie reveals before the play is half over that the Mai took her own life, the effect resembles that moment when Friel’s Michael discloses the squalid death of one of the women we see so vibrantly alive before us. [While] Michael’s ambivalent position could be read as Friel’s acknowledgment that, for all of Lughnasa’s emphasis on women, it is being authored by a man. Similarly, the presence of a young woman narrator in The Mai is an acknowledgment that the play is being authored by a woman.  

The character of Millie is central to the construction of the drama due to the fact that the entire action of the play is filtered through her subjective memory-narrative, just as Michael’s is in Dancing at Lughnasa. Millie’s fluidly interwoven passages of dialogue serve to introduce new characters, offer expositional detail and frame the action, organically guiding the narrative and scene changes, and reminding the audience that this is a memory-play. In Act One, for example, Julie and Agnes are invoked and introduced to the audience by Millie:

Two of the Mai’s aunts, bastions of the Connemara click, decided not to take the prospect of a divorcee in the family lying down. So they arrived one lovely autumn day armed with novenas, scapulars and leaflets on the horrors of

51 Roche, in Irish University Review, p. 55.
premarital sex which they distributed amongst us children along with crisp twenty-pound notes. Julie and Agnes enter, disarmed of their furs, but not their handbags which go everywhere with them.\(^{52}\)

The structuring of The Mai can be regarded as a representation of the internal ‘mid-land’ of Millie’s psychological realm, again making permeable the boundaries between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’. Unlike any of the other characters in the play, we experience Millie both subjectively and objectively. Furthermore, Millie’s character is ‘split’ into the ages of sixteen and thirty, rupturing realist conventions of corporeal and temporal unity on the stage, and enabling another excessive, liminal moment of boundary ‘crossing’ or ‘in-between-ness’ in the drama.

Memory operates as a structural frame in The Mai, but also displays the ways in which performance can destabilise borders of subjectivity and objectivity, and linear time and space. Carr’s ‘meta-temporality’, or layering of time within time, (through the performative devices of the monologue and flashback), is excessive in that it indicates the movement between, and fluidity of, past and present, and internal and external ontological realms. In Memories of the Present, Patrick O’Carroll writes: ‘The process of remembering is highly symbolic, a matter for interpretation. It is therefore, open-ended. [...] When the past is re-collected, our narratives are reconstructed to reinforce our own identities and ideologies and to guide our interactions.’\(^{53}\) Ni Dhuibhne comments: ‘A storyteller, in the context of drama, is someone who narrates rather than acts out an epic event. A storyteller is someone who understands how to affect an audience’s emotions by the judicious selection of images, ideas, and words.’\(^{54}\) Due to the dramaturgical device of the narrator in The Mai, the process of remembering is literally enacted through the temporal layering of Millie’s intermittent direct-address monologues, while the narrative itself centres around the continuous and contiguous condition of past and present. Thus

\(^{52}\) Plays: One, p. 135.
\(^{54}\) Ni Dhuibhne, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made.”
memory is meta-theatricalised, its active performativity heightened, and made ‘excessive’ in the play, as the audience structurally, and conceptually or thematically, considers the process and conscious construction of memory, both through the performativity of the action of remembering and thematically, in the content and context of the narrative.

Due to the structural non-linearity of the dramatic narratives, The Mai and Portia Coughlan can be regarded as feminist critiques of realism. In her illuminating exploration of the sexual politics of representation, Elaine Aston observes:

In contemporary feminist theatre […] the contradiction of the subject is split open in the interests of challenging and changing the symbolic or social orders. What women have contested and resisted are the oppressive systems of symbolic closure which, for example, characterise the dominant theatrical traditions of staging realism.55

In narrative terms, theatrical texts in the realist tradition operate systems of ‘closure’, where the ‘well-made’ form follows a definitive linear pattern from exposition to crisis, to ultimate resolution. Aston notes: ‘The subject of the narrative is male and its discourse is phallocentric and expressive of male experience. By contrast, the ‘female’ is enclosed within the male narratives of realism, is most commonly defined in relation to the male ‘subject’ (as wife, mother, daughter, etc.), is unable to take up a subject position, and is used as an object of exchange in a heterosexual, male economy.’56

In considering the symbolic politics of the “Mechanics of Fluids”, Irigaray offers a contestation of the essentialist relegation of solidity to rationality, dominance and stability, in the same way that Carr’s dramatic structure is recalcitrant to the closed and ‘solid’ discourse of realist representation. The non-realistic structure of the The Mai is similar to that of Portia Coughlan in that death is revealed in media res in both plays, with Act Three flashing back to the events preceding the deaths of the eponymous

characters. While *Portia Coughlan* is not a memory play *per se*, it also operates in terms of non-realism, where the rupture of conventional temporal linearity, and the representation of incorporeality through the figure of the ghost of Gabriel, a motif which is carried through in *By the Bog of Cats...*, blurs dominant modes of fixed form.

The structure of *The Mai* displays the ways in which the operation of memory can destabilise the fixity of individual and collective historical narratives. Memory and the process of remembering is highlighted or denaturalised through performance, while at the same time, presented as a recognisably organic active process of ‘framing’ or recording and re-living experience. In foretelling The Mai’s death at the end of Act One, Carr says that she was: ‘Playing with time. It was a formal experiment. I wanted to see how having her die in the middle would affect the third act.’\(^{57}\) By foretelling the Mai’s death, Carr destabilises solid and linear boundaries between the past and present, the living and the dead and traditional unities of plot. In a recent interview Carr notes: ‘I have never believed that time is linear. […] We are of time, but also beyond it. And to forget that we are beyond it is the problem. [We] are both inside and outside of time.’\(^{58}\) As in *Portia Coughlan*, the audience witnesses a theatrical ‘post-mortem’ in Act Three, a re-telling of the events that lead up to the present, which fluidly incorporates both the ‘real’ of the present with the incorporeal quality of the past.

In *The Mai*, Irish women’s collective historical experience is corporeally inscribed through the memory-bank of the one-hundred year old character Grandma Fraochlán. Through her age and visceral presence, Grandma Fraochlán is the mobius strip of past and present, and the central genealogical, matrilineal and thematic weave of the drama. Born post-famine in 1879, she has experienced a century of social change, from the nineteenth century through to modernity, and has existed as a liminal figure during the radically transitional position of women in modern Irish history. Grandma Fraochlán’s name lyrically evokes the geographical place of her birth, named as she is, after the

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\(^{56}\) *An Introduction to Feminism and the Theatre*, p. 40.


\(^{58}\) *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, pp. 56, 59.
natural features of the surrounding rugged landscape of her remote Western seaboard island home *Inis Fraochlán*. The Gaelic word for ‘heather’, *fraochlán*, implies the fecund interrelationship between place or landscape, identity, cultural history and language.

While the play is set in 1979, at the height of the Women’s liberation movement, Grandma Fraochlán’s ontological experience and memory straddles the extreme poles of women’s social positioning in this country.\(^59\) In *The Irish Women’s History Reader*, Maria Luddy notes:

Nineteenth century Irish politics were a function of male life, a male activity in which women played little if any role. [...] For the most part of the nineteenth century Irish women were excluded from formal male political culture. The ideology of ‘separate spheres’, the world of work and politics advocated for men and the world of domesticity advocated for women, played some part in limiting their political aspirations.\(^60\)

Grandma Fraochlán’s subjectivity as a young woman in Ireland in the late nineteenth century is radically different to her social position and increased agency as a widow-woman in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. Luddy notes: ‘When associated with nationalist uprisings of the last century, such as those involving the Young Irelanders, or the Fenians, women are generally seen in symbolic terms and rarely acknowledged as playing an active role in the practical or theoretical formulations of these organisations.’\(^61\) Grandma Fraochlán’s presence throughout the temporal and political passage of women’s acquisition of civil rights in Ireland, (such as gaining the vote in 1923), thus marks her as a liminal and excessive figure.

\(^{59}\) In “Women and Politics in Nineteenth Century Ireland”, Maria Luddy notes that ‘Isabella Todd was the pioneer of most feminist organisations of nineteenth-century Ireland. From a meeting in Belfast in 1867, Todd undertook the formation of the first consciously feminist group in nineteenth-century Ireland when she organised a small committee to press for changes in the married women’s property laws.’, in *The Irish Women’s History Reader*, p. 33.

\(^{60}\) *Irish Women’s History Reader*, p. 29.

\(^{61}\) *Irish Women’s History Reader*, p. 31.
The transition of woman from Republican icon of nation to sentient subject is the concern of much of women’s writing and recent historiography in Ireland. In *Object Lessons*, poet Eavan Boland writes of woman’s iconographic centrality and subjective disavowal in Irish social history, encapsulating Grandma Fraochlán’s experience as a young woman:

What female figure was there left to identify with? None. The heroine, as such, was utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. Or was she a nineteenth century image of girlhood, on a frontispiece or in a book of engravings. She was invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted. And, most important, died for. She was a mother or a virgin. Her hair was swept or tied back, like the prow of a ship. Her flesh was wood or ink or marble. And she had no speaking part. Her identity was as an image. Or was it a fiction?62

Grandma Fraochlán’s origins and identity are ambiguous. We are told that she ‘was the result of a brief tryst between an ageing island spinster and a Spanish or Moroccan sailor – no-one is quite sure – who was never heard of or seen since the night of her conception.’63 Grandma Fraochlán is aware of her illegitimate, ‘outsider’ status, and of the effect that this had on her mother, the mythically named ‘Duchess’: ‘Take my life now, I came into the world without a father. [...] I was the only bastard on Fraochlán in living memory and the stigma must’ve been terrible for her.’64 Wallace notes:

As in folkloric traditions, names indicate character and bear multiple significances as stigma or stigmata. Characters then inhabit the role invoked by their names. For instance, Grandma Fraochlán’s name emerges as a cipher to a whole family’s intricate and unfortunate history of self-deception. The name is equivocal, functioning to anchor her amid all her flights of fancy to a place of origin and as

63 *Plays: One*, p. 115.
an implicit reminder of the social stigma of her illegitimacy. [She] is given the island’s name in place of a father’s name as a means to a façade of respectability or legitimacy. In this manner, the name also facilitates a symbolic contraction rendering grandmother and island synonymous, both sites of origin, mapping the fertility of the woman [...] onto the land.  

In “Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century Ireland”, Dympna McLoughlin notes that while the official line purported there to be little extra-marital sexual relations, ‘there was a spectacular range of sexual relationships thus challenging the stereotype of a country of exceptional chastity and prudery.’ However, McLoughlin continues, ‘Details of illegitimacy and illicit sexual contact are not to be found in the official records of the age. The fact remains that illegitimacy, infanticide and the concealment of births did not come under sustained official scrutiny and are thus presumed not to have existed.’ With all the substance and agency of a translucent water-mark, Grandma Fraochlán’s status as an illegitimate islander marks her as doubly invisible in the country at this time.

In *The Mai*, the historical transition of women’s rights, and place in society are played out in the inherent generational conflicts between the female characters. The material ramifications of this social history is made explicit when the audience is informed of how Ellen, Grandma Fraochlán’s daughter, became pregnant out of wedlock in the 1930s to a labourer soon after she had earned a place at Trinity College, and of how Grandma Fraochlán consequently forced her to marry him, and thus forfeit her career: ‘I would not have the scandal. I seen what it done to The Duchess. Oh Ellen – She was heartbroken [...] at where she had arrived and no one nor nothin’ could console her.’ At one-hundred years of age, Grandma Fraochlán now bitterly regrets the stance that she had

64 Plays: One, p. 170.
65 Wallace, Clare, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made.”
68 Sir John Lavery’s image of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, or ‘Mother-Ireland’, was the water-mark on Irish currency until the advent of the Euro in 2001.
69 Plays: One, p. 169.
previously taken, and feels that she will go to hell for her imposition: 'I shouldn’t’ve
cared. Ellen could’ve had The Mai on her own and I could’ve minded her and she
could’ve gone on and had the very best of lives. [...] I’ll not enter heaven without a spell
below for what I done to that girl.'™ As McLoughlin unequivocally articulates: ‘At that
time there was only one acceptable life path for women – marriage and motherhood – and
a diminishing tolerance for any type of sexual diversity.'™ The reality of Ellen’s
experience in the 1930s may be compared with the very different experience of Millie in
the 1970s, who had a child out of wed-lock by choice after a brief affair in New York
City.

In The Mai Carr represents the ways in which Irish society radically disempowered and
depotentialised women up until the mid, to late, twentieth century. Julie recounts the
tragic significance of Ellen’s predicament, and reiterates Grandma Fraochlán’s previous
conviction:

And then Ellen, she was brilliant, that girl was going places but there was
something in Grandma Fraochlán that must stop it, and she did. She made that
child marry that innocent. He wasn’t Ellen’s steam at all and he only married her
because Grandma Fraochlán saw he did.™

The narrative reveals a multitude of gender and class politics and conflicts, in the past and
present worlds of the play. The audience is told of how Ellen’s husband was:

a brickie [...] who couldn’t write or spell very well and [of how] Grandma
Fraochlán would mock his letters until finally he stopped writing. And at the same
time she filled the girl’s head with all sorts of impossible hope, always talkin

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70 *Plays: One*, pp. 170-1.
about the time she was in college, and how brilliant she was, and maybe in a few
year she'd go back and study.\textsuperscript{73}

The critical state of the Mai and Robert's disintegrating marriage also relates to tensions
of sexual identity, social status, property and professional jealousy. Millie's monologues
articulate the socio-economic, as well as the symbolic, importance of the house at Owl
Lake:

The Mai set about looking for that magic thread that would stitch us together
again and she found it at Owl Lake, the most coveted site in the county. It was
Sam Brady who sold the site to The Mai. For years he'd refused all other offers,
offers from hoteliers, publicans, restaurateurs, rich industrialists, Yanks, and then
he turned round and gave it to The Mai for a song.\textsuperscript{74}

While the house at Owl Lake can be read as a structural framework for the character of
the Mai, it is also a determining signifier of social status and female autonomy in the
drama. These characteristics, usually associated with the patriarchal economy of land-
ownership and inheritance, are here definitively abstracted from male authority and
possession. In Act One, the sexual politics of land-ownership is focused upon with
Robert's first visit to the house at Owl Lake:

\textbf{Robert:} What's all this?
\textbf{The Mai:} I built it.
\textbf{Robert:} All by yourself? How?
\textbf{The Mai:} Just did.\textsuperscript{75}

In the same act the Mai's aunts quantify the value of the property:

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Plays: One}, pp. 145-6.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 108.
Julie: I wonder how much the site cost.

Agnes: What is it? Half an acre? You wouldn't get much change out of eight grand, not with a view like that.

The Mai's career trajectory displays a successful class transition which has encompassed a deliberated desire to break with patterns and cycles of the past; to move from 'Fraochlán scrawbin' the seaweed off the rocks.' Her acquirement of land, her economic independence and her professional career is indicative of the struggle at the heart of the Mai and Robert's relationship. The house displays achievement and social standing. Robert, in contrast, is the landless or nomadic body in the drama. As absent, and thus passive, patriarch, Robert has no economic holding and, in a reversal of the traditional male-female status quo, must relinquish active agency within the family unit.

In The Mai, Portia Coughlan, and By the Bog of Cats..., 'The fluid association of character and landscape breaks the strong Irish tradition that links land to individual, male possession or dispossession.' Property and possession are integral to sexual politics and identity in Ireland, and land ownership is a key issue with regard to women's equality with men. In "Women and Politics in Nineteenth Century Ireland", Luddy writes:

Titles and property were passed to sons in preference to daughters. The home was seen as 'the woman's sphere', yet [...] when a woman married, her legal identity merged into that of her husband. Her property, whether earned or inherited, passed under his control to dispose of as he pleased and the law gave him full authority over her and their children.

The Mai's high-profile position in the community, as head-mistress of the local school, her single-handed upbringing of four young children and her acquisition and maintenance

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76 Plays: One, p. 135.
77 Plays: One, p. 142.
78 McMullan, in British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958, p. 117.
79 Luddy, Maria, "Women and Politics in Nineteenth Century Ireland", The Irish Women's History Reader, p. 16.
of the house at Owl Lake reveal the transitions that have occurred in Irish society since the time of Grandma Fraochlán’s youth, when woman was solely dependent upon on the marriage-unit and the production of (male) off-spring, for individuation. Luddy makes the important point:

The patriarchal structure of society led naturally to women’s subordination and to their exclusion from the body politic. Women in nineteenth century Ireland were denied a legal and political identity. Single women and widows had full legal capacity, but married women were legally dependent on their husbands. […] The control of women’s property in post-famine society significantly affected women’s economic and political claims. […] From 1857 women lobbied parliament in an attempt to alter the property laws, but change was slow in coming. Discrimination in the area of property rights led women to campaign, not only for changes in these laws, but also for the rights to make political claims based on property qualifications. This formed the basis of their claim to the vote and thus political equality with men.80

In the play, Carr’s representation of the Mai’s class transition reveals a conflict with other members of the family where upward mobility is not achieved, and is ostensibly resisted. Agnes and Julie comment derogatorily on ‘the posh accents’ of Mai’s children, and her house and possessions are crudely commodified by the aunts, who seem to regard her achievement as an ostentatious recalcitrance to her origins:

**Julie:** A lot of money’s been spent here. I wonder where they got it from.

**Agnes:** Everythin’s on credit these days. Would you look at the size of that window?

**Julie:** *(peering in the window)* An ordinary house wouldn’t do them. No, The Mai’d have to do the bigshot thing. I’d say they haven’t two pennies to rub together. Is it my eyesight or is that a Persian rug?

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80 Luddy, in *The Irish Women’s History Reader*, p. 32.
Agnes: *(taking out glasses)* Show. It is. It is.

Julie: *(taking glasses off Agnes, looking through them)* Not a mock one?

Agnes: Show. *(taking glasses back)* The genuine article.

Julie: They could’ve bought a picture of a view.

In Carr’s plays, the security of the domestic sphere is constantly in threat. There is a distinct lack of private space in the *Portia Coughlan, By the Bog of Cats...* and *The Mai.* In *Portia Coughlan* characters are noted for ‘gawkin’ [...] from behind hedges and ditches and sconces’ in a community where all the lands border one another in a proximity that is both insular and incestuous. In *The Mai,* the window provides access and visibility between inside and outside, and is frequently penetrated by the (morally) invasive, voyeuristic tendencies of Agnes, Julie and other family members. In the stage directions, Carr indicates that *Julie and Agnes appear in fur coats, with similar handbags, outside the window, peering in, nosing around. They pass across the window.*

In Act One, Grandma Fraochlan literally and figuratively ‘sticks her oar in.’ The stage directions indicate: *A huge currach oar moves across the window with a red flag on it.*

*Connie appears, stares in the window, nosey. She bangs the oar in her nosiness.*

Grandma Fraochlan *(off)* Would ya watch where you’re goin’! Shoulda carried it meself! Mind me oar! Connie eventually successfully negotiates the oar in through the window:

‘There! I have it! Millie, run round and catch it!’ With a red flag announcing danger and misrule, Grandma Fraochlan’s quest to literally push the oar through the window comically literalises a well-known phrase for ‘nosiness’, enacting the penetrative tendencies of the Mai’s family. The Mai’s concern for her vulnerable threshold, and the impending threat of invasion, is apparent as she attempts to protect her domain: ‘Easy, easy, mind the window!’

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81 *Plays: One,* p. 135.
82 *Plays: One,* p. 214.
83 *Plays: One,* p. 135.
84 *Plays: One,* pp. 111-2.
85 *Plays: One,* p. 113.
86 *Plays: One,* p. 112.
The window-pane is the transparent site between inner and outer in the play, and between the contained body of the Mai and the wandering and excessive, nomadic bodies of Grandma Fraochlán and Robert. Both Robert and Grandma Fraochlán carry the instruments and facilitators of travel, which indicate their drive to fluid mobility and uncontainability. Grandma Fraochlán’s penetrative entrance with the oar in Act One signifies her impulse to water and motion. While the Mai remains framed within the domestic arena in the play, Robert moves fluidly between the inside and the outside ‘with coat on and car keys dangling’. A landless wanderer and ‘jobbing musician’, he invades and retreats the female space as desired, displaying the non-committal characteristic tendencies of mobility while he hovers on the threshold, never fully present.

Robert’s emotional withdrawal from the family unit is, at times, markedly similar to that of Grandma Fraochlán’s, Christmas Day being a case in point. Grandma Fraochlán describes her retreat to the bedroom with her husband on Christmas afternoons, where, ‘with a bottle of poitin and a porter cake and we’d sing all the Christmas carols we knew.’ Julie confronts Robert about his similarly anti-social behaviour: ‘What’re you doin’ readin’ the paper on Christmas Day?’ After one of Robert’s many periods of unexplained absence, the Mai’s aunts comment:

**Julie:** I wonder where he really was all that time.

**Agnes:** Wasn’t he in America?

**Julie:** You can be sure that’s only the tip of the iceberg.

The ominous association of Robert with the portentous image of the ice-berg foreshadows the imminent crisis of the Mai’s death by drowning. Robert’s decision to retreat from the family unit, perpetuating cycles of behaviour from his own family background, is interrogated by Grandma Fraochlán, who notes (and perhaps identifies with) the fluid historic pattern:

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87 *Plays: One*, p. 164.
88 *Plays: One*, p. 181.
89 *Plays: One*, p. 179.
Grandma Fraochlán: Why couldn’t you just leave [The Mai] alone? Ya come back here and fill the girl’s head with all sorts of foolish hope. Your own father left your mother, didn’t he?

Robert: He never left her! He went to America for a few years. It was after the war, he had to get work, but he came back, didn’t he!

Grandma Fraochlán: And thousands stayed, war or no war, or brung their wives and children with them. But not you, no, because we can’t help repeatin’ Robert, we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same.\(^1\)

Robert’s casual five-year abandonment of the economic responsibility and emotional welfare of his family is put into brute perspective by the Mai:

The Mai: So you want to reduce the conversation to money. Right! Let’s talk about money! Add this up! What it costs to feed, clothe, educate four children for five years. Do you know what that cost?

Robert: No, I don’t.

The Mai: Then keep your fuckin’ mouth shut about your paltry little contribution. How can you do this to your children?\(^2\)

Robert’s profound feelings of intellectual inadequacy at being nothing more than a middling composer, contribute to his repeated sexual infidelities: ‘Mai, I’ve finished nothing this past five years - nothing I’m proud of.’\(^3\) The Mai matches him on all fronts. In Act two she:

\[\textit{sounds a note on the cello, takes the bow, begins screeching it across the cello to annoy Robert. [...] The Mai sits down and plays a few phrases expertly: Not bad,}\]

\(^1\) \textit{Plays: One, p. 136.}
\(^2\) \textit{Plays: One, p. 123.}
\(^3\) \textit{Plays: One, p. 156.}
hah? For someone who hasn’t played in over fifteen years. With a bit of practice I’ve be as good as you. Now there’s a frightening thought - for both of us.  

Robert articulates the impossibility of his place in the Mai’s fantasy/fantastic-world:

The Mai thinks in absolutes. And I am The Mai’s absolute husband and when I refuse to behave as The Mai’s absolute husband, The Mai shuts down because the reality of everyday living is too complicated for The Mai. […] My beautiful wife with her beautiful body and her beautiful face and the goodness shining out of her. What am I supposed to do with all this beauty?

In an attempt to undermine the Mai’s intellectual capacity, Robert buys his wife inappropriate gifts such as *Cosmopolitan*, to which the Mai responds: ‘I read Plato and Aristotle on education, because education is my business, and do you know the differences between their philosophies? No, I didn’t think you would.’ Robert retaliates: ‘It was I who brought Plato and Aristotle into this house. When I met you, you were reading Mills and Boons! The Mai fights back in desperation: ‘You’re a fuckin’ liar! When you met me I was cellist in the college orchestra! I had a B.A. under my belt and I was halfway through my Masters! You lower me, all the time you lower me. (*She brandishes the cello bow all over the place).*

In *The Mai*, Carr explores the role of motherhood, representing it in all its complex variables and multiplicities. Since *Low In The Dark*, each one of Carr’s dramas denaturalises essentialist notions of the so-called ‘maternal instinct’. The words ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ are still used effectively *interchangeably* in the Irish constitution, radically displaying the assumed relationship between the two. The 1937 Article 41.2. in the Irish Constitution that attracted the fiercest opposition from women, reads as follows:

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94 *Plays: One*, pp. 154-5.
95 *Plays: One*, pp. 172, 174.
96 *Plays: One*, p. 155.
1. In particular 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.
2. The State shall therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

In “Marginality and Militancy: Cumann Na Mban, 1914-1936”, Margaret Ward observes: ‘De Valera remained adamant that a woman’s place was in the home. [...] Women’s participation in 1916 established an image of the women’s role within the nationalist movement which closely resembled that of an ideal house-keeper, able to cook appetising meals out of unsavoury ingredients.’\(^\text{97}\) Similarly, In “The Constitution and the Role of Women”, Yvonne Scannell notes: ‘Despite the protests about article 41.2, de Valera refused to delete it. His reasons for refusing show that his vision of the role of woman in Irish society was that of a full-time mother in an indissoluble marriage, having ‘a preference for home duties’ and ‘natural duties’ as a mother.’\(^\text{98}\) In accordance with this view, Mary Cullen writes: ‘The new wave of feminism which emerged in Western society around 1960 [and later in Ireland in the 1970s], challenged the prevailing stereotype which insisted that every female, by virtue of her sex, was individually fulfilled and made her best contribution to society as a wife and mother, subordinating the development of other talents and leaving responsibility for the organisation of society to males.’\(^\text{99}\)

Carr radically contests and explores the assumed relationship between ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ in a variety of manners in each one of her plays, most notably in The Mai through the characters of Grandma Fraochlán and the Mai, who each display self-absorbed, non-typically ‘maternal’ tendencies. While the Mai’s self-preoccupation is indicated through her general level of non-interaction with her children, Grandma

\(^{97}\) Ward, Margaret, “Marginality and Militancy: Cumann Na Mban, 1914-1936”, in The Irish Women’s History Reader, p. 60.


\(^{99}\) Cullen, Mary, “History Women and History Men”, in The Irish Women’s History Reader, p. 15.
Fraochlán is remembered for her prioritisation of her husband over the emotional needs of her children:

I know he was a useless father, Julie, I know, an’ I was a useless mother. It’s the way we were med! There’s two types a people in this worlt from what I can gather, thim as puts their childer first an’ thim as puts their lover first an’ for whah it’s worth, tha nine-fingered fisherman an’ meself belongs ta tha lahher a these. I would gladly a hurlt all seven a ye down tha slopes a hell for wan nigh’ more wud tha nine-fingered fisherman an’ may I roh eternally for such unmotherly feelin.  

In addition to renegotiating the ideology of the ‘maternal instinct’ in *The Mai*, Carr addresses other issues relevant to women and sexual politics in Ireland such as illegitimacy, divorce, abortion, miscarriage, and the effects of extra-marital relationships. Contraception was constitutionally illegal up until the 1970s in Ireland. Mary Cullen writes:

The roots of feminism lie in the behavioural patterns societies have prescribed for women and men. While these have differed over time and place, feminism has always grown from women’s perception that the sex roles prescribed by their own society conflicted with their knowledge of themselves and with their development as autonomous persons.  

After becoming pregnant ‘be a brickie’, Ellen was compelled to marry and forego a university education. In addition to experiencing loss and ontological trauma in her status as a socially liminal figure at the transitional phase of the 1930s in Ireland, Ellen significantly died in childbirth, thus breaking the assumed positive link between reproduction and motherhood. Thus, as noted above, Ellen straddled the intersticial historical threshold of women’s rights in this country, by both gaining a place at

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101 Cullen, in *The Irish Women’s History Reader*, p. 15.
102 Significantly, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, is also set at the transitional phase of 1930s Ireland.
university, and ultimately suffering due to the stifling social stigma of pregnancy out of wedlock.

The conflicting and transitional position of women in this country is clearly articulated in the different world views of thirty-seven year old Beck, and her seventy-year old aunt Julie, who remains collusive with the rigid, old-world doctrine. The Catholic Church relied on the complicity of women in the policing of their bodies, and the maintenance of hegemonic patriarchal authority. Julie and Agnes personify the female perpetuators of this exclusively male systematisation. In their assumption that Beck is pregnant, they pray that 'With the luck of God, she'll miscarry.' The restrictions placed on women’s bodies by the Catholic Church have always been bound up with the government of the State in this country, as the most effective method of ensuring economic sustainability, through inheritance, legitimacy and marriage laws. McLoughlin notes: ‘Sexual prudery in nineteenth-century Ireland had little to do with the Church and all to do with the economics of the emerging middle class.’ It is important to note that, in practical terms, illegitimacy has never been an issue of ethical or sexual morality but was bound up with the efficient governing of the state.

Agnes and Julie consistently uphold and maintain the patriarchal status quo. Raised within the earlier social system, they exemplify the dominant ideologies at the turn of the nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries where, ‘by Christ, if they had anything to do with it, Beck would stay married even if it was to a tree.’ Unable to articulate the

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103 Plays: One, p. 136.
104 In The Irish Women’s History Reader, Mary Cullen writes that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ‘Titles and property were passed to sons in preference to daughters. The home was seen as ‘the woman’s sphere’, yet, to take a representative example, under English common law, in force in Ireland, when a woman married, her legal identity merged into that of her husband. Her property, whether earned or inherited, passed under his control to dispose of as he pleased and the law gave him full authority over her and their children. Divorce was considerably more difficult for a wife to obtain than it was for a husband, and if a woman left her husband his duty to maintain her lapsed while his right to her property did not. In sex-related offences such as adultery, prostitution and illegitimate birth, the law treated women as the more guilty and punishable party.’, p. 16.
106 Plays: One, p. 135.
word ‘divorce’ out loud, Agnes says: ‘You’re not really getting a (whisper) divorce, are you?’ Beck explains to her aunts: ‘It just didn’t work out [...] I tried. I really did.’ Julie responds: ‘What’s all this talk about working out. In my day you got married and whether it worked out or it didn’t was by the by.’ Divorce was not legal in Ireland at the time in which The Mai is set (1979), but was just made legal in this country when the play was first produced (1994), thus the temporal links between the world of the play, 1979, and the contemporaneous time of production, 1994, incorporate a significant transitionary period in terms of changes in family law and rights for women. Julie and Agnes’ mother, Grandma Fraochlán, is ambivalent in her negotiation of sexual politics. As a transitionary, and thus symbolically excessive figure, Grandma Fraochlán now radically resists and contests the patriarchal ideologies of church and state against which women were defined in the late nineteenth and early half of the twentieth century.

In Carr’s plays the fabric of family life is central to each of the narratives. Paternal landscapes are similarly explored and de-romanticised in The Mai, where fatherhood is depicted as being in a state of crisis. On numerous occasions in the play, paternal responsibility is either not acknowledged, or simply denied, by the nameless males in question, linking back to the absent, unnamed fathers in Low In The Dark. Grandma Fraochlán’s ambiguous ‘father-land’ is linked to her own bifurcated and inconclusive sense of identity, as she mythologises the father whom she has never met:

Take my life now, I came into the world without a father. [...] The Duchess told me me father was the Sultan of Spain and that he’d hid The Duchess and meself on Fraochlan because we were too beautiful for the world. But in the summer he was goin’ to come in a yacht and take us away to his palace in Spain [...] – I believed her and watched on the cliffs every day for the Sultan of Spain.  

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107 Plays: One, p. 140.
108 Plays: One, p. 141.
109 Plays: One, p. 169.
Millie tells the audience that he was ‘a Spanish or Moroccan sailor – no one is quite sure – who was never heard of or seen since the night of her conception. There are many stories about him as there are about those who appear briefly in our lives and change them forever. Whoever he was, he left Grandma Fraochlán his dark skin and a yearning for all that is exotic and unattainable.’

Wallace notes:

[…] origins are supposed to determine destiny and yet in each play the problematic nature of origins is stressed. Carr’s multiple strategies of developing the notion of destiny and the inevitable, all have some ontological dimension, and in every case reveal a lack which is amended through simulation – illusion, fantasy, false memory, story. Although the dramas achieve a ‘destined’ closure, more powerful is the traumatic unstable space of identity they open.

History is repeated almost one-hundred years later when the man with whom Millie had a brief relationship with in New York similarly defers responsibility: ‘I wrote a sensible letter, enclosing a photo of you, asking him to acknowledge paternity. And I did not tell you he did not answer.’

A crisis of masculinity is again articulated when the audience learns that Ellen’s husband similarly ‘left her on Fraochlán to rot. Came home every summer, left her with another pregnancy’, until finally she died alone in childbirth.

Wallace notes: ‘A concern for genealogy and the notion of heredity as destiny is foregrounded in narrative terms by the testimonies of different generations of characters in the plays. In each the present is haunted by the past and seems determined by its spectral legacy.’

Romantic fantasy and mythology become distortional defence mechanisms and sources of psychological and emotional refuge for each of the abandoned women in the play.

Grandma Fraochlán speaks of ‘knowing no higher love in this world or the next’ than that

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110 Plays: One, p. 116.
111 Wallace, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: ‘…before rules was made.’
112 The Mai, p. 56.
113 Plays: One, p. 145.
114 Wallace, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: ‘…before rules was made.’
of her beloved Tomás, scipérí, mac Scipéara’, the ‘Nine-Fingered fisherman’. Her stories recounting the ‘rare and sublime love [...] in this wild and lonely planet’ of her and her husband fail to negotiate the fact that his early death by drowning ‘twenty mile sou’west of Fraochlán’ left her abject and abandoned on a remote island with young children and no source of income apart from ‘scrawbin’ seaweed off the rocks’.\footnote{Plays: One, p. 180.}

According to Wallace: ‘Grandma Fraochlán provides an imaginative archive of fantasies and far-fetched stories, passed on to her by her mother ‘The Duchess’, many of which hinge upon her father’s identity; an exotic, mysterious Spanish/Moroccan/Tunisian sailor.’\footnote{Wallace, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made.”} The Duchess constructs her fleeting male into a dashing sovereignty-figure as the ‘Sultan of Spain’, while she and her abandoned daughter play out empty fantasy roles of queen and princess. Similarly, Millie describes her one-time lover through rose-coloured glasses as a ‘drummer who swept me off my feet. [...] his eyes are brown and his hair is black and [...] he loved to drink Jack Daniels by the neck. [...] High on hash or marijuana or god-knows-what we danced on the roof of a tenement building in Brooklyn.’\footnote{Plays: One, p. 165.} The Mai is in a similar state of self-protective, fantastic delusion. After being humiliated once again in public by Robert and his latest mistress, she reconciles the situation: ‘I don’t think anyone will ever understand, not you, not my family, not even Robert, no one will ever understand how completely and utterly Robert is mine and I am his, no one.’\footnote{Plays: One, p. 180.} Mythic paternity, and the precarious ambiguity of ‘father-land’, is similarly dramatised in By the Bog of Cats..., in the absent figure of Hester’s father ‘Jack Swane of Bergit’s Island’.

In The Mai, Grandma Fraochlán’s identity is complicated by the ambiguity of her origins, her mixed racial background and abandonment by her father, affording her an anomalous and anachronistic status within the family. The romantic fantasy and conjecture surrounding her paternity is made humorous in the drama, rendering her an agent-less, exoticised, and mythically constructed object by the other characters. Millie’s description
of Grandma Fraochlán as ‘The Spanish beauty’, who yearns for the ‘exotic’ and ‘unattainable’, renders Grandma Fraochlán to the status of object, and the reality of her inherent ontological anxiety is important to note. Grandma Fraochlán explicitly articulates the crisis of subjectivity that her inconclusive paternity, social stigma of mixed racial heritage, and ignoble illegitimate status affords: ‘I was tha only bastard on Fraochlán.’

The trauma of the liminal subject position, displayed in Grandma Fraochlán’s inconclusive parentage is continually elided in favour of the romantic desire to cultivate and perpetuate a fetishised sense of her mystique and ‘exotic’ unattainability. A fractional half of her genealogy is based on speculation and circumspection and is thus embellished and frequently liberally re-mythologised. Grandma Fraochlán’s ambiguous ethnicity, and inability to correctly mathematically quantify her mixed racial heritage is shown to be a farcical and derogatory source of amusement for the family:

**Julie:** You watch your dirty Arab tongue!

**Grandma Fraochlán:** I’m half Spanish, half Moroccan for your infor- **Julie:** Oh it’s half Moroccan this time, is it! Last time it was three-quarters Tunisian!

**Grandma Fraochlán:** I told ya, ya eejit, my great grandfather was Tunisian! I’m only quarter Tunisian, half Moroccan and half Spanish!

**Julie:** That makes five quarters! How many quarters in a whole?

**Grandma Fraochlán:** A good kick up yours is what you need!

Although Grandma Fraochlán perpetuates the exotic aspect of her mixed racial origins, she significantly fails to articulate the equally Irish proportion of her genealogy. While her Irish lineage is thus elided, it is specifically her ‘Irishness’ that renders her most ‘exotic’ in the play. In the first published edition of the script, her heightened Hiberno-

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118 *Plays: One*, p. 185.
120 *Plays: One*, p. 142.
English speech rhythms and unique dialect mark her as radically other to those around her. Each of Grandma Fraochlán’s lines in the first edition is written phonetically, in part dialect: ‘And me pinsion walleh, where’s thah? […] Can’t amimber, look in all a thim.’ Her next Irish word is ‘seafoid’ [rubbish]. In the same act she says to her daughter; ‘Mebbe a bih a hoorin’ around would a done ya’arself no harm; might take thah self-righteous straois off ya’ar puss!’ Due to the cultural specificity of the language, this line, a hybrid of Gaelic, English and colloquial speech, practically requires translation.

Grandma Fraochlán’s first entrance in Act One marks out the pattern of her speech, and is the very first example of Carr’s unique dialect form, which has become a defining characteristic of her theatre, and in which her next play, Portia Coughlan, is entirely constructed in. On her first entrance, Grandma Fraochlán says of her oar: ‘Did ya do any damage ta ih?’ Grandma Fraochlán is the only character in The Mai who speaks in dialect, and her speech is interspersed with traces of Gaelic more so than any of the other characters. In her next line she exclaims: ‘Ah Mai, great ta see ya, a chroi.’ Wallace writes:

Grandma Fraochlán’s difference is underlined by the language she uses, which is a curious mixture of heavily accented Donegal English tempered with the sentiments of popular romance. In addition, her frequent use of the word ‘sublime’ is replete with associations with English Romanticism, and coupled with her opium habit, serves to align her with escapism and the imagination. This proliferation of myths of origin to supplement ‘reality’ is crucial to the course of the play.

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122 Plays: One, p. 17.
123 Plays: One, p. 22.
124 Plays: One, p. 37.
125 The Mai, p. 15.
126 The Mai, p. 15.
127 Wallace, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: "...before rules was made."
A comparison between the first (1995), and subsequently revised (1999) playtexts of *The Mai* reveals Carr’s return to a more standardised dialogue pattern. In the Gallery Press (1995) edition Grandma Fraochlán says of her oar: ‘Well then ya can puh me in the garage along wud ih.’ In the later Faber and Faber (1999) edition the same line reads as: ‘Well then ya can put me in the garage along with it.’ ‘Wud ih’ becomes ‘with it.’ Further dialect and Gaelic interjection is as follows; ‘Sorry, a stóir, buh it’s all I’ve left of him now. Why didn’t ya build a bigger winda, Mai?’

Carr’s representation of the grandmother figures in the plays from 1989 - 1998 may be considered in terms of post-Bakhtinian carnivalesque symbolism of the female grotesque, as excessive and hybrid bodies. Carr’s representation of indeterminate corporealities, fluid spatio-temporalities, mythologised landscapes and flowing dialect rhythms, projected against backdrops of evocative leakage and wateriness, with their excessive drive to overflow and to exceed normative and dominant ideological boundaries, are recurrent tendencies of *mésalliances* in the plays. Bakhtin notes carnivalistic *mésalliances*, to be the breaking of ‘all things that were once self-enclosed or distanced from one another, [which are now] drawn into carnivalesque contacts and combinations.’

In the older female figures of the plays we can see a basing on the ‘conception of the world as eternally unfinished; a world dying and being born at the same time, possessing as it were, two bodies.’ As the central corporeal link between past and present, youth and old-age, Grandma Fraochlán is what ‘Hélène Cixous, in a term strikingly similar to Bakhtin’s formulation of the grotesque body as a continuous process, notes as “the body without beginning and without end.”’ The linguistic polyphony in *The Mai* is most significantly inscribed in the excessive figure of Grandma Fraochlán, who is *between* past

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128 *The Mai*, p. 15.
129 *Plays: One*, p. 112.
130 *The Mai*, p. 16.
131 *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity*.
133 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 166.
and present, and Gaelic and English, and who is most closely linked to death and the 
erotic, and licentious and semiotic plurality, all of which mark her closely to a post-
Bakhtinian, female-grotesque sensibility.

Grandma Fraochlán may be associated with Bakhtin’s very specific imagistic notion of 
the Kerch terracotta figurines, which he uses to analogise his notion of the grotesque 
body:

This is typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is 
pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm 
and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying, and 
deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed [...] 
Moreover, the old hags are laughing. 135

Larger than life, at one-hundred years of age, Grandma Fraochlán shows no sign of 
passivity or decay. Of her mother, Julie says: ‘Isn’t Grandma Fraochlán looking well. 
She’ll have to be shot.’ 136 In Portia Coughlan, Blaize Scully is the octogenarian who is 
closely aligned with death, profanity and the grotesque swing of the lower bodily stratum. 
She, like Grandma Fraochlán, is the laughing crone of Bakhtin’s Kerch terracotta 
figurines, the ‘smiling, senile, pregnant hag’, associated through her age and speech with 
death, sexuality and scatological irreverence: ‘Shut up to be fucked, you,’ she says to her 
son, Sly. 137 Of the Kerch figurines, Bakhtin writes: ‘They remain ambivalent and 
contradictory: they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of “classical” 
aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and completed.’ 138

At one-hundred years of age, Grandma Fraochlán is the corporeal link between Thanatos 
and Eros: ‘You’re born, ya have sex, and then ya die’, she says simply. 139 In Act One, she

135 Rabelais and His World, pp. 25-6. 
136 Plays: One, p. 137. 
137 Plays: One, p. 215. 
138 Rabelais and His World, p. 25. 
139 Plays: One, p. 143.
reminisces over private moments with her dead husband at the Cleggan Fair. In this dreamy, evocative image of the lovers dancing in each others’ arms at the carnival, in a swirl of red petticoats and rouge cosmetics, Grandma Fraochlán presents a memory of ‘sublime’, romantic sexuality:

Applying lipstick, she dances with the air; cello provides music, Irish with a flavour of Eastern; Remember ya bought it [lipstick] for me – 1918 at the Cleggan fair – still have it – Why wouldn’t I? Remember the Cleggan fair, me nine-fingered fisherman, we went across from Fraochlán in the currach, me thirty-eight birthday, a glorious day – (Listens, laughs softly). I knew you’d remember, you’d got me a bolt of red cloth and I’d made a dress and a sash for me hair. Remember, Tomás, remember, and you told me I was the Queen of the ocean and that nothing mattered in the wide world, only me. And we danced at the Cleggan fair and you whispered in me ear – sweet nothins – sweet nothins.140

Grandma Fraochláns evocative association with the fairground, as the excessive corporeality within the drama, is the embodiment of the symbolic politics of intermixing and hybridisation in the play, where the fair represents a site of oscillation between excess and containment, and the dilution of fluid and solid. Stallybrass and White comment: ‘Thinking the marketplace, or fair, is somewhat like thinking the body. [...] In the marketplace ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are persistently mystified. It is a place where limit, centre and boundary are confirmed and yet also put into jeopardy.’141 Bakhtin argues that the market place with ‘its special status at fair time [is] a popular domain created outside, and beyond, the official sites of authority. In the fair, [Bakhtin] argues, one could experience ‘a certain extraterritoriality’ from the official order and official ideology.142 A carnivalesque body, this ‘extraterritoriality’ is the liminal, social and ontological, positioning that Grandma Fraochlán inhabits in The Mai.

140 Plays: One, p. 121.
141 Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p. 28.
142 Politics and Poetics of Transgression, p. 28.
In its association with the erotic, the licentious and the grotesque lower bodily stratum, the fair, like Grandma Fraochlán is both within and outside of dominant ideology and social structure, tenuously inhabiting the, at times traumatic, liminal territory of social between-ness, a status which is accompanied by a necessary subversive potentiality. The fairground is the site of intermixing and hybridisation vis a vis leisure activity and economic commodification. Stallybrass and White note that the fair 'is only ever an intersection, a crossing of ways.'\textsuperscript{143} The ex-centric, geographically marginal space of the fair traditionally incorporated the dual purpose of commerce and communal pleasure, which was subsequently separated for what was seen as the dangerous and subversive actual potential of the market-place, where the temporary license may 'often act as catalyst and site of actual symbolic struggle.'\textsuperscript{144}

The blurring of the conventionally demarcated stratifications of business and pleasure at the fairground was regarded as threatening and destabilising to dominant social codes and practices. Stallybrass and White outline how ‘the bourgeois classes were frequently frightened by the threat of political subversion and moral licence, [and] they were perhaps more scandalized by the deep conceptual confusion entailed by the fair’s inmixing of work and pleasure, trade and play.’\textsuperscript{145} As Stallybrass and White point out: Magistrates increasingly attempted to distinguish between the fair which was economically useful and the pleasure fair. [...] The fair had to be split into two opposed parts: in so far as it could be thought of as low, dirty, extraterritorial, it could be demonized as the locus of vagabond desires. In so far as it was economically useful, it could be seen as part of what Norbert Elias has called ‘the civilising process.’\textsuperscript{146} Essentially, authorities wished to separate the economic from ‘play’ and the clean from the dirty, to ‘consolidate the binaries which the fair so mischievously seemed to intermix and confuse.’\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{143} *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{144} *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{145} *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{146} *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{147} *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 31.
Bakhtin’s compelling descriptions of the Kerch figurines as poetic analogies of his notion of the grotesque body invoke characteristic comparisons with the pre-Christian Irish stone carvings known as ‘Sheela-na-gigs’ or Sili-na-gig. In *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Vivien Mercier writes:

All these female figures have in common either grossly exaggerated genitalia or a posture which directs attention to the genitals – and usually a combination of both features [displaying] the following characteristics; an ugly mask-like or skull-like face, with a huge scowling mouth; skeletal ribs; huge genitalia held open by both hands; bent legs. In some examples [there are over sixty known statues] the mouth is smiling, the body is that of a young woman, and the genitalia are in a more natural proportion to the whole figure.

This Irish form of the grotesque can be linked to what Mercier notes as ‘the expression ‘Sheela-na-gig’ which was current fairly recently in the neighbourhood of Macroom, County Cork, meaning ‘hag’. Echoing Bakhtin, Mercier conjectures: ‘She must have been a goddess of creation-and-destruction, of whom there were many among the Celts. ’

In considering the sex/death ambivalence of Carr’s representation of Grandma Fraochlán, and Blaize Scully in *Portia Coughlan*, Mercier’s comments on the Sheela-na-gigs are appropriate: ‘Perhaps she was incorporated into Christian churches as a representation of the deadly sin of luxuria or lust. She does not become an unmistakeably comic figure until she is represented as smiling.’ The explicitly erotic nature of the statues, and Mercier’s notion of the goddess of ‘destruction and creation’, can be considered in the same symbolic frame as Bakhtin’s ‘pregnant, smiling, senile hags’, as images of the excessive, transgressive potential and *mésalliances* that Grandma Fraochlán embodies in

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149 *The Irish Comic Tradition*, p. 53.
150 *The Irish Comic Tradition*, p. 54.
151 *The Irish Comic Tradition*, p. 54.
The Mai, and which fluidly permeate the drama, leading into Carr’s next play, Portia Coughlan.

With the The Mai, Carr’s unique theatrical voice is asserted, and becomes increasingly assured with each successive play. The dialect rhythms of Grandma Fraochlán’s phonetic dialogue in the first edition of The Mai are intensified in Carr’s next play, Portia Coughlan, where each one of the characters’ speech is wholly imbued in the landscape that they inhabit. With the nascent emergence of a trilogy of strong, defiant women, in The Mai, Carr remains within the Midlands of County Offaly in her depiction of another protagonist negotiating a society that is ontologically confining and emotionally unfulfilling in her next play, Portia Coughlan.
Chapter Three:

Spectral Voices: Self and Other-ness in 
*Portia Coughlan*

*All the dead voices.*
*They make noise like wings.*
*Like leaves.*
*Like Sand.*
*Like leaves.*
*[Silence.]*
*They all speak together.*
*Each one to itself.*
*[Silence.]*
*Rather they whisper.*
*They rustle.*
*They murmur.*
*[Silence.]*
*What do they say?*
*They talk about their lives.*
*To have lived is not enough for them.*
*They have to talk about it.*
*To be dead is not enough for them.*

*Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett
The aim of this chapter on Portia Coughlan is to explore the development of Marina Carr’s renegotiation of female identity and fluid representation of space, gender and the body in an Irish cultural and dramatic context. In Portia Coughlan Carr presents contrasting, yet related spatio-temporal and ontological realms of the ‘real’, the mythic and the ghostly, in which language and landscape are poetic sites of excess and imaginative transformation. Rosemary Jackson notes: ‘By offering a problematic representation of the empirically ‘real’ world the fantastic raises questions of the nature of the real and the unreal, foregrounding the relationship between them as its central concern.’ Sites of tension, permeability and unresolvability, between classical unities of time, place and character, are once again opened up in Portia Coughlan, in which the dialectics of containment and excess destabilise rigid boundary and border logic.

In Theorising the Fantastic, Lucie Armitt writes: ‘Under the spirit of the carnivalesque, the body is not only the central reference point, but also the limits of its concerns – a preoccupation that provides it with its primary socio-political significance as a crucial site of power and manipulation.’ In Carr’s plays from 1989 – 1998, borders become ‘leaky’, slippery and overflowing, where ambivalent representations of the body as both material and spectral, male and female, cross-dressed, old and young, grotesque and classical, and complete and mutilated, display a tendency to excess. In Portia Coughlan, the ghost of Gabriel is that which most radically challenges ‘classical’ notions of corporeality. As shall be discussed in the final part of this chapter, Carr’s representation of Grandmother figures, with Blaize Scully in Portia Coughlan and Grandma Fraochlán in The Mai, figuratively embodies the notion of excess and the ‘female grotesque’ as reappropriated from Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the grotesque body.

In the introduction to this thesis, Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian theories of the grotesque body were explored, where the move beyond limiting nineteenth century connotations of ugliness, vileness and repulsion, to the primary etymological roots in the fifteenth century

was emphasised. In its original context the term ‘grotesque’ denotes an overflowing, blurring and hybridisation of ‘extremely fanciful, free, and playful plant, animal and human form [which seem] to be interwoven as if giving birth to one another.’\(^4\) Thus it is in its primary conceptualisation that the notion of the grotesque challenges the closed rationale of Enlightenment ideals, denoting as it does in this context, an ‘over-flow’ or blurring of traditionally dominant representational and ideological structures. The transformative potential of grotesque corporeality is noted by Armitt: ‘The grotesque body is always in the process of breaking open: orifices gaping, fluids overrunning; [a] form which is continually resistant to closure.’\(^5\) Similarly, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Wolfgang Kayser writes that the grotesque body is: ‘The distortion of all ingredients, the fusion of different realms, the coexistence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly, and repulsive elements, the merger of the parts into a turbulent whole.’\(^6\) In Carr’s plays the grotesque can be regarded as an excessive concept of intermingling and hybridity which represents the fusion, and confusion, of discrete categories of gender, language, sexuality, class and spatio-temporality.

In each of Carr’s plays the condition of ‘excess’ points to potential destabilisations of ‘traditional’ or dominant structures and ideologies. As noted in the General Introduction, ‘excess’ is officially defined as being an ‘overstepping of due limits; of superabundance; of exceeding the proper amount or degree’.\(^7\) What are these ‘due limits’, who demarcates them, and what is the ‘proper amount or degree’ as posited within this definition? Such a politically naturalised statement covertly constructs and maintains an exclusive hegemonic value-system in its implication, and relegation of, something ‘excessive’ as ‘other’; as being outside the limits, or beyond the ‘proper amount’.

3 ‘Classical’ in the Bakhtinian sense as being ‘closed’, stable, defined, masculine, rational and aesthetically beautiful.
4 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 32.
5 *Theorising The Fantastic*, p. 69.
In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler warns that ‘the effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail and ought to. What is at stake in using the term at all?’\(^8\) What is more useful then, than defining something as ‘excessive’ in operational opposition to that which is ‘contained’, is ‘excess’ as a kind of *blurring*, a potential intermix or overflow of, and *between*, ‘within’ and ‘without’, which can be linked to Bakhtin’s useful notion of grotesque ‘*mésalliances*’. For Bakhtin, ‘*mésalliances*’ denotes the moment when ‘all things that were once self-enclosed or distanced from one another by hierarchical world view[s] are drawn into carnivallistic contacts and combinations.’\(^9\) Bakhtin’s reference to ‘contacts’ and ‘combinations’ connotes intermingling, blurring, and a resistance to closure and fixity, which relates to the imagery of water and the properties of the fluid in Carr’s plays.

In *Portia Coughlan*, Bakhtin’s concept of Carnivalistic *mésalliances*, is represented in the omnipresent, ever flowing motion of the Belmont River, symbolising the ways in which Carr makes fluid, permeable and potentially transformative or ‘unfixed’, hegemonic structures of time, place, language, gender and the body. As in *The Mai* and *Low In The Dark*, there is a fundamental link between form and content in *Portia Coughlan*. While the narrative content of the plays from 1989 - 1998 is concerned with the renegotiation of female identity and the fallibility of traditional Irish patriarchal ideologies, the structure and dramaturgy of the dramas simultaneously challenges conventional modes of theatrical representation.

Set in the present-day, in the Midlands of Ireland, the drama opens on the morning of Portia Coughlan’s thirtieth birthday. To her immediate family it would seem that Portia has it all. In Act One Maggie May reminds Portia that she’s ‘marriet ta wan a’ tha richest min i’tha county, beauhiful house, beauhiful clothes, beauhiful everthin’.\(^10\) Yet the opening moments present a woman dejected and disintegrating, sitting alone at the kitchen table of her coffin-like home, brandy in hand at ten o’clock in the morning, in a

\(^{8}\) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. xxii.

\(^{9}\) Bakhtin, Mikhail, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 250.

somnambulistic haze, while the ghost of her dead twin hauntingly sings by the banks of the nearby Belmont River. Portia has never recovered from the death by drowning of her brother, Gabriel, fifteen years previous, in the Belmont River, and has since fought a daily battle to ‘have a chance to enter the world and stay in it.’

In Portia Coughlan the central character is repeatedly compelled to the Belmont River, where her twin brother was drowned, after a disastrous suicide-pact, fifteen years previous. In scene three of Act Three, Portia tells her aunt Maggie of the tragic drowning of her brother:

I knew he was goin’ to do it, planned to do it together, and at the last minute I got afraid and he just went on in and I called him back but he didn’t hear me on account of the swell and just kept on wadin’, and I’m standin’ on the bank, right here, shoutin’ at him to come back and at the last second he turns thinkin’ I’m behind him, his face, Maggie May, the look on his face, and he tries to make the bank but the undertow do have him and a wave washes over him.

Punctuating and underscoring all significant moments in her life, Portia draws on the well-spring of the Belmont River to frame and underscore her increasing ontological anxiety. In Act Three, Portia reveals how the river talks to her: ‘Forget Gabriel! He’s everywhere. Everywhere... The river tells me that once he was here and now he’s gone.’ The river marks the limits or boundaries of Portia’s life, and it is to the river’s ‘leakiness’ and ‘overflow’ that she finally escapes.

In terms of considering the links between form and content in Portia Coughlan, the crucial starting point is in the contrasting spaces of the opening moments of the mise-en-scène. Armitt writes: ‘Space has increasingly become a central metaphor in literature [and performance] which inevitably evokes the fantastic [and] informs other conceptual

11 Plays: One, p. 255.
12 Plays: One, p. 240.
paradigms. As in The Mai and By the Bog of Cats..., Carr represents interchangeable and symbolic spaces of the ‘real’ and the ‘non-real’ in Portia Coughlan, in addition to employing metatheatrical devices such as simultaneous playing spaces and flash-back, which evocatively correspond with the central concerns of the plays. The symbolic resonances of the opening stage-directions of each one of Carr’s plays poetically imply the critical tensions that are about to unfold. In Low In The Dark it is indicated that the stage-space is ironically divided into the ‘men’s space’ and an ‘other’ space. In The Mai, the single-set of the house, and dominating metatheatrical feature of the window, is central, while in By the Bog of Cats the expansive limbo of shifting bogland, denoted as a bleak white landscape of ice and snow, is crucial to Hester’s precarious sense of self.

In “Unhomely Stages: Women Taking (a) Place in Irish Theatre”, McMullan writes:

In order to present the space-time experience of the individual, realism has often been combined with more self-consciously theatrical conventions, as in Friel’s Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964), which presents a double protagonist in Private and Public Gar, yet still maintains the realist frame of location.

McMullan goes on to assert that while ‘Some playwrights adapt elements of theatrical realism in order to critique the constraints of the society they represent, the traditional forms of realism are often at odds with the perspectives, identities and relationships they offer. Many go beyond realism in their staging of female dis-location. In each of Carr’s plays from 1994, the mise-en-scènes hover between memory and imagination, between literary allusion and topographic realism, incorporating spaces which are never fully ‘real’ and never purely fictional, in which ambivalence, liminality, and excess challenge hegemonic rationalisations of identity, language and the body.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Hélène Cixous articulates:

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13 Theorising The Fantastic, p. 7.
14 Plays: One, p. 265.
15 McMullan, in Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens, p. 74.
16 McMullan, in Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens, p. 74.
Women’s writing’ is concerned with ‘working the in-between’ […] it can be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete. This contiguity exists within the text and at its borders; the feminine form seems to be without a sense of formal closure – in fact it operates as an anti-closure […] Without closure, the sense of beginning, middle and end, or a central focus, it abandons the hierarchical organising principles of traditional form that served to elide women from discourse.¹⁷

While there is a danger that Cixous essentialises the ‘feminine’, for the purposes here her argument nevertheless articulates the aesthetic and political potential of the non-realist strategies that Carr employs in the plays from 1989 – 1998, in which narrative non-linearity, contrasting psychological realms, multiplicities spatio-temporalities and corporealities of ‘otherness’, (as represented in the spectre-body), allow for imaginative, fluid and inconclusive disruptions of closed hegemonic structure and identity. In terms strikingly similar to the Bakhtinian conceptualisation of the grotesque-body, Luce Irigaray writes about female authorship as a form ‘constantly in the process of weaving itself.’¹⁸ This openness to renewal and transition, and the lack of closure is characteristic of the structure and content of Carr’s dramas, which, as Sue-Ellen Case notes: ‘releases the expression of female desire from the snares of patriarchal narrative structures and traditional forms of representation that have repressed woman as subject.’¹⁹

The opening stage-directions of Portia Coughlan present a symbolically ‘split’ mise-en-scène, effectively denoting the dialectical sites of interior and exterior, corporeal and incorporeal, male and female and solid and fluid. The directions indicate:

¹⁸ Irigaray, Luce, in New French Feminisms, p. 99.
Two isolating lights up. One on Portia Coughlan in her living room. [...] The other light comes up simultaneously on Gabriel Scully, her dead twin. He stands at the bank of the Belmont River singing. They mirror one another’s posture and movements in an odd way, unconsciously.\textsuperscript{20}

In “Unstable Space” Wallis and Shepherd note: ‘Simultaneous action is, literally, action in two or more places at once [in which] two or more characters are connected across contrasting spaces. [...] Used in two different ways simultaneously, the stage space retains its fictional dimensions even while these are revealed as unreal.’\textsuperscript{21} The evocative mirror-images of the ghost, singing by the bank of the river, with the silent woman sitting inside at the kitchen table, immediately maps out the symbolic realms of the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ in the play. Displaying the dialectics of inner and outer, and excess and containment, through the contrasting solid structure of the domestic sphere with the banks of the fluid Belmont river, and the masculine, speaking ‘ghost’-body with the silent female material body, the \textit{mise en scene} imaginatively conjures-up the central ontological concerns of the drama.

Conflicting discourses of space and agency are central to Carr’s dramas. In relation to the contrasting arenas of domesticity and the outdoors, McMullan writes:

The Mai and Portia are situated in society, they have families and responsibilities [yet] their society allows them little imaginative space or agency, so their repressed dreams and desires are figured by the surrounding landscape which seems to possess them or be possessed by them: Owl Lake in \textit{The Mai}, which engulfs the women in recurring myths of abandonment and literally claims the Mai: the river in \textit{Portia Coughlan}, in which Portia drowns herself, as did her twin brother – or masculine other self – fifteen years earlier.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 193.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Studying Plays}, pp. 126-7.
In mapping subjectivity in performance, the relationship between space, the body and the borders between the outside and inside is central. Unlike the Mai, who remains indoors, Portia flirts with the threshold but remains contained, until her death, within the boundaries of family property. She has never left the Belmont valley and is an ostensible agent of her own confinement and insularity. In scene four of Act One, Portia tells her friend Stacia that she has never been on holiday:

Don't want one, don't think I'd survive a night away from the Belmont Valley… Oh, I'm sure I'd live through what other folks calls holidays, but me mind'd be turnin' on the Belmont River. Be wonderin’ was it flowin’ rough or smooth, was the bank mucky nor dry, was the salmon beginnin’ their rowin’ for the sea, was the frog’s spawnin’ the waterlillies, had the heron returned, be wonderin’ all of these and a thousand other wonderin’s that the river washes over me.\(^{23}\)

In Portia Coughlan, Carr presents for the first time, what emerges as a recurring trope in her plays – the ghostly figure that hovers between this world and an otherworld. Kayser writes:

The grotesque is seen to function in a manner that opens up an entry-point between the two worlds. In this respect […] the grotesque takes us into a fictive space that ‘is – and is not – our own world’; a world of anxiety, insecurity and the terror inspired by [individual and collective] disintegration.\(^{24}\)

The juxtaposed representation of the ‘real’ with the realm of the ‘supernatural’ in the first moments of Portia Coughlan is typical of Carr’s representation of ‘otherworlds’ and imaginative spaces.\(^{25}\) In “Marina Carr’s Unhomely Women”, McMullan writes: ‘The

\(^{23}\) Plays: One, pp. 207-8.
\(^{24}\) The Grotesque In Art and Literature, p. 30.
\(^{25}\) Ghosts also appear in By the Bog of Cats... (1998) and Ariel (2002), which were both produced on the main-stage of the Abbey Theatre for the Dublin Theatre Festival.
eponymous women in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan* [...] are placed in a setting that is specific, limited and stifling, and yet inhabited by mythical, uncanny presences.  

Throughout *Portia Coughlan* and *The Mai*, Carr’s impulse towards non ‘realist’ modes of dramatic representation may be read as ‘excessive’ and ‘grotesque’ in their resistance to the Aristotelian model of form. In *Poetics*, Aristotle considers form thus:

> A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an end is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it. A middle is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes after it. Well-constructed plots should therefore not begin or end at any arbitrary point, but should employ the stated forms.

While not a memory-play, *Portia Coughlan* is similarly constructed to *The Mai* in that the death of the eponymous character is revealed in the middle. At the beginning of Act Two the audience learns of Portia’s death by drowning:

> By the Belmont River. Evening. A search light swoops around the river. Raphael, Marianne, Sly, Stacia, Damus, Fintan, Senchil and Maggie May. They stand in silence as a pulley raises Portia out of the river. She is raised into the air and suspended there, dripping water, moss, algae, frogspawn, waterlillies, from the river.

With this striking physical image Carr achieves a fluidity of narratival linearity and dramatic structure. Carr considers this to be an ‘experiment with the material [and a way of finding] the most interesting way to tell the story; sometimes that’s playing with time. If the ending of *Portia Coughlan* was at the end, it wouldn’t work. It would be too...

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28 *Plays: One*, p. 223.
melodramatic, but because of its position in the play, it resonates through the third act. Watching her living, knowing that she is dead [...] shifts the focus.29 In Portia Coughlan the past bleeds into the present, as the third act becomes a theatrical ‘post-mortem’ in which the action returns to the morning after Portia’s birthday, and to the events which lead to her death-day. Fintan O’Toole notes the return in Act Three as being a kind of ‘psychical autopsy’, in which Portia’s corporeality and posthumous immateriality are overlapped and ambivalent.30

The mise-en-scène of Portia Coughlan is a layered, metaphysical chiaroscuro landscape, in which Gabriel’s ethereal presence ‘ghosts’ the action, just as Portia’s ‘re-apparition’ effects a sedimented performance of corporeal memory, as she lies in ‘the murky clay of Belmont graveyard.’31 In “The Uncanny”, Freud writes: ‘Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.’32 In both Portia Coughlan and By the Bog of Cats..., the relationship of the ethereal (or memory) body to notions of subjectivity, corporeality and the past radically crosses the boundaries of fixed notions of ‘reality’ or so-called Realism. Armitt points out that ghosting, as an aesthetic value ‘[...] transforms the unknowable and the unfathomable through figurative means to produce a form that has verifiable shape and tangibility [...] becoming a fantasy enacted with corporeal definition. Such fantasies are simply another way of enacting the two-way intersections of border crossings.’33

Incorporating metatheatrical spaces between the real and the fantastic, ghosts may be read in performance as signifiers of an other world, and also as internal psychological manifestations of the character who is ‘seeing’, and interacting with, the ‘spectre.’ The representation of the ‘ghost-body’ in the opening moments of Portia Coughlan, where Gabriel ‘stands at the bank of the Belmont River, singing’, is preceded by Carr’s

29 Reading The Future: Irish Writer in Conversation with Mike Murphy, p. 53.
30 O’Toole, Fintan, Irish Times, 02/04/1996.
31 Plays: One, p. 229.
33 Theorising The Fantastic, p. 9.
naturalisation of the ghost in the dramatis personae of the script: ‘Gabriel Scully, fifteen, Portia’s twin, a ghost.’ In “The Uncanny”, Freud writes about supernatural representations in art:

The creative writer can [...] choose a setting that [...] differs from the real world by admitting superior spiritual beings such as daemonic spirits or the ghosts of the dead. [...] We adapt our judgement to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer, and regard souls, spirits and ghosts as though their existence had the same validity as our own has in material reality.

Gabriel’s detached, omniscient presence pervades or ‘ghosts’ the action, significantly punctuating the climactic moments in the drama. In scene five of Act One, the stage directions indicate: Enter Gabriel Scully. He wanders by the Belmont River singing: effect must be ghostly. In Theorising the Fantastic, Armitt notes:

Space and its relationship to play as boundary demarcations, renders frontier territory central [...] where play becomes a means of adapting to ‘the boundaries between self and not-self’. Once [...] boundaries have been established, literature [and theatrical performance] permit us to loosen and thus subject them to interrogation. Fantasy fiction enables not only the self/not-self boundary, but also the boundaries between ‘inner and outer’ and ‘past, present and future’ to be placed under scrutiny in this manner.

With the return of Portia in Act Three, Portia Coughlan becomes a mi-d-landscape of the ‘un-dead’. In an interview Carr speaks about the return of the dead, and the impulse of haunting, as being ‘the fight for the possession of your soul [...] the dead are jealous of the living.’ As the battle for Portia’s soul reaches its climax in Act Three, the final

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34 Plays: One, pp. 192-3.
35 Art and Literature, pp. 373-4.
36 Plays: One, p. 209.
37 Theorising The Fantastic, p. 53.
38 Reading The Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy, p. 49.
directions of the play denote: *The sound of Gabriel’s voice, triumphant.* In the first scene of Act Two, as the body of Portia is suspended over the river, it is directed that: *Gabriel stands aloof on the other bank, in profile, singing.* At further significant moments in the drama the audience hears Gabriel, but does not actually see him, such as for instance, at the end of Act Two, where Portia and her husband Raphael ‘*eat and drink in silence.*’

[The] *sound of Gabriel’s voice comes over.*

In performance ghosting is both an aesthetic value, and a representational trope of political alterity, which Carr notes is ‘A way of seeing the world’. Non-realism and the imaginative spatialities of the fantastic often come under attack from mainstream journalism, criticism and theory because, as Armitt identifies: ‘Fantasy […] is fluid, constantly overspilling the very form it adopts, always looking, not so much for escapism but certainly to escape the constraints that critics impose upon it.’ As Carr notes: ‘People don’t believe in things anymore. They go to the theatre and they want two episodes of a soap opera. They don’t want to be told about a ghost.’ From Classical Greek theatre, which will be discussed in the chapter on *By the Bog of Cats*…, universalised notions of ‘truth’ and ‘the real’ have been constructed by, and locked within, monological male discourse. In 1878 Émile Zola proclaimed a manifesto of patriarchal hegemonic form:

> The future is with naturalism. The formula will be found; it will be proved that there is more poetry in the little apartment of a bourgeois than in all the empty, worm-eaten palaces of history; in the end we will see that everything meets in the real: lovely fantasies that are free of capriciousness and whimsy, and idylls, and comedies, and dramas. […] Where is the as-yet unknown author who must make the naturalistic drama? […] Audiences would give way before the onslaught of a really strong man. This man would come with the expected word, the solution to

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39 *Plays: One,* p. 223.
40 *Plays: One,* p. 231.
41 *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy,* p. 49.
42 *Theorising the Fantastic,* p. 3.
43 *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy,* p. 48.
the problem, the formula for a real life on stage, combining it with the illusions necessary in the theatre. He would [...] remain so close to truth that his cleverness could not lead him into lies.44

The aesthetic links between the sensibilities of J.M. Synge and Carr may be traced in Synge’s vociferous reaction to the Naturalist movement in 1907, when he famously commented: ‘[...] Ibsen and Zola deal [...] with the reality of life in joyless and pallid works.’45 Zola’s ‘really strong man’ with ‘the expected word’ epitomises phallocentric discourses of rationalism, and the radical rejection of imaginative and mythic possibility, which Carr notes as the ‘all-consuming intellectual pursuit [...] of de-mystification.’46

In *Portia Coughlan*, *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats...*, Carr asks the audience to consider which bodies may be regarded as ‘real’ and which may be considered ‘ether-real’. The symbolic resonances of the excessive crossing of boundaries between the living and the dead in performance leads to Butler’s question in *Gender Trouble*: ‘Is the materiality of the body fully constructed, or not?’47 Carr’s dramas centre around the performance of the body and the ‘non-body’, where the dialectics of interior, ‘psychic’ space and exterior landscape, are constantly played out. In *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, the fluid operation of memory is foregrounded through dramaturgical strategies of flashback and non-linearity, destabilising borders of the ‘real’, the past and the present, and the internal and the external. Throughout *Portia Coughlan* it is only Portia and the audience who can ‘see’ the ghost-figure of Gabriel, thus penetrating the psychological ‘mid-land’ of Portia’s ontological anxiety. Portia’s corporeality is denied with her death, yet she returns as a ghost or memory in the third act, while Millie is the only character in the ‘present-tense’ in *The Mai*, the other characters all being conjured-up through her internalised memory-narrative.

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47 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. xv.
Carr indicates in the directions of Portia Coughlan that ‘the stage must incorporate three spaces: the living room of Portia Coughlan’s house; the bank of the Belmont River; the bar of the High Chaparral’. Like the Belmont River, traditional boundaries of spatio-temporality, gender and language are represented as blurred, shifting and unstable throughout the drama. Taking the central image of water as a conceptual link between the three plays, the resonances of ‘leakiness’ and ‘overflow’, symbolically and imagistically may be regarded as representative of Carr’s multiplicit drive to exceed ‘normative’ boundary distinctions in performance. Andrew Conner writes: ‘Water is often symbolic of liminal states, including gendered and erotic fluidity.’ In Portia Coughlan the motif of the male and female pair of twins is central. Yet rather than being a reductive or essentialist motif of binarism or doubling, it is represented in a more complex manner in terms of interchangeability and fluid permeability. The poetic framing of the twins negotiates Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalistic mésalliance, that is: ‘All things that were once self-enclosed, [being] distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations.’

In scene three of Act Three, Portia says:

Don’t know if anyone knows what it’s like to be a twin. Everythin’s swapped and mixed up and you’re aither two people or you’re no one. He used call me Gabriel and I used call him Portia. Times we got so confused we couldn’t tell who was who and we’d have to wait for someone else to identify us and put us back into ourselves. I could make him cry just by callin’ him Portia.

The ‘leaky’ representation of the conventionally discrete categories of gendered identity point to an excessive spillage in Portia Coughlan, through Gabriel and Portia’s recurring association with, and compulsion to, water and embryonic fluidity. In Act Two, after Portia’s death, Damus Halion and Fintan Goolan remember a time when the twins were

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'found five mile out to sea in a row boat. [...] ‘We were just goin’ away’, says one of them. [...] ‘Anywhere’ says the other of them, ‘just anywhere that’s not here.’” Portia’s suitors also remember the interchangeable aspect of the children’s appearance and identity:

**Damus:** [Gabriel] looked like a girl.

**Fintan:** Sang like one too.

**Damus:** One thing I always found strange about them Scully twins. [...] You’d ask them a question and they’d both answer the same answer - at the same time, exact inflexion, exact pause, exact everythin’. [...] You’d put them in different rooms, still the same answer. [...] still have the photo of the whole class, still can’t tell one from the other.  

Each one of Carr’s protagonists, in the plays from 1994 – 1998, experiences a loss which impacts unalterably upon their emotional state. In *By the Bog of Cats*... that loss is represented most explicitly in terms of the absent mother-figure, for the Mai it is that of her husband Robert, while in *Portia Coughlan* it is projected onto the dead twin. Armitt notes: ‘One explanation for the particular pleasures offered by the literary fantastic derives from the prevalent awareness of loss. This frequently articulates itself in relation to the mother.’ In an attempt to empathise with Portia’s sense of loss, Raphael says ‘I have heard the bond between twins is ever strange and inexplicable.’ Nothing can compensate for the absence of her masculine other. In scene five of Act One, Portia tells her mother:

> Sometimes I think only half of me is left, the worst half. [...] Came out of the womb holdin’ hands - When God was handin’ out souls he must have got mine and Gabriel’s mixed up, aither that or he gave us just the one between us and it

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50 *Plays: One*, p. 241.
51 *Plays: One*, p. 225.
52 *Plays: One*, pp. 224-5.
53 *Theorising the Fantastic*, p. 8.
54 *Plays: One*, p. 221.
went into the Belmont River with him. Oh Gabriel, ya had no right to discard me so, to float me on the world as if I were a ball of flotsam.55

The images of water in Carr’s plays offer poetic spaces where the limiting constraints of social determinacy may be contested. In Portia Coughlan, the current of the Belmont River is a metaphoric third-space or a liminal site, in its persistent threat to erode and redefine the contours of the male-owned bordering farmlands. In scene six of Act One, Fintan says to Portia when they meet on the banks of the river: ‘Fierce close to home – Don’t your father’s land go by this place?’ To which Portia responds ‘Aye, and sure I live only up the lane.’56 Here is displayed the tension in Portia Coughlan between the close proximity of the male-owned farmlands and the transformative potential of the ever-moving Belmont River. While contained between the boundaries of her husband and father’s neighbouring lands, Portia negotiates and charters the alternative route of the river. In scene six of Act One, Portia escapes the clutches of Fintan Goolan: ‘I’m not afraid of ya, so don’t waste your time threatenin’ me – Think I’ll wade home be the river-Night. (exits).’57 The conflict between the solid and the fluid is continually enacted by patriarch Sly Scully, who is frequently seen re-constructing and attempting to maintain the fallible boundaries of his property, where the water persistently weakens his fences.

Cutting through the farmland in the valley, the water offers a leaky alternative to the claustrophobic tendencies of the bordering properties, in a community where the boundaries of propriety are constantly violated. In Act Three, Sly says to Portia: ‘I watched how you played with him, how ya teased him, I watched yer perverted activities, I seen yees, dancin’ in yer pelts, disgustin’, and the whole world asleep barrin’ ye and the river.’58 As in The Mai, characters have no access to a safe, private space in Belmont. In a landscape where familial farmlands border one another in stagnant proximity, the possibility of exogamy is reduced in favour of the homogenous and the incestuous.

55 Plays: One, pp. 210-11.
56 Plays: One, p. 218.
57 Plays: One, p. 220.
The incestuous insularity of the remote village of Belmont, itself contained within the 'land-locked' county of Offaly, is emphasised by the ceaseless motion of the river. In scene five of Act One, Sly's inappropriate fixation with his daughter's comings and goings becomes apparent: 'Seen ya talkin' to young Halion today down be the Belmont River.' Laura Mulvey writes: '[Freud] associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.' Portia accuses her father of spying on her, to which he responds: Going about me business mendin' fences on the shallow side. Yet his words reveal the prolonged nature of his spectatorship: 'More than talkin' I seen! I'm tellin' ya now, put a halter on that wayward arse of yours. [...] Don't ya know everyone's watchin', been watchin' us this years.' Portia contests his thinly concealed masturbatory voyeurism: 'I'm not your wife nor your mother. [...] I'm sick of you gawkin' at me from behind hedges and ditches and sconces. I'm a grown woman and what I do is none of your concern.'

The image of water displays the possibility of boundaries being made supple, and the ability to, as Eavan Boland writes, 're-define land.' In representing the landscape of the Irish Midlands, Carr's unique employment of language is central. In the dialogue of the first, second and third published editions of Portia Coughlan, the corpus or 'body' of standard English is fractured, ruptured and defamiliarised as conventions of syntax are radically broken. In the first published edition of The Mai (1994), Grandma Fraochlán speaks in dialect, and at times in the Irish language, heightening her exoticism and 'otherness', in comparison to those around her who speak a more standard kind of English. In the 1999 Faber and Faber edition of Portia Coughlan, Carr writes: 'I've

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58 Plays: One, p. 251.
59 Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance, p. 270.
60 Plays: One, p. 213.
61 Plays: One, p. 214.
62 Plays: One, p. 214.
given a flavour in the text, but the Midland accent is more rebellious than the written word permits. 66

Carr is the first Irish playwright since Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge to identify a particular kind of dialect so closely to the landscape. Mic Moroney notes the emergence of this linguistic tradition in Irish theatre:

Ó Muirthile and others credit Hyde, Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory et al for intuitively recognising that, by 1900, the Irish had forged a new language from the one they had been forced to learn: a kind of musical creole from which the new dramatists could create and heighten a new and fictive literature for the spoken art of the Irish stage. 67

Re-negotiating dominant representations of Ireland, Carr’s dramas are situated between East and West, imaginatively recuperating the geographically central, and culturally marginal, dark interior of the ‘Midlands’ of Ireland. In Portia Coughlan Carr creates an exclusive dialect that is tribal and hermetic, mirroring the flat, rough, watery and boggy topography of its origin. Like the leaky meanderings of the Belmont River, words flow into one another in the early versions of Portia Coughlan. Carr notes that the Offaly accent is characteristically ‘slow, [and] flat, with no t’s.’ 68 Language is ‘liquidised’ in the pre-1999 scripts, such that formal structure is broken and damaged. The lack of formal punctuation effects an indistinct, blurring quality onto the speech, articulating on-stage a kind of inebriated spew; a fluid, lazy kind of slur, where each word effectively runs into the next, and meaning becomes apparent primarily phonetically. Moroney identifies that: ‘the liberating rhythms of the Irish vernacular tend to open the door into a primitivism, an

66 Plays: One, p. 191.
ill-mannered eruption into the psyche as though of some unconscious force, of something oral and uncivilised; a wild, untamed elasticisation of reality.

The arresting first lines of the Royal Court edition of Portia Coughlan read as follows:

**Raphael:** Ah for fuche's sache. Tin a' clache i'tha mornin' an' ya'are ah ud arready.

**Portia:** Though' you war ah worche.

**Raphael:** Ah war.

While the Royal Court and Dazzling Dark editions (1996) are the most radically phoneticised, with each published edition, the words become increasingly standardised. There are subtle standardisations in the same opening lines of the 1996 Dazzling Dark edition, specifically with regard to the word 'work':

**Raphael:** Ah for fuche's sache. Tin a' clache i'tha mornin' an' ya'are ah ud arready.

**Portia:** Though' you war ah work.

**Raphael:** Ah war.

The 1996 Royal Court and 1996 (Faber and Faber) Dazzling Dark editions begin with a glossary translating the phoneticisms and clarifying the cultural specificities contained within the text. In the glossary, 'lew in' means 'popping out of', 'cines' are 'coins', 'wache' denotes 'week' and 'thinche' is the Midlands dialect equivalent of 'think.' This glossary is absent in the revised 1998 Gallery edition, and in the further standardised 1999 Faber and Faber edition. The physical attack on the conventions of syntax is radically reduced in the 1998 and 1999 editions, where the opening lines almost unrecognisably read as:

69 Moroney, in Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens, p. 255.
Raphael: Ten o’clock in the mornin’ and you’re at it already.

Portia: Thought you were at work.

Raphael: I were.

The radical defamiliarisation and deconstruction of standard English is apparent in the Royal Court and Dazzling Dark editions, where meaning is often difficult to access. In Act Three, in one of Portia’s final speeches, words are diluted and almost reduced to guttural sound, with a distinct lack of formal punctuation, so that words literally ‘stream’ or flow into one another:

Times ah close me eyes an’ ah fale a rush a’ waher ‘roun’ me, an’ above we hear tha thumpin’ a’ me mother’s heart, an’ we’re atwined, hees fooh an me head, mine an hees foetal arm, an’ we don’ know which of us be th’other an’ we don’t wanta, an’ tha waher swells ‘roun’ our ears an’ all the world be Portia and Gabriel packed together forever in a tigh’ hoh womb, where there’s no brathin’, no thinchin’, no seein’, on’y darcheness an heart drums an touch […]

This evocative description of unborn corporeality suspended in amniotic fluid reflects the almost pre-natal or primordial quality of the sounds, which echo ‘somethin’ before a voice.’ The same passage of dialogue in the 1999 Faber and Faber edition shows Carr’s ‘translation’ of the earlier versions, where there is now a marked return to conventional speech and structure:

Times I close me eyes and I feel a rush of water around me and above we hear the thumpin’ of me mother’s heart, and we’re a-twined, his foot on my head, mine on his foetal arm, and we don’t know which of us is the other and we don’t want to, and the water swells around our ears […]

72 Carr, Marina, By the Bog of Cats..., Unpublished re-writes for Irish Repertory of Chicago, May 2001: Joseph, Act three (reproduced by permission of author).
73 Plays: One, p. 254.
Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* that ‘Neither grammar nor style are politically neutral. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalised language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself.’\(^7^4\) In the 1999 collected plays Carr revised *The Mai*, standardising Grandma Fraochlán’s dialect, and even more so, *Portia Coughlan*, radically reducing or bleaching the dialect rhythms. Thus it would seem that while the contestation of standard linguistic structure has poetic and political value, the semantic inaccessibility of the early versions of *Portia Coughlan* was, in Carr’s opinion, self-defeating, especially for non-Irish practitioners and scholars.

In addition to the increased standardisation of the dialect rhythms of the play, some of the content of the *Dazzling Dark* edition was also sanitised or somewhat diluted in subsequent revised editions. For instance, in scene two of Act Three, Portia says of her husband: ‘ah wish ta jaysus he’d run off wud somewan an tache the brats wud him. Noh a hope, noh a hope in hell. Men; ah jus’ want ta castrate thim.’\(^7^5\) In the same scene she says to Maggie May: ‘me mother, d’ya know what ah want ta do wud her? […] Ah want ta rape her, thah’s noh righ is ud. Ah’ve imagined ways, don’t worra, don’t tell anawan ah said thah. […] She’s a darche fuchin’ witch an’ ah chan’t abide tha sigh’ a’ her.’\(^7^6\)

Through the emergent Midlands dialect rhythms of the plays from 1994, the interaction of language and culture with place, and ‘landscape’ is displayed and performed. In the Afterword to the 1996 Faber & Faber edition of *Portia Coughlan*, Carr comments: ‘I grew up in a place called Gortnamona which means ‘field of the bog.’ [Here] we talk long and slow and flat.’\(^7^7\) The revised editions of *Portia Coughlan*, and the 1998 *By the Bog of Cats...*, are not as easily placed, in terms of cultural specificity, and the relationship of dialect to landscape is not as pronounced. In the Gallery Press edition of *By the Bog of Cats...*, Carr notes in the stage directions: ‘Accent: Midland. I’ve given a slight flavour in

\(^7^4\) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. xvii.
\(^7^5\) *The Dazzling Dark*, p. 276.
\(^7^6\) *The Dazzling Dark*, p. 276.
the text, but the real Midland accent is a lot flatter and rougher and more guttural than the
written word allows.°

Portia Coughlan is set in the poetically named ‘Midlands’ of Ireland against the backdrop
of the Belmont valley. The mid-lands - that flat, geographically monotonous, liminal
zone, is defined in name by its negative relationality to East and West, making it a
between-lands. In the Afterword to Portia Coughlan, Carr continues:

I am a Midlander. I grew up seven miles outside of Tullamore. [...] A contributory
factor to the genesis of Portia Coughlan is my nightly forays back to that
landscape. I have not lived there for fourteen years, in the flesh that is, but find
myself constantly there at night.°

Beginning with The Mai in 1994, this precise triangle of Clonmacnoise, Tullamore and
Birr in County Offaly is the concentrated space into which Carr locates the plays. The
evocation of a mythopoetic and ritualised sense of Irish landscape and nature in Carr’s
plays from 1994 can be associated singularly with the central female characters. In
Transgressing the Modern John Jervis writes about nature as a kind of ‘grotesque body’:

The body of nature is nature as a gendered body. A central strand in the pre-
modern popular and essentialist conception of nature in the West is of nature as a
kind of living womb, a female body, a powerful procreative and regenerative
force. This can in turn be related to carnivalesque notions of the ‘grotesque body’,
which characteristically had female imagery associated with it; and this body, both
destructive and regenerative, was above all active, a dynamic embodiment of
cosmic creativity. Not only was nature seen in a general sense as female, then, but
the earth specifically was seen as a nurturing mother, sensitive and responsive to

77 The Dazzling Dark, p. 296.
79 The Dazzling Dark, p. 310.
human actions; humans and other animals were her offspring, at times troublesome, but always dependent on her.  

Portia lives by the banks of the Belmont River in County Offaly. The resonances of ‘Belmont’ and ‘Portia’ point further to the play’s genealogy. The remote village of Belmont can be found in County Offaly and also in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, and the play was inspired in part by the ‘suitor’s speech’ of Act One: ‘In Belmont is a lady richly left; And she is fair and, fairer than the word, Of wondrous virtues: sometimes from her eyes I did receive fair speechless messages: Her name is Portia.’ At once symbolic and real, this landscape becomes a quasi-metaphoric terrain, suspended somewhere between the playwright’s memory and imagination, between literary allusion and topographic realism. Carr notes the liminal resonances of this fecund setting: ‘[It] is no accident that it’s called the Midlands. For me at least it has become a metaphor for the crossroads between the worlds.’ The political potential of such a poetic space is noted by Armitt, who recognises that ‘Feminist writers and critics have capitalized on […] developing a substantial corpus of work which utilises the genre of fantasy to reconceive gender relations in so-called ‘other’ cultural spaces as a means of interrogating our own ideological and narrative structures.’

As has been critiqued in the previous chapter, in the works from 1994 there is a strong connection between place, character, myth and memory. In the plays from 1994 – 1998, Carr specifically associates the surrounding terrain with the central female protagonists’ ontology, allowing for a symbiosis, and mutual dependency of subjectivity and space. Each one of Portia’s memories is inscribed in the surrounding topography. In Act One she says to her father:

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80 Transgressing The Modern, p. 137.
82 The Dazzling Dark, p. 311.
83 Theorising The Fantastic, p. 2.
There's not a corner of your forty fields that don't remind me of Gabriel. His name is in the mouths of the starlin’s that swoops over the Belmont hill, the cows bellow for him from the barn on frosty winter nights.  

Portia constructs her ontology by projecting her memory and imagination onto the external site of Belmont. In the play, it is shown repeatedly how she attempts to negotiate a sense of 'self' through her identification with the landscape, as images of the Belmont River punctuate the key moments of her experience. When Portia tells Raphael of her sexual relationship with Gabriel, she evokes the backdrop of the river: 'And I never told anyone this before - ya see, me and Gabriel made love all the time down be the Belmont River among the swale.

As noted in the previous chapter, geographical 'place' transforms into mythic, historicised 'landscape', through the central characters' narrative projections. Like memory, place or 'landscape' is constantly re-shaped and re-imagined through the act of storytelling, where placing the body within a consciously constructed landscape serves to verify a sense of identification and authenticity. In Portia Coughlan the audience learns of how the Belmont River came by its appellation through Portia’s purveyance of an old, oral folk-tale, effectively imbuing the valley with history, identity and 'a sense of place', into which she can 'place' herself. The pre-Christian, Celtic resonances of Carr’s images of water, woman and nature inscribe Portia Coughlan within a mythologised sense of place. In The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrigan to Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Rosalind Clarke writes: 'The evidence shows overwhelmingly that most place-names, particularly for wells and other bodies of water, refer to women.' In scene six of Act One Portia rebukes one of her suitors, Fintan Goolan, for his banal ignorance concerning the toponymy of the locality:

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84 Plays: One, pp. 213-4.
85 Plays: One, p. 253.
Portia: Ever hear tell of how Belmont River came to be called the Belmont River?

Fintan Goolan: Heard tell alright. Miss Sullivan used to tell us in school. Fuckin' hated English and all that poetic shite she used to drum into us - wasn't it about some auld river God be the name of Bel and a mad hoor of a witch as was doin' all sorts of evil round here but they put her in her place, by Jaysus they did.

Portia: She wasn't a mad hoor of a witch! And she wasn't evil! Just different, is all, and the people around here impaled her on a stake and left her to die. And Bel heard her cries and came down the Belmont Valley and took her away from here and the river was born. [...] Gabriel used hear the girl when the river was low; said she sounded like a aria from a cave.

Fintan: Load of bollix, if ya ask me, them auld stories.\textsuperscript{87}

In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscape*, Yi-Fu Tuan notes that 'landscape only takes place in the mind's eye.'\textsuperscript{88} 'Landscape' is not a pre-existing 'given' but a textual and ontological projection of the viewing subject. Agency is thus removed from the 'looked-at', written or remembered landscape, meaning being conferred onto it purely through the scopophilic gaze of the speaking, writing or contemplating subject. Carr's theatrical representation of the Midlands claims and constructs the landscape through the very act of authorship. This relationship of place and 'personality' is articulated by Carr, who says: 'I've always thought that landscape was another character in the work.'\textsuperscript{89}

Carr's plays from 1994 are filled with toponymic detail, following the Gaelic bardic tradition of *dinsheanchas* or knowledge of the lore of places. Clarke argues: 'In the *Dindsenchas*, the predominance of women is unmistakable. The *Dindsenchas* is a collection of place-name stories and therefore contains a sampling of myth, folklore, and pseudo-history from all over Ireland.'\textsuperscript{90} In *The Mai* the backdrop of Owl Lake and its mythic association with King Bláth and the female Coillte presides, while the 'mad hoor

\textsuperscript{87} *Plays: One*, p. 219.

\textsuperscript{88} Tuan, Yi-Fu, cited in *Transgressing The Modern*, p. 150.

\textsuperscript{89} *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, p. 47.
of a witch’ haunts the Belmont Valley. In Carr’s mature plays the central motifs of nature are linked primarily to the female protagonists’ constructed sense of selfhood and authenticity. In the 1996 Dazzling Dark edition, the folk-tale of Bláth and Coillte is significantly extended, and becomes very much a self-reflexive, portentous narrative of Portia’s subjectivity:

[...] there war a woman; more a ghirl tha say, an’ she war tha stranges’ loochin’ creature ever seen in these parts, dark an’ thin’ an broody she war an’ all was afraid a’ her acasue she had tha power a’ tellin’ tha future. If ya lookt her in th’eye ya didn’t see her eye buh ya seen how an’ whin ya war goin’ ta die. Ah wouldn’t a bin afraid for ah know how an’ whin ah will go down. Knowed ud this long while now.91

Portia’s perpetuation of, and emotional investment in, these stories displays her determined access to myth, legend and history, while her poetic sensibility and access to an excessively lyrical language serves as an exclusive and defiant act of self-definition that exceeds the male-authored confinement of her socially demarcated position as wife, sister and daughter, within the contained county of Offaly. Carr says: ‘She has a much sharper intelligence than the rest of them. She has a much finer sensibility than they have, than they’re aware of. And they’re a bit embarrassed by her. They want to tell her to ‘Shut up and do what you are supposed to do. Look after the kids and keep the house tidy.’ And she says, ‘No, I’ve tried all that.’92 In Act One, Portia’s elevated sensibility and poetic expressiveness is displayed in her articulation of her love for her dead twin:

I dreamt about him last night, was one of those dreams as is so real you think it’s actually happening. Gabriel had come to dinner here and after he got up to leave [...] he turns and smiles and I know he’s goin’ to stay and me heart blows open

90 The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrigan to Cathleen Ni Houlihan, p. 10.
91 The Dazzling Dark, p. 253.
and stars falls out of me chest as happens in dreams – we were so alike, weren’t we, Mother?²⁹³

As previously noted, Portia’s autonomy is asserted in the drama in her evocative articulation of nature and the mythologised landscape. This awareness of orality and storytelling becomes the potential site and source of her greatest freedom. In Act One, her thoughtful comments to Goolan on the annual migration of the salmon contain a sensual aura and seductive musicality:

You can hear [them] goin’ up the river if ya listen well enough, strugglin’ for the Shannon, on up into the mouth of the sea and from there a slow cruise home to the spawnin’ grounds of the Indian Ocean. [...] They never made that journey before, just born knowin’ the route they’ll travel.²⁹⁴

Portia projects the hopeful notion of escape and transition onto the glorious image of the swiftly moving fish. With its exclusive access to the exotic ‘otherness’ of the Indian Ocean, the Belmont River becomes the singular vessel of possibility within the land-locked Midlands county. Goolan replies with unimaginative crudeness: ‘There’s only one story as interests me, Portia Coughlan, the story of you with your knickers off. Now that’s a story I’d listen to for a while.’²⁹⁵ Portia responds with contempt, turning her lyrical description of salmon-spawning on its head: ‘Ya fuckin’ turnip head, ya! Just get off me father’s land, Fintan Goolan, because you’re a fuckin’ clodhopper, just like your people before you and like those you’ll spawn after you in a wet ditch on a wet night in a drunken stupor!’²⁹⁶

In the play, Portia’s social position and subjectivity is unequivocally demarcated within the confining patriarchal structures of land-ownership, genealogy and inheritance-laws. Portia left her father’s home at the age of seventeen to become the wife of Raphael

²⁹³ Plays: One, pp. 210-11.
²⁹⁴ Plays: One, pp. 218-9.
²⁹⁵ Plays: One, pp. 218-9.
²⁹⁶ Plays: One, pp. 218-9.
Coughlan, the wealthy local business-man. In the *Dazzling Dark* edition of the script, Portia says with regret: ‘An ah was goin’ ta college an’ all, had me place, but Daddy says naw, marry Raphael.’ The economic significance of Portia’s marriage is reiterated by her father in scene five of Act One:

Don’t you talk down to me, you. I’ve worked long and hard for you to be where you are today, built Belmont Farm up from twenty acres of bog and scrub to one of the finest farms in the county with them there hands. That don’t happen just like that! And do you think Raphael Coughlan would’ve looked at you twice if there wasn’t land and money goin’ with ya? 

While Portia is framed within the roles of daughter, wife and mother, the narrative of *Portia Coughlan* powerfully challenges the naturalised position of women, revealing the rupture or increasing gap created by the diminished roles of the traditional patriarchal authorities of Church and State in this country. Characteristic of Carr’s plays is the representation of individual, familial and religious authority and stability in crisis, displayed by the radical rejection of a nostalgia for the past, essentialist notions of maternity, domestic security and fellowship. In keeping with dominant Classical Greek social and political conventions of gender politics, Portia, as wife and mother, is identified with the *oikos*, and yet, this relegation to the domestic is complicated and interrogated through Portia’s abjection in the limited roles that are available to her. In scene one of Act Three, her disassociation is articulated at its strongest:

Ya think I don’t wish I could be a natural mother, mindin’ me children, playin’ with them, doin’ all the things a mother is supposed to do! When I look at my sons, Raphael, I see knives and accidents and terrible mutilations. Their toys is weapons for me to hurt them with, givin’ them a bath is a place where I could drown them. And I have to run from them and lock myself away for fear I cause

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96 *Plays: One*, pp. 221-2.
97 *The Dazzling Dark*, p. 232.
98 *Plays: One*, p. 214.
these terrible things to happen. Quintin is safest when I’m nowhere near him, so teach him to stop whinin’ for me for fear I dash his head against a wall or fling him through the window.\footnote{Plays: One, p. 233.}

Each one of Carr’s plays interrogates the notion of the ‘natural’ mother, a radical move in Irish theatre and culture, which has constructed and maintained the image of the ‘instinctual’ Irish Mother as its nationalist and ecclesiastical fulcrum for centuries. In scene seven of Act One, Portia says to her husband: ‘I never wanted sons nor daughters and I never pretended otherwise to ya: told ya from the start. But ya thought ya could woo me into motherhood. Well, it hasn’t worked out, has it? You’ve your three sons now, so ya better mind them because I can’t love them, Raphael. I’m just not able.’\footnote{Plays: One, p. 221.} Her dislocation in the roles of mother and wife is manifest throughout the play. In scene five of Act One, when Portia’s parents pay a visit for her birthday, Marianne notices the lack of domesticity: \textit{(Begins tidying up) ‘The state of the place! Look at it! (continuing to tidy) You’d swear you were never taught how to hoover a room or dust a mantel; bloody disgrace, that’s what ya are.’ She tidies with impotent rage; Portia undoes what she does.}\footnote{Plays: One, p. 209.}

In “Neither Feminist Nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman”, historian Maryann Valiulis stresses the rigid social and personal demarcations to which women in Ireland were traditionally subjected:

The ideal Irish Catholic woman was pure and good, with a particular appreciation for the beautiful, the pleasing. [...] The public arena wherein political and economic power resided was no place for women [...]. Any attempt by women to leave their domestic confines would wreak havoc not only on the home but on the nation as well. As the Catholic publication \textit{The Irish Monthly} noted in 1925, woman has but one vocation: “The one for which nature has admirably suited her
that of wife and mother. The woman’s duties in this regard especially that of bringing up the children, are of such far-reaching importance for the nation and the race, that the need of safeguarding them must outweigh almost every other consideration.\textsuperscript{102}

Valiulis quotes another historically significant extract, by Edward Cahill, from an edition of \textit{The Irish Monthly} in 1924, which articulates the lack of options open to women in the early and mid twentieth century: ‘Girls should not be employed away from their homes or in work other than domestic until they have reached a sufficiently mature age, so that they not be exposed too soon to external dangers to their modesty; and that they have sufficient time before leaving home to become acquainted with household work.’\textsuperscript{103}

The ontological bifurcation that Portia experiences in the feminised roles to which she is ascribed effectively alienates her from her society. Portia’s repeated indulgence in extra-marital affairs, and frequent retreat to the local public house, reveals not an emotionally immature desire for adventure, but rather, a desperate search for refuge and solace. In scene four Act One, she arranges a date with the local playboy, Fintan Goolan: ‘Only want to fuck ya, find out if you’re any good, see if there’s anythin’ behind that cowboy swagger and too honeyed tongue.’\textsuperscript{104} In scene four of Act Two, the audience notices Portia’s increasing emotional dis-integration as she enters the pub: \textit{Enter Stacia followed by Portia with a bag of groceries. Fairly dishevelled by now. As she drinks brandy and ginger she is seen looking off into space, holding drink, cigarette, look[ing] upstage to river. Gabriel is there. Her moods then change rapidly as she ‘jives expertly, madly’ with Stacia to music from the juke-box.}\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{102} Valiulis, Maryann, “Neither Feminist Nor Flapper; The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman”, in \textit{The Irish Women’s History Reader}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{103} Valiulis, in \textit{The Irish Women’s History Reader}, p. 154.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 243.
Traditionally, women who behaved in such ‘non-conformist’ modes were, in the early and mid-twentieth century, as Valiulis points out, held culpable for the moral disintegration of the nation:

To many in the Church, one fundamental characteristic of Irish society, of national being, was ‘purity’. Purity was primarily cast as a woman’s responsibility and any endangering of Ireland’s definition of self was observed by the “Catholic Truth Society” as being the blame of: “The women of Ireland, heretofore, renowned for their virtue and honour, who go about furnished with the paint-pot, the lip-stick […] and many of them have acquired the habit of intemperance, perhaps one of the sequels to their lately adopted vogue of smoking. A so-called dress-dance today showed some of our Irish girls in such scanty drapery as could only be exceeded in the slave markets of pagan countries.”

The articulation of female alienation and disconnection within the domestic sphere is also revealed in the lives of the older generation of women in the play. In the first edition of the script Blaize Scully, Portia’s Grandmother, fantasises about being a slave-girl:

**Blaize:** Man an tha radia says biggest slave markeh I’tha Europe, time a’ th’ centura be in Dublin. Jay, ta be a slave ghirl in th’ centura Dublin.

**Stacia:** ‘Ya be raped an’ beh up an’ soult for small change Mrs. Scully, soult for a chattel.

**Blaize:** Dipind an who ya war chatteled ta Stacia Diyle. Could be a khing, nor tha saltrap a’ Babylon, nor mebbe Alexander tha Greah. Imagine bein’ hes chattel now. Ever mornin’ ya wache up, a new continent.

The exotic imagery of the ancient female slave-trade is a pivotal link with Carr’s exploration of women’s lack of agency within the marriage-unit in Ireland. Blaize’s desire to be a sex-slave to a foreign king ironically mirrors the state of her own abusive

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106 Valiulis, M, in *The Irish Women’s History Reader*, p. 155.
marriage, where, as is later revealed, she was brutally ‘beh up’ for years behind closed doors by her husband.

As in The Mai and By the Bog of Cats..., the family is represented in Portia Coughlan as fundamentally antithetical to de Valera’s romantic 1943 fantasy “Ireland That We Dreamed Of”:

Whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that man should live.108

In Carr’s plays the domestic sphere is a site of danger, ‘unnatural ways’, corporeal mutilation and incest. Carr’s representation of incest is ambivalent in Portia Coughlan, being on one hand, a romantic and mythic allusion to Isis and Osiris, or Hera and Zeus, while also displaying the genealogical crisis of such unions. In scene four of Act Three, Maggie tells Stacia that Portia’s parents are: ‘[…] brother and sister. Same father, different mothers, born within a month of one another.’109 Portia’s mother and Grandmother engage in an altercation, in which more secrets are revealed: ‘We don’t know where ye came from, the histories of yeer blood. […] There’s a devil in that Joyce blood.’ Marianne responds to Blaize: ‘And what were you before ya were married? One of the inbred, ingrown, scurvied McGovers. They say your father was your brother!’110 Bakhtin’s joyous celebration of carnival as ‘a new mode of interrelationships between individuals’ is turned upside-down in Carr’s plays where this ‘free and familiar attitude’

107 “Portia Coughlan”, in The Dazzling Dark, p. 263.
109 Plays: One, p. 244.
110 Plays: One, p. 215.
is depicted as violating, implosive and destructive. Here, the disturbing blurring of public and private space, and its implicit but unequivocal association with incestuous sexual relations, (explicitly depicted in On Raftery’s Hill), problematises Bakhtin’s singularly utopian notion of

[...] carnivalistic mésalliances [that is] A free and familiar attitude [that] spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical world-view are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations.112

The polluting instances of incestuous ‘contacts and combinations’ that occur in Portia Coughlan can achieve, according to Blaize Scully, only devastating results: ‘when you breed animals with humans you can only bring forth poor haunted monsters who’ve no sense of God or man.’113 In “Authentic Reproductions: Marina Carr and the Inevitable", Wallace notes:

Portia Coughlan delineates a territory of corrupted relationships in which an atmosphere of foreclosure is conjured through genealogy. Again, generations of characters appear on stage. Portia is the last in a three-generation line of poisoned marriages and her parent’s hidden and inadvertent incest resurfaces like a hereditary disease. Portia associates her dead twin with her essence/origin. As proof she relates a fantasy memory of how they were ‘lovers’ in their mother’s womb and how they came into the world holding hands. Significantly, her mother’s memory is more sinister – Gabriel ‘[c]ame out of the womb clutchin’ [Portia’s] leg and he’s still clutchin’ it from wherever he is.'114

111 Bakhtin, in Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, p. 251.
113 Plays: One, p. 229.
114 Wallace, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made.”
At Portia’s funeral horrific stories of domestic violence finally overspill the confines of social codes of silence. Maggie May articulates that she has always known the truth about Blaize’s marriage: ‘Happy, were yees, happy? Then how come he beat the lard out of ya every time he looked at ya - How come weeks and weeks would go by and no one would’ve seen Blaize Scully out and about because her face was in a pulp again? How come he kicked ya down the road once in front of everyone?\textsuperscript{115} Graphic corporeal mutilation is also implied in the character of Stacia Doyle, also known as the ‘Cyclops of Coolinarney’. Portia unwittingly reveals the deliberate nature of Stacia’s mutilation when she responds to Stacia’s new eye-patch: ‘I don’t know, Stacia, sometimes I think if I had me eye gouged out, I’d wear ne’er a patch at all.’\textsuperscript{116} Stating that Stacia had her eye ‘gouged out’ belies that the removal of her eye was not accidental, but rather, an enforced and brutal infliction.

In \textit{Portia Coughlan} Carr depicts a society where the options for women remain confined to the domestic sphere. For women who fall ‘outside’ of the roles of wife and mother, ‘independence’ and autonomy come at a costly price. In scene two of Act Three, Maggie May, Portia’s aunt, reveals that she was once a prostitute: I was in London, workin’ Kings Cross, big angry fuckers with too much money and no respect. Had this rough customer one night, lug on him like a scalded baboon, showed me his fists, done his job, taken me money and shoes so as I couldn’t folly him.\textsuperscript{117} Not a social reality exclusive to England, prostitution has always been a common means of survival for women in rural and urban Ireland. At the end of act two, Maggie tells Blaize that she once gave her husband ‘a job down Mohia Lane, the dirty auld dog, paid me with your egg money, fifty quid.’\textsuperscript{118}

In “Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Ireland”, Luddy writes:

Commentators on prostitution portrayed prostitutes as women whose lives were destroyed by sexual experience. Rescuers never accepted that, in a country which

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 231.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Plays: One}, p. 239.
provided few employment opportunities for women, women could chose prostitution as a viable means of earning an income. [...] The range of names applied to women who worked as prostitutes relates the ambiguity, ambivalence, hypocrisy and disgust the public often felt towards these women. Ideally, the public preferred not to think about and certainly not to see, them at all. Confinement and reform were the ideal means of dealing with these women.\(^\text{119}\)

From the social positions of each of the female characters in *Portia Coughlan*, it is clear to see that, in rural communities at least, the singular conventional identity for a woman is solely that of wife and mother. While Carr’s female protagonists do not transform the social systems to which they are consigned, the playwright’s portrayal of their ontological dislocation, and their vehement verbal recalcitrance to the confining social structures, is a landmark in Irish theatrical representation. McMullan rightly points out: ‘[...] their lucid perception of their own alienation, their evocation with mythical forces, and their critique of the lack of accommodation of difference in small town or rural Ireland is powerfully articulated.’\(^\text{120}\)

The lack of ‘accommodation of difference’ and alterity in Carr’s implosive communities is heightened by the excessive and fantastically-minded older generation of women, who seek, through the imagination, a means of transcending the stagnation of their immobility. In *The Mai*, Grandma Fraochlán speaks wistfully of Zanzibar, an island in the Indian Ocean, which links her to the Belmont River, and to Portia. In Act Two she says to Beck: ‘We’ll go in an aeroplane through the sky an’ ax them ta stop at Zanzibar.’ Beck asks: ‘Zanzibar, where’s that?’ Grandma Fraochlán replies: *(one arm out, then the other one)*

It’s way off that way somewhere. What’s it like in an aeroplane, Beck?’\(^\text{121}\) In the first edition of *Portia Coughlan*, Blaize says to Stacia:

\(^{118}\) Plays: One, p. 230.

\(^{119}\) Luddy, Maria, “Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Ireland”, in The Irish Women’s History Reader, p. 93.

\(^{120}\) McMullan, in Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre, p. 41.

\(^{121}\) Plays: One, p. 167.
Beautiful word, Afghanistan, Afghanistan. A word you could say all night into the pillow and the home of the morning. Afghanistan, Jay. [...] you people round here can't imagine anything beyond next Frida into the pub and a bag of chips and then home. Portia now, she'd imagine you. In a sort of way Portia was an Afghanastanish.\(^\text{122}\)

As has been critiqued in relation to Grandma Fraochlán in *The Mai*, Carr’s representation of the grandmother-figures in the plays from 1994 (and to an extent in *Low In The Dark* in the figure of Bender), as excessive figurative tropes of post-Bakhtinian carnivalesque images of the ‘female grotesque’ is revelatory. ‘Naming’ can be seen as a symbolic signifier in each of the plays, and Bender, Blaize, Grandma Fraochlán and Elsie Kilbride in *By the Bog of Cats*, ... possess names that offer appropriate starting-points from which to view the characters representationally. If Portia, the Mai and Millie can be associated with water, Sly, Xavier and Carthage with the earth and land, and Gabriel and Joseph with the air, then Blaize Scully, the loud-mouthed octogenarian grandmother in *Portia Coughlan*, has a name that can be associated with fire, a strongly carnivalesque image. Bakhtin writes: ‘Deeply ambivalent also is the image of fire in carnival. It is fire that simultaneously destroys and renews the world.’\(^\text{123}\)

Through her old age, Blaize is aligned closely with death, and also with profanity and irreverence: ‘I spent the first eighty years of my life holdin’ me tongue, fuckin’ and blindin’ into the pillow, and if God sees fit to give me another eighty they’ll be spent speakin’ me mind foul or fair.’\(^\text{124}\) Like the ‘secret black and midnight hags’ of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Blaize Scully hovers ambivalently through the filthy air of Belmont.\(^\text{125}\) ‘Fair and foul’, like Grandma Fraochlán, Blaize Scully may be regarded as the ‘Old Hag’ of Bakhtin’s imagistic Kerch terracotta figurines – an unconventional, smiling, senile pregnant hag, associated through her age and speech with the bringing

\(^{\text{122}}\) “Portia Coughlan” in *The Dazzling Dark*, pp. 262-3.
\(^{\text{124}}\) *Plays: One*, p. 212.
\(^{\text{125}}\) “Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air”, Act one, scene one, Shakespeare, William, “Macbeth”, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, p. 766.
together of death and sexuality. Of the figurines, Bakhtin writes: ‘They remain ambivalent and contradictory: they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of “classical” aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and completed.’

The Grandmother figures in Carr’s plays are excessive in their embodied intermingling of seemingly exclusive categories. Through the excessive speech and actions of the eighty-year old Blaize, Carr offers a humorous and unconventional mésalliance of death, sex and the aging, maternal body: ‘Shut up to be fucked, you’, she says to her son Sly, in Act One. ‘Take me home. The next funeral will be me own.’ In the same scene, Blaize dismisses the family celebration: ‘Birthday’s load of bollix,’ to which Sly responds: ‘Told ya, Mother, not to be cursin’. [...] put a lid on it now! Here the notion of the ‘lid’ is again indicative of Sly Scully’s drive to contain, and to maintain, social boundaries of property and propriety. As in Carr’s plays, Jordan writes: ‘McGuinness frequently deploys a savage comedy within his plays, which is at once engaging, bawdy, surreal, excessive and subversive. The language of comedy underscores the serious consequences of the plays without ever distracting from the grave focus.’

As Grandmother and matriarch, Blaize incorporates the peculiar logic of mésalliances and profanatory debasings with her excessive blasphemies and obscenities. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin writes about ‘certain forms of familiar speech - curses, profanities and oaths. The market-place was the centre of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology.’ These carnivalesque obscenities are linked with ‘the reproductive power of the earth and the body: Bringing together, unifying, wedding and combining the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.’ Bakhtin notes that the ‘Familiar speech of all European peoples is to this day filled with

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126 Plays: One, p. 241.
127 Plays: One, p. 215.
128 Plays: One, p. 229.
130 The Feast of Famine: The Plays of Frank McGuinness, p. xxiii.
131 Rabelais and His World, pp. 153-4.
relics of carnival, especially the speech of abuse and ridicule. The symbol system of carnival fills the abusive, ridiculing gestures of today.¹³³

Just as one-hundred year old Grandma Fraochlán is associated with the liminal carnival-space of Cleggan Fair, the octogenarian Blaize Scully articulates the relics of the unofficial, profane ‘extraterritorial’, language of the fair, or symbolic market-place. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin notes that contained within carnivalesque imagery is ‘the drama of laughter presenting at the same time the death of the old and the birth of the new world. Each image is subject to the meaning of the whole; each reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming, even though the image may be separately presented.’¹³⁴ Blaize’s foul-mouthed cursing frequently evokes the lower bodily stratum which Bakhtin notes as being a relic of market-place speech. She liberally associates Portia’s birthday, (and thus the notion of ‘giving birth’), with the male genital organs: ‘Birthday’s load of bollix.’ Bakhtin notes this as the ‘fearless talk, free and frank, which echoes in the festive square beyond all verbal prohibitions, limitations, and conventions.’¹³⁵ Bakhtin points to the coarse nature of curses, oaths and obscene language in relation to the topography of the body: ‘To besmirch means to debase. But grotesque debasement always had in mind the material bodily lower stratum, the zone of the genital organs.’¹³⁶

In Act One of *Portia Coughlan*, Sly remonstrates Blaize for trying to get out of her wheelchair: ‘That’s right, Mother, break that hip. I’m not payin’ for another one!’¹³⁷ In the *Dazzling Dark* edition, Blaize responds: ‘Fuche me hip!’¹³⁸ Bakhtin writes: ‘The body that interests [Rabelais] is pregnant, delivers, defecates, is sick, dying, and dismembered [...] It is the body that appears in abuses, curses, oaths, and generally in all grotesque images.’¹³⁹ Throughout *Portia Coughlan* there are multiple images of corporeal

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¹³⁵ *Rabelais and His World*, p. 167.
¹³⁶ *Rabelais and His World*, p. 147.
¹³⁷ *Plays: One*, p. 216.
¹³⁸ *The Dazzling Dark*, p. 249.
mutilation and deformity. Raphael Coughlan, who had ‘half his foot cut off’, is known as ‘oul hopalong’, while one-eyed Stacia is known as ‘Cyclops of Coolinarney’. Abuses, curses and oaths represent the life of the ‘marketplace’ according to Bakhtin, and are ambivalent in that ‘it is the negative pole of the lower stratum which here prevails: death, sickness, disintegration, dismemberment of the body, its rending apart and swallowing up.’ In scene five of Act One, the aging, fettered body is represented as incapacitated and dependent. Blaize enters Portia’s kitchen, frustrated to be confined to her wheelchair: ‘Would ya leave me chair alone! You’ll destroy me brakes! […] If I had the power of me legs again! Why won’t yees leave me on me own anymore? Afraid I’ll fall into the fire?’

The images of corporeal deformity that populate Portia Coughlan echo-back to the medieval grylli - those ‘joyous celebrations of deformity’. Etchings by Jacques Callot from Florence, in 1616, depict a group of laughing gobbi (hunchbacks) raising up one of their companion’s shirts to expose his bare bottom beneath. These bodily representations in Portia Coughlan display an emphasis on grotesque corporeality, what Bakhtin calls ‘[…] the ‘Unfinished’ body, parading its lumpy extensions, pregnant with liquids’, which can be viewed as a conscious repudiation of the closed body of the Renaissance, ‘in which all protuberances will be smoothed down, all apertures closed.’

In the introduction to Rabelais and His World Bakhtin joyously emphasises:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, complete unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself. The [grotesque] body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, child-birth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body.

140 Rabelais and His World, p. 187.
141 Plays: One, p. 211.
143 Carnivalesque, p. 17.
However, the emphasis on orifices, gouged eye-sockets, damaged limbs and severely beaten bodies in Portia Coughlan displays the traumatic reality of the body in pain, something which Bakhtin systematically elides in his discourse. As noted above, in Act Two, the audience learns that Blaize’s was often forced to conceal her body for weeks at a time, her face deformed to ‘a pulp’, as a result of the violence she endured from the abusive husband who regarded her as ‘a bitter auld hag’.

Swearing, Bakhtin continues, ‘was mostly done in the name of the members and organs of the divine body […] they have returned us to the grotesque bodily themes: diseases, monstrosities, and organs of the lower stratum. There is scatological, irreverent and obscene, liberatory ambivalence in the content of much of Blaize’s dialogue, which links the reproductive female with ageing, bodily disintegration and death. At Portia’s funeral Blaize demands whiskey: ‘Black Bush, black label! (Finishes her drink, smashes her glass against the wall.) Take me home. The next funeral will be me own.’ The sex/death ambivalence that Bakhtin sets-up in Rabelais and His World is made prominent in the narratives of Low In The Dark, Portia Coughlan, and The Mai, where in Portia Coughlan, Blaize’s attendance at Portia’s funeral meal is preceded by her unorthodox demand to listen to music, and her crude and sensual response to graveyards and dead bodies: ‘Put on the Count first. […] Isn’t he magnificent. […] They’ll be here before long, tomb eyed, stinkin’ of the bone orchard. Hate the smell of coffins […] very particular smell, cross between honeysuckle and new-mown putrefaction.’ Portia’s friend Stacia responds: ‘I wish you’d speak gentler about the dead, Mrs. Scully.’

Jordan writes: ‘The Irish comic tradition is a defiant, grotesque, anarchic and macabre one.’ Blaize’s association with death and subversive revelry is a feature of Irish folk-culture. In The Irish Comic Tradition, Mercier writes: ‘The Irish propensity for macabre

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145 Plays: One, p. 231.
146 Rabelais and His World, pp. 192, 195.
147 Plays: One, pp. 228-9.
149 The Feast of Famine: The Plays of Frank McGuinness, p. xxiii.
humour may be traced to the [...] wake-games, at which merriment alternates with or triumphs over mourning, in the very presence of the corpse.\textsuperscript{150} The wake-games were another instance of licentious activity that was deemed as threatening to ‘normative’ codes of social order. The proximity of sexuality, corporeality and death was seen as disturbing, dangerous and disruptive to the body-politic of the State, (and was thus gradually suppressed), linking death, as it did, with inebriation, scatological activity and eroticised bodily expression, and embodying the notion of grotesque excess.

Oaths, profanities and improprieties were ‘the unofficial elements of speech and were conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address [because] they refuse[ed] to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability.'\textsuperscript{151} The bawdy content of Blaize’s speech can be regarded as ‘grotesque’ in its deliberated stance against social propriety or the official, closed, hierarchical forms of address. The ‘inappropriateness’ of her language, in terms of her age and gender, can be seen as ‘excessive’ in that it overspills the demarcated boundaries of social convention. Her Rabelaisian cursing, drinking and heightened tendency to revelry represents her uncompromising excessive tendencies, which are at odds with, and destabilising of, socially demarcated codes of behaviour. In scene two of Act Two, Blaize asserts that her age affords her a sense of extraterritoriality and licentious authority: ‘At my age, [there] isn’t nothin’ left to talk gentle about. From here on in it’s just bitterness and gums.'\textsuperscript{152} Bakhtin notes: ‘Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies and prohibitions of established idiom, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally.'\textsuperscript{153}

Also in Act Two, Blaize freely associates sacred religion with the profane when she says to her son: ‘Swear to Jaysus if hell were free, you’d go there, sooner than pay a small

\textsuperscript{150} The Irish Comic Tradition, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{151} Rabelais and His World, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{152} Plays: One, p. 227.
\textsuperscript{153} Rabelais and His World, p. 188.
entry fee to heaven. This identification with hell and the devil is reminiscent of Grandma Fraochlán in *The Mai*, who says: ‘I keep dramin’ I’m in hell and I’m the only one there apart from Satan himself. […] And through a glass ceilin’ I can see everyone I ever cared about, up beyond in heaven, and d’ya know the worst part of the dream is Satan and meself gets on like a house on fire.’ In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin tells us that:

> The church and government disapproved of the sacrilegious use of holy names, and under the Church’s influence the government often condemned the *jurons* (oaths) in ordinances proclaimed by the heralds. Such ordinances were issued by Charles VII, Louis XI and Francis I. These condemnations and prohibitions merely strengthened the oath’s unofficial character. […] Oaths began to be considered as a certain rejection of official philosophy, a verbal protest.

In both *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan* the liberal indulgence of alcohol and stimulants is associated with the older women. In Act Two of *Portia Coughlan* Stacia says to Blaize: ‘Ya know your whiskeys, Granny.’ Similarly, in *The Mai*, one-hundred-year-old Grandma Fraochlán is known for her partiality to *poitin*, mulberry wine and general Rabelaisian inebriation: ‘The Lord put grapes and tobacco plants on the earth so his people could get plastered at every available opportunity.’ The search for transcendence is at the core of the older women’s compulsion to intoxication. In Act Two Beck gives Grandma Fraochlán an opium pipe: *Grandma Fraochlán takes four or five puffs, holds them in, exhales slowly, smiles. As the conversation goes on and the opium takes effect, it becomes apparent, they’re dreamy, slur some words, smile unexpectedly.* In the incongruous ambivalence of the Grandmother figures, who are associated with death, profanity, the sensual and the erotic, Bakhtin’s image of the smiling senile, pregnant hags of the Kerch

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154 *Plays: One*, p. 212.
155 *Plays: One*, pp. 118-9.
156 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 189.
158 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 167.
terracotta figurines is evocatively represented in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, there being ‘nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags.’

Portia Coughlan’s unequivocal refusal to compromise her sense of self, in favour of the socially prescribed roles of daughter and wife, prefigures the defiant energy of Hester Swane in Carr’s next play, *By the Bog of Cats*.... In this play comes Carr’s most vocal and contestational female protagonist yet. Hester Swane’s qualities of carnivalesque ‘inappropriateness’, and unorthodox recalcitrance, eventually effects her exclusion, and ultimate sacrifice. Like the preceding tragic heroines in Carr’s plays, Hester is vital in her defiant articulation of discontent, and in her attempts to renegotiate the dominant patriarchal values upon which her society unquestionably operates. The deaths of Carr’s female protagonists are never a waste, but a necessary act, for just as each one will not compromise her integrity, Carr cannot offer a romantic resolution. The deaths of these strong figures crucially portray the marginalisation and abjection that women in this country have been subjected, in their on-going battle for subjectivity.

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159 *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 25-6.
Chapter Four:

Between Purity and Filth: Identity and Abjection in *By the Bog of Cats*...

*But there is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible, and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghost-like, the spot where some great and marked event has given the colour to their lifetime...*

*The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne
Set once more in the Midlands of Ireland in the present-day, Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*... is loosely based on Euripides’ story of the exiled and ‘stateless refugee’, *Medea*.\(^1\) Marina Carr’s Medea-figure, Hester Swane, is presented as an outsider and potential exile, in her status as a Traveller-woman, living on the Bog of Cats. Of the Euripidean text, Richmond Lattimore writes: ‘Medea [is] a barbarian princess and a sorceress, related to the Gods [who] came from the faraway land of Colchis at the eastern extremity of the Black Sea.’\(^2\) When Medea and her husband Jason settle as exiles in Corinth, Jason decides that he must marry the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth, to strengthen his own economic position, and foregoes his ‘dangerous, foreign wife’.\(^3\) In Carr’s play, Hester and her daughter are precariously situated on the threshold of ‘within’ and ‘without’, in relation to the settled rural community which Carr’s characters inhabit, in the plays from 1994 to the present. Hester, like Medea, has been foregone by the father of her child, Carthage Kilbride, for a woman with land and social standing. In “Unmasking Myths? Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*...”, Eamonn Jordan notes: ‘Hester protected and built up Carthage Kilbride. When Jason was to take a second wife (as Carthage does), Medea was to be banished, to be made stateless and without home, as she faced eviction from Corinth. Hester is also to be shunted from her own home. [...] Jason marries for security, Carthage for land.’\(^4\)

Hester’s ontology as woman and Traveller is further marginalised through the bifurcation of her genealogy, her mother Big Josie Swane, being a Traveller, and her father, Jack Swane ‘of Bergit’s Island’, being a member of so-called ‘settled’ community’. This ambivalent and amphibious subject-position is historically perpetuated through Hester’s illegitimate daughter, also named Josie, being of a similarly ‘mixed’ parentage, with a settled father, Carthage Cassidy, and a half-settled, half-Traveller mother in the figure of Hester. In “Journeys in Performance: On Playing in *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats*...”,

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Olwen Fouéré, who created the role of Hester for the premiere production, notes: ‘By the Bog of Cats... [...] is a deeply political play about the outsider. Carthage is not just marrying another woman; he’s entering this land-grabbing, gombeen society. So Hester’s rage is also a cultural rage, of a colonised culture which is being driven out, not allowed to exist, and where her sexuality and creativity are being suppressed.’

By the Bog of Cats... focuses upon issues of class and gender politics, land ownership and patriarchal systems of endogamy. The central conflict of the play centres upon the opposing politics of nomadism and ‘fixity’, illegitimacy and inheritance. In considering the position of Travelling Peoples in Ireland, By the Bog of Cats... explores aspects of their cultural identity, interrogating essentialist assumptions and stereotype. Carr says: ‘I chose to make [Hester] a traveller because Travellers are our national outsiders.’ The Midlands of Ireland has long been associated with a significant population of Travellers, especially around the environs of Tullamore in Co. Offaly, the topographical region in which the play is set, and where Carr grew up. Throughout the play Carr explores the dynamics of social abjection, displayed in the conflicting dialectics of the so-called ‘settled-community’, or insiders, and Travellers, embodied in the play in the figures of Elsie Kilbride and Xavier Cassidy, and Hester Swane and her child respectively.

In “Decolonisation Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash”, Victor Merriman suggests that Carr appropriates, objectifies and fetishises Traveller culture for a bourgeois, middle-class audience. What needs to be noted here are the complexities involved in a play and its production and reception. Meaning is mediated not singularly through the text, but in performance and the variant and multiplicit geographical and ideological factors of its consumption. Merriman’s critique is limiting and appropriative in itself, predicated as it is, upon an uncomplicated and assumed singular hegemony of production and institutional theatre-practice and reception, which is the Abbey Theatre. This uncomplicated argument elides the fact that By the Bog of Cats... has been produced

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5 Fouéré, Olwen, “Journeys in Performance: On Playing in The Mai and By the Bog of Cats...”, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made.”
internationally by independent theatre companies in locales as diverse as California, Chicago, Dublin, and London, and features most prominently on the amateur dramatic circuit in Ireland. The cultural resonances and associations of the play will thus differ widely in each of these locations, where meaning becomes dependent on the ideological positioning(s) of the audience(s). Merriman writes that 'Carr offers bourgeois audiences course after course of reassurance', however he ossifies By the Bog of Cats... within a singular frame of production, and paradoxically affords authority and centrality to the very discourse that he is critiquing.⁷

In their mixed genealogy, and more importantly, Josie’s illegitimacy, Hester and her daughter are ‘grotesque’, excessive hybrids of ‘inner and outer’, socially positioned between ‘stability’ and ‘ex-centricity’, marking them as being, what Julia Kristeva notes in The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, ‘Neither Subject Nor Object’.⁸ In Act One Hester says to the local strong-farmer, Xavier Cassidy: ‘I had a father too, Jack Swane of Bergit’s island [...] I’m as settled as any of yees... and as for me tinker-blood, I’m proud of it.’⁹ In being ‘half-settled’, Hester and her daughter are interstitial figures, positioned at a transitional point between ‘authorised’ and ‘ex-centric’ notions of the dominant middle-class social fabric in which the play is set.¹⁰ Inhabiting this threshold, they stand at a conflictual symbolic site of both transformative potentiality through their ‘neither/ nor’ status, and a traumatic abject liminality. Residing between fixed house and mobile home, mother and daughter’s living-quarters are reflective of this ambivalent position, being simultaneously static and fluid, fixed and in flux.

⁹ Carr, Marina, By the Bog of Cats..., (Meath: Gallery Press, 1998), p.35.
¹⁰ Marina Carr refers to Hester as being ‘half-settled’ at a reading of her plays in Trinity College, 29 June 1999.
The relegation of Hester's identity as being, in Kristeva terms, 'neither/or', issues a representation that complicates the limiting binarism of 'inner or outer'. In this conflictual discourse, Mother and daughter are at once, excluded and inscribed: what Kristeva calls the 'deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject'. While the quality of abjection may seem to be part dual, it is finally excessive, as it exists between within/without, between subject/object, between impure and pure, exceeding closed, 'normative' structures. This is the trauma of abjection, a state of being which Kristeva notes as ambiguous and ambivalent, that is: 'I/Other, Inside/Outside - an opposition that is vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain.'

The notion of the family is central to Carr's dramas, and to the culture of the Travelling Peoples of Ireland. In the representation of the exogamic relationship, between the 'sedentary' Carthage Kilbride and the potentially nomadic, and landless, traveller Hester, Carr addresses the issue of the perceived threat of a 'mixed' alliance or 'mixed marriage', where the resultant children are between cultures. Symbolic community is defined implicitly by those it rejects. In the case of this play, the exclusive politics of the bourgeois middle-class seeks to produce and maintain a hegemonic sense of identity and authority through the negation and denial of the Travelling 'other'. In Act Two of By the Bog of Cats..., Hester says: 'The truth is you want to eradicate me, make out I never existed."

'Dominance' works as a process of expulsion and disavowal of the threatening other. As in the Euripidean text, 'Carthage/Jason's' marriage-alliance with the 'Cassidy/Creon' household indicates the desired social transition that Hester and Josie's 'otherness', as nomads, women and illegitimates, radically threatens. On the morning of his wedding day, Carthage seeks to remove Hester: '[I]t's time ya moved on to another haltin' site [...]
just clear out of the Bog of Cats for wance and for all. Hester’s ambivalent paternity, and her landless ‘tinker’s blood’ unalterably disturbs Carthage’s aspirations to a stable, upward mobility, thus her exile is sought repeatedly. Mrs. Kilbride, Carthage’s mother, is a willing collaborator in the machinations behind this exile. In scene four of Act One she says to her seven-year old granddaughter Josie: ‘yees are tinkers [...] Why don’t yees head off in that auld caravan, back to wherever yees came from?’

The politics of naming, as represented in *By the Bog of Cats...*, is another factor in the maintenance of hegemonic social construction. By definition, if one community is ‘settled’ then another community must, by virtue of difference be ‘un-settled’, and thus implicitly ‘un-stable.’ In a move to depotentialise the naturalised political hierarchy inherent in naming one group ‘settled’, Travellers have brought about the use of the counter-active term ‘sedentary’ in place of ‘settled’ in order to shift or neutralise the political goal-posts of qualitative identification.

If the symbolic hierarchies of inner and outer are defined implicitly through the imperative of *rejection*, it is the logic of exclusion that causes the abject to exist. The production of ‘stable’ identity and authority thus appears through negation and denial. As an upholder of the politics of legitimacy and naming, Mrs. Kilbride resides in a self-designated subjective homogeneity, representing the collectivity of ‘any organisation constituted by exclusions and hierarchies.’ As noted above, Mrs. Kilbride is actively opposed to the union of her son Carthage to Hester, and will only acknowledge Josie once she has been battered ‘into the semblance of legitimacy.’ Throughout the drama Mrs. Kilbride is fixated with the permeable, ‘diluting’ threat of illegitimacy: ‘You’re Hester Swane’s little bastard. You’re not a Kilbride and never will be.’ She repeatedly attempts to subsume or eradicate the possibility of illegitimacy: ‘Don’t you worry child, we’ll get...

15 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 302.
16 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 26.
18 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 26.
19 *Plays: One*, p. 279.
ya off of her yet. Me and your Daddy has plans. [...] I’ll break your spirit and then glue ya back the way I want ya.’

In each of Carr’s plays from 1989 – 1998 the question of paternity is central. In *The Mai*, Grandma Fraochlán, who is named after her island birthplace, spends a lifetime speculating on the ambiguity of her ‘father-land’, as does Hester, who seeks to recuperate a tangible sense of paternity from an unknown, unseen, and thus mythical father-figure, who is also named after an island: ‘I had a father too! Ya’d swear I was dropped from the sky the way ya go on. Jack Swane of Bergit’s island, I never knew him - but I had a father. I’m as settled as any of yees.’ Here Hester displays her ambivalent desire for social inclusion and legitimacy, and her defence of her status as Traveller: ‘As for me tinker blood, I’m proud of it. Gives me an edge over all of yees, and allows me to see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower yees are.’

In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva considers the hierarchic caste system in India, which:

> provides the most complex and striking instance of a social, moral and religious system based on pollution and purification, on the pure and the impure. [...] The endogamic principle inherent in the caste system amounts, as everywhere else, to having the individual marry within his (or her) group, or rather to his (or her) being prohibited from marrying outside of it.

The endogamic displays ‘The concern with separating, with constituting strict identities without intermixture, [and is a mode then], of perpetuating economic, familial and social self-reflexivity.’ The practice, and political implications, of endogamy are alluded to in Irish theatre, notably in the plays of Brian Friel, where it is articulated in classical and

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20 *By the Bog of Cats...*, pp. 25-6.
21 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 43.
22 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 35.
23 *Powers of Horror*, p.79.
24 *Powers of Horror*, p. 93.
historical terms respectively in *Translations* (1980) and *Making History* (1988). In the former, Jimmy-Jack contemplates his bride-to-be Athene, asking Hugh:

> Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word *exogamein* means to marry outside the tribe. And you don’t cross those borders casually - both sides get very angry. Now, the problem is this: Is Athene sufficiently mortal or am I sufficiently godlike for the marriage to be acceptable to her people and to my people? You think about that.\(^{25}\)

In *Making History*, exogamy is metonymised through the thematically appropriate activity of planting and gardening. Mary Bagenal advises her sister Mabel: ‘Don’t plant the fennel near the dill or the two will cross-fertilise.’ Mabel replies: ‘Is that bad?’, to which Mary responds: ‘You’ll end up with a seed that’s neither one thing or the other.’\(^{26}\) Kristeva notes how the condemnation of hybridity goes back to the Bible. In Leviticus: verse 19, chapter 19 it is stated that: ‘Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and wollen come upon thee.’\(^{27}\) The extreme points of this logic are then enunciated in Leviticus 18:30, as the divine word of God; ‘Therefore shall ye keep mine ordinance, that ye commit not any one of these *abominable* customs, which were committed before you, and that ye defile not yourselves therein: I am the Lord your God.’\(^{28}\) Thus ‘abominable’ becomes the term for ‘heterogeneity’. Kristeva logically continues: ‘When one avoids the binarism of the... [caste] system, one multiplies abjections between the sexes, between subjects and objects, [creating borderlanders], and between castes.’\(^{29}\) It can be seen thus historically how the ‘*borderlander*’ is the constant threatening entity that must be eradicated.


\(^{27}\) Leviticus, cited in *The Powers of Horror*, p. 104.

\(^{28}\) *Powers of Horror*, p. 104.

\(^{29}\) *Powers of Horror*, p.104.
Yet, the abject positioning of Hester and Josie, as both ‘subject/object’ acknowledges, according to Kristeva, the stable, centralised subject, (in this case, Xavier Cassidy and Mrs. Kilbride), to be in perpetual danger. But how does that danger manifest itself? In terms of the destabilising threat posed to the dominant structures of the community by Hester and Josie, ‘excess’ is the key concept. It is Hester and Josie’s grotesque excessive, and transformative potential in their status as ‘neither/nor’ and ‘subject/object’ that is of most threat to closed or ‘fixed’ hegemony. Previous chapters have addressed Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘classical and grotesque’ corporeal binary distinction in which Russo’s feminist re-appraisal of Bakhtin’s ‘Grotesque body’, places the ‘female-grotesque body’ in a binary with what she relegates to be the ‘male-classical’, and thus rational, ordered, closed body. In the preceding chapters I have complicated this helpful, but limiting perpetuation of Bakhtinian binarism, by considering the word ‘grotesque’ in its original etymology as a trope of excess. Pre-Bakhtinian semantic notions of the grotesque, denote it as a type of co-mingling, which, as Kristeva notes in relation to abjection, is an ‘intermixture, erasing of differences, [and a] threat to (singular) identity.’ Bakhtin’s literary application of the grotesque illuminates the political potential of infringing what he calls, ‘the borderlines that divide kingdoms.’ This metaphoric and aesthetic fluidity, and grotesque, hybridised dynamic, is characteristic of the abjectified, or ‘Neither/ Nor’ status of Hester and Josie.

In the chapters above, the poetic centrality of water, and the Irigarayan dialectics of the fluid and the solid, have been discussed in terms of the subject-positioning of the central characters. Characteristic of water is its excessive drive to overflow, to transgress demarcated boundaries. It is the actual and symbolic movement between inner and outer that is of most interest here, in the fluid’s potential to destabilise boundaries and depose and dilute rigid binary logic. Thus, the political potential for transformation, rupture and uncontainability lies in the very motion, transition, blurring and leaky-ness of the fluid.

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At this point, the carnivalesque liminal and hybridised characteristics of fluidity as a political trope of transformation and destabilisation must be contextualised in terms of the ontological anxiety that often accompanies such an excessive and grotesque subject-positioning. Bakhtin conceives of a singularly celebratory and romantic notion of the carnivalesque, in which an uncomplicated binary of grotesque as opposed to classical, based on the preferential politics of the grotesque, is applied. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin univocally writes:

> The grotesque liberates man from all the forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept of the world [...] The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which the grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretence of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities.^^

While the grotesque-excess dynamic challenges the rigid symbolic and political demarcations of dominant social structures, it is nevertheless an unresolved subject-position which, while complicating and perhaps even dissolving the hierarchical hegemonic binaries of inner and outer, or solid and fluid, is nevertheless left floating in an indeterminate ‘in-between’ or ‘mid-land’ status.

As a traveller, and ‘half-settled’, Hester threatens the bourgeois socio-economic systems of legitimacy and propriety through her ‘grotesque’ land-less and mixed genealogical status. The conflictual tensions between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ are foregrounded in the drama in the central conflict between Hester and Carthage, and Carthage’s desired alliance with the local strong farmer, Xavier Cassidy. Caroline is what Carr refers to as ‘a proper girl, respectable, with standing in the community’. After their wedding ceremony Carthage says to Caroline: ‘A soft-boned lady, your mother. I used to see her shoppin’ with you be the hand, ya wanted to bow when she walked by, she had class. And you have too,


^33 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 49.
Caroline, like no wan else around here.\textsuperscript{35} This dialogue displays the way in which Caroline, as an object of exchange between the Cassidy and Kilbride households, is a commodity within the patriarchal economy of land ownership and inheritance. Carthage explicitly articulates his fixation with class politics and transition, openly displaying his motivation for marrying Caroline Cassidy and abandoning the land-less mother of his child. Hester is aware of his compulsion: ‘You’re selling me and Josie down the river for a few lumpy auld acres and notions of respectability. I never thought you would.’\textsuperscript{36} In Act Two she grows to despise Carthage’s petty-\textit{bourgeois} materialism, while Carthage, in turn, grows to despise Hester’s status as a landless Traveller:

\textbf{Hester:} Ya know what they’re sayin’ about ya? That you’re a jumped-up land-hungry mongrel.

\textbf{Carthage:} And ya know what they’re sayin’ about you? That it’s time ya moved onto another haltin’ site.\textsuperscript{37}

Carthage justifies his ‘bull-headed pride and economy and painful advancement’ through his vicarious ambitions for his daughter: ‘I want Josie to do well in the world, she’ll have her share of everythin’ I own and will own. I want her to have a chance in life, a chance you never had and so can never understand.’\textsuperscript{38} In Act Three Carthage unequivocally reiterates his position: ‘I’m not havin me daughter livin’ in a caravan! […] and have the whole neighbourhood makin’ a laughin’ stock of me.’\textsuperscript{39} The concern with class awareness and upward mobility permeates the play, as it does in \textit{The Mai}. In \textit{By the Bog of Cats}…, Caroline Cassidy reveals her inherent lack of fulfilment: ‘I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher or a air hostess or a beautician.’\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, the minor character of Young Dunne illuminates the lack of transformative options available: ‘I want to be an astronaut but me

\textsuperscript{34} Carr, Marina, Public Reading at the Great Memorial Building, Trinity College, Dublin, 29 June 1999.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{By the Bog of Cats}…, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{By the Bog of Cats}…, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{By the Bog of Cats}…, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{By the Bog of Cats}…, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{By the Bog of Cats}…, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{By the Bog of Cats}…, p. 77.
father wants me to work the bog like him and me grand-father. The Dunnes has always worked on the bog."\textsuperscript{41}

As a Traveller woman, Hester’s origins are doubly ambiguous, being of both individual \textit{and} collective significance. The history and identity of the Travelling people have always been open to assumption, contestation and renegotiation. There remains a fundamental discordance in Ireland in terms of how their history has been constructed by the dominant myths of ‘settled’ discourse. Popular anachronistic opinion holds that travellers descend from those who became dispossessed of their land during the Great Famine of 1845. Yet the word ‘tinker’, first recorded in 1175, and which appeared many times in written documents, shows that there clearly was a group of travelling crafts people who played an important role in Irish society and economy, and comes from the Old Irish ‘\textit{Tinceard}’ meaning ‘tin craft’.\textsuperscript{42}

In \textit{Do you Know Us At All?}, a collection of papers which form the major component of an educational module about Ireland’s indigenous Travelling People, the origins of the culture are explored. In “Who are the Travelling People?”, Michael McDonagh interrogates received notions about the origins of Irish Travellers:

\begin{quote}
It is very hard to say where in history Travellers come. We’ve always existed but the disasters in history, like the famine, would have swelled the ranks of Travellers on the road. I am not trying to ‘prove’ the origins of the Travellers in Irish society but to disprove that we only came about because of a disaster in Irish history. This shows that the idea that we are dropouts or misfits, because either ourselves or our ancestors couldn’t cope, is wrong.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} \textit{By the Bog of Cats...}, p. 43.
\item \textsuperscript{42} McDonagh, Michael, “Who are the Travelling People?”, in \textit{Do You Know Us At All?} Published by P.A.C.T.T. – Promoting Attitudinal Change Towards Travellers, Parish of the Travelling People, St. Laurence House, Cook Street, Dublin 8, 1993, p.11.
\item \textsuperscript{43} \textit{Do You Know Us At All?} P. 10.
\end{itemize}
McDonagh notes three distinct sub-groups of Irish Traveller. ‘The first group’, he maintains, ‘the largest, has a certain number of family names and certain traditions, especially marriage patterns. This group has a long nomadic tradition, and is confident about its identity as Travelling People. The second sub-group ‘comes from the tradition of the fairground, carnival and entertainment people.’ McDonagh goes on to identify a third group, to which Big Josie, Hester and her daughter belong, that ‘would be known to have a lot of relationships with the settled community and had a lot of contact, even inter-marriage between both groups. Back in the 1930s marriage into this grouping would be frowned upon by the other two sub-groups. There would have been clearer distinctions in the past.’

Prejudice is reflexive and social studies reveal that Irish Travellers rarely marry non-travellers, thus Big Josie was an unusual woman for her time. Identity is defined by familial relationships and an endogamic genealogy, ‘so Travellers are quick to claim kinship when they meet.’ Interfamilial marriage, where cousins are encouraged to marry, is a distinct and common method of perpetuating and protecting a strong and stable sense of exclusive identity. Certainly, one cannot ‘become’ a Traveller, it is a birthright. Yet in terms of land, property and convention, Carr notes that ‘All of the characters in the play are landless, except for the Cassidys.’ Through their inter-marriage, both Big Josie and Hester would have experienced a large degree of resistance and hostility from both communities. When the endogamic drive of the Travelling Community is destabilised by inter-marriage, they, as well as the sedentary community, feel threatened. Winnie McDonagh notes: ‘The settled people wouldn’t be happy with one of theirs marrying a Traveller but would we be happy marrying a settled person either?’

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44 Do You Know Us At All? p. 13.
45 Do You Know Us At All? p. 13.
46 Do You Know Us At All? p. 23.
48 Do You Know Us At All? p. 25.
Travellers’. We called them this because they were married to settled people so we didn’t mix with them.\(^4\)

The Travelling peoples’ resistance to wage labour in favour of self-employment and trading has historically led to charges of idleness and indolence, and to tensions with the so-called ‘settled’ working classes. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Karl Marx identifies what he considers to be the non-productive lumpenproletariat:

Alongside decayed *rouës* with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origins, alongside ruined and adventurous off-shoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, brothel-keepers, porters, *literati*, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars, - in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*.\(^5\)

Similarly, in *Transgressing The Modern*, Stallybrass and White cite a nineteenth century description of the nomad:

Mayhew’s definition of the nomadic is a demonised version of what Bakhtin later defined as the grotesque. The nomad, Mayhew writes in 1861, is distinguished from the ‘civilised’ ‘by his repugnance to regular and continuous labour - by his want of providence in laying up store for the future [...] by his passion for stupefying herbs and roots, and, when possible, for intoxicating fermented liquors [...] by his love of libidinous dances [...] by the looseness of his notion as to property, by the absence of chastity among his women, and his disregard for female honour and lastly, by his vague sense of religion.’\(^5\) Mayhew asserts that nomads are improvident: ‘Like all who make a living as it were by a game of

\(^4\) *Do You Know Us At All?* p. 23.

chance, plodding, carefulness, and saving habits cannot be reckoned among their virtues. [...] They are opposed to constituted authority and above all to the police. [...] The hatred of [nomads] to a “peeler” is intense, and with their opinion of the police, all the more ignorant unite that of the governing power; ‘in their continual warfare with the force, they resemble many savage nations, from the cunning and treachery they use.\(^52\)

Travellers have long been essentialised within Irish society as having characteristics of ‘wiliness’ and ‘shrewd cunning’. Dominant culture has constructed the travelling community as superstitious, with a propensity to irrational, excessive outbursts and a violent temperament, dishonesty, excessive sexuality and an inherently irresponsible nature. At the wedding party Mrs. Kilbride says to Hester: ‘I’ve the measure of you this long time, the lazy shiftless blood in ya, the savage tinker eye ya turn on people to frighten them.’\(^53\) Jervis identifies the objectifying process of othering discourses as namely:

[...] the production of stereotypes. These simultaneously generalize, exaggerate and fix certain features of particular individual instances of a category, thereby rendering them necessary, universal and immutable features of the category in question [where] the drive to homogenisation and control constantly recreates otherness out of difference, the other that must be produced only to be reduced, seduced or destroyed.\(^54\)

In *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity*, it is stated that: ‘Their alterity has usually been perceived as an undesirable kind of different-ness in Ireland.’\(^55\) This is perhaps predicated upon the fact that Irish Travellers do not have the ethnic difference afforded to the origins


\(^{52}\) Mayhew cited in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 129.

\(^{53}\) *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 54.

\(^{54}\) *Transgressing The Modern*, p. 8.

of European gypsies, who come originally from Asia, and who have a marked physical difference, being of a darker complexion. Irish Travellers are radically disturbing because of their ‘invisible’ difference. The study goes on to state that ‘since foreign extraction has never been ascribed to them, they have never had the exotic, erotic aura projected onto the gypsy - which may be the cause of the troubling Irish resistance to defining them as an ethnic minority.’ Thus, the Traveller’s lack of corporeal difference is yet another threat and disturbance to the seemingly ‘fixed’ and dominant body.

With a high illiteracy rate, the Travelling culture is, by necessity as well as tradition, a predominantly oral one. The particular idiomatic and dialect speech rhythms of Travelling people are an intrinsic defining characteristic of their culture and language. In *By the Bog of Cats*..., Hester and her daughter’s dialect patterns signify their difference in the community and are written into the text, just as Grandma Fraochlán’s are in *The Mai*. In scene one of Act One, Hester says to Monica: ‘Don’t keep axin’ me that.’ Similarily in scene four of Act One, Josie says to her father: ‘Will you ax her for me?’ Catwoman also uses ‘ax’ instead of ‘ask’. In Act Two, at the wedding breakfast, Catwoman says, ‘I tould ya not to ax me’, and Hester also consistently uses the Traveller dialect, with ‘ax’, in place of the Standard English verb ‘ask’.

Olwen Fouéré, who created the role of Hester for the premiere at the Abbey Theatre, writes:

*The dialect form is a departure that Marina undertook with Portia Coughlan, where her characters speak with this very particular sound, and it’s essential that they speak with that sound. The music of the piece is crucial. I was very anxious to get that right in *By the Bog of Cats*... because I feel it is the key to a number of things that are lurking underneath the language. It is certainly one of the keys to the primal energy that drives Hester, and many of Marina’s characters.*

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56 *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity*, p. 95.
57 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 15.
58 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 27.
59 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 51.
60 Fouéré, Olwen, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr*: “...before rules was made.”
Hester’s mother, Big Josie Swane’s speech patterns mark her as even more significantly other, in her status as Traveller, known as she was for speaking in a particular language. Xavier Cassidy remembers Big Josie: ‘outside her auld caravan on the bog and the fields covered in stars and her croonin’ towards Orion in a language I never heard before or since.’\textsuperscript{61} The language of Travellers has its roots in Twelfth century Ireland. McDonagh notes:

We ourselves call it ‘\textit{Cant}’ or ‘\textit{Minceirtoiree}’. \textit{Minceir} means Traveller and \textit{Toiree} means talk, so ‘Traveller talk’. Language is the last thing that we have left, that gives us our antiquity. The closest cousin to our language is old Irish. This was spoken here pre - 1200. Some of the words used at the time are still used by Travellers today when we speak in our language. Our own words for a priest and for God have shown up in old documents to be words used in pre-Christian Ireland and yet we still use them today.\textsuperscript{62}

Bardic cultures purvey and perpetuate a sense of continuity and exclusive cultural identification through language and storytelling. Big Josie Swane is remembered as ‘the greatest song stitcher ever to have passed through this place and we’ve had plenty pass through but none like Josie Swane.’\textsuperscript{63} In Act Three, Monica remembers:

There was a time around here when no celebration was complete without Josie Swane. She’d be invited everywhere to sing, funerals, weddin’s, christenin’s birthdays of the bigger farmers, the harvest, And she’d make up songs for each occasion. And it wasn’t so much they wanted her there, more they were afraid not to have her.\textsuperscript{64}

From this it is shown how the settled community fetishises, and excludes Travellers from the social fabric of the community. What is also very clear in Carr’s play is the mutually-

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{By the Bog of Cats...}, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{62} McDonagh, Michael, in \textit{Do You Know Us At All?}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{By the Bog of Cats...}, p. 22.
dependent dynamic of desire for, as well as exclusion of, that defiled ‘other’, in order to construct and maintain a distinctive sense of self. In the play is divulged that Xavier Cassidy was ‘in a constant swoon’ over Big Josie, and in Act Three he implies that they had a sexual relationship, indicating the possibility that he could be Hester’s father: ‘We often breathed the same air, me and Josie Swane, she was a loose wan, loose and lazy and aisy, a five shillin’ hoor, like you.’ In the end he sought and achieved Bog Josie’s exile, just as he knew seeks Hester’s: ‘I ran your mother out of here and I’ll run you too like a frightened hare.’ The fascination with which the community objectifies and fetishises Big Josie represents the mutual dependence of what Stallybrass and White note as the ‘twin poles’ of repulsion and desire. Hester’s response to Monica openly articulates the Traveller’s lack of subjectified ‘place’ within society:

[And] they never axed us to stay, these people, to sit down and ate with them, just lapped up her songs, gave her a bag of food and a half a crown and walked us off the premises, for fear we’d steal somethin’, I suppose. I don’t think it bothered her, it did me - and still rankles after all these years. But not Josie Swane, she’d be off to the shops to buy cigars and beer and sweets for me.

While Hester is disturbed by her and her mother’s objectification at local social gatherings, for Big Josie, this was a typically ‘naturalised’ component of her status as a Traveller woman within the community.

Repeatedly compelled to the dramatic possibility of the outsider, Carr’s depiction of Hester, The Mai and Portia Coughlan, as women who ‘will not bow down [and] will not accept things the way they are’, completes what can be regarded as a trilogy. While Carr posits the outsider in conflict with hegemonic social orders, the strategy of her dramas reveals the precarious fallibility of the so-called ‘settled’ or dominant identity. In the

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64 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 65.
65 By the Bog of Cats..., pp. 39, 70.
66 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 69.
67 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 65.
68 Carr, Marina, Unpublished interview with Melissa Sihra, Dublin, 8 February 1999.
plays, both dominant and ex-centric are seen to be as unstable as one another, where the ‘other’ is a vital component to the hegemonic politics of the ‘inside’, against which a dominant sense of self is fabricated. Carr subverts the notion of the outsider in *By the Bog of Cats*.... Instead of detachedly observing the excentric figure from within, the audience, through its engagement with Hester also becomes marginalised from the so-called settled-community. This results in the audience ironically observing themselves (as predominantly members of the ‘settled-community’), a collusion which gives both Hester and the audience ‘an edge over all of yees [and] allows me see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower yees are.’

While *By the Bog of Cats*... seems to offer a representation of the settled versus travelling communities, Carr provocatively blurs the differences between these two ostensibly oppositional states. In the play, characteristics of both are not so much opposite, as mirroring one another. In Act Two, for instance, Mrs. Kilbride rejects Hester on the basis of her Traveller identity, in order to conceive of, and substantiate, a stable sense of centralised subjectivity. Yet in a grand *coup de theatre* in Act Two, it is revealed that Mrs. Kilbride also descends from Traveller stock. In her typical essentialisation of Hester, she says to Monica Murray:

**Mrs. Kilbride:** A waste of time givin’ chances to a tinker. All tinkers understands is the open road and where the next bottle of whiskey is comin’ from.

**Monica Murray:** Well, you should know and your own grandfather wan!

**Mrs. Kilbride:** My grandfather was a wanderin’ tinsmith-

**Monica:** And what’s that but a tinker with notions?

The ambiguity of Mrs. Kilbride’s identity is again unwittingly revealed when she retaliates to Hester: ‘We’ll burn ya out if we have to.’ Monica Murray later states: ‘That’s what the tinkers do, isn’t it, burn everything after ‘em.’

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69 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 35.
70 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 56.
71 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 57.
The transference of aspects of self onto other is what Declan Kiberd notes in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, as being one of the key defining features of the subject-object relations of colonisation, where the constructed rejection of the other proves in fact to be the mirror-image of self. He asserts: ‘The image of the stage-Irishman tells far more about English fears than Irish realities.’ In his critique of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Kiberd notes, ‘whatever seems like an opposite in the play materialises as a double.’ Kiberd notes that ‘[Wilde’s] essays on Ireland question the assumption that, just because the English are one thing, the Irish must be his opposite [and identify] the tendency of Victorian Englishmen to attribute to the Irish those emotions that they had repressed within themselves.’ Just as Mrs. Kilbride may be part-Traveller, allusions to imperialism are ascribed to her in Act Two, when she compares herself to the queen of England: ‘I just want a photo of me shoes while they’re new and clean. I’ve never had such a beautiful pair of shoes [...] A hundred and fifty pound. The Quane herself wouldn’t pay more.’ In scene six of Act One, Josie mimics her grandmother: ‘I had turf stew for me dinner and for desert I had snail tart and a big mug of wee-wee [...] Ya wouldn’t get better in Buckin’am palace.’

The performativity of Mrs. Kilbride’s identity is foregrounded in Act Two where, moments before the wedding celebrations, she insists on making a speech, assuming a ‘posh, public speaking voice’ which she then slips in and out of, becoming a parodic figure of the middle-class status which she seeks to mimetically become. She attends her son’s marriage in what looks extremely like a wedding dress, white, a white hat, with a bit of a veil trailing off it, white shoes, tights, bag, etc, and throughout the drama reveals her fixation with material wealth, constantly quantifying ‘worth’ against a vulgarised sense

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72 This refers to the Travelling People’s customary tradition of ritualised, symbolic expurgation through the act of burning belongings upon the death of a family member.
74 *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, p. 38.
75 *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, p. 38.
76 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 48.
77 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 32.
of economics and consumerism. She frequently interrogates her granddaughter as to the state of Hester’s finances:

How much does your Mam have in the bank? I’ll tell you how much, a great big goose egg… Guess how much I’ve saved, Josie, g’wan guess, guess […] Three thousand pound. All mine, I saved it. I didn’t frig it away on crame buns and blouses. No, I saved it. […] I’m lavin’ you nothin’ because your mother would get hould of it.

A number of Carr’s plays are loosely based on Sophoclean, Euripidean and Aeschylean models of Greek theatre, and the cultural politics of Classical drama is fundamentally linked to the Irish context and content of Carr’s narratives. As with the Greeks plays Carr’s dramas centre around the family and the status quo of male and female agency within that social unit. In By the Bog of Cats..., the legitimisation of female corporeality as barter is central. In what Anthony Roche notes as ‘the great bought marriage of Irish theatre’ or ‘Not the Tinker’s Wedding’, the position of Caroline Cassidy is no more than that of patriarchal object of exchange between the Cassidy and the Kilbride households.

Xavier says to Hester: ‘He loves the land and like me he’d rather die than part with it. With him Cassidy’s farm will be safe, the name will be gone but never the farm. And who’s to say but maybe your little bastard and her offspring won’t be farmin’ my land in years to come.’

In Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts, Sue-Ellen Case writes:

While ownership became more individual and located within the family unit, it was limited to the male gender. Women were restricted to limited conditions of

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78 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 47.
79 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 26.
80 The Mai is loosely based on Sophocles’ Electra, By the Bog of Cats... on Euripides’ Medea, and Ariel on Aeschylus’ Oresteia.
82 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 69.
ownership and exchange. [...] Within this new economy, women became a medium of exchange and marriage became an institution of ownership. In fact, the word for marriage, *ekdosis*, meant loan – women were loaned to their husbands by their fathers, and in the case of a divorce, they were returned to their fathers.⁸³

Similarly, Elaine Aston’s critique of the ‘princess’ in fairy-tale genres notes the fundamental lack of agency of Caroline Cassidy:

[T]he female [is] a site of transaction between the old generation of patriarchy (father) and the new lover/husband to be. The female is therefore inactive, is defined only in terms of the male (as daughter, as wife-to-be), is, in short, the object of the male hero’s quest, but not as a subject or initiator of action in her own right.⁸⁴

In light of the above, Hester’s negotiation of her surrounding space, as both woman *and* Traveller, is worthy of consideration. While it is the essentialist characteristics of vagrancy, backwardness, filth, sloth, violence and ignorance that are most prevalently superficially projected onto Traveller culture in Ireland, by the dominant ‘settled’ culture, it is the symbolic spatial ‘fluidity’ or mobility of the Travelling culture which is of most threat and danger to dominant social value-systems of land ownership, inheritance and genealogical continuity.

Hester’s representation in contrasting spaces such as the indeterminate bog ‘always shiftin’ and changin’ and coddin’ the eye, a caravan and a fixed home, indicate the fluid sense of self which she negotiates. ‘Half-settled’, she is neither one thing nor the other, ambivalently displaying aspects of anomie, itinerancy, exile *and* a desire for acceptance and ‘rooted-ness’: ‘I was born on the Bog of Cats, same as all of yees.’ [...] ‘I’m as

settled as any of yees.' In *By the Bog of Cats...*, Hester and little Josie reside *between* fixed house and mobile home, or caravan. The nomadic tendency of the 'moveable home' displays Hester's ambivalent and liminal negotiation of spatiality, as identified in the opening moments of the play, when the Ghost Fancier asks her: 'You live in that caravan over there? 'Hester replies: 'Used to; Live up the lane now. In a house, though I've never felt at home in it.' Living *between* the fixed and the fluid, with the option of movement, Hester radically disturbs the rigid land-fixed mentality upon which dominant Irish culture is founded. This ideology is unequivocally articulated by strong-farmer Xavier Cassidy in Act Three, when he says to Carthage: 'There's nothin' besides land, boy, nothin', and a real farmer would never think otherwise.'

The symbolic politics of space is clearly articulated in "Nomadism Now and Then", where Michael McDonagh vitally notes: 'Nomadism is more than travelling from A to B. It is everything about Travellers, I live in a house and have done for a long time but that doesn't make me a settled person.' What McDonagh is demonstrating is the political aspect of nomadism, as an ontological mode, for Irish Travellers. 'Nomadism', he continues, 'entails a way of looking at the world, a different way of seeing things, a different attitude to accommodation, to work and to life in general.' For Travellers, nomadism has always been linked to the economic base of self-employment. Travelling was traditionally an essential aspect of economic survival in attending markets and fairs, and of doing seasonal work such as potato or fruit picking. McDonagh continues: 'Travellers regard accommodation as a stopping place. Whether living on a halting site or in a house, any kind of accommodation is seen in a temporary capacity. It may be long term temporary, it doesn't necessarily mean short term temporary.' This fluid or ambivalent sense of 'place-ment', and symbolically impermanent domesticity, is what is

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85 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 40.
86 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 14.
87 *By the Bog of Cats...*, p. 72.
88 *Do You Know Us At All?* p. 33.
89 *Do You Know Us At All?* p. 33.
90 *Do You Know Us At All?* p. 33.
most threatening to sedentary communities, where ultimate value is placed on the fixed acquirement and possession of property.

Hester articulates the cultural and ontological trauma of enforced settlement when she refuses to move into a house in the town: ‘I’ve never lived in a town. I won’t know anywan there.’91 In the script re-writes for the American premiere of *By the Bog of Cats*... Carr added the line: ‘I won’t be stuck in no rat hole with no air.’92 McDonagh goes on to note: ‘When a Traveller goes into a house it is one of the most frightening experiences that they can have. [...] Some have been physically sick from being in houses and realising that the authorities are expecting them never to move out. My sister says sometimes that she’s smothering in the house.’93

Hester straddles the inside and the outside, resisting classical and modern constructs of male and female spatial politics. *Maenad* and *mater familias*, she oscillates between fixed abode and caravan on the Bog of Cats, and has the unlimited option of roaming the vast ‘no-man’s’-landscape of bogland. In *Money, Sex and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism*, Nancy Harstock notes that as the Greeks defined the household as a private, apolitical space from the public, political space of the *polis*, ‘The result was a theorisation of politics and political power as activities that occurred in a masculine arena were characterised by freedom from necessary labour, and the dominance of intellect and soul.’94 Sue-Ellen Case elaborates on this important point:

> Since Athenian women were confined to the house (explicitly in the laws of *Solon*), they were removed from the public life of the intellect and the soul and

91 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 56.
93 In the 1960s the Commission on Itinerancy pushed the concept of rehabilitation, whereby ‘resettling’ Travellers was regarded as the only option. McDonagh notes that ‘settlement committees’ were set up around the country in the 1960s in order to naturalise Travellers into settled society.(17) Travellers were thus regarded as people with accommodation problems, rather than as having a distinct culture of nomadism. *Do You Know Us At All?*, p. 34.
confined to the world of domestic labour, childbearing, and concomitant sexual activities. Actual women disappeared from the public life of the *polis*, lost their economic and legal powers and became objects of exchange.\(^95\)

Amphibiously, Hester is both within *and* outside of conventional society, crossing spatial boundaries more radically than the female protagonists in Carr’s plays from 1994 – 1996. Hester is known for her drive to the outdoors, or ‘night-roaming’, and this domestic uncontainability challenges conventional notions of woman’s ‘place’ in the grid of social systemisation. Hester is recalcitrant to the contained female sphere of the *oikos*, and is consequently threatened by Carthage with the law-courts on unfounded charges of negligence regarding their daughter: ‘I only have to mention your drinkin’ or your night roamin’ or the way you sleep in that dirty auld caravan and lave Josie alone in the house.’\(^96\) Xavier Cassidy similarly remembers Big Josie, as *maenad*, in her continual retreat from the domestic sphere: ‘Times I’d walk by that caravan and there’d be ne’er a sign of this mother of yours. She’d go off for days with anywan who’d buy her a drink. She’d be off in the bars of Pullagh and Mucklagh gettin’ into fights.’\(^97\)

Carr’s plays from 1989 - 1998 explore and renegotiate the cultural association of matriarchy and womanhood. Since the idealisation of ‘Mother Éire’, ‘Kathleen Ni Houlihan’, the Shan van Vocht, and *Aisling* poetry, ‘woman’ has been viewed as a personification rather than person. This tradition began as a form of political resistance during the time of the Penal Codes in the late seventeenth century, when it was forbidden to refer directly to Ireland in ballads, poems and songs. While iconographically central, woman was intellectually and subjectively absent, relegated to the silent, symbolic emblem of nation, and thus a metaphor without agency. Although there have been significant social changes, women are still underrepresented in all aspects of Irish society, and while there have been two female presidents in recent years, this is more of a symbolic than an actively political position. As noted in the chapter on *The Mai*, the

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95 Case, Sue, Ellen, in *Anthology of Modern Drama*, p. 138.
96 *By the Bog of Cats*, p. 35.
97 *By the Bog of Cats*, p. 40.
words ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ are still used effectively interchangeably in the Irish constitution. This political ideology also rings true in Classical Greek society where, as Case notes: ‘The rise of the family unit radically altered the role of women in Greek public life. Ironically, the important role women began to assume within the family unit was the cause of their removal from public life. The family unit became the new site for the creation and transmission of personal wealth.\(^98\)

While Irish Travellers have been systematically elided from dominant discourses of Irish identity and history, the notion of abjection is further complicated in terms of gender positionality. Carr’s representation of a female Traveller brings to attention what Stallybrass and White identify as the process of ‘displaced abjection’ and ‘the social process whereby ‘low’ social groups turn their figurative and actual power, not against those in authority, but against those who are even ‘lower’.\(^99\) Strict demarcations of essentialist gender distinctions and codes of behaviour are maintained and perpetuated within Travelling communities. Winnie McDonagh states:

Women in Irish society were oppressed but Traveller women were doubly oppressed. [...] If a man goes to make a cup of tea and the other women are there, it’s frowned upon that a man would make a cup of tea. That mentality is forced in. Even when a man tries to help he’s insulted by men and the women. It’s a catch twenty-two situation and it’s very oppressive for both sides.\(^100\) [Women] are not seen as equal to the men, more as helpers. [...] Training Centres are giving women a lot more power over the men in ways. The women get an allowance that would be helpful with whatever the men were receiving.\(^101\)

In *By the Bog of Cats*..., the notion of ‘childhood’ and the travelling community is represented in the figure of little Josie. Winnie McDonagh, editor of the *Voice of the Traveller*, comments: ‘There is not much of a childhood for Travellers. When you come

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\(^{98}\) Case, Sue, Ellen, in *An Anthology of Modern Drama*, p. 138.

\(^{99}\) *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 53.

\(^{100}\) McDonagh, Winnie, “A Traveller Woman’s Perspective”, in *Do You Know Us At All?*, p. 25.
on to about eight or nine years your childhood more or less ends. You're expected to be a lot cleverer than a settled child would be.\textsuperscript{102} Thus the post-enlightenment construction of 'childhood' is a product of privileged classes, where 'childhood' is result of economic possibility rather than innate essentiality. At the age of seven, Josie negotiates an adult world. In Act One, scene two, her Grandmother shouts orders: 'Get in till I dress ya.' Josie responds: 'I know how to dress meself.'\textsuperscript{103} Deliberately dressing herself with clothes 'inside out', in a marked act of defiance and subjective autonomy, she marks out an active identity for herself in an adult world. Josie also calls her Grandmother 'Granny', deliberately refusing the latter's attempts at authority and manipulation:

**Mrs. Kilbride:** Good mornin', ya little wagon of a girl child.

**Josie:** Mornin' yourself, y'auld wagon of a Granny witch.

**Mrs. Kilbride:** I tould ya not to call me Granny.\textsuperscript{104}

Another Traveller woman, the ‘rancorous hulk’ Big Josie Swane, whose absence weighs heavily on the drama, is one of the main characters of the play.\textsuperscript{105} Big Josie is afforded a mythic and legendary stature in the drama due to the vivid and conflicting stories surrounding her past. Xavier, Monica Murray, Catwoman, Hester and Joseph, all have discordant memories of Big Josie, and construct her through the subjective lens of their individual desire, memory and imagination. In Act One Hester entreats the Catwoman to speak about Big Josie: ‘Tell me about me mother, for what I remember doesn’t add up.’\textsuperscript{106}

Like her daughter Hester, whom she abandoned at the age of seven, Big Josie is known to have consistently contested her relegated, agentless role as iconic ‘woman / mother.’ Displaying less than de Valerian ‘maternal instincts’, and a virulent recalcitrance to the

\textsuperscript{101} McDonagh, in *Do You Know Us At All?* p. 24.
\textsuperscript{102} McDonagh, in *Do You Know Us At All?*, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{103} *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 18.
\textsuperscript{104} *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 18.
\textsuperscript{105} *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 62.
\textsuperscript{106} *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 21.
‘post-card Irish’ sensibility of children romping at a glowing hearth, Big Josie is remembered as being wayward, absent, negligent, self-absorbed, violent, sexually predatorial and protective, qualities which are usually appropriated to stereotypical and vulgarised tropes of masculinity. Xavier tells of how: ‘She’d go off for days with anywan who’d buy her a drink. […] Wance she bit the nose off a woman who dared to look at her man, bit the nose clean off her face. And you, you’d be chained to the door of the caravan with maybe a dirty nappy on ya if ya were lucky.’¹⁰⁷ Joseph recalls Big Josie as being: ‘fierce silent – gentle I suppose in her way’, while Hester remembers her as otherwise: ‘Gentle! She’d a vicious whiskey temper on her and a whiplash tongue and fists that’d land on ya like lightnin.’¹⁰⁸

In *By the Bog of Cats…*, Hester and her Mother contest the patriarchal commodification and politically relegated position of their genders as women in both the Travelling and the ‘settled’ or sedentary community. Big Josie married a member of the sedentary community, Jack Swane, with whom she had two children, and though of a roaming or nomadic disposition, seems to have been somewhat domestically rooted to his household at Bergit’s Island. Hester, as the child of the ‘mixed-marriage’, and thus with a claim to both communities, has remained all her life on the Bog of Cats, apart from the period when she was incarcerated in an Industrial School, when orphaned at the age of seven. So while Hester now resides between fixed abode and mobile home or caravan, spatially symbolising her bifurcated ontology and her grotesque status between places, she has never moved from place to place, or from halting site to halting site.

Hester exercises her right to claim, and to roam, the landscape. She says: ‘I was born on the Bog of Cats, and on the Bog of Cats I’ll end me days. I’ve as much right to this place as any of yees, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yees.’¹⁰⁹ Her grotesque and excessive ‘intermingling’ or *mésalliance* affords her the distance with which to contemplate the social myopia and perpetuating tribalism of the community, while her

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¹⁰⁷ *By the Bog of Cats…*, p. 40.
¹⁰⁸ *By the Bog of Cats…*, p. 62.
¹⁰⁹ *By the Bog of Cats…*, p. 35.
birthright, at the same time, affords her the authority with which to contest, accept, or reject the dynamics of the dominant social hierarchies of identification and exclusion, as maintained by the Cassidy, and to a lesser extent Kilbride, households.

While Xavier Cassidy, in his capacity as the local strong farmer, clearly demarcates the boundaries of ‘within’ and ‘without’, Elsie Kilbride, in her collusion with the Cassidy/Kilbride marriage-alliance, serves to maintain and perpetuate the dominant patriarchal coda which he systematises and enforces. In her compliance, Mrs. Kilbride upholds the law at all levels. At the wedding feast she says: ‘I’ve never been discarded, Hester Swane! Ya know why? Because I’ve never over stepped meself. I’ve always lived by the rules.’ To which Hester replies: ‘Ah rules! What rules are they?’ As displayed here, Hester has inherited her Mother’s radical anti-establishment tendencies. Referring to the legal contract regarding her house, in scene five of Act One, Hester demonstrates her lack of regard for the letter of the law, challenging property rights and legislation: ‘Bits of paper, writin’, means nothin’, can as aisy be unsigned.’

In the above chapter on Carr’s 1989 drama *Low In the Dark*, the notion of bodily fluids, excrement, expulsion, and the potency of pollution to the ‘bounded’, stable body is explored. The relegation of filth as a political trope of defining and maintaining dominance through exclusion and expulsion is similarly represented in *By the Bog of Cats*. Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*: ‘The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness.’ Similarly, ‘Iris Young’s appropriation of Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection in *The Powers of Horror* shows how the operation of repulsion can consolidate “identities” founded on the instituting of the “Other” or a set of Others through exclusion and domination.’ In Euripides’ *Medea*, Creon speaks explicitly of boundaries and borders, the need for containment, and the ‘expulsion’ of the

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10 *By the Bog of Cats* .... p. 55.
11 *By the Bog of Cats* .... p. 29.
12 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 170.
threatening body of Medea: ‘If tomorrow’s holy sun finds you or them inside my boundaries, you die. [...] I’m not going back into my palace until I’ve put you safe outside my boundaries.’

As mentioned in the earlier part of this chapter, the hegemonic political dynamics of legitimacy, which seek the exclusion of anything that destabilises legal boundaries, is exemplified in the drama in the character of Mrs. Kilbride, in her drive to endogamy and the exile of ‘impure’, threatening, or illegitimate ‘other(s)’. Kristeva notes: ‘The potency of pollution is [...] not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it.’ If it is, as Kristeva asserts, ‘the logic of exclusion that causes the abject to exist,’ then Mrs. Kilbride is a key player in Carr’s drama, in her treatment of, not only Hester and Josie Swane but also, of the Catwoman.

In *By the Bog of Cats...,* the exile and ‘eradication’ of the systemically defiling ‘filthy’ corporealties of Hester and the Catwoman is sought. In Act Two, Hester says to Carthage: ‘The truth is you want to eradicate me, make out I never existed.’ While tropes of filth and dirt are ascribed to Hester as Traveller, living in a ‘dirty caravan’, it is her threatening ontological status *between* the communities, her resistance to containment, her lack of conclusive paternity, her landless status and her illegitimate offspring, that are the metaphorically ‘excremental’ factors of her exile, and which lead to her eventual sacrifice. Butler notes:

What constitutes through division the “inner” and “outer” worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which

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113 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 170.
114 *Euripides, Medea and Other Plays*, pp. 25-7.
117 *By the Bog of Cats...,* p. 56.
Others become shit. For inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve impossible impermeability. This sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely that excremental filth that it fears.  

In Act Three, as the wedding celebrations continue, Josie brings Hester the remainder of wedding cake, which she devours. Hester later drinks wine from the party also: ‘I’ll drink the enemy’s wine. Not the wine’s fault it fell into the paws of cut-throats and gargiylies.’  

In the same act, in a last-ditch attempt to force Hester to leave the bog, Xavier threatens to violate her with his gun: ‘Now let’s see the leftovers of Carthage Kilbride.’ Kristeva writes that the ‘remainder’ appears to be coextensive with the entire architecture of non-totalizing thought. Kristeva sees the excessive quality of the ‘remainder’ as being: ‘A challenge to our monotheistic and mono-logical universes; such a mode of thinking apparently needs the ambivalence of remainder if it is not to become enclosed within One single level symbolics.’  

In *By the Bog of Cats*..., we see repeatedly how the dynamic of exclusion seeks to construct a systematised, legitimised sense of self. Kristeva notes:

> Defilement is what is jettisoned from the “symbolic system”. It is what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based, which then becomes differentiated from a temporary agglomeration of individuals and, in short, constitutes a classification system or a structure.  

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118 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 170.
119 *Plays: One*, pp. 325-7.
120 *Plays: One*, p. 330.
121 *The Powers of Horror*, p. 76.
122 *The Powers of Horror*, p. 76.
As with any notion of identity, there must be something against which that identity is defined. Filth is therefore not a quality in itself, but dependent upon the construction of something else being designated ‘clean’ by virtue of its assumed difference, and dependent on the hypothesis of boundary construction, as something to be rejected or jettisoned out of that boundary. Kristeva accurately asserts: ‘The potency of pollution is therefore not an inherent one: it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it.’ As has been noted, Mrs. Kilbride, in her desire for upward mobility and status, constructs and performs a fictional middle-class notion of self that is predicated upon the necessary exclusion of the figures of Catwoman and Hester Swane. At the wedding party in Act Two, she says to Xavier:

What did ya have to invite the Catwoman for? Brings down the whole tone of the weddin. [...] She has no right to be here. Not till she washes herself. The turf-smoke stink of her. Look at her moochin’ up to Father Willow and her never inside the door of a church and me at seven mass every mornin’ watchin’ that auld fool dribblin’ into the chalice. And would he call to see me? Never. Spends all his time with the Catwoman in her dirty little hovel... I’d love to hose her down, fling her onto the milkin’ parlour floor, turn on the water full blast and hose her down to her kidneys.

Mrs. Kilbride thus seeks to prohibit the inclusion of the constructed ‘filthy’ object as a means of constructing and maintaining a clean, dominant and ordered sense of self. Kristeva writes that the ‘filthy object [...] because it is excluded as a possible object, asserted to be a non-object of desire, abominated as ab-ject, as abjection, filth becomes defilement and founds on the henceforth released side of the “self and clean” the order that is this only (and therefore always) sacred. In a book on good manners (Goede Manieren), a certain Mrs. Van Zutphen van Dedem devotes a chapter to ‘the act of avoiding and excluding’, in the drive to maintain the cherished middle and upper class

\[124\] The Powers of Horror, p. 69.  
\[125\] By the Bog of Cats..., p. 50.  
\[126\] The Powers of Horror, p. 65.
categories of ‘pure’ and ‘impure’. She notes how the ‘more refined person’ was to avoid even:

the slightest contact, so far as possible, with the bodies and garments of other people, in the knowledge that, even greater than the hygienic danger of contamination, there is always the danger of contact with the spiritually inferior and the repugnant who at any moment can appear in our immediate vicinity [...] like germs in an unhealthy body.'

Catwoman is described by Carr in the play as ‘A woman in her late fifties, stained a streaky brown from the bog, a coat of cat fur that reaches to the ground, studded with cats’ eyes and cats’ paws. She is blind and carries a stick.’ Inspired by Ratwife from Ibsen’s *Little Eyolf*, Catwoman is the ‘blind seer’ of the play, who communes with the dead. Half human, half animal, the classical and fairytale resonances of Catwoman are rich and evocative. She lives on the bog in a little turf house, eats mice, and ‘sees things writ in the sky’, inhabiting a liminal, excessive and grotesque territory *between* realms. Her blindness similarly offers new perspectives on the myopic dominant social structure: ‘Sure I know that too’ she says to Hester, ‘seen it writ in a bog hole.’

Pagan and prophet, Catwoman is the Teireseus-like, choric-figure of the drama, a *Bacchante* who is linked most closely with the local Catholic priest, Fr. Willow, a topsy-turvy inversion of Christianity. Father Willow and the Catwoman share an unconventional alliance within the community, where Catwoman’s pagan sensibility necessarily threatens the stability of the Catholic structural fabric. In Act Two, Carr notes that they enter the wedding party ‘linking arms, both with their sticks. Father Willow *has his snuff on hand, pyjamas showing from under his shirt and trousers, hat on, adores the*

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127 *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 136.
128 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 271.
129 *By the Bog of Cats*..., p. 23.
Catwoman.’ He leads her to the table and whispers: ‘If ya were a bar of chocolate I’d ate ya.’

A decadent, Dionysian figure, associated with wine and revelry, Fr. Willow is similarly ‘otherworldly’. In Act Two he entreats the Catwoman to ‘cut back on the mice, they’ll be the death of ya.’ Catwoman replies: ‘And you’ll have to cut back on the snuff. To which he retorts: ‘Try snails instead, far better for ya, the French ate them with garlic and tons of butter and Burgundy wine. I tried them wance meself and I in Avalon. Delicious.’ The foods mentioned - Burgundy wine, chocolate, snails in garlic-butter under ‘a hot sun’, align these two figures not in the traditional Catholic sensibility of penance, fasting and frugality, but in an excessive aura of sensuality, and sexuality, more in line with classical Greek festivity.

A carnivalesque depiction of Irish Catholicism, Father Willow cannot remember the simple prayer of Grace before mealtime: ‘The grace, yes, how does it go again?’ After the wedding, Monica Murray comments to Xavier: ‘Father Willow seems to have lost the run of himself entirely [...] The state of him with his hat on all durin’ the Mass and the vestments inside out and his pyjamas peepin’ out from under his trousers.’ His wedding speech contains traces of regret over the loss of romantic love:

Father Willow: It may or may not surprise yees all if I tould yees I was almost a groom meself wance. Her name was Elizabeth Kennedy, no that was me mother’s name, her name was - it’ll come to me, anyway, it wasn’t meant to be, in the end we fell out over a duck egg on a walkin’ holiday by the Shannon, what was her name at all? Helen? No.

Mrs. Kilbride: Would ya say the grace, Father Willow, and be -

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130 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 51.
131 By the Bog of Cats..., pp. 49-50.
132 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 52.
133 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 48.
Father. Willow: The grace, yes, how does it go again?..Rowena. That was it. Rowena Phelan. I should never have ate that duck egg – no.\textsuperscript{134} 

The association of Fr. Willow with the duck egg, found also in Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, is fecund in its implication of sexual consumption and consummation, the fertile and the erotic, which again links to the pagan and is recalcitrant to orthodox representations of Irish Catholic priesthood.\textsuperscript{135}

Through the fantastical and supernatural figures of the Catwoman, Fr. Willow, the Ghost Fancier and the ghost of Joseph, Carr creates figures and landscapes of alterity and ‘otherness’. That Carr frames *By the Bog of Cats*... unambiguously from the outset allows the audience to know what imaginative leaps are expected of it. Carr’s representation of ‘ether-reality’ is explicitly manifest in the very opening moments of *By the Bog of Cats*:

Hester: ‘Who are you? Haven’t seen you around here before.’

Ghost Fancier: ‘I’m ghoulin’ for a woman be the name o’ Hester Swane.’

Hester: ‘I’m Hester Swane.’

Ghost Fancier: ‘You couldn’t be, you’re alive.’\textsuperscript{136}

Carr notes the contemporary tendency to realism and mimesis in the theatre:

‘[People] don’t want to be told about a ghost. They don’t want anything that isn’t like a Kodak instamatic photograph [...] The worst thing that they can say to you is that it’s not believable [...] but to work within those parameters is impossible for any writer who is on a journey, or who is trying to figure out what we’re here for.’\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{134} *By the Bog of Cats*..., pp. 53-4.

\textsuperscript{135} In J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, the local girls sexually ‘offer’ themselves to Christy. One Sara Tansey proffers eggs: ‘I’ve run up with a brace o’ duck’s eggs for your food today. [...] Hold out your hand and you’ll see it’s no lie I’m telling you.’ Christy: [*coming forward shyly and holding out his left hand*] They’re a great and weighty size.’ (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1974), p. 25.

\textsuperscript{136} *By the Bog of Cats*..., pp. 13-14.

\textsuperscript{137} *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, p. 48.
In terms of her aesthetic, Carr quotes Keats’ doctrine of negative capability: ‘that is when man [or woman] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’

‘Ghosting’ in performance operates within a number of symbolic, aesthetic and ontological realms, and is a potent recalcitrance to dramatic Realism and naturalistic representation. In By the Bog of Cats..., the Catwoman traverses and inhabits spaces between the mundane and the imaginary in her dialogues with the dead. At the beginning of Act Two we see her talking casually to a ghost. The representation of the landscapes of death and ‘otherness’ is manifest throughout Carr’s work and feeds organically into her layered and complex exploration of the abject outsider, where the theatrical spaces become conflictual sites of discourse between outside and inside, the ‘real’ and ‘non-real’, and subject and object. In Act Three Joseph simply says: ‘It’s not wan bit romantic bein’ dead, let me tell ya.’ Hester replies: ‘I never thought it was.’ In unpublished re-writes of By the Bog of Cats... for the United States premiere by Irish Repertory of Chicago in 2001, Carr expands on the trauma of the liminal purgatorial existence to which the ghost of Joseph is consigned for infinity:

Joseph: ‘Ya’d want to geh an eyeful a the devils here. They sih along the avenues, perched on glass, fall on ya, try to suck ya, the faces of them where faces should be, jealous of anywan thah was ever born. Ya see they’ll never make ud to to the earth, noh if they were to live a millin’, millin yare. And their howls ah nigh, ‘make me human’ they cry in their terrible voices that aren’t voices ah all buh somethin before a voice, ‘make me human just for an hour.’

Hester: ‘I’ve often whispered the same.’

The key word in Joseph’s dialogue is ‘romantic’, where he is clearly negotiating an ontology of dispossession, anomie and exile. This displays the conflictual and ambivalent politics of Carr’s representation of ‘outsider-ness’ as being both a space of potential

freedom, and ontological dis-placement. The Catwoman tries to comfort Joseph: 'Now be on your way, settle into it your new world, knock the best out of it ya can.' Joseph replies: 'It's fierce hard to knock the best out of nothin', fierce hard to enjoy darkness the whole time, can't I just stay here with ya, talk to ya a while'? Carr's representation of ghosts from 1994 – 1998 reveals much about the living characters in the plays. The notion of dialogues with ghosts in performance as being dialogues with the self is evident in both Portia Coughlan and By the Bog of Cats.... In the former play, Portia's vision of Gabriel can be regarded as representative of the psychological 'midland' of the character, while in the latter, Hester's 'stabbing' by the Ghost Fancier at the end of Act Three is effectively, a poetic representation of her suicide.

The representations and discourses of 'otherness' and alterity contained in By the Bog of Cats... are juxtaposed, in scene chronology with the mundane and practical economic concerns of Mrs. Kilbride, Carthage, Caroline and Xavier. Act two opens with the Catwoman sitting alone at the wedding party table, before the group arrives (as she has not attended the church ceremony), lapping wine, animal-like, from a saucer and conversing with the waiter. Upon the exit of the waiter, Carr directs: the ghost of Joseph Swane [enters]; blood stained shirt and trousers, a throat wound. He walks across the stage. Catwoman cocks her ear, starts sniffing. And then dialogue between the two, who cannot see each other, ensues:

Catwoman: Ah Christ, not another ghost...Go'way and lave me alone. I'm on me day off.

Joseph: Who are ya? I can't see ya.

Catwoman: I can't see you aither. I'm the Catwoman, but I tould ya I'm not talkin' to ghosts today, yees have me heart scalded, hardly got a wink's sleep last night.

139 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 63.
140 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 45.
141 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 43.
Joseph: Please, I haven’t spoken to anywan since the night I died.\footnote{By the Bog of Cats..., p. 44.}

The moment of the Catwoman and the ghost’s exit, is effectively dramatically contrasted with Caroline and Carthage’s anti-climactic entrance, where Caroline comments focus purely upon the material aspects of the wedding: ‘This is the tablecloth me mother had for her weddin’ and it’s the same silver too.’\footnote{By the Bog of Cats..., p. 45.} Similarly, the scene following Catwoman and Hester’s dialogue of dreams, visions and prophecy, where Elsie chides little Josie for her illegitimate status, and lack of economic stability, displays the same oppositional concerns: ‘Tell me this, Josie Swane, how much has your Mam in the bank? [...] I’ll tell ya how much, a great big goose egg.’\footnote{By the Bog of Cats..., p. 26.}

Carr’s plays from 1994 onwards are set in the Midlands of Ireland, in a landscape which may be considered excessive and grotesque due to its intermediary status of ‘being in-between’ the dominant geographical, political and cultural demarcations of East and West. Earlier chapters identify the symbolic resonances of the regional topography of the Midlands of Ireland, and the ways in which Carr’s plays negotiate the ambivalent poetics of geographical centrality and cultural marginality. Carr’s characteristic representation of the Midlands re-negotiates the ‘stability’ of dominant cultural tropes of a romantic, green Irish landscape, where the indistinctiveness of the flat, black Midlands bog-scape radically counteracts homologous depictions of the fixed, ‘pastoral-kitsch’ Irish scene. In its negative relationality to the East and West, of which it is ‘neither/ nor’, the Midlands may be regarded as a landscape of abjection, in Kristeovan terms. The Midlands, or between-lands embodies an intersticial liminal space, by name, it is nothing of and for itself, but a site of transition, and movement between; a mid-point or crossing rather than a final destination.

In its resistance to fixity, the bog, ‘always shiftin’ and changin’ and coddin’ the eye’, may be regarded as an ambivalent space, which in Bakhtinian carnivalesque-grotesque terms
of the somatic, is 'the epitome of incompleteness', displaying the positive destabilisation of rigid boundaries. In this sense, all of the characters in the play are 'borderlander(s)' in their residence in the 'no-place of abjection' or what Kristeva calls the 'landscape of oblivion'.

The traumatic, potentially transformative, excessive symbolic capability of the bog displays the contradictory politics of resistance, fluidity and fixity. The inherent tension of the trope of the bog lies its 'in-between' ambivalence. On the one hand the bog is a site of political carnivalesque resistance which, as Victor Turner argues, is 'a moment when those being removed in accordance to a cultural script were liberated from normative demands, where they were betwixt and between successive lodgements in jural political systems', while on the other, it remains a site of traumatic ontological stasis, limbo and arrested development.

The Bog can be seen as a liminal topography in its indistinctiveness and excessive tendency to motion, or permeability. Like the ether-real corporeality of the spectre-body, in which things also may pass beyond and between, the bog is recalcitrant to the 'fixed' binary-politics of inside and outside. In the drama Carr illuminates a discursive site in which, as Stallybrass and White articulate, the

social classification and psychological processes are generated as conflictual complexes. It is precisely here where ideology and fantasy conjoin. The topography of realms which, by virtue of exclusions at the geographical, class, or somatic level, traces lines of desire and phobic contours which are produced and reproduced through one another.

Though predominantly culturally disregarded, there are moments in Irish history and literature where the Midlands landscape of the bog has been imaginatively represented.

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146 The Powers of Horror, p. 55.
The notion of bogland as a site of interchangeability and resistance to fixity is portrayed in Brahm Stoker’s 1891 novel *The Snake’s Pass*, where the storyteller relates that: ‘they do say that the shiftin’ bog wor the forrum he tuk.’149 Similarly, the myth of moving landscapes is perpetuated in Terry Eagleton’s semi-ironic comment on cultural tropes of ‘Irishness’ in *The Truth about the Irish*, where he notes:

> It is a myth that bogs just lie there inertly without stirring [...] they have been known to shift around. Some years ago a motorist was driving along the north coast of county Mayo when he was alarmed to see a bog advancing slowly towards him along the road. This was the result of land subsidence, but word soon got around that, years after people were leaving the land for foreign parts, the land itself was now desperately trying to emigrate.150

This conceptualisation of the bog, in its ambivalence and resistance to ‘fixity’ links it to the notion of *metaspace* which Colin Graham notes in *Deconstructing Ireland*, as ‘an imperative which questions boundaries, both geographical and epistemological’ which, he continues, ‘leads to the deterioration of certainty.’151

Hester’s *in-between* status in the community is poetically underscored in her negotiation of the surrounding landscape. Refusing the contained binary politics of the (male) public and the private (female) *oikos*, Hester crosses the ‘no-man’s land’ of the bog by day and night, threatening the rigid social orders of gender, property ownership, and ‘propriety.’ With her inherited association to the outdoors comes the tendency to exceed demarcated boundaries. In *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Simon Goldhill writes about fifth century Athenian drama and ‘the regular association of women with the inside and the dangers associated with women when they go outside [and how] the requirement to keep women on the inside is so forcefully stated.’152 In scene one of the play, Monica Murray asks

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148 *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 25.
Hester: ‘Walkin’ all night again, were ya? Ya’ll cetch yer death in this weather.’
Carthage similarly recalls Hester’s drive to the outdoors: ‘I’ll remember the sound of the back door closin’ as ya escaped for another night roamin’ the bog.’

The Catwoman’s corporeality is visibly marked, or stained a streaky brown from the bog. Her colouring further highlights her ‘otherness’ and connection to the landscape and the outdoors. ‘I know everythin’ that happens on this bog. I’m the Keeper of the Bog of Cats in case ya forgotten. I own this bog.’

The bog is framed as sentient, changeable and portentous, thus becoming an active agent in the mapping of the fate of the characters. Catwoman says to Hester in Act one: ‘Lave this place tonight.’ Hester replies: ‘I’m stoppin’ here’, to which the Catwoman responds: ‘Sure I know that too. Seen it writ in a bog hole.’

In an interview Carr says: ‘[…] landscape [is] another character in the work.’ She expands: ‘Nature that makes a gratuitous appearance in a play does not interest me, but nature that is invested with memory or nature of character, or associations, faith, is so important.’

With its surface of false-security, the bogs conceal underground rivers of inherent uncontainability and ceaseless, bottomless fluidity. Bog-holes incorporate a rich well of imaginative associations from notions of infinite, mythic depth, to the twin poles of terror and the sublime. Known for their mysterious retentive capability to purvey past relics and dead bodies, Eagleton, points out:

If bogs have haunted the Irish imagination, it may be because they reveal the past as still present. With a bog, and its buried contents, the past is no longer behind […] A secret history is stacked just a few feet below the modern world. […] Objects preserved in bogs are caught in a kind of living death, and this sense of

153 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 15.
154 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 74.
155 Plays: One, p. 271.
156 By the Bog of Cats..., p. 74.
157 Plays: One, p. 277.
158 Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy, p. 47.
159 Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwrighting, p. 155.
death as part of life has been a theme of traditional Irish culture. It’s there too in the Irish love of the ghost story, in which shades of the dead slip into the living present. The country is full of [...] a past that won’t lie down. [...] What seems to have been buried out of sight is thrust suddenly to the surface like a corpse rearing up from a bog.\textsuperscript{160}

The bogs of the Midlands of Ireland have historically been considered as a carnivalesque space of subversive possibility, and it is appropriate that Carr situates her mature plays in such a site of dissent. Constantly linked to insurrection, concealment and indigenous colonial resistance, Thomas Carlyle, in the nineteenth century, in a typical tirade against the ungovernability and latent instability of Irish bogs, exclaimed, addressing the bog as if a sentient being: ‘Abominable bog, thou shalt cease to be abominable and become subject to man!’\textsuperscript{161} Again, as in Leviticus, we see the word ‘abominable’ arise in relation to intermixing and ‘unfixity’. The bog as a site of marginality and subversive potential has been arbitrarily documented. In 1868, W. Steurt Trench records an historical anecdote where members of an agrarian secret society successfully hid in an adjoining bog and were later discovered with their ‘countenances blackened with bog-mould.’\textsuperscript{162} Here again, as with the Catwoman, there is the connotation of disguise, concealment, performance and even the representation of black-face, and its politics of oppression, in the visible, corporeal marking of the abject figure.

Charles Lever’s 1872 novel \textit{Lord Kilgobbin} is one of the few examples in Irish literature where the midlands landscape of the bog is a central component. In the novel it is depicted as sublime. Lever tells us:

\begin{quote}
The dreary expanse called the ‘Bog of Allen’, which occupies a high table-land in the centre of [Ireland], stretches away for miles - flat, sad-coloured, and monotonous, fissured in every direction by channels of dark-tinted water, in which
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{160} \textit{The Truth about the Irish}, p. 32.
the very fish take the same sad colour. The tract is almost without trace of habitation, save where, at distant intervals, utter destitution has raised a mud-hovel undistinguishable from the hillocks of turf around it... On this border-land between fertility and destitution, and on a tract which had probably once been part of the Bog itself, there stood - there stands still - Kilgobbin Castle.163

It is fascinating that Lever literally uses Kristeva’s own term ‘border-land’ to describe the ‘character’ of the landscape, preceding Kristeva’s own notions of what constitutes the ambivalence of abjection. Chris Morash notes how Lever’s novel ‘moves back and forth between a world of abundance and a world of destitution, and so it is to the ‘border-land’, which shares the dual perspectives of ‘abundance’ and ‘destitution’ that one must look for the space staked out by the novel as a whole.’164

Central to an understanding of Carr’s plays are the ways in which borderlands, and the dialects between confinement and agency, and the inside and outside, are negotiated by the central characters. In his discussion of the theatre of Frank McGuinness, Jordan writes: ‘The connections between fantasy, borderlands and confinement are crucial. […] It is this borderland consciousness, this remote zone into which McGuinness leads his audience and his characters, that gives his plays their poetic and confrontational quality.’165 The same may be said of Carr’s plays, where ‘place’ and ‘no-place’, and ‘in-between place’, become symbiotic realms of exploration, ontological refuge and possibility for the protagonists. Olwen Fouéré notes: ‘If imagination is a country, then Marina’s maps bring me to a stretch of land and water that I recognise. The interior landscape of the bog, the colours of rage and passionate love. This place is dark, deep and conversant with a world at its most reduced and primal, a place of great anguish and great exultation: twin truths that rise and fall with parallel intensity.’166 By the Bog of Cats... is a drama of border-landers set on a shifting landscape of symbolic grotesque otherness. On

165 The Feast of Famine, p. viii.
this *in-between,* or *mid-*land of conflicting political potential, it is possible that, according
to Kristeva ‘...those fluid demarcations of yet unstable territories where an “I” that is
taking shape, is ceaselessly straying.’ Carr’s bog is a land-mass of grotesque
corporeality which, like Bakhtin’s Kerch terracotta figurines, is ‘the epitome of incompleteness [and] is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, [and] transgresses its own limits.’

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166 Fouéré, Olwen, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr:* ‘...before rules was made.’
167 *The Powers of Horror,* p. 11.
168 *Rabelais and his World,* pp. 25-6.
Conclusion
This thesis on the theatre of contemporary Irish dramatist Marina Carr seeks to identify the ways in which the plays from 1989 – 1998 renegotiate female identity, Irish landscape and language through imaginative reconfigurations of corporeality, space and theatrical form. Throughout the course of this dissertation I have identified the ways in which the non-realist structures of the plays are organically reflective of Carr’s recalcitrance to monologic bourgeois patriarchal ideology in an Irish cultural context.

Writing about ‘Irish theatre’ provokes the deceptively challenging question: ‘What is Ireland?’ Socially, culturally and politically, ‘Ireland’ has signified many things to many people throughout its history, and continues to do so. Colin Graham writes: ‘Ireland becomes a plenitude of images, replicating itself for continual consumption and at times reaching an oversatiation. It is here that the ‘Ireland’ which is excessive topples into an Ireland of ceaseless reproduction and commodification.’ As noted in the introduction, Ireland has evolved rapidly over the past thirty years, most notably in its recent economic affluence, and in the radical demise of the once hegemonic discourses of church and state. The notion of loss is central to Marina Carr’s theatre, and each one of the narratives powerfully reveals the rupture or increasing void created by the diminished authorities in this country. While Carr’s dramas may resist the urban, the technological and the global in favour of the remote, the rural, the local and the mythic, I argue that her theatre is fundamentally recalcitrant to traditional representations of ‘Irishness’, most specifically in terms of landscape/place, language, the family and the Irish woman/mother figure.

In “Unhomely Stages: Women Taking (a) Place in Irish Theatre”, McMullan writes:

Home’ in Irish theatre never seems to be a place, but a past memory or a future possibility. [In contemporary theatrical narratives] the traumas of personal and national history have ruptured any secure sense of home as a place of stability, refuge or restoration. Women, in their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers, are central to the concept of home. In Irish iconography, women have

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1 Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture, p. 2.
been associated both with the homeland, as Mother Ireland, and with the domestic space, particularly the kitchen.²

At the beginning of the twenty first century, Carr’s is a pivotal voice due to the ways in which she re-presents sexual and cultural politics from the female perspective, decentring masculinist and nationalist preoccupations in Irish drama. As Anthony Roche provocatively asserted in 1997: ‘With the change of Friel, Murphy and others to strong female characters, the question must be asked: is this not a move by Irish male playwrights to appropriate and colonise the concerns of women in a feat of expert ventriloquism, a pre-emptive strike against the increasing number of women writing plays and having them staged?’³ In Carr’s plays female subjectivity is afforded agency, transcendence and authority through the protagonists’ tenacious command of narrative, and the ways in which they fluidly move between the realms of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and the ‘fantastic’ and the ‘real’. The female protagonists in the plays from 1994 have access to sites and spaces of imaginative and non-rational ‘otherness’, be it through myth, folktale or communing with the dead, which offer a powerful means by which to contest the ontological immobility of their patriarchal relegation in the limiting roles of daughter, wife and mother.

Marina Carr’s theatre is inscribed within the legacy of canonical Irish playwrights yet offers representations which challenge conventional depictions of identity and culture. Colm Toibin writes: ‘And in the work of Marina Carr, there is an insistence on the old, dark violent and atavistic forces – Cuchulain at home – just as the national narrative was moving towards a version of Ireland as bright and shiny. Thus the Irish dramatic writing at the end of the twentieth century set about destroying and subverting and replacing and indeed recreating national heroics and idealisations in Cathleen Ni Houlihan.⁴

In each of Carr’s plays from 1989 – 1998 there is a link between form and content, where non-realistic strategies of performance emphasise the fallible constructions of the dominant patriarchal codes in the plays. The genre of the Fantastic, which does

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² McMullan, in Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens, p. 72.
³ Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness, p. 286.
⁴ Toibin, in Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens, p. 21.
not invent other worlds but inverts elements of the *known* world, allows for a distance that affords oblique access to, and commentary on, the society and culture in question. By entering spaces outside the frame of the ‘real’, Carr replaces familiarity and comfort with estrangement and unease, where the *unheimlich* allows for a close scrutiny of the ‘homely’, the domestic and the ‘known’. Eamonn Jordan writes: ‘The transgressive and defiant possibilities of fantasy aid in the recognition of hurt and of the forces which shape a personality. Yet all the time fantasy is inventive and subversive without ever being escapist.’ In Carr’s plays, the fantastic, or realms of ‘otherness’, become a space where the claustrophobic and limiting determinacy of the social can be transformed through play.

Each one of the plays, from 1994, is set in Carr’s childhood landscape of the Midlands of Ireland. This space is a border-crossing, a point of transition between East and West. Carr says: ‘It is the place I know. But I haven’t lived there since I was seventeen, so I suppose it has become the Midlands of my imagination. But I do remember the way the people speak, the particular rhythm of English as spoken in the Midlands.’ Carr notes the abstract universality of the landscape: ‘When you are out on the bog, especially where it’s been cut for the turf, you could as easily be on the moon. They are amazing places, especially at night.’ Samuel Beckett is unique in the Irish canon in his consistent refusal to localise his dramas. In *By the Bog of Cats*... Carr’s spare ‘bleak white landscape of ice and snow’ has resonances of ‘A country road. A tree. Evening’ in *Waiting for Godot*. The bog, a place and a no-place, hovering somewhere between the actual and the imaginary, transcends what Beckett viewed as the stifling reductivism of specific geographical allusion in Irish theatre.

Imaginative spaces of the Grotesque, the Classical, the Fantastic, the Gothic, the Absurd and the surreal are central to Carr’s dramas as sites of transformation. Jordan writes: ‘The introduction of darkness, death, the uncanny, anti-repressive and oppositional forces is the hallmark of fantasy [...]. Of the theatre of contemporary playwright Frank McGuinness, Jordan asserts: [McGuinness] engages the awareness of postmodernism, those of simulation, surface, circularity, questioning the

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arrangement between authority and performance. [...] It is in transformation, as it is in celebration, that [he] finds meaning. Indeed, McGuinness and Carr both share a fascination with poetic realms of imaginative otherness, landscapes of memory, ghosts, the past and death, and the ways in which these landscapes are redemptive and transcendent. In the introduction to the first published edition of Carr’s 1996 play Portia Coughlan, in a collection of new plays entitled The Dazzling Dark, McGuinness comments:

I’m writing this introduction as October comes to an end and we’re nearing Hallowe’en [...] a time for wearing masks and remembering the dead, as if by remembering them we resurrect them. And the mask is the outward sign that we are engaging in this ritual communication between the living and the dead [...] Marina Carr is a writer haunted by memories she could not possibly possess, but they seem to possess her.

As I have shown throughout the course of this thesis, the notion of haunting and ghosts is central to Carr’s aesthetic and operates on a number of levels. Carr considers writing to be ‘like free-wheeling; letting things pass through, letting things pass in or out.’ Of ghosts Carr says: ‘I believe in them as physical presences and I also believe in the role they play in dreams. There are certain characters who appear and reappear; it is like another relationship.’ In Waiting for Godot, Beckett wrote about ‘All the dead voices. They make a noise like wings. [...] They all speak together.’ In Irish theatre, the dead are everywhere, whether as ghosts, or as spectres of memory and history, and in Carr’s plays the dead are in a continual dialogue with the living. In the program note for the Abbey Theatre world premiere of Carr’s 2002 drama, Ariel, I comment upon Carr’s representation of ghosts and the past:

The past is never far away in Marina Carr’s plays, its secrets weep and bleed into the present, like wounds refusing to heal. [...] Carr’s plays move fluidly between realism and the now all too easily forgotten realm of the imagination.

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10 The Dazzling Dark; New Irish Plays, p. ix.
[...] the action takes place between the landscapes of the living and the
purgatories of the dead. [...] In this threshold of east and west, the dead
wander freely. [...] Who are these ghosts? Maybe they are not from an
otherworld, but parts of ourselves that refuse to go away. They are our past. If
we ignore them, we do so at our peril for they make us who we are.14

The landscapes of ‘otherness’ and alterity in Carr’s mature works forge another
dialogue with the earlier Irish dramatists. Gregory and Yeats represented the first
ghostly figure in Irish drama with the miraculous transformation of _Cathleen Ni
Houlihan_ into a regal Ireland of youth and liberty. Regarding this ‘shocking and
dramatic and highly charged transformation’, Toibín notes:

[...] stylistically Yeats and Gregory [...] offered [audiences] a powerful
element, which was to maintain its spell for a hundred years. In the significant
work produced in the Irish theatre in the last twenty years of the twentieth
century, the writers have played with the sharply realistic and attempted to
place around it a halo, or a shining from within, using a real voice but allowing
a poetic force to build from within the voice.15

In terms of the lyrical self-referentiality of Irish theatre, Toibín notes: ‘In style and
tone there has been great continuity in the Irish theatre in the twentieth century
[through the] sense of language as mysterious, a sense of speech moving into prayer, a
sense of utterance having at its centre the rhythm and power of song.’16 Carr’s artistic
genealogy within the poetic and linguistic sensibility of Irish drama becomes apparent
in the ways in which her narratives fuse language and dramatic action to, as Toibin
notes in the dramas of Gregory and Yeats,: ‘move the ordinary into the miraculous
[...].’17 Perhaps the most significant link between Carr and Gregory lies in the
playwrights’ compulsion to fuse the mundane with heightened moments of
transcendence, poetry and transformativity. Toibín continues: ‘[...] Irish dramatic
writing at the end of the twentieth century set about destroying, subverting, replacing

14 Sihra, Melissa, “Writing in Blood”, Program Note of _Ariel_, by Marina Carr, premiere production,
Abbey Theatre, Dublin, October 2002.
15 Toibín, in _Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens_, pp. 18-19.
16 Toibín, in _Druids, Dudes and Beauty queens_, p. 19.
17 Toibín, in _Druid, Dudes and Beauty Queens_, p. 19. Toibín notes the movement of the ‘ordinary into
the miraculous’ in plays by Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness, Sebastian Barry, Dermot
Bolger, Paul Mercier and Marina Carr (ps.19-20).
and indeed recreating national heroics and idealisations in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, but also adapted the tension between current speech, poetic rhythms and the possibility of transformation from which the play derived its power." Nowhere is this literary and stylistic adaptation more evident than in the plays of Carr, where the shift from a romantic idealisation of Ireland remains crucial, yet all the while, consciously incorporating the artistic sensibilities and motifs from the very tradition in which it is inscribed.

As I have shown in each chapter of this thesis, for Carr ‘the family is central to the drama.’ Carr says: ‘All of my characters tend to be outsiders.’ In each of the plays from 1989 Carr explores the turbulent dynamics of familial relationships, particularly the role of motherhood. In 1997 Carr notes:

I don’t think the world should assume that we are all natural mothers. And it does. […] The relationship between parent and child is so difficult and so complex. There’s every emotion there. We mostly only acknowledge the good ones. If we were allowed to talk about the other ones, maybe it would alleviate them in some way.

Drawn to the dramatic possibility of the outsider, Carr’s plays from 1994 – 1998 depict female protagonists in contestation with, and resistance to, the worlds that they inhabit. As I have alluded to in the Introduction, in the plays from 1994 – 1998 each one of the female protagonists commits suicide, something for which Carr has been criticised by feminist critics and theatre scholars. Perhaps, as Riana O’Dwyer observes, this is because: ‘the audience and critic have grown accustomed to the male projection of woman, [so] the representation created by a female playwright [has not] not always experienced as authentic.’ In terms of considering female authored representations of woman on stage, O’Dwyer cites Caroline Williams of Glasshouse Theatre Company, who forcibly articulates: ‘One of the difficulties in this area is that we are so used to men’s images of men, and men’s images of women on the stage,'

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118 Toibin, in *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens*, p. 21.
120 Sihra, Unpublished interview with Marina Carr, Dublin, 8 February, 1999.
121 *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwrighting*, p. 150.
that a play written by a woman is regularly criticised or rejected for not complying with these norms.\textsuperscript{23}

In reference to \textit{On Raftery’s Hill}, Claudia W. Harris writes in “Rising Out of the Miasmal Mists: Marina Carr’s Ireland”: ‘Do her depressed characters, often left in degradation and misery, offer audiences a cautionary tale, or do they give audiences an out, a way to distance themselves rather than engage? […] Jill Dolan argues that plays ‘still caught in the representational systems’ to which they refer offer little possibility for radical change; performances can lead to further debasement rather than providing a viable critique of abusive practices.’\textsuperscript{24} Harris is specifically referring to the American reception of the play at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington D.C., during the Irish arts festival: ‘Island: Arts from Ireland’. The issue of reception foregrounds the politics of cultural commodification with regard to the production and reception of Irish theatre abroad. Harris asks: ‘If theatre has traditionally been used to showcase Irish culture, setting up expectations then about the truth of that representation, what view of Ireland did \textit{On Raftery’s Hill} offer Americans attending the play?’\textsuperscript{25} Problematic in this analysis is the notion of ‘truth’ in terms of cultural representation, and the perpetuation of an assumed and ‘knowable’ or universally accepted sense of ‘Irishness’. In \textit{Deconstructing Ireland}, Colin Graham effectively addresses the problematic fetishisation and mythologisation of “Ireland”: ‘[…] in basic terms, Ireland’s dissipation into a plethora of images and its formation of itself as a fantasy island are both aspects of a continually projected utopianism which acts as a bait and as a promise.’\textsuperscript{26}

The notion of artistic and cultural ‘acceptability’ is relevant to the controversial responses to Carr’s dramas, both in Ireland and abroad, where it often seems to be that because Carr is a woman she should not write tragedies, let alone tragedies in which the female protagonists die.\textsuperscript{27} The sense of ethical responsibility imposed upon Carr

\textsuperscript{24} Harris, Claudia, W, “Rising out of the Miasmal Mists: Marina Carr’s Ireland”, in \textit{The Theatre of Marina Carr}: “…before rules was made”.
\textsuperscript{25} Harris, in \textit{The Theatre of Marina Carr}: “…before rules was made”.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Deconstructing Ireland}: Identity, Theory, Culture, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{27} In Carr’s 2002 play \textit{Ariel}, the male protagonist, Fermoy Fitzgerald dies, but this did not become a critical issue in terms of sexual politics and representation in the reception of the piece.
by some female critics, denies the ontological achievement which the characters attain in their explicit expression of discontent and their refusal to ‘bow down.’ Perhaps a more positive and sensitive, if utopian, message would be put forth if the characters each moved on to ostensibly greener pastures, but Carr’s tenacious refusal to romanticise the realities of patriarchal confinement in this country is powerful and opens up a dialogue of recalcitrance to female abjection in Irish culture and history.

Harris asks: ‘Carr brings to light what any culture might want to keep hidden, especially from the neighbours. But what is the possible danger in staging these violent and taboo interactions? Does explicit abuse on stage shock enough to make audiences question the wide-spread practice, or do Carr’s well written, disturbingly funny plays [...] simply make abuse seem a natural and even tolerable part of Irish life?’ Arguably this is for audiences to decide for themselves. However, Harris finally answers her own question, and comes to the conclusion that this thesis presents:

Writers cannot anticipate the possible responses to their work without compromising creativity; they write from their own experiences – experiences which may or may not conflict with prevailing views. Carr must, in the end, be true to the intense hauntings, the ‘wrestling’ with ‘nocturnal traffic’ which drives her work. Theatre never simply mirrors life but is an intensification of life. The dark demons Carr is exorcising are rooted in abusive relationships from which no one would argue Ireland is immune.

In response to Carr’s treatment of death in the trilogy, I have written in “Reflections Across Water: New Stages of Performing Carr”: ‘In order to shift the emphasis from death as purely negative closure, it needs to be considered in terms of performance. Death on stage does not indicate finality, but movement; it is a poetic drive to excavate what it means to live.’ Here I argue that Carr’s plays cannot offer transformative possibility if they are reduced to the literal and where ‘death is

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24 Harris, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.
29 Harris, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.
30 Sihra, Melissa, “Reflections Across Water: New Stages of Performing Carr”, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.

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regarded in terms of plot rather than poetics. In terms of the explicit on-stage representation of death in her plays Carr says: 'Heartbreak shouldn’t kill you. But we are talking about theatre. We’re talking about elevated. [...] Everything lives more intensely on the stage. It cannot be banal. [...] It’s about the journey, rather than the event.' In a recent interview Carr expands on this notion:

Death is just a moment, like two seconds. It is almost like the starting block of the race... The fact that we are dying is probably the only significant thing about us. And how we live and how we die. [...] I love reading biography because I love reading about how people die. I think it says everything about how they have lived.

Carr’s plays inhabit a transitional liminal space between spiritual and ontological realms of life and death. In the same essay, I write: ‘Seen as such, Carr’s treatment of death in her work from 1994 – 1998, can be regarded other than literally. Samuel Beckett’s aesthetic similarly contemplates the journey towards death (as the dominating impulse from the moment of birth), yet it centres around the act of being, and of how each of us negotiates the journey that is life.' It is perhaps illuminating to note that while Carr’s heightened and excessive theatrical explorations of death, loss and abjection are something for which she has been continually criticised, her representation of these immense themes is what has confirmed her central position in contemporary Irish theatre. On this point, O’Dwyer cites Garry Hynes, in 1995, ‘who has been centrally involved in the development of scripts by women both in the Druid Theatre in Galway and during her tenure as the Artistic Director in the Abbey Theatre [and who identified] some limitations in the scripts that she has read: “I just sometimes long for a woman to write, please, on a broader, more public, more epic scale.” In terms of Carr’s uncompromising and, at times, brutal dramaturgic confrontations, McGuinness observes in the closing moments of an interview in Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners: ‘Seeing the development of

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31 Sihra, in, The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.
33 Marina Carr in Conversation with Melissa Sihra, in Theatre Talk, p. 56.
34 Sihra, in The Theatre of Marina Carr: “...before rules was made”.
Marina Carr – that has been, I think, the development of a major new voice, a fearless voice, a woman who will take on enormous challenges. I think, when there’s that strength, I think [Irish theatre] is in pretty good shape.36

The positive critical profile and international production of Carr’s plays is increasing rapidly. In 2001, there were three major productions of her plays in the United States, which I worked on as Dramaturg: Portia Coughlan was produced in March by the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre Company, By the Bog of Cats... had its U.S premiere in Chicago in May with Irish Repertory, and was produced again in September by San José Repertory Theatre with Academy Award winning actor Holly Hunter in the lead role. In the academic field, Carr’s plays are achieving an increasing presence on literature and drama courses, and also at academic conferences in the major universities across the United States.37 November saw the first American publication of By the Bog of Cats..., by Syracuse University Press in New York, and her plays from 1994 are now published by the American Dramatists’ Playwrighting Service. In January - May 2003, Carr held the prestigious Heimbold Chair in Irish Studies at the University of Villanova, Philadelphia.

In terms of the international appeal of Carr’s work, I will now briefly consider some issues of representation and reception, and the ways in which non-Irish productions of Carr’s plays articulate and explore, perpetuate and contest, received notions of ‘Irishness’. The interaction between place, character and narrative in Carr’s plays, where the poetically charged landscape becomes the site of infanticide, incest, domestic violence, rape, prostitution, infidelity, violation and suicide, offers depictions of Ireland less concerned with filtering the past through a romantic lens than reflecting images as current, dangerous and ceaseless as the Belmont River. In tracing the appeal of Carr’s work for American practitioners, I have noted some common tendencies. The lyrical language and strength of characterisation that pervades the work accounts hugely for its appeal. In the Chicago Sun-Times review of Irish Repertory’s production of By the Bog of Cats..., critic Hedy Weiss notes: ‘One

37 Universities such as Harvard, Princeton, New York University, Boston University, the University of California, Berkeley, Villanova University, the University of Pittsburgh, the Central University of New York, to name a few.

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sure sign that you are in the presence of a gifted playwright in that you can laugh wildly one minute and cry in horror the next [...] the glue is Carr’s blood-rich language and her characters’ absolute fierceness and fearlessness.\textsuperscript{38} In a post-show discussion in San José, California, Carr was asked by an audience member what did she think was the appeal of Irish drama in the United States. In response, Carr commented on the effects of globalisation: ‘With cities now becoming increasingly alike – perhaps it is because [Irish theatre] is mainly rural, that it is ten years behind, perhaps that is the key. It seems that there is a yearning in people for when things were less evolved, or rawer, in terms of landscape, passions and emotions.'\textsuperscript{39}

Artistic Director of San José Repertory Theatre, Timothy Near, noted the ‘theatricality, rich poetic scope and vast landscape of By the Bog of Cats...’ after staging a reading of the play at the Magic Theatre’s Festival of Irish Women Playwrights in San Francisco a couple of years ago.\textsuperscript{40} Again the mythic context was foregrounded by Holly Hunter who referred to Carr as ‘a gifted poet [...] To find a play like this is rare, no one has this kind of powerful voice. You have to go back to the classics.'\textsuperscript{41} Andrew Paul, Artistic Director of the Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre, who produced Portia Coughlan, notes: ‘It took me several years to develop the company to the degree that I could take risks with this type of raw drama. I think the play will challenge Pittsburgh audiences, and that is a good thing.'\textsuperscript{42} Paul, who had seen On Raftery’s Hill in Washington the previous year, noted how ‘Its disturbing tone clearly unsettled the audience.’ He went on to say, ‘I think Carr’s voice is unique, and will take more time to establish itself among American theatre-goers. Her vision of Ireland is certainly not one the Irish Americans want to see and embrace. We seem to prefer Frank McCourt.’\textsuperscript{43} Significantly, most of Carr’s plays have premiered at the Abbey, Peacock and Gate Theatres in Dublin. Such positioning and artistic association is attractive to international practitioners and audiences. The Abbey and Gate Theatres have instant name-recognition in the United States which offer

\textsuperscript{39} Carr, Marina, By the Bog of Cats... post-show discussion, San Jose Repertory Theatre, California, September, 7, 2001.
\textsuperscript{40} Sihra, Melissa, Unpublished interview with Marina Carr and Timothy Near, Dublin, 11 April, 2001.
\textsuperscript{41} Hunter, Holly, in The San Francisco Chronicle, 29 August, 2001.
\textsuperscript{42} E-mail correspondence between Andrew Paul and Melissa Sihra, 22 January, 2001.
\textsuperscript{43} E-mail correspondence between Andrew Paul and Melissa Sihra, 22 January, 2001.
‘authenticity’ to the marketing project abroad in offering a product that can be sold as the ‘best of contemporary Irish theatre’.

The mixed audience response to the Pittsburgh Portia Coughlan is revealing. In a post-show discussion with Andrew Paul, a few notable issues came to light. He noted that audiences [had] some difficulty with the structure of the play, and with the relentless intensity of the performance. Several patrons commented on their inability to connect or empathise with the characters.44 During the performances that I attended, audience members laughed uncomfortably at swear words and, in particular, at the image of Portia and Gabriel making love in the womb. In an audience survey, one patron commented: ‘Very positively disgusting. The Irish may drink and swear and fight but surely not as they were portrayed in the play (if that’s what you call it). My kind of Irish are not interested in such trash.’

While positively received by the critics, the reviews tended to cast the writing in a ‘rather gloomy, grim, light.’46 Chief critic of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Christopher Rawson, who headed his notice “Portia is Drenched in Grim Truths”, commented: ‘Carr reminds me of Beckett – a great desolation is painfully and poetically probed without hope of deep change.’47 Interestingly, it seems that the word ‘grim’ is a death-knell to shows in the United States. Paul feels that the tone of the critical response was a ‘deterrent to the relatively conservative Pittsburgh casual arts consumer.’ He went on to say, ‘Comedies and titles with instant name-recognition always perform better at the box-office.’ He saw the humour inherent in the writing emerge as the run progressed, until later audience members described the play as ‘hilarious’. In considering the reception of Portia Coughlan, it seems that the lyrical quality of the writing, the women’s roles and the ebullient moments of humour are what most resonated with the audience, while the structure, with Portia’s death revealed in the middle, and the seeming lack of possibility of hope for change or transformation (and in the case of this production, the fact that there was no interval), the subject-matter of incestuous relations and abundance of alcohol and cursing, are what prevented audiences from relating fully to the work.

44 E-mail correspondence between Andrew Paul and Melissa Sihra, 10 April, 2001.
In terms of the reception of Carr's plays in the United States, I note a tension between what critics and audiences have praised as being, on one hand, Carr's 'theatrical skill' with, on the other, the content of the plots, which have often alienated, and in some cases, revolted, audience members, who have displayed difficulty in reconciling the lyrical elements of the plays with the uncompromising nature of the story-lines. These tensions became apparent with *Portia Coughlan* and *On Raftery's Hill*, where audience reception proved extremely divided. This begs the question as to whether on-stage infanticide, suicide and attempted rape (as represented in *By the Bog of Cats*...), are more palatable when filtered through a Euripidean lens, than off-stage, 'un-Classically' mediated suicide, in the case of *Portia Coughlan*. While *By the Bog of Cats*... is considered 'fearless', 'sweepingly theatrical' and 'courageous', *Portia* is viewed as 'grim, unrelenting, 'hopeless, and 'despairing'.

Thus it would appear that *By the Bog of Cats*..., which is loosely based on Euripides' *Medea*, seems to be a less controversial depiction of contemporary Ireland than *On Raftery's Hill*, or *Portia Coughlan*, due to the 'mythic distance' which is afforded to it. A contemporary 'version of *Medea*' culturally contextualises, and in a sense, validates, the narrative content of infanticide, on-stage suicide, attempted rape and incest contained in *By the Bog of Cats*.... While many audience members left at the interval, or indeed walked out, of *On Raftery's Hill* when it played in Washington, the same action of attempted rape, which occurred in both U.S. productions of *By the Bog of Cats*... (with Xavier physically forcing himself upon an incapacitated Hester in Act Three, graphically simulating an act of sexual violation), did not cause the same audience reaction.

Critics of both U.S. productions of *By the Bog of Cats*... noted the mythic allusion to *Medea*, and the positioning of Irish Travellers, as a means of contextualising Hester's social abjection as outsider and exile. *Chicago Tribune* Chief Critic Richard Christiansen commented on 'the stinging force of the dramas many furious confrontations'\(^{48}\), while Weiss wrote: 'Shakespeare was a master at orchestrating [...] volatile moods. The young Irish dramatist Marina Carr clearly shares his gift.'\(^{49}\) West Coast critics commented repeatedly on the desirability of the role of Hester: 'It is a

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role that every great actress would love to obtain', noted Richard Connema.\textsuperscript{50}

Similarly, with the other productions, the uncompromising scale of the narrative was praised: ‘Carr has emerged quietly as one of Ireland’s finest on the strength of her ability to draw characters and situations on an operatic scale.'\textsuperscript{51}

**Summary:**

In Chapter One of this thesis, “Performing Culture: Sex, Selfhood and the Body”, I have critiqued and politicised Carr’s representation of corporeality and subjectivity within the frame of every day social codes and practices. In this study of *Low In The Dark*, I identify moments and sites of excess which re-configure static and essentialist notions of sexuality, subjectivity and the body, and consider the political significance of performativity in relation to Carr’s representation. In this chapter I have historicised the notion of the body, and considered it in terms of its transitional social and political significations. As a means of identifying the ways in which *Low In The Dark* critiques dominant discourses, I contextualise the structure and form of the play in relation to Esslin’s notion of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, highlighting the ways in which the non-realist strategies of performance emphasise the fallibility and constructed nature of the dominant social codes, identities and ideologies presented in the narratives.

Chapter Two, “Writing on Water: Reflections of Womanhood in *The Mai*”, considers Carr’s representation of the female protagonists and the ways in which ontology may be linked to the theatrical *mise en scene*. Throughout the chapter I address the central thematic concerns of the play, which I identify as relating to history, memory and subjectivity. In considering Carr’s dramaturgical structure I identify the way it is reflective of the content of the drama, where memory and the past continually inform the present, as Carr employs flash-backs and an on-stage narrator. I contextualise the play in terms of the transitional socio-historical position of women in this country and consider the ways in which Carr imaginatively frames the experience of woman in the narrative.


Carr’s plays repeatedly display conflictual sites of discourse, which I have related to the central motif of water, and the politics of the fluid. In each of the plays from 1994 – 1998 I argue that the central motif of water may be read as a political trope of excess, which can be regarded as a depotentialising force to the solid, the unified and the fixed social structures and identities in the dramas. In looking at the politics of the fluid, I apply Irigarayan notions of “The Mechanics of Fluids”. In so doing I have displayed the dialectical tensions between solid and fluid and inner and outer in the plays, identifying where these binaries are made permeable and leaky. In terms of my critical methodology, I have applied Bakhtinian and post-Bakhtinian theories of the grotesque body to each of the plays, and considered the ways in which this relates to notions of ‘excess’ and the transformative potential of hybridisation, intermixing and ‘overflow’.

In Chapter Three, “Spectral Voices: Self and Other-ness in Portia Coughlan”, I consider, once again, Carr’s representation of fantastic spaces, and corporealities of alterity. My reading of Portia Coughlan looks at the ways in which Carr’s dramas present contrasting spatio-temporal and ontological realms which renegotiate fixed notions of place, language and the body. Again, the image of water is central to this drama, and is politicised in the chapter. I argue that the central image of the Belmont River is reflective of the dialectics of containment and overflow in the play, particularly in relation to Portia’s confinement within masculine discourses of authority. Again my analysis of the structure of the play identifies the ways in which Carr’s dramaturgy operates to contest hegemonic rationalisations of identity, language and the body, and the ways in which Carr’s representation of landscape is reflective of the unique dialect rhythms of the play.

In the final chapter of this thesis, “Between Purity and Filth: Identity and Abjection in By the Bog of Cats...”, I consider the cultural politics of exclusion, hegemony and legitimacy. In applying Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, I have contextualised the politics of endogamy in the rural Irish setting that Carr represents. Linking back to chapter one, I politicise the social body, and the notion of borders, boundaries and the maintenance of stable bourgeois identity. This chapter develops my exploration of the position of woman in Ireland within a socio-political context, tracing woman’s transition from object to subject in relation to property law, marriage and inheritance
rights. This drama is loosely based on Euripides’ tragedy *Medea*, and in the light of this, I consider the dialectics of containment and agency in Carr’s representation of woman in both classical Greek, and Irish historical contexts.

In *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, Colin Graham asks the vital question: ‘What and who is meant by Irish? What is its/their/our literature?’ In considering the ways in which Carr represents landscapes of contemporary Irish identity, the ‘chasmic gaps’ of authority in the late twentieth century are reflected and interrogated in her narratives. In each of the chapters I have presented a critique of Carr’s dramaturgical strategies and the ways in which they operate to contest traditional patriarchal authorities in an Irish social context. Throughout the thesis I make links between the central images in the plays, Carr’s unique use of language, and the ontological representation of the central female protagonists. In each of the chapters I consider Carr’s ambivalent negotiation of motherhood and the family. Central to this thesis is the way in which Carr fluidly weaves evocative representations of landscape, voices and corporealities of excess that are constantly reflecting one another as they poetically renegotiate ‘the borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual static presentation of reality [so that] the inner movement of being itself is expressed in the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleted character of being.’

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52 *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, p. 33.
54 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 32.
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Mac Intyre, Tom, Program Note of Ullaloo, Peacock Theatre, March 1991.

Unpublished Texts:

Carr, Marina, Ullaloo play-script.

Appendix
Plays: Selected Production History

Ullaloo, Peacock Theatre, Dublin, 25 March 1991:
Tilly: Olwen Fouere
Tomred: Mark Lambert

Director: David Byrne
Design: Bronwen Casson
Lighting: Rupert Murray
Music: Gerard Grenell, Yonatan Malin, Christopher Batten
Sound: David O'Brien
Stage Manager: John Kells

Low In The Dark, Crooked Sixpence Theatre Company, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 24 October 1989:
Curtains: Brid Mhic Fhearai
Bender: Joan Brosnan Walshe
Binder: Sarahjane Scaife
Baxter: Peter Holmes
Bone: Dermod Moore

Director: Philip Hardy
Designer: Liz Cullinane
Costumes: Leonor McDonagh
Lighting: Brian O'Rourke
Music: Bunnan Beo Ensemble
Stage Manager: Lorraine Whyte

The Mai, Peacock Theatre, 5 October 1994:
The Mai: Olwen Fouere
Millie: Dearbhle Crotty
Robert: Owen Roe
Connie: Michele Forbes
Grandma Fraochlan: Joan O’Hara
Beck: Brid Ni Neachtain
Agnes: Maire Hastings
Julie: Maire Hastings
Cellist: John O'Kane

Director: Brian Brady
Designer: Kathy Strachan
Lighting: Aedin Cosgrove
Design Co-ordinator: Karen Wevears
Music: Micheal O'Suilleabhain
Stage Director: Collette Morris

*Portia Coughlan, Peacock Theatre, 27 March 1996:*

Portia Coughlan: Dearbhle Crotty
Raphael Coughlan: Sean Rocks
Maggie May Doorley: Marion O'Dwyer
Senchil Doorley: Des Keogh
Damus Halion: Don Wycherley
Stacia Doyle: Bronagh Gallagher
Fintan Goolan: Charlie Bonner
Marianne Scully: Stella McCusker
Blaize Scully: Pauline Flanagan
Sly Scully: Tom Hickey
Gabriel Scully: Michael Boylan/Peter Charlesworth Kelly

Director: Garry Hynes
Designer: Kandis Cook
Lighting Designer: Jim Simmons
Music: Paddy Cunneen
Stage Director: Collette Morris

*By the Bog of Cats..., Abbey Theatre, 7 October 1998:*

Hester Swane: Olwen Fouere
Josie Kilbride: Siobhan Cullen/Kerry O’Sullivan
Carthage Kilbride: Conor MacDermottroe
Monica Murray: Pat Leavy
Mrs. Kilbride: Pauline Flanagan
Xavier Cassidy: Tom Hickey
Caroline Cassidy: Fionnuala Murphy
Catwoman: Joan O'Hara
Ghost Fancier: Pat Kinevane
Ghost of Joseph Swane: Ronan Leahy
Young Dunne/Waiter: Conan Sweeney
Father Willow: Eamon Kelly
Waiters: Gavin Cleland, Kieran Grimes

Director: Patrick Mason
Designer: Monica Frawley
Lighting: Nick Chelton
Stage Director: Finola Eustace
ASM: Stephen Dempsey

On Raftery’s Hill, Druid/Royal Court, Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 9 May 2000:
Sorrel Raftery: Mary Murray
Ded Raftery: Michael Tierney
Dinah Raftery: Cara Kelly
Shalome Raftery: Valerie Lilley
Red Raftery: Tom Hickey
Isaac Dunn: Kieran Ahern
Dara Mood: Keith McErlean

Director: Garry Hynes
Setting Design: Tony Walton
Costume Design: Monica Frawley
Lighting Design: Richard Pilbrow
Composer: Paddy Cunneen
Sound Design: Rich Walshe
Ariel, Abbey Theatre, 2 October 2002:
Fermoy Fitzgerald: Mark Lambert
Frances Fitzgerald: Ingrid Craigie
Ariel Fitzgerald: Elske Rahill
Elaine Fitzgerald: Eileen Walsh
Stephen Fitzgerald: Dylan Tighe
Boniface: Barry McGovern
Sarah: Joan O’Hara
Hannafin: Des Cave
Verona: Caitriona Ni Mhurchu
Young Stephen: Paul McGovern/Shane Murray Corcoran
Young Elaine: Lydia Rahill, Siobhan Cullen
Cameramen: Michael McCabe, Pepe Roche

Director: Conall Morrison
Set Designer: Frank Conway
Costume Designer: Joan O’Cleary
Lighting Designer: Rupert Murray
Assistant Director: Thomas Conway
Fight Director: Renny Krupinski
Sound: Cormac Carroll
Stage Director: Audrey Hession
Production Consultant: Melissa Sihra
Dramaturg: Jocelyn Clarke

Meat and Salt, Peacock Theatre, 22 January 2003:
Big Daddy: Andrew Bennet
Big Daughter: Caroline Lynch
Middle Daughter: Emma Colohan
Little Daughter: Ruth Negga
The Moon: Caroline Lynch
The Mother: Emma Colohan
The Wolf Prince: Matthew Dunphy
The Young King: Matthew Dunphy
Director: Andrea Ainsworth
Set & Costume: Carol Betera
Lighting Designer: Tony Wakefield
Movement Director: Andy Crook
Composer: Paul keenan
Cellist: Vyvinne Long
Sound: Eddie Breslin
Stage Director: John Stapleton
Assistant Stage Manager: Pamela McQueen
Dramaturg: Jocelyn Clarke

Selected American Productions:

Portia Coughlan, Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre Company, Eddie Theatre, Pittsburgh, 22 March 2001:
Portia Coughlan: Derdriu Ring
Gabriel Scully: Michael Karas
Raphael Coughlan: Douglas Rees
Marianne Scully: Susan McGregor-Laine
Sly Scully: Alex Coleman
Maggie May Doorley: Kate Young
Senchil Doorley: E. Bruce Hill
Blaize Scully: Ginger Lawrence
Stacia Doyle: Catherine Moore
Damus Halion: Christian Rummel
Fintan Goolan: John Yost

Director: Timothy Douglas
Production Stage Manager: Kelly Yann
Scenic Designer: David Maslow
Dramaturg: Melissa Sihra
Costume Designer: Mindy Miller
ASM: Jessie Ksanznak

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Lighting Designer: Matthew J. Kopans
Sound Designer: Jennifer Fritsch

By the Bog of Cats..., Irish Repertory of Chicago, Victory Gardens Theatre,
Chicago, 31 May 2001:
Hester Swane: Tracy Michelle Arnold
Ghost Fancier: Ed Zeltner
Monica Murray: Marilynn Bogetich
Josie Kilbride: Susan Wiltrakis
Catwoman: Mary Ann Thebus
Elsie Kilbride: Caitlin Hart
Carthage Kilbride: Mark L. Montgomery
Caroline Cassidy: Amanda Archilla
Xavier Cassidy: David Darlow
Young Dunne: Geoff Rice
Joseph Swane: Christopher Grobe
Father Willow: Brendan Gregg

Director: Kay Martinovich
Set Design: Michelle Habek
Dramaturg: Melissa Sihra
Lighting Design: Jaymi Lee Smith
Costume Design: Lisa Lewandowski
Sound Design: Lindsay Jones
Stage Manager: Melissa Renee Miller
Music: Liz Carroll

By the Bog of Cats..., San Jose Repertory Theatre, San Jose, California, 14
September 2001:
Hester Swane: Holly Hunter
Ghost Fancier: James Carpenter
Monica Murray: Wanda McCaddon
Josie Kilbride: Jillian Lee Wheeler
Mrs. Kilbride: Carol Mayo Jenkins
Catwoman: Joan MacIntosh  
Carthage Kilbride: Gordon McDonald  
Caroline Cassidy: Gretchen Cleevely  
Xavier Cassidy: J.G. Hertzler  
Young Dunne/Waiter: Alex Moggridge  
Ghost of Joseph Swane: Matt Huffman  
Father Willow: Stuart Rudin  
Voice of Josie Swane: Susan McKeown

Director: Timothy Near  
Set and Costume Design: Joe Vanek  
Assistant Lighting Design: Allison Brooker  
Sound Design: Jeff Mockus  
Music: Lunasa, Susan McKeown  
Dramaturg: Melissa Sihra  
Stage Manager: Jenny R. Friend