‘Not so much ‘after landscape’ as ‘before landscape’’:

Figurative Experimentation in the Works of Claudia Rankine and Mary McIntyre

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Emily Holt
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1 Griselda Pollock, ‘Back to Africa: from Natal to natal in the locations of memory,’ p. 53.
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SUMMARY

This thesis explores the place of the lyric self in the poetry of American poet Claudia Rankine and the place of the figure in the visual work of Northern Irish artist Mary McIntyre. Applying elements of formal critique, psychoanalytic criticism, and visual theory, I examine their drive toward formal experimentation and the development of maximalist and minimalist aesthetics. In the introduction, I explore the history of figurative representation in prose, poetry, and visual art, with a particular emphasis on photography’s relationship to realistic aesthetics. I consider the problems of a comparative method, given historical and contemporary analogies drawn between African American culture and Northern Irish culture. I examine prevailing critical approaches to the influence of identity and trauma in works of art. I then lay out the critical frameworks I will adopt—the feminist and psychoanalytic approach of painter and critic Bracha L. Ettinger and visual theorist Griselda Pollock; the ‘situated formalism’ of Anthony Reed, a critic who examines the tradition of black experimental poetry in the United States; and the understanding of representation outlined by feminist critic Susanne Kappeler. This approach bears in mind the influence of social context on the making of a work of art but attends primarily to formal choices and enacts close readings with the view that content and form are inherently interconnected.

In chapter one, I locate Claudia Rankine’s third collection, *PLOT* (2001), in relation to her other poetic works, and trace the central concerns of the collection—the place of the self, maternity, and the ethics of visual representation—through essays written in dialogue with contemporary social issues. I then focus on *PLOT*’s dialogue, with the works and life of Virginia Woolf, ultimately arguing that conceptual engagement with
Woolf is vital to the formal innovation of the text. This innovation exemplifies fractal poetics, a form of experimentation that challenges prevailing conceptions of the place of the visual in poetry.

In chapter two, I consider the increasingly minimalistic and figure-less images of Mary McIntyre through her selected works included in the text, *A Contemporary Sublime* (2013) and the installation ‘The Path to the Distribution Point of Light’ (2015). Departing from the dominant critical modes often applied to post-Agreement photography in Northern Ireland, modes which prioritize activist work and emphasize the role of repression in their psychoanalytic critique, I consider McIntyre’s work in light of Ettinger’s matrixial theory. I also explore her engagement with European landscape painting and the plays of Samuel Beckett, incorporating an author interview with McIntyre to highlight the ways in which critical approaches have been insufficient to understanding what is innovative in her work.

In the conclusion, I return to the value of juxtaposing such diverse, distinct artworks, ultimately arguing that both artists work from and toward a time in which formal experimentation and a rigorous attention to the ethics of representation enable greater freedom in representing the self and the figure in verbal and visual media.
I am immensely grateful to Rosie Lavan, PhD for her critical acumen, keen attention to detail, and gracious support throughout the year; Philip Coleman, PhD for his leadership and oversight of the program; and Mary McIntyre, for her willingness to discuss her artistic practice with me. I would also like to thank Claire Walsh, Assistant Curator, Collections: Care & Access, Irish Museum of Modern Art, for discussing the acquisition and installation of ‘The Path to the Distribution Point of Light,’ and Lorraine Orr, Private Hires and Events Manager at the Queens Film Theatre in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for enabling access to view Donovan Wylie’s ‘In the Name of God’ through the Northern Irish Film Archive. This work would not be possible with them, or without the support and sacrifices of family and friends who offered perspective and critical feedback, particularly Grace Mahoney and Braden Van Dragt.
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And behind him lie ruined houses and dead bodies—men, women, and children. But we have not laid that picture before you in order to excite once more the sterile emotion of hate. On the contrary it is in order to release other emotions such as the human figure, even thus crudely in a coloured photograph, arouses in us who are human beings. For it suggests a connection and for us a very important connection. It suggests that the public and private worlds are inseparably connected; that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other. But the human figure even in a photograph suggests other and more complex emotions. It suggests that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure. It suggests that we are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that figure. A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realize that unity the dead bodies, the ruined houses prove.

—Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 1938

There is no innovating loss.

—Claudia Rankine, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, 2004

In 2013, visual theorist Griselda Pollock asserted that we live in a post-traumatic era (*After-affects 5*). Writing of the ruined houses and the dead bodies left in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, Virginia Woolf was faced with an essential aesthetic concern of modernity—the ethics of representing the human form in the midst of widespread destruction. It is, Pollock writes, an era in which ‘‘we’ are the late-coming witnesses to events that are not our own,’ events of a severity that troubles existing modes of understanding and representation (Pollock, *After-affects 5-6*). Technological warfare, colonial and imperial racism, and racially targeted genocide fractured modernity’s belief that history was a rational movement toward human betterment (Pollock, *After-affects xxix*). Historical trauma thus ruptured the classical tradition of figurative representation, inherently altering ‘the real status of the body and its image’ (Pollock, *After-affects xxviii*). However, the legacy of such grappling, or modernism’s ‘specific
revelation of the potency of form, materiality, and process,’ has enabled artists today to use diverse media and technology to ‘transmit and transform’ trauma and its after-affects in new and potent ways (Pollock, After-affects xxviii). Because the mind and body register, rather than experience, trauma, the memory of the wounding can become a ‘perpetual troping’ by the split or dissociated psyche; any direct description or model of trauma thus risks being merely figurative (Hartman 1). While figurative representation can appear ill suited to a post-traumatic era, the total erasure of the human body from art would enact its own violence. At a time in which, as Claudia Rankine implies in the second epigraph, there is nothing new about loss, social media, mass surveillance, and artificial intelligence can tempt viewers and readers into a dissociative, perpetual troping of their own and the other’s pain. Yet as Woolf writes, the figure can also serve as a point of connection, a pathway to association, rather than dissociation.

The photographic image is uniquely implicated in the issue of figurative representation, where representation is understood as the act of spacing and temporalizing reality (Pollock, After-affects 3). From Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer to Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, theorists of photography have associated the medium with the limits and extremes of human experience—death and loss. Though a lesser recognized contributor to visual and photographic theory, Woolf, too, explored the associations between human suffering and an instrument so exacting in its ability to transmit traces of reality. Unlike painting, which as Barthes argues can feign reality without having seen it, the photographic image retains a trace of the actual (Camera 76). Bearing the time-stamp of an intimate reaction between the human body and an apparatus, photographic images—or what Vilém Flusser terms ‘technical
images’—are ontologically different than traditional images (14). The photographic image calls the viewer to consider the existential questions that arise when faced with a dead body. Considering this moment of encounter, Elizabeth Bronfen questions how we, as spectators, influence this moment of witnessing. ‘Does articulating death always mean turning it into a meaningful event, into a narrative moment?’ she asks. ‘How is the meaning of the represented death process as a sequence of events contingent on the discursive position of its spectators?’ (40). As Bronfen recognizes, our desire as spectators for narrative wholeness or meaning can erase the inherently fragmented or lyrical reality of loss. The encounter with the photographic image and the encounter with death and loss disrupt expectations of narrative consequence and time.

Experimental photographs, or works which stretch the boundaries of the image, therefore challenge the maker and viewer’s expectations of reality and time. Challenging Sontag’s claim that only that which narrates can make us understand, Pollock argues that the image’s mnemonic or associative status enables the transmission of the originary energy of the moment of its creation, that moment of subjective intensity and affective encounter (Photography 23; After-affects xxviii). Through its ‘iconic afterliving,’ the image can imbue other cultural moments and times in need of this charge (Pollock, After-affects xxviii). The image thus stands as a primary entry point into a re-envisioning and re-working of our historically troubled relationship to figurative representation.

1 Whereas traditional images are ‘first order’ abstractions of the concrete world, technical images rely on an apparatus abstracted and created from texts—the textual history of physics, science, and art history—which in turn abstract from first order images (Flusser 14). Made by a series of interactions between light and optical, mechanical, and chemical devices, technical images appear, however, not as symbols to be decoded but, as symptoms of the world (Flusser 15).

2 Pollock draws on Aby Warburg’s (1866-1929) analysis of the role of time in the image, including his articulation of Nachleben—often translated as ‘persistence’ or ‘survival,’ but in Pollock’s language meaning ‘after-life’ or ‘remaining lively after’ (After-affects xxviii). Because of the rupture of ‘Modernity,’ Pollock does not seek to identify or reclaim persisting tropes or pathos formulae (the formulation for affect) as Warburg did (xxviii).
For Claudia Rankine and Mary McIntyre, two contemporary experimental artists working in different national and social contexts, the desire for an ethical response to figurative representation is foundational to the re-envisioning of form in their respective media. Rankine is a New York-based artist whose career spans more than thirty years and weaves between genres; working primarily in poetry and prose, she also incorporates images into her text and has collaborated with other artists to create videos and photo-essays. McIntyre is based in Northern Ireland and has worked primarily in photography for the last thirty years. At first glance, their work appears only to intersect in temporal ways. They are not overtly in dialogue with each other and work in contexts in which understandings of race, feminism, and community have been differently imagined, though with an element of cross-cultural dialogue. However, a closer examination of their artwork reveals formal commonalities. Both have been deeply influenced by a critical dialogue with painting, and in both artists’ work one finds a persistent concern with three essential aspects of craft: clarity and accessibility worked through the placement or distance of the lyric ‘I’ or the figure; consciously troubled lines of access between text/image and viewer; and an unsentimental approach to conveying the realities of pain and the traumatic pressures underpinning the social context of their artistic practice. The clear surfaces of their works often belie the extent to which each must push and experiment with the formal constraints of their chosen medium in order to explore these fundamental concerns. The result is a deep engagement with maximalist and minimalist aesthetics and the production of what Hal Foster terms ‘a lyrical kind of criticality,’ a nonsynchronous form which ‘complicates found things with invented ones’ and ‘reframes given spaces’ (141). Through this strategy, Foster explains, a new medium is made out of ‘old forms,’ and markers of different temporal moments are held together ‘in a single visual structure’ (137).
Allusions to other traditions and artists become incorporations of the past, not mere references or citations. As Foster argues:

in the best instances, a double reflexivity is at work: a medium is (re)constituted in a recursive way that is nonetheless open to social content—in a way, moreover, that reminds us that ‘form’ is often nothing but ‘content’ that has become historically sedimented. (137)

This understanding of the intimacy between form and content is integral to their work, and their concern with clarity, experimentation, and an engagement both with tradition and social content ultimately places Rankine and McIntyre at the forefront of essential questions surrounding the possibilities of new, hybrid, and intergeneric media today.

In approaching these artists, there is an important distinction to be made between juxtaposition and comparison—particularly given the surface tensions of their work, as well as the numerous ways in which each artist challenges the mimetic models of artist/artwork and reality/artwork. Moreover, Rankine and McIntyre work within social contexts (African American and Irish) that have historically been compared in problematic ways. Given the prevalence of trauma studies in literary criticism of the last forty years and thus the multiple approaches that fall within the field, it is necessary: firstly, to articulate what is meant here by ‘trauma’; secondly, to consider the role of the critic in responding to works which pose purposely unsettling questions about the figure or the self; and thirdly, to unravel what it means to adopt a non-comparative approach which still holds context in mind. This aesthetically based reading is initiated by what Pollock theorizes from personal experience as a ‘bodily response’ (After-affects 27). Considering this response implicates the place of the self in the work, and a critical response that aims ‘to think with the artworks’ rather than to unpack, assess, or deconstruct the work, must bear in mind their own place as reader and viewer (Pollock, After-affects xxii).
Affective Encounter & The Critic’s Response

In the introduction to After-affects | After-images, Griselda Pollock notes that a book informed by the aesthetic, feminist theory of artist and theorist Bracha L. Ettinger ironically begins with hysteria, that is, her own (27). Pollock locates the beginnings of her reparative feminist re-reading of contemporary post-traumatic artwork in a gallery space, in a time-and-space bound ‘gasp’: the critic’s self-described ‘hysterical mimicry’ at the open-mouthed violence depicted in ‘Apollo and Daphne,’ carved by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) between 1622 and 1625 (27). Pollock thus offers an example of a critical and corporal self-reflection that acknowledges the role of the body and the self in the critic’s work. She describes the psychoanalytic effects of her ‘bodily response’:

Resonating within the body, the gasp is a sound of subjectivity as it registers a shocking, sudden, unexpectedly affective encounter with something seen, felt, or done to the body. An acoustic after-affect, it sonorously registers the piercing of what Freud, in his theorization of trauma, described as the ‘protective shield’ of consciousness. … Trauma, according to Freud, is what happens when the watching consciousness is bypassed and the psyche is invaded by a shock against which it cannot mobilize defensive gestures. … With breached psychic defences, and consciousness knocked out, the subject does not know what has happened. The body acts it out affectively. (47)

The gasp signalled, Pollock continues, a moment of potential trauma. Yet the essential question remains, ‘But whose?’ (47). Drawing on Aby Warburg’s articulation of the viewer’s potential ability to affectively register the signs of the trauma of the other through a work of art, Pollock invites readers and critics to consider the root of their affective responses (After-affects 48). Acknowledging the interplay between bodily response, affect, and psychic association, I will thus draw on my own personal response to reflect one essential way in which Rankine and McIntyre’s work intersects.
My response was not a gasp, but a shoulder-jarring moment of imagistic return. It was a return to two images, experienced two years apart. In both, a woman lies on the ground. She has been hit by a car. A protest is either calming or escalating around her. In the first, the viewer can see only the back of her legs. She is face down on the pavement underneath a car. Police and first responders fill the majority of the frame.

This first image I viewed online moments after the collision; the protest-turned-riot was a few miles from where I was staying. The young woman, a teenager, had been standing in a crowd of protesters and onlookers in front of a row of shops at the edge of the Ardoyne in North Belfast, on 12 July 2015. As the Police Service of Northern Ireland attempted to reroute an Orange Parade from the majority Catholic neighbourhood, tensions rose and violence broke out. I was in Belfast for only a week, on a research trip with a photographer. In the airport on my way there, I had read in the news of the white supremacist terrorist attack and murder of six black women and three black men at a Bible-study meeting at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I do not remember when I first read Rankine’s response to the massacre, published in the New York Times Magazine, though her words speak to the distressing gap, a gap with the character of a self-perpetuating wound, in the (and my) white imagination:

Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (*Condition* 1-2)

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3 See Deborah McAleese’s ‘Ardoyne: Teen girl trapped under car and 24 officers hurt as violence erupts at Belfast flashpoint,’ *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 July 2015.
As I travelled to Belfast, I also read of an incident three kilometres from where we would be staying—eleven masked men, five armed with pick-axes, posed in front of a hand-made sign at an intersection where Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods meet: ‘Taigs will be crucified.’

The day we arrived, a wooden cross was erected at a lot used for Eleventh Night bonfires, many of which, in the days to come, featured the flags of ISIS and the American Confederacy. Amy Clukey has written of the temporal coincidence of the massacre and reported sightings of Confederate flags across Northern Ireland. Clukey admits that the increase in sectarian symbolism on display may have been coincidental, yet she conjectures that the flags were more likely erected in order to show allegiance with white supremacist violence in the U.S. (78-79). She bases this argument on the reality that Loyalists in Northern Ireland are well aware of the Confederate flag’s racist origins, and the anti-immigrant sentiment present in parts of Belfast’s Unionist neighbourhoods.

I am a white American, second-generation Irish, raised Catholic, and in a moment, it seemed as though the effect of my racial, ethnic, and/or religious identity could slightly shift context, pivot, find echoes, and that in the process, culpability, identification, and safety could be re-conceived. In a moment, my American citizenship shifted from a physical sign of implication to a source of hypothetical safety. Yet, to borrow Ettinger’s term for ‘a rapport of borderlinking with the Other,’ response-ability travels with us (‘Wit(h)nessing’ 29n). In Belfast for a research-based photographic project examining notions of identity and community as expressed in public space, I had been informed by the expressive, photographic, and video-based works of artists

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4 See Claire Williamson, Gary Fennelly and Christopher Woodhouse’s ‘Police probe image of masked gang of thugs next to sectarian graffiti threatening to crucify Catholics in Belfast,’ Belfast Telegraph, 7 July 2015.

5 It should be noted that the design of the Confederate flag is also that of the national flag of Scotland. Clukey does not make note of this parallel, but it is worth considering that the flag may be read differently from those within Northern Ireland, and the U.K., more broadly.
such as Willie Doherty and Paul Seawright, and the seemingly quieter, more distant approach taken by McIntyre. McIntyre’s work often surfaces in discussions of post-Agreement photography in Northern Ireland not only for its aesthetic and technical interest but also for the way her work appears to defy expected representations of identity, community, and conflict in Northern Ireland. Describing the artist’s resistance to readings which see in McIntyre’s work an engagement with the Troubles, Robert Reginio explains, ‘McIntyre … insists such readings, while attuned to the context of the photographs, don’t tell the whole story, which is a wider exploration of haunting traces the human leaves behind’ (351). Thus, through the overlay of my research trip and contemporary social events, Rankine’s nonfiction writings and McIntyre’s images intersect at a tangent.

The second image of a woman under a car I recently realized I never actually saw; there is little clear, photographic evidence of what happened, only a blurred video in which it is hard to identify the woman who died. Instead, the image made its way into my awareness by suggestion, conflation, and partial video footage I viewed months after the August 2017 white supremacist rally in Virginia where Heather Heyer, a paralegal and white anti-racist protester, died after a man drove his car into a crowd of protesters. Rankine’s voice again returned. In the New York Times Magazine essay, ‘Was Charlottesville the Exception or the Rule?’ Rankine wonders at the ‘national sentimentality’ apparently spurring Americans to demand that President Donald Trump, in the wake of the violent rally and related death, denounce white supremacy ‘in a show of good manners’ (‘Charlottesville’ 5). Calling readers to consider what is shocking about white supremacist violence, Rankine notes the historical disparity in resistance to white supremacy, noting that people of colour have been resisting ‘for as long as black people have been on American soil simply trying to live’
In ‘The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning’ (2015), Rankine similarly identifies a long history of collusion with and investment in white supremacist violence, tying the Charleston terrorist attack to the 1963 killing of four black girls in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, and pointing out: ‘We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here’ (‘Condition’ 2). The brutal reality Rankine describes, and the directness of her diction, demand that a writer such as myself consider the extent to which my physical reaction to the bodies of two white women hit by a car during a protest has been over-determined by wider cultural forces dictating sympathy and identification.

While Pollock situates the root of her aesthetic analysis in the body, she emphasizes that ‘Research is answerable to its subjects’ (After-affects xxi). Pollock uses an example of academic discourse and reflection to share the extent to which this process is ongoing, continuing beyond the text and reshaping future work. While at a conference, art critic and cultural theorist Geeta Kapur asked Pollock if the Western cultural turn toward Trauma Studies represents an avoidance of negotiating the ‘shared but asymmetrical histories of Modernity,’ which Pollock characterizes as ‘a struggle in which the West cannot but face up to its role as perpetrator and beneficiary of relations of domination and exploitation’ (After-affects 351). Pollock in turn asks herself a series of questions that go straight to the social worth of critical analysis:

What if trauma studies functions as an alibi that allows everyone to become a victim in some way or other? What is lost if all difference of historical conflict and hardship is submerged in the abstracted notion of an unspeakable void of immemorial wounding instead of critical projects of engagement with the denunciation of violence and violation and the construction of common futures premised on our real work together? Does the ethics of our turn to suffering conflict with or extend our political responsibilities? (After-affects 351)
Aware that her focus on specifically European, and in many cases European-Jewish artwork, must be considered in light of the ongoing reality of the ‘trauma of the Middle East’ and the specific consequences of the settler colonial state in Israel/Palestine, Pollock asserts that she wants to make space for these continuing questions, questions, she says, ‘that I cannot master but will not silence’ (*After-affects* 351). Pollock’s insistence on facing the vulnerabilities in the very root of her life’s work calls other critics to consider their positions in relation to the texts and artworks they analyse, the authors behind or before the work, and the social forces in which those artists live and work.

In an effort to follow Pollock’s example, I stand aware of the extent to which my early ideas of activism were once rooted in popular conceptions and misconceptions, often romanticized, of the civil rights movements in the U.S. and in Northern Ireland and their supposedly safe location in the past. I am aware of the extent to which evoking Pollock and Woolf’s attentive and careful thinking on the impact of the fascist violence on art, the human body, and representations of suffering can perpetuate a type of white innocence, or white surprise, at the possibilities of human destruction. One could argue that if the trans-Atlantic slave trade—and forms of modern slavery—were more rigorously acknowledged and faced by white cultural critics, twentieth century fascist violence would not often come forth as the ultimate sign of human destruction and culpability. In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), first published the year of the March on Washington—the occasion of Dr Martin Luther King Jr.’s iconic ‘I Have a Dream’ speech—James Baldwin addressed the ways in which a desire for empathy can morph into a self-righteous distancing and a fetishization of

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6 Pollock uses the construction, ‘Israel/Palestine,’ but does not describe the relationship as that of settler colonialism.
contemporary genocide as something uniquely modern. ‘White people were, and are
astounded by the holocaust in Germany,’ Baldwin writes. ‘They did not know that they
could act that way. But I very much doubt whether black people were astounded—at
least, in the same way’ (63). Frightened by the ‘world’s indifference’ to the fate of the
Jews, Baldwin admits that he knows this indifference ‘would be my portion the day that
the United States decided to murder its Negroes systematically instead of little by little
and catch-as-catch can’ (62-63). One might say the day Baldwin predicted has long
come, even if the forces of housing discrimination, mass incarceration, and police
profiling, brutality, and murder appear, or are made to appear, sporadic and
disconnected.

Identity-Focused Criticism & Comparative Approaches

Though readers often approach poetry and prose with different expectations, critics
have found that the conflation of author and text transcends genre or form. In poetry,
the conflation of the poet and the lyric ‘I’ can be attributed to ‘lyricization,’ a historical
and cultural process explored by Virginia Jackson. As a result of post-eighteenth-
century print culture, various forms and techniques of poetic expression came to be
understood as ‘lyric’ (Jackson 10). Epitomized in the reception of Emily Dickinson’s
hand-sewn leaves and poems written on pieces of envelope, lyricized reading recalls
‘modern readers to an archaic moment of handwritten composition and personal
encounter, a private moment yet unpublicized, a moment before or outside literature…’
(Jackson 10). This impulse to locate a moment of personal encounter, Anthony Reed
notes, is often based on intuition or desire. ‘One reads for the other as a model for the
self,’ Reed writes (‘Erotics’ 25). As Sophie Ratcliffe shows via her analysis of literary
criticism, psychoanalysis, and neurology, a concern with sympathy, empathy, compassion, and understanding has been prevalent throughout the history of literary theory. Ratcliffe locates a peak in these concerns, however, after the September 11th terrorist attacks and traces it to the influence of prominent writers and critics in the U.K. and the U.S., including Martha Nussbaum, Noël Carroll, Murray Smith, and Gregory Curry, who advocated for literature as a means of understanding and empathizing with the other (226). In focusing her analysis on dramatic monologues in poetry, novels, and plays, Ratcliffe draws attention to the influence of aurality in the now often silent dialogue between author, text, and reader. ‘Once the nuances of the spoken, live voice are lost,’ she writes, ‘we, as readers or performers, may become engaged in acts of imagination, attempting to reconstruct the voice and intentions of an absent person’ (3). In this construction, reading is as much centred on loss as it is on imagining the presence of an ‘other’—whether a character, lyric subject, or the author. Ratcliffe ultimately makes the case that ‘our sympathetic emotions are matters of social construction and object-based desire,’ revealing the tenuous, socially constructed nature of understanding (235). Gender and race, two influential matters of social construction, have also played a vital role in shaping the contemporary theorization of text and author and guiding critical articulations of form.

In his analysis of Rankine’s work, Reed notes the risks of this trend, in particular, for women poets and poets of colour, for whom the challenge of telling one’s story and the use of conventional forms is often critically overdetermined before one can even begin (‘Erotics’ 25). Jacqueline Rose has written of the risks of such an overdetermination by examining the case of Elena Ferrante. In 2016, a journalist sought to expose the identity of the author of the internationally successful Neapolitan quartet written under the pseudonym Elena Ferrante. Rose attributes the public pressure on
Ferrante to reveal her true identity to the ‘modern cult of the author’ which ‘straps the literary work to the writer, as if the only possible link between a text and its creator is that of a domineering mother … who cannot bear to let her children go’ (147). Rose echoes a formative conceptualization of the writer—Roland Barthes’ metaphor of the author as ‘the father and the owner of his work’ and of the ‘birth of the reader’ coming at the cost of ‘the death of the Author’ (*Image* 160, 148). We can never know the true identity of an author, Barthes argues, ‘for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin’ (*Image* 142). Despite his spatial and to some extent corporal diction, Barthes still erases identity from his formulation of the author: ‘Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing’ (*Image* 142). Barthes represents one pole at which the author’s identity is apparently inconsequential to the text; at the other extreme lies an essentialist conception in which gender—and race and/or ethnicity—may determine the production of the text.

Attending to issues of gender and identity has often arisen from attempts at correcting underrepresentation, yet these attempts have not always ushered in new ways of thinking. In his literary historiography of post-Revival Irish writing, Colin Graham notes ‘[t]he all-pervasive nature of the language and thought of identity politics’ running through contemporary criticism (‘Literary’ 591). ‘Despite the bitterness of the differences occasioned by nationalist-revisionist or postcolonial controversies,’ Graham observes, ‘both ‘sides’ (or all sides) have rarely questioned that an historical identity is the core of what Irish literature is’ (‘Literary’ 590). Graham describes this concept as ‘an academically global, not just Irish idea,’ commending the ‘richly textured’ cultural histories that move between the literary text and political history (‘Literary’ 590). Despite this praise, Graham appears wary of an approach that
only seems to add to the canon of Irish literature without critically assessing what constitutes ‘Irish literature.’ The fact that many of the new ‘additions’ are women authors has implications Graham does not adequately acknowledge on the page. He notes that the ‘intensely close relationship’ between Eavan Boland’s poetry and her literary criticism is due to Boland’s sense of exclusion from the canon of Irish poetry and her desire to join it (‘Literary’ 579). That a poet as influential and internationally recognized as Boland should receive one sentence in an otherwise thorough 36-page historiography is perhaps indicative of why the relationship between her poetic and critical work is a close one; it is also indicative, ironically, of why a concern with representation alone can be limiting.

Examining the impetus behind American women’s poetry anthologies from the 1960s until the early 2000s, Jennifer Ashton focuses on the interplay between representation and the articulation of formal concerns. Ashton attributes an essentialist understanding of the influence of gender on text to Second Wave feminism in the U.S., tracing the continuing acceptance of ‘form as something the artist’s own body caused her to make’ (224). In the emerging literary feminism of the 1980s, attention to women’s underrepresentation transformed into what Ashton describes as an attack on representation as such, as embodied by avant-garde poetics and formal innovation (228). Responding to theories spurred by Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan, Ashton argues:

If the innovative poetry of the language movement has insisted on the materiality of the text (and its material effects on the reader) as an alternative to the meaning of the text (and the intentions of its author), the ‘innovative women’s writing’ that has emerged so powerfully out of that context has insisted on an even more literal connection between the text and the body. Now the text is not a function just of the reader’s bodily experience of it (how we come to care about the text’s materiality in the first place); it is a function of the poet’s bodily production of it. (228)
In Ashton’s view, this apparent demand for formal innovation ‘requires that the femininity of the poem be understood not as a function of its content but as a function of its form’ (228) From this perspective, anthologies of women’s poetry, compiled for the sake of gender inclusivity, appear to reinscribe reductive views of formalism, gender, and authorial ownership.

Like Rose, Ashton’s argument observes the risks in conflating gender, form, and a work of art, yet unlike Rose’s critical engagement with Ferrante’s text, Ashton’s argument does not derive from critical engagement with texts of the anthologies she critiques. In the second volume of one of these anthologies, *Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics Across North America* (2012), edited by Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell, Sewell responds to Ashton’s criticism and directs the conversation closer to form. Addressing the charge of essentialism, Sewell argues that Ashton’s view flattens the association between innovation and gender. What is ‘essential about gender’ in the work of the writers included in the anthology, Sewell writes, is the continual investigation of the relationships between gender and language, and gender and genre (5). She characterizes this engagement as reflective of Third Wave feminism (rather than post or post-post feminism), which considers the intersection of multiple forms of identity (Sewell 5). Rather than being rooted in ‘bodily experience, shared oppressions, and identity politics,’ Sewell writes, the feminism revealed in the anthology strives for a dialogical model that avoids binarism, relativism, and positivism (5). Sewell highlights Isobel Armstrong’s argument that this resistance to Second Wave feminism is also representative of contemporary theory.

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7 Sewell draws on Leslie Haywood and Jennifer Drake, editors of *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 3.
today and current women’s writing. Armstrong argues, ‘from a need not to be trapped inside the expressive self of the female subject, but the obligation as a female subject, to release the lyric ‘I’ from the trap of a narrow identity politics’ (xvii). Attending to women’s poetry thus illuminates critical theories dependent on binary thought and necessarily engages with formal innovation in the lyric.

Women’s poetry in the U.S. has also been implicated in debates over the characterization of the American tradition as lyric, narrative, or hybrid. Sewell defends Juliana Spahr’s characterization in the 2002 volume, American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language, edited by Rankine and Spahr, that women’s writing is an ongoing revising of the lyric tradition, a revision rooted in innovation encompassing both the expressive lyric and the experimental poem (Spahr 6). In their second volume, Sewell and Rankine seek to avoid the narrative of American poetry that situates all poets ‘at the crossroads of hybridity,’ a narrative Sewell locates in Cole Swenson and David St. John’s anthology, American Hybrid (2009) (2). To do so, Sewell and Rankine include poets such as Carla Harryman and Lucille Clifton, whose experimentation with Language poetry and the lyric ‘I’ reflect the ways in which the expressive lyric can innovate and the experimental poem can express (2). This innovation is marked by a ‘complex resistant engagement with the world’—a resistance reflected in the theorization of identity; the interrogation of boundaries between genres and cultures; and a resistance to critical analysis itself, to readings that ‘unpack,’ assess, contextualize and situate’ (4). Sewell notes that even in work which appears at first to take the form of an expressive lyric, ‘the autobiographical comes under scrutiny.’

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whether the ‘i’ represents, as Lucille Clifton explains, ‘both [her] Lucille and the me that stands for people who look like me and the me that is also human,’ or stands, as in Joan Retallack’s work, as a ‘mere point of reference among others’ (Sewell 3; Clifton 59; qtd. in Sewell 3). While the turn to biographically based criticism can offer the reader and critic an illusion of temporality and situatedness, of clear personal and cultural boundaries, Sewell reveals the extent to which focusing on apparently known quantities of identity pre-empts consideration that the poet herself might be consciously implicating these issues of identity in her form. Highlighting Jena Osman’s call to momentarily leave aside critical assumptions and consider the material sounds, rhythms, and associations in Retallack’s work, Sewell notes that this resistance to intellectually-bound accessibility ‘provides a concrete experience of what it is like to encounter alterity in all of its inassimilable otherness’ (4). Whether honouring Clifton’s destabilized lyric as an articulation of the poet’s awareness of historical positioning as ‘the other,’ or M. NourbeSe Philip’s ‘hybrid speak’ which exposes the bodies and stories erased by colonization, Sewell and Rankine highlight the extent to which Ashton overlooked the influence of race and trauma (3, 12). Ashton points in a footnote to Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten’s work on performativity, music, and race, admitting that ‘certain social contingencies’ (such as race) may inform poetic resistance, but her wariness of essentialism appears to pre-empt further exploration of the complex relationship between identity, form, and innovation (230, 221). This hesitancy appears to be rooted in respectful distance yet ignores factors that can influence lyric poetry’s relationship to the subject, to tradition, and to formal experimentation.

In attending to the realities of racial and/or racialized identity and trauma, the critic also risks not only amplifying biographical interpretation but also creating
boundaries around expression. Writing of the journalist’s ‘act of flagrant misogyny’ in releasing Ferrante’s legal name, Rose acutely notes the limits ‘the modern cult of the author’ can set on creative freedom: ‘her greatest offense was to have misrepresented her own mother (as Neapolitan dressmaker in the novel rather than Holocaust survivor in her real life)’ (147, 148). What Rose highlights is parallel to what Reed has termed ‘racialized reading,’ an act rooted in romantic and nationalist conceptions of expression and connected to a reductive, commodity version of black ‘folk’ culture, particularly as appropriated by white modernist authors (Freedom 8). In a racialized approach to reading, an approach rooted in romantic and nationalist ideas of expression and spirit, black texts are simultaneously singular and collective—at once evidence of ‘black genius’ and an insight into the lives of black people in general (Freedom 8, 10). In dialogue with Moten’s ‘provocative chiasmus’ that ‘blackness is an avant-garde thing…and the avant-garde is a black thing,’ Reed observes that racialized reading produces the sense that the black text is necessarily oppositional because it is equally necessarily external to modernity: the position of black subjects makes their speech seem necessarily subversive, if only because the conditions of life for so many black people continue to be informed by the singular barbarism of slavery and its aftermath. That may make blackness ‘an avant-garde thing’ to the extent that it continues to figure a disruption of unmarked notions of the human, but to avoid reification it requires Moten’s subsequent qualification that to ‘say that Blackness is intrinsically experimental is not the same thing as to say that black folk are intrinsically experimental. (Moten 33; Freedom 8)

To resist the pull of racialized reading, Reed proposes a ‘situated formalism that remains attentive to the specificity of the moment of a text’s emergence, the events to which it refers, and the formal conventions or techniques the work repurposes or reconstitutes’ (Freedom 8).

Juxtaposing the works of Rankine and McIntyre evokes the concerns raised by Rose, Ashton, Sewell, and Reed, particularly given the history of analogical comparisons between the experiences of African Americans and Catholics, and/or those
who identify as Irish, both in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Historically, these articulations of alliance and sympathy consistently turn to analogy for explication. Ratcliffe argues that readers and writers use analogy and allegory ‘because there are limits to our sympathetic comprehension’ (4). ‘[O]ur recourse to such metaphorical means of understanding,’ she writes, ‘might be said to stem from the sense of our mental confinement’ (4). In comparisons made between the suffering of the Irish, Northern Irish, and African Americans, however, the analogy does not appear to arise from a desire to move beyond mental confinement. Building on Charlotte McIvor’s work, Marguérite Corporaal characterizes the use of analogy between Irish and African-American experiences as a ‘mnemonic strategy’ utilized in the nineteenth century in order to assert historical duty to work toward ending the oppression of Irish cottiers at a time when competing claims for abolition may have taken precedence on the agenda of American or British activists (53). Attuned to the ways in which memory formation—both direct and ‘prosthetic’ memory—is an intertextual, multidirectional process carried and transmitted via migrants, literature, and popular culture across generations and national borders, Corporaal raises the important question of dialogue and influence. Her focus on mid-nineteenth century writing is also notable, given the immense changes occurring within Irish and African American culture at the time, changes which are partially charted by Noel Ignatiev. Ignatiev’s history of ‘how the Irish became white’ charts ‘the change that Catholic Irish underwent on emigration to the United States, from being victims and opponents of racial oppression to upholders of slavery and white supremacy’ (216-217). Essential to Ignatiev’s

9 See Charlotte McIvor’s ‘Historical duty, Palimpsestic Time, and Migration in the Decade of Centenaries.’ Irish Studies Review, vol. 24, no.1, 2016, pp. 49-66. Corporaal refers to McIvor’s analysis of the general intertextuality of fiction and autobiographical writing that recalled Ireland’s Great Famine and was written in the U.S. and Ireland between 1854 and 1890.
10 Ignatiev’s title echoes James Baldwin’s characterization of Irish immigrant assimilation into the U.S.: ‘The Irish middle passage, for but one example, was as foul as my own and as dishonourable on the part
argument that the Irish only ‘became white’ upon arrival in and assimilation into the U.S. is the belief that the Irish had not experienced racial oppression before—that they were influenced by a uniquely American phenomenon.\footnote{His evidence centres on Daniel O’Connell, the outrage of Irish abolitionists toward American slavery, and the seemingly liberal viewpoints of a few nineteenth century male seafarers who embraced aspects of culture from communities in Latin America and Africa during their travels (ch. 1). In a history that focuses primarily on economic labour, this focus on the exceptional, apparently open-minded white man might leave the reader puzzled about what such men say about an entire country or cultural attitude toward racialized identity. Additionally, Ignatiev’s strict focus on white and black male wage labour elides the role of black and white women in the labour market and in contributing to or navigating racial tensions. Though in need of feminist analysis, Ignatiev’s work nonetheless makes an important argument for considering race as a historically fluid and contextually dependent concept. Ignatiev’s articulation of ‘becoming white,’ however, seems at odds with the theoretical premise of one of his primary influences—Theodore Allen. Calling for a consideration of the shared colonial roots of racial oppression, Allen makes a comparative study of the destruction of tribal and communal indigenous life in the U.S., Ireland, and Africa. He locates the rise of a system of racial oppression in the Protestant Ascendancy in mid-seventeenth century Ireland and views the 1800 Act of Union as the official shift from Great Britain’s system of national oppression of Ireland to a system of racial oppression (370-371). Once British thinkers and leaders could make racialized delineations between English Protestants and Irish Catholics—a difference based on religion—Allen maintains that racial oppression began and continued through the Penal Laws, plantation system, and exploitative tenancy systems that continued through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries (370-371).}

Driving Ignatiev’s thinking appears to be a belief that past victimhood is a protection against future oppression of others. Ta-Nehisi Coates sees in this view an essential misunderstanding of the role of oppression and trauma on individual and collective psyches. ‘There is nothing ennobling about being a victim,’ Coates writes. Discussing the question of reparations for African Americans within the context of reparations to Israel after World War II, and the ‘seeming paradox’ that such reparations were used to ‘advance policies that [he] thought were categorically wrong,’ he writes:

The Irish so victimized by Cromwell escaped to America, where they swiftly joined in violence against African Americans. The Cherokee, warred against by white Americans, held blacks as slaves. And those blacks, emancipated after the Civil War, joined the war against the Plains Indians. (160)
Coates’s concept of whiteness is also broader and more nuanced than that allowed by Ignatiev and Allen; he conjectures that with Trump’s election only affirming the U.S. as a class ‘responsible for and intrinsically tied to a history of torture, bombings, and coups d’état carried out in our name’ all Americans might be considered ‘white’ in the global context (366). Such fluid yet historically mindful conceptions of whiteness are often missing from previous writings on race and Irish culture.

There is no strict consensus about whether prejudice against the Irish in America—and even in eighteenth and nineteenth century Ireland—can be considered racial oppression. Writing on the history of whiteness, Nell Irvin Painter notes that today’s Americans, bred in the ideology of skin colour of racial difference, find it difficult to recognize the historical coexistence of potent American hatreds against people accepted as white—Irish Catholics (132). ‘Hatred of black people,’ she continues, ‘did not preclude hatred of other white people’ (Painter 132). Discussing the role of cartoons, stereotyping, and pseudo-ethnographic essays on the ethnicity of the Irish written by nineteenth century British and American writers—including, notably, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—Painter cites a Thomas Nast cartoon, highlighting, ‘It is important here to recognize that the Irish figure is not only problematical but also, and most importantly, labelled white’ (142). ‘Obviously Irish Catholics were white,’ she writes, ‘and, especially in the South, white enough to hold themselves above black and Chinese people in the name of whiteness’ (Painter 132-33). Painter’s view, like Coates’s, is based on a relationship to power, as well as a call to consider that prejudice, discrimination, and even racism against the Irish is still not equivalent to African Americans’ experience of being deemed property.
Lest one believe that comparisons between Irish and African Americans ceased with the end of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford and Amy Clukey trace the modern history of the analogy and bring us to the present day. Cullingford examines comparisons made via history and historiography (including geography, archaeology, ethnography); linguistics, literature and literary criticism; and popular culture as expressed in film and country music. Cullingford notes the role of questions of racial purity in constructions of Irish history and racial identity, particularly ancient history, and the influence of nationalism and romanticism on these narratives—such as the belief that Ireland’s Milesian ancestors—in Ireland by way of Spain, the Mediterranean, and Northern Africa—‘blacken’ the Irish by association (145). She tracks acts of inspiration and allusion—from the inspiration civil rights activists in Northern Ireland found in the nonviolent struggles of African American activists in the Jim Crow South to murals in West Belfast ‘associating Irish women with blacks, Muslims, and Native Americans’ (149). She examines how Seamus Heaney’s allusion to Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ in his poem of that title in North (1975) uses the ‘literal blackness of the ancient bog bodies to construct a triple analogy between murdered prehistoric Danes, contemporary Irish Catholics, and lynched American slaves’ (Cullingford 147). Her aside on the influence of Irish outreach and missionary work in Africa is in need of revision—one that considers the possible development of a ‘white saviour’ complex fostered by well-intentioned outreach that may still perpetuate unequal power dynamics (156). Though Cullingford uses Bernadette Devlin McAliskey’s horror at seeing racism among Irish-Americans against African Americans to illustrate the gap between racialized sympathy among the Irish in Ireland versus among the Irish in the U.S., her appeal to Frederick Douglass’s sympathy for the Irish—and her omission of his speeches addressing Irish violence against African
Americans in the U.S.—both flattens the nuance of dialogic, cross-cultural exchange between African American and Irish writers and activists and has implications for literary historiographies of African American writing more broadly (159-160). From these examples, one begins to wonder at the use of comparisons when the ‘historical duty’ named by McIvor is no longer present. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin tries to explain why ‘the situation of the Irish a hundred years ago and the situation of the Negro today cannot very usefully be compared’ in response to attempts to undermine the civil rights movement (69). Noting that ‘the Negroes were brought here in chains long before the Irish ever thought of leaving Ireland,’ he asks: what manner of consolation is it to be told that emigrants arriving here—voluntarily—long before you did have risen far above you? (69). Baldwin’s question, taken in conjunction with Coates’s fluid conception of whiteness and Painter’s longer view, demand that scholars of prejudice, race, and allusion in Irish culture pivot away from comparisons rooted in a sincere but misdirected desire for recognition of past trauma.

Amy Clukey’s work begins a contemporary reckoning that holds the breadth of past and present trauma and brings us to the context of Rankine and McIntyre’s work. Noting that Irish-American studies and New Southern Studies are, ‘at their best … methodologically anti-essentialist and anti-exceptionalist,’ Clukey nonetheless demands that acts of inspiration, allusion, and analogy be reconsidered with a new premise: that ‘Both the Irish imaginary and the southern imaginary are imbricated in constructions of white identity’ (63, 62). While Northern Ireland and the American South can be viewed as exceptional cases of racial animus, Clukey argues that such exceptionalism is part of the problem, and that the racial, political, and economic problems associated with the American South are ‘quintessentially American phenomena,’ subtly inviting the reader to consider how common conceptions of
Northern Ireland’s political, sectarian, and economic conflicts may also finds echoes across the rest of the island (63). Noting sincere cases of transnational solidarity, Clukey observes that many instances where inspiration or a desire for recognition end up participating in ‘the southern imaginary,’ wherein ‘groups construct their victimization as whites within a predominantly white culture’ (68). While noting that analogies and allusions are in themselves not useless rhetorical devices, she asks readers to consider where such comparative methods might ‘opportunistically equivocate’ (72). Insisting that ‘inspiration does not obviate or excuse racism,’ Clukey contrasts the Catholic Nationalist embrace of ‘not-quite-white-Irishness’ as a means of situating their social justice activism within a global struggle for civil rights against the Loyalist embrace of ‘an Anglo-Protestant vision of transnational white supremacy’ (76, 68). Ultimately, she argues, both communities rely on a homogenous view of another culture, do not account for their own white privilege, and eventually fall apart upon closer inspection. The comparison of an American black/white binary to the Northern Irish Catholic/Protestant binary does not acknowledge the other people of colour in the U.S. or the presence of non-Christians, travellers, immigrants, and people of colour in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (Clukey 72). Nor does it consider Paul McVeigh’s recent work on the ‘new racism’ of Northern Ireland, which is anti-black, anti-refugee, and anti-immigrant (Clukey 67). Ultimately, Clukey’s subtle call for a wider conceptualization of whiteness challenges the trace of essentialism remaining in Ignatiev’s view. Using phrases such as ‘some forms of whiteness’ and ‘the carefully

12 For example, Clukey examines the inclusion of a Palestinian youth and the silhouette of Michael Brown on the Free Derry Wall in the Bogside, noting the ‘solidarity vigil’ held by the Bloody Sunday March Committee on November 29, 2014 after the grand jury refused to indict Darren Wilson for the shooting and killing of Michael Brown. She also takes into account efforts of the Bloody Sunday Committee to form tangible relationships with African American activists (76).
delineated hierarchy of whiteness’ to discuss the racialized social system in nineteenth century Ireland, Clukey maintains that ‘there are degrees of whiteness that may fluctuate under white supremacy’ (65, 69, 75). Though seemingly not referring to Ignatiev directly, Clukey warns that white nationalists today ‘use this history of ‘becoming’ white to argue that the Irish were—or are—in some way blackened within American and British racial systems’ (74-75). While Ignatiev calls for an abolition of the idea of race from a radical left position, and does not associate with white nationalism, Clukey demands that readers consider the nuances of over-identifying with another’s experience within a system of racial oppression. The society in which McIntyre works, though not directly reflected in her work, is thus part of a larger, complex context in which analogical comparison, exploitation, solidarity, dialogue, and education have all played a part.

Given trends in contemporary criticism, Rankine and McIntyre’s gender, and their social contexts, the artists’ work has often been analysed through critical lenses focused on the interrelation between identity and historical trauma. While my analysis will not be focused on the expression of identity or historical trauma in either Rankine or McIntyre’s work, the situated formalism Reed invites and which I will strive for demands an awareness of the possible influences of these factors in the making of artwork and on the ongoing repercussions of comparative analyses of African American and Northern Irish art and culture. Going forward, David Theo Goldberg’s relational model of analysing racial oppression, premised on the reality that thinking on race is never entirely unidirectional, that conceptions of race in one context are influenced by that of other contexts and histories, is useful in its respect for historically rooted yet continuously evolving social realities (366). Goldberg’s conception of the
‘joint making’ of continually evolving connections between cultures returns us to Pollock.

Though distrusting of the demands of relational aesthetics, Pollock similarly invites critics to begin in encounter rather than predetermined seeking (*After-affects* 13). Pollock warns of reading with the expectation of a directly mimetic relationship between experience—especially traumatic experience—and artistic rendering, an expectation which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed the ‘paranoid’ reading position (*After-affects* xxv). Rooted in the legitimate impulse within queer, feminist, and post-colonial theory to locate and acknowledge the influence of systemic oppression in the creation and reception of texts, Sedgwick argues that such a position can at times prove to be impoverishing (144). Sedgwick thus proposes another method—‘reparative reading.’ ‘No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival,’ reparative reading allows the reader to learn ‘the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them’ (150-151).

Adopting an approach of reparative, situated formalism, readers and critics can thus experience and witness acts of sustenance and survival as vital yet not overdetermining aspects of a work of art. In examining works that include or consist of photographic images, a situated formalism requires a consideration of the ways in which the theorization of photography has revolved around the medium’s relationship to reality, painting, and narrative—formal concerns which in turn pivot on the place of the figure.

_A Concern with Reality_
In the following brief artistic historiography, the critical articulation of poetry, prose, and visual forms will remain in conversation in theory as they have been in the practices of artists moving fluidly between disciplines. Writing in 2017, Sarah Pape illustrates through her analysis of contemporary writing ‘how closely the meaning-making and observation of artistic approaches already parallel one another’ (4). Historically, the theorization of visual art is also bound up in the theorization of literary arts, and vice versa. In the influential text *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) analysing photography’s relation to realism, Kracauer suggests a continuum along which to view different media ‘according to the degree of the elusiveness of their properties,’ or their dependence on fixed material and technical factors (256). It might be more fruitful, he offers, to use the term ‘art’ more loosely such that it also encompasses ‘achievements in a truly photographic spirit,’ that is, pictures ‘which are neither works of art in the traditional sense nor aesthetically indifferent products’ (268). John Szarkowski, the influential photographer, curator, and from 1962 to 1991 director of photography at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, similarly defines the artist within a broad scope, thereby elevating the status of photography. ‘An artist,’ he writes, ‘is a man who seeks new structures in which to order and simplify his sense of the reality of life’ (6). While not all artists aim—or should aim—to simplify their own sense of the reality of life, Szarkowski’s broad emphasis on artists as those seeking structures prioritizes a consideration of form over content. Geoffrey Hartman’s conception of form-making in literature is parallel in its focus on structure, and also formative in Pollock’s writings (*After-affects* 6). Pollock highlights that for Ettinger, art is a ‘long-term process of research’ (*After-affects* 352). Re-envisioning Sigmund Freud’s concept of *Arbeit*/work, conceived of as dreamwork, working through, or the work of mourning, Ettinger characterizes her aesthetic practice
as self-consciously in dialogue with the beauty arising from trauma (Pollock, *After-effects* 12-13). Each of these articulations invites an openness to the blurred lines between artist as maker and critic as researcher and generator of ideas.

While Rankine and McIntyre often appear to seek structures and forms in order to complicate or further—but not necessarily simplify—their sense of reality, Szarkowski’s focus on the structural principles of photography as laid out in *The Photographer’s Eye* (1966), remain useful, even given recent technological developments in the medium. He focuses on the photograph and photographer’s relationship to five elements of form, or five ‘characteristics or problems’ posed by the medium: The Thing Itself, Time, The Detail, The Vantage Point, and The Frame. Juxtaposing the theorization of thinkers across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with Szarkowski’s framework reveals the extent to which photography’s relationship to reality and other media is both a historical and ongoing concern, the discussion of which has opened up new possibilities for the medium.

For Szarkowski, the photograph’s relationship to reality, or to the Thing Itself, is neither directly mimetic nor entirely mechanistic. While conveying an appearance of the ‘actual,’ the camera filters reality; despite the common conviction that photographs are reflections of truth, Szarkowski conceives of them as symbols or a ‘symbolic report’ (3). Rebecca Solnit has similarly observed photography’s metaphoric nature, situating mid-nineteenth century photography among other transformative technologies of the time: ‘It did not impose itself on the world but interpreted it, transporting appearance as the railroad transported matter’ (14). Early on, she notes, ‘photography had been called ‘the pencil of nature’ and [photographs] ‘sun drawings,’ with the implication that nature itself was the artist’ (Solnit 40). Solnit’s metaphoric description of photography and the parallels to drawing and painting may seem easy to accept
today, but the radical nature of her diction and of Szarkowski’s 1966 thesis arises from
a long history of thinkers connecting photography, and other art forms, not with
symbolism or subjectivity but with empiricism and objectivity.

Ratcliffe traces the tension between the mirroring of allegory and the
allegorized, or that of representation and reality, to repeat misreadings of Plato’s *The
Republic*, highlighted in Philip Sidney’s 1579–80 *A Defence of Poetry* (30). From
Martin Heidegger to Jean-Paul Sartre to Emmanuel Levinas, philosophical and ethical
systems of the modern era have centred on a form of Neoplatonism which turns on
whether one reads Plato’s warning about the risks of losing oneself in a work of art as
ironic or serious, and/or as a call to distinguish between good art and bad art (30-31). In
the essay ‘Against Interpretation,’ (1964) Sontag also returns to western art criticism’s
Platonic origins, examining the risks of a singular interpretation of Greek theory of art
as *mimesis* or representation (‘Against’ 95). If art is not a thing unto itself but, rather, a
referent back to reality, then content is paramount. This prevailing belief in art as
mimesis, Sontag writes, has led to the ‘odd vision by which something we have learned
to call ‘form’ is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content,’ and to
the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory’
(‘Against’ 96). Such focus on content, she argues, irrevocably shapes criticism, leading
to the ‘perennial, never-consummated project of *interpretation*’ (Sontag, ‘Against’ 96-97).
Thus, it is ‘[t]he habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them,’ she
writes, ‘that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work
of art’ (Sontag, ‘Against’ 97). A focus on content, or the surface of the photographic
image, has led to the association of the medium with direct mimesis; yet as Sontag
shows, this fundamental aesthetic question predates even the development of the
medium.
In focusing on the roles of the photographer, the viewer, and their historical context, cultural theorists have argued that the relationship between photography and reality is a reflection of social forces, not simply an inherent property of the medium. Kracauer attributes the nineteenth-century concern with photography’s relationship to realism to the interplay of the Romantic movement, positivist thinking in France, and concurrent western industrialization (247). Positivist thinkers favoured a scientific, empirical approach, and thus praised photography for its ‘faithful, completely impersonal rendering of reality’ (Kracauer 247). Yet as Pollock has shown, the relationship between realism and photography was dialogical: as photography developed, ‘realism as a mode of signification,’ rather than as a matter of style or manner, began to dominate visual and literary expressions in bourgeois culture (Pollock, Vision 171). Photographs, Pollock writes, offer a particular pleasure and sustain a specific illusion, one which goes to the basic human desire for fantasy and connection. She explains: ‘A sense of actuality—someone like this was here, once—combines with and plays against the freedom of fantasy, for the only actual presence, now, is the viewer’s’ (Pollock, Vision 171). In Pollock’s view, then, photography’s relationship to actuality is misleadingly transparent yet ultimately akin to other mediums which depend on the viewer to complete the act of interpretation or experience.

This concern with the viewer’s expectations of fantasy vs. reality is a central issue for Susanne Kappeler. In The Pornography of Representation (1986), Kappeler calls for an examination of the assumption that fantasy (the realm of art) and reality are distinct realms which do not influence each other. Literature and the visual arts, Kappeler argues, embody the naturalization of representation, and through their articulations of realism, a common-sense attitude has developed in which we as readers
and viewers divide representation into form and content, and medium and represented
reality (2). ‘The aim of realism,’ she writes, ‘is to obliterate our awareness of the
medium and its conventions to make us take what is represented for a reflection of a
natural reality’ (Kappeler 2). Such an object-orientation in art thus directs us away from
the subject, or the producer of art, and creates the assumption that the objects—the
works of art or the representations—are separate from any objects they might refer to in
the world (Kappeler 53). Thus, objects in art can remain ‘in a sphere of their own: the
aesthetic’ (Kappeler 55). Demanding that readers, viewers, and other critics consider
both the role of the spectator and the fluidity between represented and representation,
Kappeler calls for an ethical approach in which art is not cut off from the world from
which it is derived and which it shapes. Though her analysis broadly applies to both
visual and literary arts, the ethical implications of her project take on real-world
consequence as she discusses the connection between pornography and violence
against women. She does return, however, to one specific photograph as a call to
consider ‘the structure of representation’: the image depicts the body of Thomas Kasire,
an 18-year-old black worker in Namibia, alongside the men who lynched him, Kasire’s
white boss and the man’s friends. In the image, Kasire’s lynchers pose, smiling. ‘In the
structure of representation,’ Kappeler writes, ‘the two subjects are the author and the
spectator/reader, the white man and his guests’ (51). Kappeler’s insistence on attending
to subject/object relations in images past and present is vital for a medium which has
such a complex and at times violent relationship to time.

In Szarkowski’s framework, photographs describe ‘a discrete parcel of time’: the
exposure, or the time when the photograph was made, which is the present (5). He
thus reads Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ‘decisive moment’—often assumed to be a dramatic
climax, or a moment of narrative interest—as ‘a visual climax,’ a moment of time when
visual elements come together (Szarkowski 5). The question of time also weighs heavily in Sontag’s consideration of ethical photography. Discussing the American and European project of photographing ‘the poor’ or the marginalized and oppressed, Sontag warns the reader of the immediately interpretive act which is making an image. ‘Photography,’ she writes, ‘implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it’ (Sontag, *Photography* 23). This fact is ethically troubling because, as Sontag writes:

> All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no …. In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand. (23)

Though Sontag does not detail her understanding of narrative, her analysis of photography is rooted in her background in prose and her familiarity with the history of painting, and so Ellen Bryan Voigt’s examination of the lyric provides insight into how one might define narrative. ‘In the lyric,’ Voigt writes, ‘you can stop time; you pick that moment of intensity and hold it. The narrative moves through time.’ Solnit echoes Voigt’s language when she describes photography arriving in the world ‘as though someone had found a way to freeze the water of passing time’ (18). She continues: ‘appearances that were once as fluid as water running through one’s fingers became solid objects’ (Solnit 18). Later describing the photograph as ‘that freezing eye whose gaze soon reached the corners of the world,’ Solnit invites one to consider the ‘tense’ of photography via the use of image series, sequences, and the photograph’s intimate relationship to the development of moving pictures (19, 53). Sontag and Solnit view photograph’s relationship to time in opposing ways, yet an essential element to that relationship that neither addresses directly is detail.

The Detail, for Szarkowski, is what determines photographs as fragments, not narratives (3). As his concern is primarily aesthetic, Szarkowski echoes Voigt’s
concern with movement and time and does not here note the essential relationship between shutter speed and/or lens length (both measured in stops of time) and the camera’s ability to render detail. Instead, he observes that the photographer could show what was too ordinary to paint (Szarkowski 42). As they became more mobile and more technologically adept, cameras provided photographers and viewers with insight into things previously unobservable, previously left to the imagination—rendering the flow of a river, or the static freeze of body in motion; capturing a grain of sand, or detailing the human red blood cell. Though Szarkowski embraces the medium’s relationship to detail, early practitioners and theorists were wary of the camera’s ability to render detail, to offer an apparently scientific view of the world rather than a hand-made projection of imagination, sight, and fantasy. Julia Margaret Cameron intentionally used poorly made lenses to capture the ‘spirit’ of the people she photographed for portraits, wanting to avoid the accidental detail of better lenses, and other painters and painter-photographers used retouching and in-camera edits to blur the inherent clarity of camera work (Kracauer 249). Walter Benjamin commended Eugène Atget for his contributions to the aesthetic development of photography, for his ability to isolate detail and render objects clearly (82). Praising the way Atget ‘cleansed this atmosphere, indeed purged it,’ Benjamin concludes of the artist’s style: ‘he commenced the liberation of the object from the aura’ (82). Yet in 1931, when Benjamin wrote his ‘Small History of Photography,’ he also mourns the loss of the aura, which he loosely defines as ‘[a] peculiar weave of space and time: the singular appearance only of distance, however close it may be’ (83). Intimately tied to the long exposure times and necessary distance from the subject characteristic of early cameras,
the aura is a function of time. Benjamin describes the relationship in corporeal, climactic terms: ‘until the moment or the hour takes part in their appearance—that is what it means to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch’ (84). Yet as lens sharpness improves, shutter speeds increase, and cameras become more mobile, there developed ‘a medicative alienation between environment and person’ (Benjamin 84). For Benjamin, such a development marks a departure in the very nature of perception:

Stripping the object of its husk, the disintegration of the aura is the hallmark of a perception whose inclination towards similarity in the world has grown such that it even takes pleasure in the singular by means of reproduction. (84)

Benjamin’s focus on the mechanistic side of camera work and its increasingly functional status has important repercussions for photography theory through the 1980s, epitomized by Flusser’s theory of technical images. Ultimately, Benjamin demands that viewers consider the implications of ‘a photography that can fit any tin can into the universe but can grasp none of the human relationships in which it appears’ (91). The photograph’s relationship to the physical universe, including the web of human relationships, was an early ethical concern for theorists and remains a defining characteristic of the medium.

‘The central act of photography,’ Szarkowski writes, ‘the act of choosing and eliminating, forces a concentration on the picture edge—the line that separates in from out—and on the shapes that are created by it’ (4). The Frame, and The Vantage Point are thus the elements that highlight photography’s inherently interpretive, rather than transparent, nature. Through the Vantage Point, a photographer gives their viewer ‘the sense of the scene, while withholding its narrative meaning’ (Szarkowski 5). This liminal relation to narrative complicates the photograph’s relation to the physically embodied photographer.
Predating Szarkowski’s focus on the position of the photographer, Kracauer pays due to the role of the body in the highly mechanistic medium. When concerned in the act of looking, the photographer, he writes, is simultaneously aware of his other senses and ‘certain perceptual form categories inherent in his nervous system’; thus his ‘general dispositions’ enable the photographer to order ‘the visual raw material in the act of seeing’ (Kracauer 259). Though Kracauer notes that the photographer ‘cannot freely externalize his inner vision’ or fantasy as a painter or poet might, his characterization of form categories inherent in the body transforms photography into a physical, organic act (260). Kracauer characterizes the act of framing, or the photographer’s selectivity, as one closer to empathy ‘than to disengaged spontaneity’ and the photographer as akin to ‘the imaginative reader intent on studying and deciphering an elusive text’ (260). Due to the inherent limit of the frame, which refers to a world beyond itself, a photograph is defined by the way in which it precludes a notion of completion (Kracauer 264). Predating Szarkowski’s concern for the world beyond the frame, Kracauer explains that the photograph’s structure ‘denotes something that cannot be encompassed—physical existence’ (264). Though placing photography and painting at opposite ends of a continuum, Kracauer, unlike other critics, maintains that photography retains an aesthetic flexibility and freedom (256). Because photographs refer to the infinite realities of physical matter, ‘it makes sense to speak of multiple meanings, vague meaningfulness, and the like only in connection with camera work’ (Kracauer 265). These limitations on creativity thus reveal a truth about art and reality more generally:

the photographer’s peculiar and truly formative effort to represent significant aspects of physical reality without trying to overwhelm that reality—so that the raw material focused upon is both left intact and made transparent. (Kracauer 268)
The experimental photographer then works between these realistic and formative tendencies, allowing the world to present itself through the camera (Kracauer 262). This freeing sense of the medium’s potential remains increasingly important as the realities of mass reproduction and circulation raise new questions for an ethical photographic practice.

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), Flusser finds possibility in the reprieve from the mechanistic, increasingly functional nature of reproduced images in the work of experimental photographers. For Flusser, photography has overturned the line between realism and idealism: ‘It is not the world out there that is real, nor is the concept within the camera’s program—only the photograph is real’ (Flusser 37). In the ‘photographic universe’ we have created, built on the tension between the mass circulation of images and the increasingly programmed and thus increasingly absurd nature of the camera, the role of human will, freedom, and intention become paramount (Flusser 71-72). The primary task of a philosophy of photography is thus to question photographers about freedom, which Flusser defines as ‘the strategy of making chance and necessity subordinate to human intention’ (80). Though his description seems paradoxical at first, the only way human will can come forth in a programmed, automated medium is to work against, or in a creative dialogue with, its prescribed, technical nature. ‘Freedom,’ he writes, ‘is playing against the camera’ (Flusser 80). Because there is no single, fixed viewpoint inhering in the medium, photography is post-ideological, and thus Flusser finds hope in ‘experimental’ photography, or the work of photographers who still seek information and try to work against the camera’s automated nature (38, 81). ‘Experimental photography,’ Hubertus von Amelunxen explains in the afterword to Flusser’s text, ‘must expose these cracks in representation, the absurdity of any ‘post-historical’ technical representation’ (94). Echoing Kappeler,
von Amelunxen foregrounds the risks of not attending to the increasing absurdity of unsituated or dehistoricized representation: losing sight of the world with which the artwork engages.

The Countertradition of Unsentimentality

From Benjamin and Kracauer to Sontag and Szarkowski, the theoretical history of photography reveals the extent to which a singular definition of the medium and its meaning has never truly existed. Into this ambiguous place of continual development enters McIntyre, an experimental photographer, and Rankine, an experimental artist working in hybrid spaces between poetry, prose, painting, and photography, who each reveal the creative potentials still unfolding in unsentimental work that resists stasis in the face of pain and suffering.

My use of the term ‘unsentimental’ begins in dialogue with Friedrich Schiller’s formative eighteenth-century articulation of the naïve and sentimental in poetry and continues to the present day with Deborah Nelson’s characterization of the unsentimental artist in the twenty-first century. For both, an artist’s perception and sympathy rely on their relationship to reality. For Schiller, the naïve poet follows nature and is thus confined to rendering an imitation of reality. Thus, Schiller explains, the naïve poet has ‘a single relation to this object, and there is, in this regard, no choice of treatment for him,’ or no choice of formal approach (14). The sentimental poet, in comparison, reflections on the impression which objects make in him and grounds his emotion and ideas in this reflection; it is through this process that the poet is moved and so moves their reader. ‘The sentimental poet,’ Schiller writes, ‘is therefore always concerned with two conflicting conceptions and feelings, with reality as limit and with
his idea as the infinite …’ (14). Though later theorists have written of sentimentality in different ways, this tension between reality and conception, limitation and freedom has remained a common concern.

Today, the term ‘sentimental’ can carry the connotation of affective, emotionally easy treatment of difficult subjects. Noting that ‘unsentimentality’ does not have the critical history that ‘sentimentality’ does, Deborah Nelson defines an unsentimental approach—as opposed to ‘non-sentimental’ or ‘antisentimental’—as one which pays attention to the same subjects as sentimental literature, that is, painful reality and suffering (2, 5). In Nelson’s view though, an ‘unsentimental’ style pays attention without emotional display (5). Using the term to describe the style of twenty-first century American and European artists whose work explores the ethics of representation, Nelson observes that unsentimental work often has ‘little that we can identify as interiority’ (5). Focusing on the careers of Diane Arbus, Hannah Arendt, Joan Didion, Mary McCarthy, Simone Weil, and Susan Sontag, Nelson shows that despite their varied approaches, they all consistently treat painful reality ‘concretely, directly, and realistically,’ yet not—and this qualification is vital—‘without conveying some of the writer’s relationship to the suffering …’ (5). Nelson cites Arendt’s own argument in On Violence that to be affectless in the face of extreme violence can be terrifying, and is not the aim of the unsentimental writer.

Such an approach implicates an artist’s formal choices. Unsentimental work, Nelson writes, ‘prizes the object of reflection over feelings about that object,’ and as a result, its syntax tends to be simpler, without unnecessary qualification or subordinating clauses, choices which Nelson describes as working to ‘fold in the feeling perspectives of both subject and writer’ (5-6). She notes that Weil, Sontag, and Didion are wary of the satisfactions of sympathy, whether these satisfactions are narcissistic (the
heightened self-regard of displaying how compassionate one’s feelings are), moral (the displacement of guilt in that if I feel bad, I must be good even if I’m not doing anything) or sensual (the pleasures of intensity, the excitement of shared feelings) (Nelson 6). Nelson observes that Arendt’s style suggests that feelings can ‘obliterate thought,’ and Sontag, McCarthy, and Didion’s styles imply that feelings ‘are anaesthetic in that one form of more tolerable pain works to mask another, deeper injury’ (6). Rather than reading this common approach as mere affected toughness, hardheartedness, or the bravado required to stand on the same field as their male counterparts, Nelson reads the unsentimental approach as a critical response to modern philosophical developments on questions of pain and the ‘Other,’ particularly in the decades following World War II (7). She notes that the story told of suffering in the twentieth century is a paradoxical one: that it was both a period in which the valorisation of emotional expression, authenticity, and empathy demanded a public sharing of feelings; and that it was a period defined by ‘its coolness, its irony, and its affectless’ (7). The writers whose work Nelson explores do not insist on a midway point between these two polarized responses; instead, they create a style in which the expression of personal feelings is minimized if not entirely excluded, and which insists on an individual encounter with suffering that is ‘serious, engaged, and often painful’ (7). Nelson argues that these writers and artists ‘neither sacralised pain nor remained indifferent to it,’ thus offering a ‘countertradition’ of what she calls ‘toughness’ (7-8). ‘They sought,’ Nelson writes, ‘not relief from pain but heightened sensitivity to what they called ‘reality’’ (8). ‘Perversely or not,’ she continues, ‘they imagined the consolations for pain in intimacy, empathy, and solidarity as anaesthetic’ (Nelson 8). These women did more than tolerate pain, she notes; they insisted that it was ordinary. ‘In discourses where pain is a serious ethical and political question, as it was for them,’
Nelson writes, ‘the explanatory authority of trauma has rendered unintelligible both ordinary suffering and the *ordinariness* of suffering’ (8). While Pollock’s approach toward trauma is psychoanalytic and Nelson’s more informed by craft and social analysis, both critics reveal the extent to which pain and suffering challenge the very foundations of artistic process and the ethics of representation.

To return to a writer Nelson has deemed unsentimental and who has been influential in conceptions of photography, Sontag herself uses the term ‘sentimentality’ to productively consider a photograph’s relationship to reality. In *On Photography* (1971), she first uses the word to describe a lover’s photograph hidden in a wallet, a poster of a rock singer, or the snapshot of a child as ‘talismanic uses of photographs’ that ‘express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical … [that attempt] to lay claim to another reality’ (Sontag, *Photography* 16). Her subtle differentiation between ‘contacting’ and ‘laying claim to’ another reality implies not only the artist’s possession (claim) to reality but also their navigation of distance from or proximity to reality. Sontag goes on to describe the work of Adam Clark Vroman, who photographed indigenous peoples in Arizona and New Mexico from 1895 to 1904, as ‘unexpressive, uncondescending, unsentimental’ (*Photography* 62). She contrasts these images with the 1935 Farm Security Administration photography project—featuring key figures in American photography, such as Dorothea Lange—the purpose of which was ‘to demonstrate the value of the people photographed,’ particularly to middle-class Americans who ‘needed to be convinced that the poor were really poor, and that the poor were dignified’ (Sontag, *Photography* 62). Sontag argues that Vroman’s images ‘do not invite sympathy’ because in beginning his work with the assumption that a ‘dying or superseded part of America’ has dignity, Vroman does not need to invite sympathy. Sontag’s praise for Vroman’s approach is indicative of what Nelson
describes as her critical approach to compassion and intentionally witnessed suffering. ‘To suffer,’ Sontag writes, ‘is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate’ (Photography 20). Even by Regarding the Pain of Others (2003), and thus thirty-two more years of living with images of suffering, Sontag’s position has not changed drastically; having seen the damaging effects of photographic censorship during America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the continuing, perhaps less questioned escalation of images of suffering, Sontag concedes, ‘There isn’t going to be an ecology of images. No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror …’ (Sontag, Regarding 97). ‘Harrowing images,’ she writes, ‘do not inevitably lose their power to shock’ but ‘are not much help if the task is to understand’ (Sontag, Regarding 80). ‘Narratives,’ she argues, ‘can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us’ (Regarding 80). Sontag’s call to consider the ways in which we witness horror might now seem tepid or regressive in the current age of social media in which the ordinariness of images, and of depictions of suffering, have only increased. The ease with which social media now enables individuals to witness the pain and even death of people they do not know has had arguably mixed results, playing both a socially-constructive and devastating role, for example, in progressive activist movements such as Black Lives Matter in the U.S. To remain critical today, as Sontag would undoubtedly urge, it may be less important to debate the essential nature of photography and more important to heed Sontag’s call to consider what we are witnessing, and what it means to witness.
In Griselda Pollock’s aesthetic framework, trauma is not understood as it often is in popular culture or even in curative models within clinical psychology. Recognizing the word’s Greek root as a medical term for what pierces the body, Pollock conceptualizes trauma in a multi-faceted way—in an aesthetic sense, as drawn from Ettinger’s concept of trauma as that which is beyond thinking and thus closely tied to ‘the pressure from which art emerges’; in a structural, psychoanalytic sense as the ‘condition of human receptivity to, and for the non-verbal intensities and affectivities resulting from, incoming stimuli from the world outside and from inside’; and in the historical sense as ruptures which fundamentally change how we conceive of the body and its image (After-affects 2, 5, xxviii). Trauma, Pollock explains, is not an anterior or exterior, generating source of imagery for a perfectly self-aware, knowing subject (After-affects xxvii). ‘Trauma,’ she writes, ‘is the not-yet-experienced non-thing towards which a lifetime of making art might be unknowingly journeying (Pollock, After-affects xxvii). Thus, it is counter-intuitive to expect entirely direct or mimetic representation of personal pain or suffering from a work of art which might convey traces of trauma or may have been made in a conscious or unconscious dialogue with trauma. This approach does not equate to projecting contested theories of repressed and forgotten memory and locating them in an unknowing subject; Pollock does not probe the personal histories of her critical subjects, but rather approaches the surface of a work of art with a careful attunement.

Inherent in Pollock’s definition of trauma is a challenge to the very basis of representation: ‘events or experiences excessive to the capacity of the psyche to ‘digest’ and the existing resources of representation to encompass’ (After-affects xxii). Works bearing what Pollock terms traces of trauma thus require a critical approach aware of the formal challenge trauma poses (After-affects 4). Pollock’s position is rooted in
Ettinger’s concept of *aesthetic wit(h)nessing*, a phrase which linguistically invites us to consider how *witness* may also be an act of *withness*—of being with the other rather than merely hearing a testimony of trauma. Pollock expands:

*Aesthetic wit(h)nessing* fosters *matrixial alliances* that do not refer to sympathy or even empathy between fully formed human subjects, but indicate another level of fragilization of parts of a partial self, opened by the aesthetic processes, to share in, to carry something of, to be a transsubjective partner in transformation, whatever the affective cost, for the trauma and jouissance of the Other. (*After-affects* 14)

The matrixial refers to ‘a primordial human capacity for co-affection and transsubjective sharing,’ a concept which supplements Lacan’s theory of the Phallus, the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic (*After-affects* 14). Rather than beginning based on the logic of the psychoanalytic cut, in rejection of the abject maternal sphere in order to enter the symbolic order and move toward selfhood, the matrixial is attuned to the prenatal and prematernal space each human experiences before birth (Pollock, *After-affects* 14-15). Pollock thus invites us to consider what it means that ‘all human becoming is premised on a prolonged subjective and potentially subjectivizing intimacy of the several in which the pro-subject senses an already-human subjectivity across a shared, aesthetically-sensed borderspace’ (Pollock, *After-affects* 14-15). In the Matrix, boundaries between self and other disintegrate, and one instead embarks on a journey between and of becoming. As Ettinger writes: ‘The *non-I* is *not* Other but, like the *I*, is a *becoming-in-ter-with*, and therefore a clear cut between the living and the dead, the pure and the impure, so basic in the Phallus, is beyond the matrixial scope’ (‘Red Cow’ 82). Ettinger’s theory thus points beyond Lacan’s movement between Thing (trauma), and Object (psychic representation), to another sphere in which, Pollock writes, there can be no direct substitution or displacement from the Real to the Imaginary (*After-affects* 3). In doing so, she moves us away from content toward *gesture*, toward the performative space of encounter generated made by artwork (Pollock, *After-affects* 3).
Pollock builds on the insight of Cathy Caruth, eminent theorist of trauma, narrative, and comparative literature, to echo the claim that trauma is not experienced fully as it occurs and is evident only in connection to other places and other times (After-affects 9). These connections, or encounters, can occur within and between the body of the artist, the artwork, and potentially infinite others, yet rather than focusing on the importance of obligatory mourning and loss in response to historical trauma, Ettinger views art as a site of potential transformation, com-passionate (sharing with of pain or feeling) relations to the other (Pollock, After-affects 13). In the aesthetic encounter experienced with artwork, or this ‘shared borderspace becoming a threshold,’ the viewer is pulled, drawn, moved to wanting to know and even process the other’s trauma (Pollock, After-affects 15, 19). In such a highly physical, psychically charged moment, the location of the body, or the figure, and the body’s relationship to the landscape take on a revitalized meaning.

To read fully the role of the landscape in the works of Rankine and McIntyre, I am going to turn to one final generative concept from Pollock. Working and writing through her attachment to landscape imagery of South Africa, where she was born, as it is evoked in films and family photos, Pollock constructs the phrase ‘natal memory’ to describe ‘a deep, often unrecognized memory of place and space associated with where we are born and pass those years of early childhood’ (‘Back’ 53). During this early time, we ‘absorb’ a sense of location ‘without the fear of separation that renders the remembered, imaged location poignant in estrangement’ (Pollock, ‘Back’ 53). During this time, there emerges a sense of place that is not topographical but is one of ‘emplacement in a phenomenological world’ (Pollock, ‘Back’ 53). Pollock uses the term to attempt to explain the complex relationship of a colonial, immigrant, or refugee subject in relation to a place that cannot be claimed and therefore cannot be
incorporated by the imagination into a sense of identity (‘Back’ 53). Natal memory evokes a sense of anxiety and of the uncanny derived from the ‘caesura’ between emplacement and location’ (Pollock, ‘Back’ 53; emphasis mine). Pollock’s articulation of an ‘impossible relation to a home that is not yours’ echoes Reed’s concept of ‘Freedom Time,’ which derives partly from inadequate official responses to demands for civil recognition, which have proven ‘palliative rather than fully emancipatory’ (Pollock, ‘Back’ 71; Reed, Freedom 2). ‘Freedom Time,’ Reed writes, is ‘a question, an insistence, a plea, a command, a description of a time yet to come, and a reminder that the definition of ‘freedom’ is not given or limited to present enunciations’ (Freedom 24). While Reed writes of being a black artist in the U.S., a nation with an arguably unofficial and unrecognized system of apartheid, and Pollock of being born white during South Africa’s Apartheid era, each speaks to a desire for impossible relation ‘[that] can only be accessed through a disfiguring fantasy of identification that remains blocked by the schism of a racism that is the legacy of the very feeling of knowing a place, longing for its familiarity, knowing permanent exile’ (Pollock, ‘Back’ 71) In naming a desire ‘impossible’ to fulfil under current conditions, Reed and Pollock, in their respective ways, honour the impulse to imagine forward, and artwork’s role in providing a space to encounter and experience this hopeful movement.

In Ettinger, Pollock, and Reed’s conceptual frameworks, anxiety arises cyclically from the subject’s troubled relation to time. Pollock’s idea of natal memory depends on the human experience of lost time, and of losing time—both derived from our awareness of an inevitable mortality. Time, as an inherent element of photography, and a formal challenge in any medium, is also a fundamental concern when approaching the figure and the landscape image. Though landscape’s obvious subject is space, its most central concern is time (Solnit 84). For those who live in the city,
landscape speaks of life slowed down, of leisure, stepping ‘out of the pace and place of production’ and lush landscape imagery speaks of the ‘organic and cyclical time of plant life and the daily cycle of light and darkness’ (Solnit 84). Photographs, Solnit argues, ‘speak of the moment of vision the photograph made permanent,’ of the stop of time for which the aperture was open and light flowed onto the film (or activated the sensor) (84). In Solnit’s view, behind each image of the land lies a movement, a journey: that of a photographer in search of a subject, in search of light (84).

The Place of the Artist in Formal Analysis

The project of this thesis will require a balancing act—remaining attuned to historical and cultural situatedness while attending to the artist’s dialogue with the self, culture, and occasionally, with experiences of trauma. While I will at times consider Rankine and McIntyre’s selves as artists—as expressed in interviews and reflective writing by each—it is not the concern of this project to seek correspondences between their work and their personal or private [selves and] lives. Throughout, I will follow Pollock’s impulse to resist approaching artists ‘as mere reporters, indices, or reflexes of historical legacies as personal suffering’ (After-affects 352). This approach, derived from Warburg’s denunciation of ‘aestheticizing art history,’ or critical expectations which treat the artist as a pacifying source of genius and beauty, allows the work to remain productively unsettling and disruptive (Pollock, After-affects 48). In her critique of interpretation, Sontag proposes that it might be possible to ‘elude’ the interpreters ‘by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so
rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be…just what it is’ (‘Against’ 102). Rankine and McIntyre have done just that—presenting clear surfaces that usher the reader and viewer into an immersive experience, a sensation which at times alluringly resists critical analysis. Through their depictions of subjective moments of encounter—with maternity, with illness, and with landscape—both artists question the security of the self and thus the place of the self in the text or image. Through their experimentation with maximalist and minimalist aesthetics, both artists generate in the reader and viewer a pained longing for a future time not conditioned by the schisms of the present—a future time in which the self might be imagined on other terms.

In Chapter One, I will focus on the place of Claudia Rankine’s third collection, *PLOT* (2001), in her poetic work to date. Significant attention has been paid to her two most recent collections, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), in which she plays with clarity, obscurity, multiple speakers, and images, primarily photographic, to trouble the relationship between seeing and understanding. While these ‘American lyrics’ echo the clarity and multiple yet rooted perspectives of Rankine’s first collection, *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1992), Rankine’s second and third collections, *The End of the Alphabet* (1998) and *PLOT*, mark a significant formal departure. Relying on fragmented narration, dense allusions, and fictionalized characters, both collections unsettle the reader’s ability to access the lyrical or narrative moment. Focusing on *PLOT*, I will closely examine Rankine’s consideration of landscape imagery and mental disintegration as reflected through allusions to the life and works of Virginia Woolf. In my formal analysis, I will draw on Moten’s concepts of improvisation, black performance, and aurality, and Reed’s particular definition of ‘experimentation’ as both an aesthetic category of innovation and as the ‘use of literature to reconfigure blackness and of blackness to
reconfigure literature’ (*Freedom* 8). Unlike Reed, however, I view Rankine’s allusions to Woolf and her writings not merely as citations but as proof of Rankine’s attempt to reconfigure literature such that the female—and maternal—mind and body do not disintegrate in the process of artistic creation.

In Chapter Two, I will explore this surface clarity in Mary McIntyre’s selected works, including images from *A Contemporary Sublime: Photographs 1998-2012* (2013) and, ‘The Path to the Distribution Point of Light’ (2015), an installation purchased by the Hennessy Art Fund for IMMA Collection 2018 and on exhibit at the Irish Museum of Modern Art 11 May through 16 September 2018.\(^\text{14}\) Published on occasion of the exhibit with the same name, *A Contemporary Sublime* includes landscape images spanning McIntyre’s career and ranging in size from 10 centimetres by 13 centimetres to 122 centimetres by 152 centimetres; though not always immediately evident in the text, the variations in size play an important role in McIntyre’s aesthetic. Considering *A Contemporary Sublime* in relationship to her earlier, more figurative images and exhibits, and the ways in which these have been read as reflective of the artist’s gender, I will examine McIntyre’s mid-career shift toward landscape imagery and her more recent shift to highly minimalist indoor images. Rooting my analysis in significant studies of ‘post-Troubles’ photography in Northern Ireland by Colin Graham and Declan Long, and responding to close readings of McIntyre’s work by Suzanna Chan and Slavka Sverakova, I will ultimately depart from their approaches, which focus primarily on identity and a phallocentric model of trauma and repression. Incorporating the photographer’s reflective writing and interviews, including my own 2018 interview with McIntyre, I will explore her

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placement of the figure; the role of minimalism in her style; the connections between her work and Samuel Beckett’s; her focus on light; and ultimately the way in which her landscape images create joint spaces of encounter and longing.

Through my analysis, I will demonstrate the ways in which both artists’ experimentation with the place of the self or the figure challenges prevailing critical understandings of the role of narrative and reality in poetry and photography. To echo Foster’s diction, both artists take what has become formally ‘sedimented’ in their respective media and offer their readers and viewers new articulations of what it means to make art at a time when posttraumatic conditions have disrupted our lines of connection to natal memory and the landscapes of home.
Critics have taken diverse critical approaches to Rankine’s recent works, and many of these have focused on the poet’s engagement with political and social discourse. While Michele Prettyman Beverly has explored Rankine’s work in relation to the discursive features of mourning and black lives, and Amy Moorman Robbins has examined Rankine’s use of hybrid forms as a means of disrupting dominant discourses in American culture, Angela Hume has located in Rankine’s work the development of an antiracist ecopoetics. Other approaches have diverged more widely: where Christopher Nealon examines Rankine’s work within the system of American capitalism, maintaining that despite her many references and allusions, Rankine’s work remains lyrical in its reflection of the movement of the poet’s mind, Reed clearly defines the poet’s work as representative of a new formal mode, ‘postlyric.’ Rankine often enters this critical discourse, curating anthologies which reflect dominant concerns in poetry today, as evident in previously mentioned anthologies co-edited with Sphar and Sewell, and most recently, in American Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement (2018), co-edited with Michael Dowdy.¹

Fewer critics have examined Rankine’s early works, particularly her first three collections: Nothing in Nature is Private; The End of the Alphabet; and PLOT. After

her first, more accessible collection, Rankine’s style became increasingly experimental—incorporating multiple personas, temporal periods, and allusions, and engaging more deeply with visual art. *PLOT*, in particular, features the most consistent and overt allusions to a single author—Virginia Woolf. Proposing that *PLOT* can be read as ‘a long engagement with … To the Lighthouse,’ Reed observes that the collection reveals the extent to which reading ‘can ‘shatter the surface that is the self’’ (*Freedom* 112-113; quoting from Rankine, *PLOT* 43). He also accurately notes that the issues taken up in *PLOT* mirror those of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), namely a generational and historical shift in conceptions of motherhood (113). In his view, ‘Rankine’s text tropes Woolf or, better, cites ‘Virginia Woolf’ the author’ (Reed, *Freedom* 113). It is unclear whether Reed here means ‘trope’ in a musical sense, as in a turn or change, which would result in a more critical, creative move by Rankine; or in a more standard literary sense, as a figurative language or rhetorical device. Whereas Reed ultimately views this engagement with Woolf as citational and thus reflective of Rankine’s increasingly postlyric style, I propose that Rankine’s style in *PLOT* is fractal, and thus locate the development of her postlyric poetics later in her career.² Moreover, I maintain that her engagement with Woolf is reflective of essential formal concerns regarding maximalist aesthetics and how formally to reflect the precarious nature of the self in motherhood and throughout times of illness.

Though Rankine’s engagement with *To The Lighthouse* is vital to the structure and issues of *PLOT*, the collection also features allusions to *The Waves* (1931) and echoes concepts Woolf explores in her critical prose and life-writing, including *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and ‘On Being Ill’ (1930). These multiple allusions reveal that

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² Reed hyphenates the term postlyric in ‘The Erotics of Mourning in Recent Experimental Black Poetry’ (2015) but does not in *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014). In keeping with his original view that the term does not imply a form ‘after’ the lyric, I do not hyphenate the term.
PLOT is not merely an argument for the ways in which reading, generally, disrupts expectations of individuality. Instead, PLOT reveals an artist—Rankine’s main character, Liv—whose sense of self has already been disrupted by the experience of pregnancy, and who is seeking in literary and critical traditions another artist who stood at the forefront of questions regarding formal experimentation, women’s place in society and in the arts, and the place of the self in the text.

This valuation of Rankine’s engagement with Woolf in turn influences the interpretation of visual art in PLOT. The moments in which Rankine refers to photographic images are among the most lucid and accessible in the text, often accompanied by aural, rhythmic play. In contrast, the sections and poems modelled after landscape paintings are among the most complex, and her focus on visual forms reflects the affective intensities of Liv’s struggle with mental and physical coherence during pregnancy. The fact that these ‘landscape poems’ also centre on Woolf’s death creates a connection, though not an equivocation, between Liv’s concerns and Woolf’s. Liv’s concerns are echoed in other allusions to other female writers concerned with motherhood, creation, violence, and nature of reality. Reed characterizes an allusion to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the ‘true real’ toward the end of PLOT—as Liv is examining a photograph—as reflective of the ambiguous significance of photography in Rankine’s postlyric works (Freedom 119). Yet even in texts which incorporate numerous photographic images, Rankine also includes paintings. Citizen incorporates visual art by several contemporary artists and ends the text with a reproduction of Joseph Mallord William Turner’s painting, ‘The Slave Ship,’ and a cropped detail of the painting, ‘Detail of Fish Attacking Slave’ (Rankine, 160-161). In contrast, PLOT focuses primarily on painting, with only a few references to photographic images and improvised moments that mirror theatre and sculpture. And unlike the ‘landscapes’
evoked in *Nothing in Nature is Private*, the painting-gestures in *PLOT* are not ekphrastic in the traditional sense of the term. I thus read *PLOT*’s allusion to Kristeva not for its insight into the role of photography in Rankine’s work, more generally. Instead, I view it as integral to the breadth of allusions to female writers (and characters) throughout *PLOT*, and, specifically, as a conceptual engagement with Kristeva, whose lyrical writings on motherhood in ‘Stabat Mater’ (1977) further illuminate Liv’s preoccupation with maternal love and representation.

While I view *PLOT* as formally different than *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*, Reed’s articulation of postlyric poetics, particularly in light of Rankine’s two most recent collections, is instructive of the forces driving Rankine’s experimentation with the lyric. Rankine’s work, Reed argues, epitomizes postlyric poetics in its use of the fictionality of the first-person pronoun, a construction often assumed to conflate autobiographical and authorial presence and mimic the movements of the poet’s mind (*Freedom* 109). The resultant text thus functions, he notes, ‘as an open, internally differentiated ‘maximal self” without the burden of representation …’ (Reed, *Freedom* 109).

Though Reed notes that Rankine’s work is not serial, he observes that she does return, in her past four collections, to the postlyric self ‘as a surface and the play of deixis,’ or the linguistic choice of using words such as ‘me’ and ‘here,’ which require context in order to be understood (*Freedom* 114). Given that there are moments in and *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* which invite affective response and emotional

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3 Reed borrows Nealon’s phrase from *The Matter of Capital*, p. 51.
4 Reed characterizes postlyric poetics as an emergent form, not a new genre (‘Erotics’ 24). The form draws on the radical thought of feminist and black liberation struggles and seeks to redefine the dominant poetic mode of the last fifty years—the expressive lyric, where poetic expression is tied to a ‘voice’ which in return represents ‘a singular consciousness referred to as a ‘speaker’’ (‘Erotics’ 25). See ‘The Erotics of Mourning…’, p. 25, for more on the role of white avant-garde writers in perpetuating this dominant mode.
connection between the speaker(s) and reader, Reed urges readers that they can still attend to the poem’s emotional resonance ‘Without flattening the several voices … to a single ‘I’ we can identity as ‘Claudia Rankine’’ (Freedom 115). In this view, then, allusions also cannot simply be read as a reflection of a single ‘I’ one could identify with the author.

In the ‘dense network of détourned poetic techniques’ which constitute the postlyric, formal elements associated with the mass media—the appearance of a present moment without dimension, the use of graphic and pictorial elements, and the recontextualization of other texts—work to complicate prevailing ideas of coherent voice and identity, ‘emphasizing the moment of self-expression as a moment of self-othering’ (Reed, Freedom 98). Direct allusion thus reminds readers of ‘the media environment within which this work appears, without being commentary on that environment’ (Reed, Freedom 100). From this perspective, the allusions to other texts, literary conventions, and historical moments in Rankine’s previous four collections make use of ‘the artificiality of the lyric genre,’ and emphasize the importance of ‘the telling rather than the told’ (Reed, Freedom 109-110). Rankine’s speakers, Reed argues, ‘confess the priority of others—especially other texts—for the solidity of their selves (Freedom 114). This emphasis on the ‘telling’ is apparent in PLOT, which, despite its nine sections, can appear like one long dream sequence, demanding that the reader stay within the text or risk losing the work’s thread entirely. And while the fictionality of the ‘I’ in Don’t Let Me Be Lonely is readily apparent, where the texture of diverse voices disrupts the readers’ desire to conflate autobiography and author, this fictionality is more literal, in PLOT, a collection centred on named characters. If PLOT depends on Woolf’s texts for its apparent solidity, it is less certain what this engagement with a white, British author might mean for in a fictional poem centred on
an artist (Liv) whose race is not overtly specified—particularly given the role of race in Reed’s conceptualization of postlyric poetics.

At the end of the text, Liv’s son, Ersatz, who has just been born, turns and considers his mother: ‘the breast a boast / requiring an image: its brown flesh, its darker nipple, hue of / hill, of path, of downward slope’ (Rankine, PLOT 102). Ersatz is the most unusual name in the text, blurring the lines between a ‘real’ character and a substitute for Liv to think about creation more generally; the connotation that the foetus, and then child, may be a ‘spare part’ or of inferior quality complicates Liv’s increasing concern that Ersatz develop as an independent entity without eroding her own sanity and sense of self. Since the text has until this point been mediated through Liv’s and Erland’s perspective, it could be argued that noting the characters’ race(s) might be overly self-conscious for a text which relies on close third, interior narration. Yet once Ersatz is born, once he must begin to develop object permanence and maternal attachment, the reader is brought outside of Liv’s perspective and so views Liv at a greater distance. Viewing the text as one centred on the existential and ethical concerns of a female painter of colour could, in an American context, add to its intellectual and affective force for some readers. Given, however, that the text does not overtly refer to the U.S. in particular, assuming an American sense of racial constructions, or assuming that Liv might be black because Rankine is, risks ignoring her work as part of a tradition of black experimental writing, the radical politics of which discourage reading texts as a direct reflection of the biography or politics of the author (Reed, Freedom 5-6). It may or may not be meaningful that Reed does not refer to Liv’s race, though he highlights his departure from modes of literary analysis that read texts as a reflection of social conditions; instead, he seeks an attunement to texts as
a form of self-production. He also calls on readers and critics to resist the allure of racialized reading, and of assessing texts by their saturation (for example, pre- or overdetermining the meaning of the word ‘master’ in a text by a black author) (Reed, *Freedom* 105). Assuming that the phrase ‘brown flesh’ is racially determining, specific, or central could thus risk assessing *PLOT* by its textual saturation.

I raise this point, in part, because of the extensive writing on Woolf and race—in her writings and as reflected in life-writing, diaries, and letters—and the possibility that there is a place for a productive consideration of the ways in which Rankine and Liv may depart from Woolf, aesthetically, on the grounds of perspectives gained from social and racial position. I am mindful, however, of Reed’s call for a situated formalism and the overall impulse of black experimental writing, which is to look ‘beyond familiar terms of critique or protest that treat form as another kind of content …’ (*Freedom* 2). Reed’s definition of form mirrors Pollock’s articulation of trauma; in each, they warn readers from relying on easy binaries of expression and intention. ‘Form,’ Reed writes, ‘is neither a purely creative act nor a predetermined set of significations that bring to consciousness—through replication or estrangement and critique—the dynamics of the social system with which it is contemporaneous, but something in between’ (*Freedom* 6). While Rankine and Woolf have both written

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5 Moreover, Reed invites readers to consider the challenge ‘to disarticulate race as a pseudo-ontological category from the ethico-political obligations thought to derive from race as ‘lived experience’ (*Freedom* 6).

6 Reed draws on Stephen E. Henderson’s writings on saturation in *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972).

directly about social issues, I see in the work of both a concern with the interrelation of form and content, as well as an insistence that form is not merely a reflection of protest or social injustice. Moreover, because I would maintain that neither Rankine nor Liv need to justify their interest in or connection to Woolf, I will leave that task for another critic.

Without assuming that Rankine’s public persona across essays and interviews is an entirely definitive means of reading her work, it is still productive to examine the development of formal and ethical concerns which may influence the shape of formal experimentation in PLOT. These concerns circle around three key issues: the place of public pain and suffering; the place of the self; and the influence of maternity and motherhood on artists. Moreover, tracing these issues indicates why Rankine chose to engage so deeply with painting, rather than photography, in PLOT.

On Self, Maternity, and Mourning

In a November 2014 interview with Guernica, Claudia Rankine describes her choice to use the second person throughout Citizen as means of avoiding the ways in which ‘the first person would have deactivated the scene’ (Sharma 6). She tells interviewer Meara Sharma that she also found it funny to think about blackness as the second person. ‘Not the first person,’ she says, ‘but the second person, the other person [laughs]’ (Sharma 6). When Sharma asks if Rankine was aware that setting the poems ‘in the ‘I,’” might enable a white reader to read Citizen as ‘a kind of memoir,’ Rankine responds, ‘Exactly.’ She expands:

Because I think of the described dynamics as a fluid negotiation. I don’t think these specific interactions can happen to the black or brown body without the white body. And there are ways in which, if you say, ‘Oh, this happened to me,’ then the white body can say, ‘Well, it happened to her and it has nothing to do
with me.’ But if it says ‘you,’ that you is an apparent part of the encounter. (Sharma 6)

Writing in the second person, Rankine thus places the white reader in a liminal space—caught between witnessing something they have not lived through in their daily life (racial aggressions and micro-aggressions, police targeting, racial profiling) and feeling the weight of collective responsibility for these aggressions.8

This question of limitations to the reader’s understanding is reflected in her thinking on the lyric. In ‘The First Person in the Twenty-First Century,’ Rankine articulates her use of the fragment: ‘The languaged self … in order to keep itself human, in order to cohere, has to fragment’ (‘First’ 132). The illusion that coherence itself is not fragmented, Rankine argues, ‘lands a certain kind of ‘I’ into a singular subject position’; yet that position is necessarily contradicted by the truth that ‘the ‘I’ exists in time and is married to biological, personal, historical, and cultural meaning’ (‘First’ 132). Rankine then performs this reality, stating, ‘I am a black girl in a yellow dress,’ and inviting the reader to consider the ‘adjectival insistence’ and cultural inflection of her diction (‘First’ 132). Though abandoning the fragmented text is a fantasy falsely rooted in a ‘world of homogeneity, a single ‘I,’ the stillness of it fixed by time,’ it is a stillness often assumed to be a privilege (Rankine, ‘First’ 135). Rankine thus asks artists and readers to consider how an assumed privilege, this flatness of one’s conceptions of identity, actually limits and confines form-making.

This concern with lyric subjectivity and form is echoed in an essay featured in a special issue of AGNI entitled ‘The Lowell Trail’ (2012) and dedicated to one of ‘the pale fathers of literature,’ Robert Lowell, whose revealing, experimental use of the first

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8 For more on Rankine’s thinking on the racial imaginary and whiteness, see videos from the ‘On Whiteness’ symposium, held in partnership with The Kitchen (www.thekitchen.org) in New York, 30 June 2018: www.theracialimaginary.org/on-whiteness-symposium-june-30th/.
person in *Life Studies* (1959) shaped confessional poetry for decades (Gewanter 173). In the essay, Rankine imagines an encounter with Lowell, beginning, ‘Another definition of a father is someone who comes apart the closer you are to him’ (‘Another’ 171). As the speaker reflects on how loosely Lowell’s sense of self was held together, she imagines how he ‘would record his voice saying, you should be scared, the first person can’t pull you together’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 171-172). The unexpected intrusion of a recording device distances Lowell, even as the speaker addresses him candidly, even with intimacy: ‘Shit, Pappi, you are reading my mind but did you try?’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 172). The poem shifts, and where the first part of the poem clearly alternated in each line between voices, the two begin to overlap, such that the reader cannot always tell who is speaking. The speaker’s voice breaks in clearly again when she echoes the argument in ‘The First Person in the Twenty-First Century’ regarding the fragmented self: ‘But I am thinking your ill-spirited, broken-down, hell on Main Street, nobody’s here, cooked, first person could be one of many definitions of being me that you have passed on, Pappi’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 172). Tension builds in the poem as Rankine’s speaker and Lowell debate their shared experiences of suffering, their ‘unlikeness’ in ‘the social death of history,’ and their respective relationships to the past conceived as a ‘life sentence’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 172). The tone of the conversation remains gently critical, peppered by ‘maybes’ until the speaker admits she may not have anything to confess, and Lowell stands. ‘Listen girl,’ he begins, ‘I was creating a life study of a monumental first person, a Brahmin first person’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 173). The speaker responds, with a gentle but revealing hesitation in Lowell’s vision: ‘If you need to feel that way—but you are in there and there is nowhere, Pappi. // Join me down here in nowhere, Pappi’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 173). Lowell calls the speaker’s view ‘a strange dream,’ and the speaker corrects him: ‘No,
Pappi, it’s a strange beach, each poem, a strange beach, and if you let in the excess emotion you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 173). Suddenly, the two figures’ ‘unlikeness’ is simultaneously dulled and sharpened, the reference to the Atlantic Ocean likely referring to Lowell and Rankine’s relationship to the East Coast, but possibly also referencing the Atlantic slave trade and the way it positions Rankine’s speaker and Lowell differently in relation to the past, that ‘blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow’ (Rankine, ‘Another’ 172). In this dialogue between Lowell and a persona whose tone echoes that of Rankine, the author, lies a concern further explored in The Racial Imaginary (2015), a text which began as an open letter from Rankine to friends about their experience of writing about race. ‘One way to know if you’re in the presence of—in possession of, possessed by—a racial imaginary,’ Rankine and Beth Loffreda write, ‘is to see if the boundaries of one’s imaginative sympathy line up, again and again, with the lines drawn by power’ (Rankine, Racial 17). ‘Another definition of a father…’ highlights that in ‘each poem, a strange beach,’ the poet must arrive anew to encounter and re-imagine the place of power in prevailing conceptions of lyric subjectivity.

While ‘Another definition of a father…’ initially places Rankine’s speaker in the position of a daughter, her critical yet gentle tone toward Lowell comes to reveal the forced wisdom of a child learning to parent a father. In Rankine’s work, and in the work of James Baldwin, a writer influential to Rankine, American race relations have been articulated via parent/child relationships in revealing ways. In The Fire Next Time, Baldwin argues that ‘The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling,’ citing the

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9 Rankine’s line also echoes the final line of Lowell’s poem, ‘Man and Wife,’ in which a man addresses his wife’s silent back in bed: ‘your old-fashioned tirade— / loving, rapid, merciless— / breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.’ This mirroring further complicates the gendered relationship between Rankine and Lowell.
dissonance between valuing freedom and actually securing it for all, as well as misconceptions of settler-colonial history and gender roles. He continues:

Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Americans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way. And perhaps this attitude, held in spite of what they know and have endured, helps to explain why Negroes, on the whole, and until lately, have allowed themselves to feel so little hatred. (108-109)

This articulation of a pained but intimate relationship is echoed in a personal anecdote which begins Rankine’s essay, ‘The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning’:

A friend recently told me that when she gave birth to her son, before naming him, before even nursing him, her first thought was, I have to get him out of this country. We both laughed. Perhaps our black humour had to do with understanding that getting out was neither an option nor the real desire. This is it, our life. (1)

Integral to Rankine and her friend’s experience to being black in the U.S. is a heightened attention to their ‘precarious’ role as mothers, as well as a deeper knowledge that their particular fear for their children’s lives is a social construct not equally effecting all parents (‘Condition’ 1). In a 2015 interview with The Guardian, Rankine attributes her concern with calling out racial injustices and racial aggressions as she did in Citizen and Don’t Let Me Be Lonely to a daily concern of responsible parenting, especially as the parent of a young woman. Discussing the importance of modelling agency for her daughter, she notes, ‘Nothing I say can equal what she sees me do in this world’ (Cocozza). She cites conversations among leaders of activist movements in the U.S., including Black Lives Matter, about whether black lives also include female lives, given the disparity in media attention when a black female is killed. ‘How do you keep the black female body present,’ Rankine asks, ‘and how do you own value for something that society won’t give value to?’ She notes that if there is an urgency to these questions, ‘it is engendered from being a mother,’ and knowing her child will face what she has faced. At the end of the interview she pauses and adds,
'Her contribution is really her presence.' This attention to the multi-faceted impact of ‘living while black’ in the U.S. often appears as a lonely effort, though it is a loneliness inflected by a complex stance toward social change.

In her poetic work, Rankine’s speakers often appear as individuals, alone, facing visual media and contemplating an ethical, intellectually informed response to affectively wrenching encounters with the traumas of other people. A central concern in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, loneliness was also a formative concern in the writer’s early development. In the essay ‘Adrienne Rich’s Poetic Transformations,’ Rankine attributes her initial understanding of feminism and racism to her first and near simultaneous readings as a nineteen-year-old college student of Adrienne Rich’s *Leaflets* (1962) and *Diving Into the Wreck* (1971-1972), and Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (Introduction xxvii-xxviii).10 She found in both writers a ‘twinned dissatisfaction with systems invested in a single, dominant, oppressive narrative’ and serious ethical considerations of sexism, race, the ‘poisonous’ nature of silence, and the interdependence of ethical personal relationships and ethical political and cultural systems (Rankine, Introduction xxxviii). She describes approaching Rich’s thirteen-section poem, ‘An Atlas of the Difficult World,’ while in graduate school in her late twenties, and being surprised: ‘I … found myself transported by Rich’s profound exploration of ethical loneliness. Rich called forward voices created in a precarious world’ (Rankine, Introduction xxxix). Though Rankine notes coming across the term ‘ethical loneliness’ years later in the work of critic Jill Stauffer, she reflects that she ‘understood Rich to be drawing into her stanzas the voices of those who have been, in the words of Stauffer, ‘abandoned by humanity[,] compounded by the experience of not

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10 This essay appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2016 and was slightly revised for a 2017 introduction to Adrienne Rich’s *Collected Works*; I draw from the latter.
being heard’” (qtd. in Rankine, Introduction xxxix). Rankine summarizes Rich’s collected work as an ethical project in and of itself: ‘a chronicle over half a century of what it means to risk the self in order to give the self’ (Introduction xlvi).\(^{11}\) Rankine approaches Rich’s work as a poet aware of the intimate connection between political awareness and formal innovation. She notes that even in Rich’s earlier, more formally traditional poems, Rich strove to embody what she later calls the ‘liberative language’ of poetry, challenging the restrictive decorum around femininity which did not condone Rich ‘speaking her truth to power’ (Rankine, Introduction xl). This early exposure to the concept of ethical loneliness and to Rich’s call to challenge decorum proves formative not only in Rankine’s political development but in the way she approaches the role of visual media in mourning.

In poetry and essays, Rankine has questioned the role of sentimentality in loss and mourning, often implying that dialogue and lyrical expression are insufficient responses to encountering trauma. About midway through _Don’t Let Me Be Lonely_, a speaker admits, it felt ‘wasteful’ to cry at the television when they saw news coverage of the death of Amadou Diallo, a 23-year-old immigrant from Guinea shot and killed in 1999 by four New York Police Department plain-clothed officers after they mistook him for a rape suspect from one year earlier. The text is disrupted by a still image of Diallo smiling and framed by the graphic outline of a television set (Rankine, _Don’t_ 57). ‘Sometimes I think it is sentimental,’ the speaker continues, ‘or excessive, certainly not intellectual, or perhaps too naïve, too self-wounded to value each life like that, to feel loss to the point of being bent over each time’ (Rankine, _Don’t_ 57). She continues not with a defence of sentimentality or a display of it, but instead a reflection on the private nature of pain:

\(^{11}\) Rankine draws on Baldwin’s language regarding risking the self in _The Fire Next Time_.


There is no innovating loss. It was never invented, it happened as something physical, something physically experienced. It is not something an ‘I’ discusses socially. Though Myung Mi Kim did say that the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space. She did say it was okay to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut, to have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and then to translate it here. She did say, in so many words, that what alerts, alters. (Rankine, Don’t 57)

While the text refers to the physical violence of Diallo’s death, and the physical effects of loss on the speaker, the accompanying image is of Diallo’s smiling face. Rankine thus refuses to objectify Diallo’s death through a photographic image and instead evokes his life; this move stands in stark contrast to the way mass media often depicts racial violence and police brutality in the U.S.

As noted in my introduction, Rankine describes popular demands for Trump to denounce white supremacy after the 2017 violent protest in Charlottesville as a reflection of ‘our national sentimentality’ (‘Charlottesville’ 5). Such sentimentality appears to be rooted in a form of historical amnesia that, Rankine points out, is clearly challenged by mass media. Noting that the ‘spectacle’ of the 2015 massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston might imply ‘an event out of time,’ Rankine notes that the reader should know better than to delude themselves that ‘the killing of black people with white-supremacist justification interrupts anything other than regular television programming’ (‘Condition’ 2). In ‘The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,’ Rankine traces the role of media in mourning the loss of black lives and galvanizing national attention to racial violence to a time when it was not ‘regular programming,’ to which millions, she implies, have become desensitized.

In the essay, Rankine highlights the connections and contrast between the ‘spectacle’ of Michael Brown’s 2014 death, recorded and circulated across multiple media platforms, and Mamie Till Mobley’s request in 1955 for a photograph of the open coffin at the funeral of her son, Emmett Till. Carolyn Bryant, a 21-year-old white
woman, accused the 14-year-old African American boy of flirting with her and 
whistling at a grocery store in Mississippi while Till was on vacation there; as a result, 
Bryant’s husband, Roy Bryant, and her brother-in-law, John W. Milam, abducted, beat, 
and mutilated Till before shooting him and throwing his body in the Tallahatchie River. 
Till’s mother requested that her son’s coffin remain open during the funeral, which was 
attended by tens of thousands of mourners, and, subsequently, photographs of her 
lynched son’s bloated body were taken and published in newspapers and magazines 
across the country. An all-white jury acquitted the Bryant and Milam of the murder in 
1955, but Carolyn Bryant admitted in 2008 that she lied about her interactions with 
Till. Ms. Mobley’s decision, however, denied the ‘etiquette of grief’ and thus 
‘disidentified’ with the tradition of the lynched figure left out in public view as a 
warning to the black community, thereby using the lynching tradition against itself” 
(Rankine, ‘Condition’ 3). In doing so, Rankine writes, Ms. Mobley forged ‘a new 
pathway for how to think about a lynched body,’ one which served as an important 
impetus for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and ’60s, including the 1955 
Montgomery bus boycott (‘Condition’ 3). Fifty-nine years later, the media 
representation of Michael Brown’s death became part of this tradition. Brown, an 18-
year-old African American male was fatally shot six times by 28-year-old police officer 
Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown’s death, the ensuing protests, and the 
authorities’ militarized response spurred nation-wide activism. ‘Whatever their 
reasons,’ in choosing to leave Michael Brown’s body on the pavement for hours after 
his shooting and refusing to allow his mother to see him, Rankine notes that ‘the police 
made mourning his death part of what it meant to take in the details of his story’ 
(‘Condition’ 3). It would be a mistake, she says, to presume that everyone who saw 
Brown’s body also mourned his loss; yet once they saw the image, they were faced
with the decision of whether ‘his dead black body mattered enough to be mourned’ ('Condition' 3-4). Aware that the act of looking risks creating ‘a spectacle of white pornography’ where the dead black body satisfies ‘an illicit desire’ to do harm or see it done, Rankine proposes that a state of national mourning for Brown may force white viewers to recognize that the extent to which black death and mourning has become extraordinarily ordinary ('Condition’ 4). The title, drawn from a statement made by a friend of Rankine’s when asked what it means to be the mother of a black son, accentuates the interplay between motherhood and mourning. The phrase, ‘The Condition of’ holds a double meaning akin to her declaration ‘[t]here is no innovating loss’—suggesting that black life is both characterized by mourning and dependent (conditional) on being able to maintain a state of near perpetual mourning.

Fred Moten’s writings on the aesthetic of the black radical tradition reveal the centrality of motherhood to understanding the nature of black performance in particular, and black radical art more generally. ‘[E]nslavement—and the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance),’ Moten writes, ‘is a being maternal that is indistinguishable from a being material’ (16). Moten’s focus on materiality comes, in part, from his feminist rereading of Marxist theory of subject and object, master and slave relations, and is rooted in Frederick Douglass’ introduction to the horrors of slavery: the ‘heart-rending shrieks’ of his Aunt Hester as she is beaten by a white master (2, 9; Douglass 5). In this ‘terrible spectacle,’ Moten points to the role of ‘the substitutive mother’ of Aunt Hester as indicative of the role of maternity in black performance (3, 241; Douglass 5).12 Given the crisis of the ‘miscegenative origin of

12 Moten draws the phrases ‘heart-rending shrieks’ and ‘terrible spectacle’ from Douglass’s text, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845).
black/American identity,’ a lost claim to origins—maternal, historical, and cultural—marks the animating force, pain, and joy of black music and poetry (Moten 71). ‘Black performances,’ Moten writes, ‘are the discourse of the (m)other, the discourse of the substitution of the mother, the discourse of motherless children, a discourse that lies before its origin …’ (Lippit 1339-1340).13 Moten extends this reading of black performance to the display of Till’s photograph. Critiquing Barthes’ ‘use of the black example’ and rendering ‘of naïve blackness’ in Camera Lucida (1981, English transl.) and ‘The Family of Man,’ Moten juxtaposes Ms. Mobley’s vocalized insistence that her son’s photo be reproduced and shown in order to spur social reform against Barthes’ refusal to display a less violent image of his mother in Camera Lucida (290: 50n; 206). For Ms. Mobley, the insistence to show her son’s photograph reflects a mourning that must be performed (Moten 198). For Ms. Mobley, Moten writes, ‘the discovery of a photograph in the fullness of its multiple sensuality moves in the drive for a universality to come, one called by what is in and around the photograph—black mo’nin’’ (206).14 Here, Rankine and Moten’s references to new pathways and a time to come echoes Reed’s concept of ‘Freedom Time,’ discussed earlier as a drive rooted in ‘the still unrealized visions of a liberated future of the past and our own moment’ (Freedom 24). This fluid sense of time and resistance to passive or distant mourning reverberates in Moten’s writings. Ms. Mobley’s vocalized grief performs ‘a resurrective or (second) reconstructive improvisation through death’s pride …’ (Moten 209). He continues:

Black Art, which is to say Black Life, which is to say Black (Life Against) Death, which is to say Black Eros, is the ongoing production of a performance

13 Lippit’s review quotes from a manuscript of Moten’s In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (2003); the referenced quote is not in the published copy yet offers the most succinct, and affecting, summary of the essential role of maternity in the text.
14 Moten refers to Ms. Mobley by name from her first marriage, Bradley; for consistency, I use the name Rankine uses.
… rupture and collision … motherless child, childless mother, heartrending shriek, levee camp moan, grieving lean and head turn … The ways black mo’nin’ improvises through the opposition of mourning and melancholia, disrupts the temporal framework … such that an extended, lingering look at—

aesthetic response to—the photograph manifests itself as political action. Is the display of the picture melancholic? No, but it’s certainly no simple release or mourning either. Mo’nin’ improvises through that difference. You have to keep looking at this so you can listen to it. (209-210)

With the production of *Citizen*, Rankine anticipated this need to look and to listen; leaving open space in the ‘documentary text,’ Rankine allowed room for future reprints to include the victims of the Charleston shootings, and possibly others. Evoking Moten and Reed’s sense of the role of temporality, she explains: ‘The book sits on top of a devastating and despairing reality that is both moving forwards and backwards’ (Cocozza). In the black radical and experimental tradition, photography is intimately tied to death, as for Sontag and Barthes, but not only in a melancholic sense, not bound only to the past. Instead, the act of looking and the role of the photograph speak to what is to come and the hope for a greater liberation. Given the historically experimental relationship between photography and mourning in the black radical tradition, it is fitting that Rankine incorporates photographic images into texts which examine violent loss—*Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*—and painting to explore pregnancy, even as Rankine renders motherhood and pregnancy as precarious experiences.

**Beyond Ekphrasis: Painted Landscapes in *Nothing in Nature is Private* and *PLOT***

Rankine’s aesthetic interest in ekphrasis begins in her first work, *Nothing in Nature is Private*, where one can also trace the start of many of Rankine’s central formal and political concerns. In the title, Rankine marks the start of a career-long exploration of what it means to exist in private spaces and claim the first person in a country where ‘billions of lives never mattered’ (Rankine, *Don’t 23*). As in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*,
Rankine’s speaker hovers between the living and the dead. Unlike the speakers of
Rankine’s latter works, individuals who oscillate between the social intimacies of
friends, editors, and strangers on the subway and the solitude of life at home either
alone or with a partner, the speakers in Rankine’s first collection manoeuvre within a
family of origin. In ‘Birthright,’ the lines between living and dead, father and daughter
overlap: ‘I dream I visit my own grave / but I am not dead. I lie there uncovered, / my
face, the image of my father’s. / I turn away from my body, his’ (Rankine, Nothing 7).
In each of Rankine’s later collections, the speakers are pregnant, are mothers, or are in
caregiver or supportive roles for others, yet here the speaker can turn to her mother to
attempt to learn another way of coping than this identification with the dead or dying.
The speaker shares, ‘Repeatedly, I ask my mother why / I feel naked in familiar places.
// She wonders what I fear / that she does not already fear’ (Rankine, Nothing 7). When
the speaker’s mother says that the speaker ‘never looked worse,’ the speaker replies,
‘Who she sees, the girl facing me / in the bathroom mirror, replies: \ The way I look
mirrors my father. / I am everywhere in the faces of black men. / Imagine the concern I
feel for myself’ (Rankine, Nothing 8).

Though Rankine uses a lyric ‘I’ that appears consistent in tone and style across
the collection, she also moves into the third person to highlight the extent of her
speakers’ attachment/detachment, and, at times, into the second person to highlight the
extent of identification between the speaker and her lover, whom she addresses. The
book’s second sequence, ‘In Transit’ charts a woman’s fear when her lover is not with
her. She urges him: ‘But, love, this is America and you / are what is human in my
world. / Whenever I hear of another black / man dying, it’s again clear’ (Rankine,
Nothing 12). Mourning takes on physical form in ‘Mourning Song,’ a poem also rich in
allusions. Opening, ‘The urge was to slice into myself— / to see my blood and know /
who it came from—/ how it got into the world,’ the poem evokes the opening to Sylvia Plath’s ‘Cut’ from *Ariel* (1961): ‘What a thrill——/ My thumb instead of an onion. / The top quite gone / Except for a sort of a hinge // Of skin, …’ (Rankine, *Nothing* 19; Plath, ‘Cut’ 13) But whereas Plath continues with a troubling comparison ‘The stain on your / Gauze Klu Klux Kan,’ Rankine’s poem ends with a direct statement of trying to make sense ‘again, of the flood / giving way around me’ (Plath, ‘Cut’ 14; *Nothing* 19). Rankine also echoes Plath’s own ‘Morning Song,’ which evokes the unsettling confusions of new motherhood through a woman’s declaration to her newborn, ‘I’m no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand.’ These allusions constitute part of Rankine’s ongoing reckoning with the influence of white writers, such as Lowell and Plath, in the confessional and avant-garde tradition, an engagement continued into her second collection, *The End of the Alphabet,* a re-envisioning of John Berryman’s *The Dream Songs* (1964).

While *Nothing in Nature is Private* meets more traditional expectations of lyric registers, Rankine begins the aural experimentation and linguistic disruption that comes to characterize later works. The four poems constituting the book’s second section are told in the patois of a man and a woman from the West Indies who immigrate to the U.S. only to learn the harsh realities of life in the U.S.: ‘America go kill you, / but if you feel you must, / go ‘long, go ‘long’ (Rankine, *Nothing* 37). The collection ends with a series of poems figured after landscapes: ‘On the Shore’, ‘Sunset Returning,’ ‘Landscape at Dawn,’ and ‘Man and Woman in Landscape’ (Rankine, *Nothing* 64, 66, 72, 75). While Rankine creates an intimacy between the individuals in the poems and the physical landscape, the poems remain more traditionally ekphrastic—using the landscape to add visual images, not to disrupt the coherence of the poem.
In *PLOT*, the opposite is the case, and the text’s visual disruption reaches its height in the sequence, ‘Eight Sketches: After Lily Briscoe’s Purple Triangle.’ Reed argues that in this sequence, despite the echo of words like ‘purple’ and ‘hush,’ Rankine’s engagement with Woolf is paratactic, and at the level of concept, with the shared concept being the idea that ‘‘Mother and child then—objects of universal veneration…—might be reduced … to a purple shadow without irreverence’’ (*Freedom* 113, quoting Woolf, *Lighthouse* 59). This allusion to *To the Lighthouse*, in Reed’s view, refers to Mr. Ramsay’s concern with adequate representation and representational norms (*Freedom* 113). The passage Rankine cites, however, evokes not Mr. Ramsay but one of Woolf’s central characters, a painter named Lily, and a gentleman visiting the Ramsays, Mr. Bankes. ‘Eight Sketches’ thus evokes female concerns regarding representation, concerns which also centre around motherhood and women’s place in society.

As the extent of Rankine’s allusions reveals, Woolf is not merely a passive interlocutor in *PLOT*. The vastness of research on Woolf and the variety of critical approaches taken to her work suggest that there are, in some ways, many Woolfs. Rankine’s interest appears to be in the feminist author relentlessly focused on the question of self-representation, women’s role in society, and the ethics of visual representation. Though many of Woolf’s works are highly visual, and often described as post-impressionistic, it is telling that Rankine chose to focus her poem-sketches on *To the Lighthouse*, which Maggie Humm has described as an artist-novel (4). The deep engagement of Woolf with the arts is well known and widely documented. As an artist, her sister Vanessa Bell defied traditional taboos against women painting nudes and challenged the representational norms of portrait painting (Gillespie 131, 127). Vanessa’s paintings often inspired Virginia’s writings, and their dialogue was a means...
through which the two considered ‘artistic creativity vs. physical procreativity,’ or the choice to work as an artist or as a mother (Gillespie 136; 134). While not a visual artist herself, Virginia Woolf was deeply interested in ekphrasis, often describing art objects in her novels in order to reveal her characters’ aesthetics, explore the intersection of artistic and social themes, and ‘puncture the reality of time’ (Humm 12). Woolf’s own, often-debated aesthetics blend elements of post-impressionism and realism, and imitated technical elements of photography; ultimately, however, Linden Peach argues, Woolf’s realistic aesthetic is a visual aesthetic (109). ‘Shifting the emphasis from ‘observed objects’ to ‘observing subjects,’” he argues, ‘is an important element in Woolf’s ‘realist’ perspective …’ (Peach 116). Jane Goldman reads Woolf’s style of ‘prismatic colourism’ over traditional chiaroscuro as part of her overall efforts to reconceive subjectivity in prose and unsettle the dualistic conception of art and nature in Aristotelian art theory (49-50, 55, 48). Engagement with Woolf’s work and life, then, is a rich means through which to explore the representation of women and motherhood, as well as subjectivity and objectification in the structure of representation. These concerns with the aesthetics of high modernism, and the representation of reality, contribute to the maximalist and fractal aesthetic of PLOT.

Fractal aesthetics are rooted not only in poetic tradition, as such, but in science. Taking her inspiration from mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot’s theory of the deep logics and patterns that govern apparently turbulent or chaotic structures, and his subsequent term for these configurations—fractals—poet Alice Fulton proposes that Mandelbrot’s insights regarding turbulence are helpful in describing poetry of volatile, as opposed to fixed, form (62-63). The curved, non-linear structure of space-time

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15Mandelbrot’s research on irregular structures that contain just enough regularity such that they can be described confirmed other theories that ideal Euclidian forms rarely occur in nature (Fulton 54-55). Conceiving of the lyric as a ‘natural’ form is thus inherently false.
itself is an example of fractal form, and this alternative and deeper understanding of reality, Fulton argues, has expressed itself in twentieth century aesthetics, often characterized by non-objective art and asymmetrical or turbulent forms (56). In poetry, then, fractal verse—as opposed to free verse—is composed of digressions and interruptions in rhythm; multi-directional movement and rhythm; spontaneous linguistic gestures; juxtapositions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture; and fragmentation—all regarded as formal functions rather than ‘lapses into formlessness’ (57, 58, 71, 58).

Throughout PLOT, Rankine plays with linguistic gestures, as in poems titled ‘Proximity of Inner to Her’ and ‘A short speech entitled Proximity of Weary to Wary,’ and ‘Or Passing the Time with Some Rhyme,’ which features complex, playful variations on an aba end rhyme (30, 36, 76). Moments of drama and intimacy in PLOT depend on unexpected juxtapositions: emotionally restrained, visually disrupted poem-paintings are placed beside the characters’ playful, somewhat bawdy pillow talk about The Confessions of St. Augustine (between AD 397 and 400); and dream sequences are followed by dense, textured passages in which it is difficult to place Liv in any one time or place. Transparent lines, Fulton notes, are defined not necessarily by their lyric registers but by their lucidity, and may be constructed from exposition, reportage, platitudes, advertisements, or clichés (76). In PLOT, many of the most transparent or lucid passages include references to images, as when Liv is viewing her child through a sonogram, ‘as the chilled gel brings to the screen inked in. / black and white. glimpsed. scrutinized. joy,’ and when Liv is watching television because she is unable to sleep (Rankine, PLOT 12, 21). Because these passages are often brief, sometimes only a few lines, they demand that the reader remain on her feet, poised for a switch in registers. Lucidity is also achieved through ‘limbic lines,’ Fulton’s term for lines with emotional affect (81). These well-placed emotional asides often break through dense, textured
passages in *PLOT*, as when Liv’s voice arises from mental turmoil, imploring, ‘Can I love now / please?’ (*PLOT* 74). Yet even the affective power of Rankine’s declarative, lyric passages begin and end in silence and are internally disrupted by forcefully-drawn equivalences, as in the end of ‘Proximity’: ‘…how many days can we hush up, how many hours? To know / ugliness and yet the beauty we are is the battlefield we live / is the body to use in favour—’ (*PLOT* 95). ‘Fractal poetics,’ Fulton explains, ‘is interested in that point of metamorphosis, when a structure is incipient, all threshold, a neither-nor’; *PLOT* moves the characters and the readers near and through such thresholds (63). Fulton’s injunction to ‘Consider water’ or to look to clouds in the sky as examples of fractal form takes on particular meaning in the consideration of formal movement in *PLOT*, a book saturated with rivers, sky, clouds, near-drowning, paint-water, and bodily fluid—all apt images to create a sense of perpetual transition (63).

Fulton characterizes fractal form as a maximal aesthetic, though not in the modernist sense. In modernist maximalism as espoused by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, the poem was a gesture of mourning for lost mythologies and civilizations, rooted in nihilism and symbolic signification (Fulton, *Feeling* 66, 73). In contrast, the postmodern poem, and therefore the fractal form, Fulton explains, is an ‘architecture of excess,’ composed from ‘the plethora of what-is,’ and the concreteness of metaphor (67, 73). And in contrast to Pound and William Carlos Williams’s injunctions to root organic verse in ordinary speech, fractal verse is not a voice-based aesthetic (Fulton 67). Though *PLOT’s* allusions are preoccupied with another artist of high modernism, Virginia Woolf, the work’s excessive experimentation, linguistic play, and celebration of ordinary details that serve no apparent narrative function are characteristic of postmodern and fractal forms. The diverse, nearly improbable constructions of voice, self, and body—seen in the final section, voiced by a pre-verbal infant; the framed
word-sketches; and poems which meld gestures from television, theatre, landscape painting, and sculpture—contribute to ‘the maximal self’ Reed identifies. Fulton’s framework, however, provides more insight into the role of spontaneity, music, and visual art in *PLOT*.

Departing from Romantic poetics, as epitomized by William Wordsworth’s call in the influential ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) to root one’s poetry in ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and ‘emotional recollected in tranquillity,’ fractal poetics achieve spontaneity through intention and even calculation (Wordsworth 138; Fulton 65). Fractal spontaneity, Fulton explains, refers to linguistic gestures that appear, to the reader, to be improvised, yet are inherent to the structure of the poem (65-66). Within the black radical tradition, Moten defines improvisation as ‘a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation, speech and writing’ (63). Improvisation, Moten writes, is ‘never manifest as a kind of pure presence’; it is neither the ‘multiplicity of present moments’ nor is it governed by ‘an ecstatic temporal frame wherein the present is subsumed by past and future’ (64). In *PLOT*, the overall structure is improvisational; though the book’s nine parts mirror the nine months of pregnancy, the vague temporal location of the Afterword, in which Liv’s child speaks, and marked departures in style between each section trouble any sense of strict parallelism between section and month, past and present. As the book progresses and the allusions to Woolf and her work increase, Liv struggles with mental turmoil and disintegration of the self—reflected in Rankine’s increasing use of improvisational switches in tone, scene, lucidity, and lyrical register.

From the moment she learns she might be pregnant, Liv grapples with the distinction between her sense of self and the selves that will develop over the next nine months—her self as a mother, and her child’s self. When Liv begins to hear the child’s
cries in the middle of the night, months before he is born, it is ‘as if the hood of motherhood was meant to / blur herself from herself, a dark cloth dropping over her eyes / until the self of selfless near arose’ (Rankine, PLOT 20). There is no clear moment of epiphany when Liv ceases to worry, yet at the end of the sixth ‘month’ ‘the unborn answers,’ seeming to offer some comfort to his mother, ‘After birth, I will / perpetually stir. We will swirl together in this’ (Rankine, PLOT 68). This interlude begins ‘Always,’ as if the unborn has been speaking in a language or medium to which the reader is not privy. While offering a moment of affective intimacy, the section still ends in an admission of uncertainty, with the unborn child admitting, ‘Still, I know it is not pleasing, / never pleasing to see our protection trembling’ (Rankine, PLOT 68). Throughout PLOT, neither Liv nor the reader are entirely bound by the poems’ moments; scenes shift, and transparent passages that invite the reader’s identification with the characters are bound by strings of abstractions (‘blessedly the absolute miscarries’), broken dialogue (‘‘What kind of log is that?’’), and aural play (‘For this world, oh this whorl is a woo’) (Rankine, PLOT 52, 56, 76). Between the two sections with the densest allusions to Woolf lies a sequence, ‘Intermission in Four Acts,’ where Liv, Erland, and the first person alternate. In Act I, Rankine invites the reader to think beyond the page, beyond the appearance of a plot: ‘A world outside this plot prevents our intermission from being / uninvolved—a present, its past in the queue outside the toilet, / in each drink dulling the room’ (PLOT 49). Rankine grapples with the implications of narrative form and its ability to contain moments of lyrical intensity: ‘Our plot assumes / presence. It stays awkward, clumping in the mouth: I shall so / want’ (Rankine, PLOT 49). While Rankine pushes the limits of narrative, the poem’s speaker confesses a reliance on it: ‘I cannot release us to here, cannot know and still go on as if all / the world were staged’ (PLOT 49). The tension of the first act turns on
rough abstractions of survival: ‘Plot, / its grammar, is the linen no one disgorges into’ and ‘But some / of us have drowned and coughed ourselves up’ (Rankine, *PLOT* 49). Yet Act II ushers the reader into a physically bound space with the prosaic, though rhyming, exposition, ‘On the street where children now reside, the speed limit is 25’ (Rankine, *PLOT* 50). Even in poems that disrupt the use of white space, and thus the reader’s understanding, Rankine uses consonance and assonance to offer lyrical moments: ‘a vanishing link & / gillery where surface plummeted’ and ‘be made to bend to a quiet?’ (*PLOT* 65). Appearing to exist primarily for the aural and affective pleasure, these sonically evocative lines are in stark contrast to moments when Rankine refers to sound, seemingly outside the poem and bursting forth from the visual: in the fourth ‘month,’ ‘the conceived ‘we,’’ depicted as a ‘bruised purple surface,’ erupts into sound: ‘hush she hush she // hush // shush rushed within’ (*PLOT* 43). ‘Pulled back tautly,’ the surface breaks and ‘bits of hue and cry thrust’ (Rankine, *PLOT* 43). Though not in dialogue with each other, both Fulton and Moten use both physical and highly visual metaphors to describe such acts of improvisation. ‘Riffing and jamming, rough edge and raw silk,’ Fulton writes, ‘such wet-paint effects take the form of long asides, discursive meanderings, and sudden shifts in diction or tone’ (66). For Moten, it is ‘a matter of sight’ and ‘a matter of time, the time of a look ahead,’ a time and shape created ‘in and as light,’ enacted through ‘the illuminative event’ (64). Rankine’s improvisation is thus both an aural and visual aspect of fractal form, challenging lyrical assumptions about the spoken nature of poetry, the placement of the figure (rather than the voice-bound speaker), and the effects of white space.

Inherent in the experimental nature of fractal verse is its relationship to visual rupture. ‘As free verse broke the pentameter, fractal verse breaks the poem plane,’ Fulton declares (74). Fulton compares the poem plane to the picture plane in painting: a
two-dimensional surface that renders the illusion of spatial depth. Historically, Fulton notes, poetry has maintained the single plane seemingly necessitated by the horizontal and vertical movement that is reading (75). In contrast, disrupting the poem plane with a justified flush-right margin, for example, returns the reader’s gaze to the surrounding white space, and, Fulton argues, subtly reinforces both the content of the poem and its linguistic materiality (74). In PLOT, the more Rankine disrupts the poem plane with varying justification, frames, and caesuras, the more many readers will, somewhat ironically, cling to the apparent aspects of content—Liv and Erland’s relationship, Liv’s pregnancy and visual art, and the physical world around them. In doing so, Rankine demands that the reader constantly consider and reconsider the relationship between the visual, formal experimentation, and the more physically-grounding aspects of content.

Fulton proposes that poets can build spatial depth—on the page of the poem and in the reader’s mind—by ‘shifting its linguistic densities,’ much as painters use colour, shape, and lines to create distance on the canvas:

The poem’s transparent, ‘easy’ passages impart the sensation of negative space; they vanish into meaning when read rather than calling attention to their linguistic presence. More textured language, on the other hand, refuses to yield its mass immediately. The eye rests on top of the words, trying to gain access, but is continually rebuffed. Such (relatively) opaque sections assume the solidity of positive space. … Planes of varying densities move us into and out of the poem, as if it were a field of three dimensions. We gaze ‘through’ thin lines and are deflected to the surface by ‘showier,’ distracting, dense language. (76)

This emphasis on the ‘background’ texture of a poem, and on its use of space, rather than on the often-foregrounded self, changes the nature of perspective in a poem. ‘The emphasis on ground rather than figure,’ Fulton explains, ‘necessarily changes the poem’s point of view’ (69-70). Adjusting the poem’s depth of field, Fulton argues, enables readers to experience the poem ‘as a construct of varying focal lengths’; while Fulton switches to a photographic metaphor, her emphasis on the poet’s ability to build
distance through texture, lucidity, and density remains (76). Rankine so disrupts the reader’s literal and mental field of vision throughout the text: through her highly visual diction (‘proximity,’ ‘surface,’ and ‘distance’ repeated between four and six times, respectively); the framed poems in ‘Eight Sketches…’; sequences conceived as landscapes; and the incorporation of television, sonograms, theatre, and sculpture.

The brief moments of clarity in which Rankine alludes to Woolf roots the reader, in the midst of Liv’s growing concerns over her ability to be both a mother and an artist, in an intellectual dialogue with another writer. The way Rankine refracts these allusions—through enjambment, caesura, and poetic ‘framing’—increase the poems’ texture, leaving the meaning dependent on the contribution of the reader. Allusions to *To the Lighthouse* begin in the fourth movement, or ‘month,’ and entail a sequence of poems, ‘Eight Sketches After Lily Briscoe’s Purple Triangle,’ in which lines, enjambment, caesura, and all disrupt the poem plane. While the sequences bookending these ‘sketches’ all evoke parenthood—a memory of Liv’s parents; a trial over perceptions of maternal responsibility; humorous interactions between Liv and Ersatz; reflections on the world around them—in the fourth ‘month,’ Liv appears alone, and the reader is presented with images depicting her struggle to represent maternity. Though visually disruptive, the first poem, or sketch, keeps the reader in a nearly compulsive lyrical loop. Echoing Lily Briscoe’s ongoing painting of James and Mrs. Ramsay, Liv creates, ‘a portrait,’ beginning ‘bruised // triangular pelvic-shaped purple / darkening so much’ (Rankine, *PLOT* 40). Tying Lily’s ‘triangular purple shape’ of a mother and child, ‘objects of universal veneration’ which might ‘be reduced … to a purple shadow without irreverence’ directly to the womb, Rankine blurs the lines between surface, self, other, body, and canvas, ending the poem with an aside or caption, ‘(triangulated so that the obstruction holding shadow is the self / obtruded,
reflecting its surface, surfacing up its source, true’ (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 59; *PLOT* 40). Where Lily, in *To the Lighthouse*, contemplates Mrs. Ramsay’s approach to motherhood from the perspective of a woman determined not to marry, ambivalently praising and judging Mrs. Ramsay, Liv, in *PLOT*, appears to face Mrs. Ramsay from the full weight of pregnancy, of trying to intellectually conceive of how she will continue as ‘A face silenced by its own resignation to its roots. // A face as mother, a shadowing other, an unyielding / surface in waste and worse—’ (*PLOT* 41). Churning with nausea, ‘a sea she bares in herself for herself,’ bruises, eruptions, and shatterings, Liv encounters her own work, and Woolf’s, until the lines between Liv and Mrs. Ramsay disappear, though the latter is never mentioned by name, only evoked by Lily’s painting (Rankine, *PLOT* 42). As in Woolf’s novel, where the reader
Eight Sketches

After Lily Britson's Purple Triangle

in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child in hope that the mother and child are meant to be

an exertion into

need relating to

released to being

without surfeit: nothing, no moment in exceed

(to land as inception, beginning now, despite the smoldering
other surfacing up to smother, to begin again, newly to be, and
in being, belong

from PLOT, p. 37
witnesses glimpses of Lily’s painting twice before hearing a description of it (a painting which also continues to change throughout the novel), Rankine’s ‘sketches’ remain provisional, open to the painter’s touch and the reader’s involvement. Yet this openness troubles Liv, caught in the conflicting forces within her—‘a hurt progeny to a live evil living hymn within’ (PLOT 44). Liv calls out, questioning whether her work has meaning: ‘the surface […] is the damaged beauty of what?’ (PLOT 44). The plea continues onto the next page, where the frames disappear and left-hand text alignment returns except for the right-aligned, ‘…of what? God help us, what?’ (PLOT 45). This moment of affective intensity is then broken by a joke between Liv and Erland, and a reference to St. Augustine’s Confessions, punning on Liv’s cry out to god. Rather than undercut Liv’s frustration, this intimate juxtaposition of pain and humour highlights the ordinary nature of Liv’s struggles, an unsentimental move that ultimately reveals the depths of her pain.

Liv’s concern regarding the stability of the self returns in the fifth month, intensifying with allusions to Woolf’s suicide by drowning. Opening with a dialogue where voices debate the appearance of ‘a log…a black log of soaked bark like floating fur,’ the brief scene evokes the boys who found Woolf’s body (Rankine, PLOT 48). Thinking it was a log floating downstream, they threw stones at it before wading in and finding the body of a woman in a fur coat (Lee, Woolf 752). Rankine’s sudden shift away from Woolf’s body to an ‘Intermission in Four Acts,’ poems driven more by physical location and intellectual wondering, appear to enact a certain distancing, a calm acceptance, perhaps a refusal to mourn, to be affected; yet the image of a drowned woman remains in the reader’s view, returning in the sixth month, where Liv creates a ‘Painting after the death of Virginia Woolf entitled: Beached Debris’ (PLOT 54).
Throughout the section, poems on the left-hand page are juxtaposed against framed ‘paintings’ on the right. The first poem begins: ‘The painting, Liv knows, has to be truer than its reflection. / The subject must be erased though the painting is saturated / by what was felt, what was seen by the erased face’ (*PLOT* 54). Rankine thus reveals Liv’s concern with the necessary failures of representation and the viewer’s affective response. Yet like the speakers in *Citizen*, Liv persists in attempting to process loss in and through her body. In the second poem, Liv asks herself, ‘Or is the self (she paints) insulated from itself because it has / been handheld, occupied by everyone?’ (*PLOT* 56). In a sequence where the lines between figures and landscapes blur, Rankine thus explores the simultaneously protective and revealing nature of representation—how it both offers self-expression and opens oneself to the gaze of others.

Rankine’s return to the image of a log evokes Woolf’s own return to the image within her novels. At the end of chapter ten, Lily gazes over the sea at the island, watching the wake of the boat with Mr. Ramsay, the children, and the father and son assisting them, and sees ‘a log wallowing down one wave; a gull riding on another’ (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 215). Dipping her fingers into the water, Lily thinks ‘About here … a ship had sunk’ and murmurs ‘how we perished, each alone’ (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 215). Chapter eleven opens with Lily considering how much depends ‘upon distance: whether people are near us or far from us’ (Woolf, *Lighthouse* 216). Through these allusions, Rankine evokes, from beyond the pages of *PLOT*, Lily’s thoughts on mortality, loneliness, and intimacy, and hearkens back to Lily’s thoughts, earlier in the novel, of drowning. The image of a log in water returns in *The Waves*, when Bernard laments, ‘I cannot keep myself together,’ and fatigued and confused about whether to move on confesses, ‘I am like a log slipping smoothly over some waterfall’ (Woolf, *Waves* 133). Gillespie argues that the nine sections of *The Waves* ‘echo nine months
from conception to birth as the cycles of days, years, and lives repeat themselves as waves”; thus, the entire structure of *PLOT* could be said to mirror Woolf’s later novel as well (135). Conceptually, too the direction of Bernard’s thoughts echo Liv’s concerns about visuality and physical disintegration:

> I am not a judge. I am not called upon to give my opinion. Houses and trees are all the same in this grey light. Is that a post? Is that a woman walking? Here is the station, and if the train were to cut me in two, I should come together on the farther side, being one, being indivisible. (Woolf, *Waves* 133)

In the poem accompanying the painting ‘Beached debris III,’ Rankine quotes from Woolf’s previous paragraph and indirectly refers to the novel’s title: ‘Her landscape, in waves, held me strangely from / inception: ‘Now far off down the river I hear the chorus…”’ (*PLOT* 58). In evoking Bernard, who states at the end of the novel, ‘I am not one person; I am many people; I do not know altogether who I am … or how to distinguish my life from theirs,’ and who critics have associated with Woolf, Rankine incorporates Woolf’s preoccupation with the integrity or falseness of the self (Woolf, *Waves* 156; Parsons x). In the poem, Liv contemplates, ‘I think I am open to experiencing all drowning,’ but admits

> I remain suspicious of landscape that is a mental rehearsal set down to wash recognition out of mind. I see there is meant to be plot, a burial, but the beginning of reflection should have fewer maybes and tension should exist between the bank (our solidity) and the river (our dissolution).’ (*PLOT* 58)

Summoning various meanings for ‘plot,’ Rankine questions the very tenets of artistic representation, placing Liv in a liminal space between solidity and dissolution. Woolf admittedly conceived of *The Waves* not as a novel but as a musical arrangement, telling composer and friend Ethel Smyth, ‘my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot’ (qtd. in Parsons v). Moreover, Vanessa praised *The Waves* for the way it evoked the experience of ‘having a baby’ and for its successful rendering of maternal
Holt 92

themes Vanessa had sought to explore in her painting, ‘The Nursery’ (Gillespie 135). Given its extensive exploration of narrative, selfhood, and maternity, The Waves is a rich literary precedent for Rankine’s drive to push writing to visual and fractal extremes.

This concern with the solidity of where one self ends and another begins also appears in ‘On Being Ill,’ where Woolf refers to ‘those embryo lives which attend about us in early youth until ‘I’ suppressed them’ (Essays 107). The repeated ‘I’ in Rankine’s ‘Beached debris IV’—‘murmuring / face, facing: a banked stamina called: I, I, I’—appears both in To The Lighthouse and The Waves, when Mr. Ramsay and Bernard contemplate their place among other writers (PLOT 61; Woolf, Lighthouse 117, Waves 143). The one instance where Rankine overtly ‘cites’ Woolf, the author, and not Woolf’s text, echoes these concerns about the place of the self: “What would the world be without ‘I’ in it?’ (Virginia Woolf)’ (PLOT 62). This quote appears not in Woolf’s personal writings but in slightly different form in The Waves, when Bernard asks, ‘But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blues, red—even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through’ (162). Contemplating their relationship to landscape, to other writers, and even to their own artistic materials, Woolf’s characters thus whisper beneath the surface of PLOT, echoing Liv’s struggle with adequate representation.

Other conceptual references to Woolf’s work appear in brief flashes throughout the collection. In the ‘Afterword,’ Ersatz declares, ‘Innocence in no sense, anon, aground. A soul knows. Death is / not the title of this project’ evoking Woolf’s writings on the forced anonymity of female writers in A Room of One’s Own and her diary entry from 17 February 1922, ‘I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual’ (PLOT 100; qtd. in Lee i). Rankine’s conception of the self in the text as a figure
shadowed in a landscape seems nearly forged from Woolf’s description in *A Room of One’s Own* of meeting the ‘I’ while reading:

One had a sense of physical well-being in the presence of this well-nourished, well-educated, free mind, which had never been thwarted or opposed, but had had full liberty from birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked. All this was admirable. But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’ One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether indeed it was a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter ‘I.’ (98)

The subtle parallels between Woolf’s aesthetic interests and the central concerns of *PLOT* enable Rankine to contrast limbic lines of affective intensity with conceptual avenues through which to consider how female artists have experimented with the place of the self.

This concern with female creation and artistic agency is quietly echoed in allusions to other writers as well. In ‘Dream Play,’ Liv’s recurrent fear of miscarriage echoes a climactic scene from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606) in which Lady Macbeth attempts to rub blood off her hands after inciting her husband to murder. In *PLOT*, the dialogue appears to occur between Liv and Erland: ‘Where’s the baby? he asks. / I haven’t got it, she says. / What’s in your stomach then? / The blood’s run out. / The blood’s run out? Where out? / Out, out, and it’s taken the thing with it. / Are you mad?’ (*PLOT* 22). In *Macbeth*, the scene marks the beginning of the couple’s joint descent into madness, as well Lady Macbeth’s anguish over her inability to bear children.\(^\ast\)

This concern with maternity is echoed in a more subtle allusion in ‘Beached debris IV.’ As Liv’s ‘paintings’ begins to take on a three-dimensional quality—‘Liv sculpts it, scrapes at its coagulated surface’—she quotes to herself, ‘Lost in darkness and distance […] though neither adamic nor…’ echoing The Creature’s departure into

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the sea at the end of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) (Rankine, *PLOT* 60). Liv’s turmoil over her artistic creation thus becomes intertwined with Frankenstein’s anxiety over the ethical implications of scientifically engineering a human life, as well as Shelley’s own pregnancy as she wrote the novel.¹⁷

References to the work of Adrienne Rich are briefer, but reinforce the focus on the precarious nature of female creation. In the first section of ‘A short narrative of breasts and wombs entitled / Liv Lying on the Floor Looking at / the Dirty Thought’ the image of a ladder appears, seemingly not as a household implement but as a metaphor or abstraction: ‘Then the wind / touched the opened subject until Liv in a light breeze, squalls, / was without a place to put her ladder’ (Rankine, *PLOT* 16). The image reappears twice more in stanzas that obscure straightforward readings but refer to shifting states of pain, or states of mind. Evoking the book which was so formative for Rankine, the image recalls Rich’s poem, ‘Diving into the Wreck,’ in which the speaker recalls literally diving into a wreck deep in the sea to face the drowned, armed only with a camera and ‘a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear’ (Rich 24).

One final allusion, to Julia Kristeva, reinforces *PLOT’s* concern with maternity and representation. ‘Interlude,’ one of the collection’s most transparent poems, appears after Liv has faced Woolf’s drowned body and teeters on the edge of disintegration herself. Listening to two women in a café talking about how pregnancy made one of them feel less lonely, Liv becomes disappointed to hear the woman is concerned with herself, not ‘with how much the / world loved’ (Rankine, *PLOT* 77). Liv holds ‘her found thought like a photograph / before her. A beautiful photograph? A true

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photograph? Real? / Was it a real photograph? The ‘true real’ (Rankine, PLOT 77). Recalling the phrase as one she read in college, but not remembering the phrase’s meaning or Kristeva’s name, Liv leaves the café reflecting on how to envision herself and her child as intimately connected but not synonymous. The phrase, ‘the true real’ derives from ‘Le vreel’ (1979), a paper Kristeva wrote for a seminar at the Service de psychiatrie, Hôpital de la Cité Universitaire in Paris, in which she proposes a concretization of the real as reflected in modernist art—the aesthetics concerns of which are reflected in Rankine’s fractal, maximalist aesthetics. Yet there are further parallels between PLOT and Kristeva’s ‘Stabat Mater’ (English transl., 1985). In the poetic text accompanying and running alongside Kristeva’s analytic exploration of maternal love and primary narcissism, she explores the embodied experience of maternal love and its resistance to representation. Kristeva’s imagistic diction—waves, dew, butterflies, abyss, milk, and tears—all appear in PLOT, as does an articulation of feminine power as ‘an ersatz yet not less authoritarian form of real power in the family and the city …’ (‘Stabat’ 141). Ersatz, Liv’s son, thus evokes a melding of private and public power. Kristeva’s main argument reaches its height when she mourns the difficulty of demolishing ‘the fiction of the mother-as-love’s mainstay’: ‘No one is spared. Except perhaps the saint or the mystic, or the writer who, by force of language, can still manage nothing more than … to identify with love as it really is: a fire of tongues, an escape from representation’ (‘Stabat’ 145). Maternal love and feminine power thus supersede the limits of representation, even as Kristeva acknowledges that this love is finite and physically embodied.

Unlike the allusions to Woolf, the allusions to these female characters and authors are fleeting. Still, they illuminate why Rankine depicts maternal love not with the clarity and realism of photographic images—as she depicts mourning in Don’t Let
Me Be Lonely, Citizen, and select essays—but with an aesthetic that combines the verbal and visual elements of painting and fractal verse. Throughout PLOT, Liv’s experience and her own artwork resist direct representation because, as Rankine shows, maternity stretches the boundaries of the self and reconstitutes the very idea of the subject. Rankine’s extensive allusions to Woolf contribute to the text’s critical lyricality—its insistence on raising but not resolving questions of gender, race, and representation. Writing about Woolf’s conception of the critic’s duty, Laura Marcus envisions a drive parallel to Reed’s conception of ‘freedom time’ and Moten’s focus on futurity in the black radical tradition. Marcus cites Woolf’s call at the start of her essay ‘Poetry, Fiction, and the Future’:

… must the duty of the critic always be to the past, must his gaze always be fixed backward? Could he not sometimes turn around and, shading his eyes in the manner of Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, look into the future and trace on its mist the faint lines of the land which some day perhaps we may reach? (Essays 74)

Through her extensive formal innovation and performance of maternal love in PLOT Rankine sketches such a landscape for her readers.
Chapter Two

*Of Light and Fog: the Paintorial Act in Mary McIntyre’s Work*

There is historical precedent for an artist implicating the self via their style and formal choices. In *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*, Angela Leighton characterizes the ‘insistence on style’ on the part of the aesthetes—or the nineteenth- through twentieth century proponents of ‘art for art’s sake’—as ‘a way of emphasizing the ‘impersonality’ of art, its distance from self-expression as well as its distance from simple intention’ (183). Tracing this idea from Walter Pater to Wallace Stevens, Leighton describes style as having ‘no natural connection either with the author or with the age’ (183). She cites, as evidence, Stevens’s categorical aesthetic statement from ‘Two or Three Ideas’: ‘A man has no choice about his style. When he says I am my style the truth reminds him that it is his style that is himself’ (qtd. in Leighton 183). For Pater, Leighton notes, ‘this reverse analogy works to obliterate the centrality of the self’ (183). Influential critical interpretations have thus cycled between the belief that the artist’s self is essential to the poem (via content or form) and the belief that it is superfluous. While Leighton focuses on poetry, Sontag reminds us that the interpretive modes for painting, poetry, and prose are interdependent, and all paved the way for theories and interpretations of the art of photography. These interpretive modes are thus instructive in considering the ambiguous place of the figure and the self in McIntyre’s work.

Though McIntyre often photographs landscapes with little trace of human life, critical responses to her work have focused on the meaning of location and environment through the lens of identity in post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Colin Graham has characterized the three dominant forms in post-Agreement photography as
the portrait, the place-based image, and the event image, and the major interpretive modes as documentary, ‘aftermath,’ and archive (‘Evidence’ 87-88).

Graham observes that despite the predominance of the portrait in the ‘loose tradition of ‘aftermath’ archival art,’ it is notable how frequently the person is absent, and how often places, buildings, and objects fill the frame and thus the archive (‘Evidence’ 87). Graham ventures that this absence of the figure may reflect the way in which focusing on an individual can evoke a sectarian label rather than an individual’s personal experience (‘Evidence’ 87). The figure is often absent in McIntyre’s work, especially her landscape imagery, and when she does use the figure, places, buildings and landscapes tend to dominate the visual field. In Graham’s terms, McIntyre’s use or omission of the figure could be read as an avoidance of being identified with a community.

Documentary or ‘aftermath’ modes can also imply a sense of narrative and emotional affect. ‘The portrait-in-the-archive,’ Graham notes, ‘also brings with it an insistence on a personal narrative and thus an implication of empathy, or even pity, a reaction which can as easily depoliticize the image as it can allow for a point of entry for the viewer into a larger narrative’ (‘Evidence’ 87). McIntyre’s formal choices, however, challenge the viewer’s attempt to enter into narrative, at least a narrative of the artist’s choosing; even if vaguely alluding to personal pain or suffering, her work unsentimentally refuses to use personal narrative to garner empathy from the viewer or to use narrative to clarify the viewer’s understanding.

Questions of empathy and identification are, however, paramount in the dominant modes of the two generations of Northern Irish photographers preceding and overlapping with McIntyre. Looking at the work of Victor Sloan, Paul Seawright, and

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Willie Doherty, Graham characterizes this dominant mode as a reaction against photojournalism’s ‘misrepresentation, or hyper-representation’ of Northern Ireland as defined through Troubles imagery (‘Luxury’ 140). These photographic practices, emerging primarily in the 1980s, work in the vein of photojournalistic and documentary modes in their relation to ‘events’ (killings, riots, protests) and their rendering of the North as a site of conflict. Yet unlike news-driven photojournalism, they work against ‘the easy shock tactics of transient photo-journalism by taking … [a more] implicated look at the Troubles and the society which they produced’ (Graham, ‘Luxury’ 141). Here, Graham assigns photography not only a prominent place, but an active role in shaping society. Yet many of the above artists remained within a documentary framework, if only in a loose sense. Though Sloan intervened most in a physical sense, scoring and marking his negatives and his prints, his images, Graham notes, still maintained ‘the compositional norms of the photojournalism he was repelled by’ (‘Every’ 569). As Graham argues, Sloan, Seawright, and Doherty use the documentary mode ‘in serious mimicry’—while not dismissing the worth of truth and honesty, they refused to assume these values necessarily result from the mimetic nature of photography (‘Every’ 569). Such an intervention, Graham argues, ‘clearly creates an aesthetic (anti-realist as much as anti-photojournalist) disturbance that … provokes a familiar recourse to situational, formal, and ideological readings’ (‘Every’ 569-570). Inherent in the documentary and narrative mode that took shape in post-Agreement Northern Ireland, then, is a move toward aesthetic and formal experimentation.

While underscoring the influence of worldwide art and photographic practices on artists in the North, Graham argues that by photographing in Northern Ireland an artist ‘summons up the ghost of publicity (the news item, the feature, the enticement to visit) into every image’ (30 Years 12). He contrasts this exploration of public space
against the ‘confessionalism’ of contemporary American photographers such as Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman, and what he calls ‘the stretching of the real’ in the work of American photographer Diane Arbus (30 Years 17). In contrast to Goldin and Arbus’s explorations of ‘personal’ issues—sexuality, autobiography, and ‘private mythologies made public’—prevailing tastes in the North, Graham observes, followed more closely in the vogue of the banal urban landscapes of The New Topographics (1975), the outsider-flâneur road journal of Robert Frank’s The Americans (1958), and the documentary modes collected in John Szarkowski’s The Photographer’s Eye (1964) (30 Years 17). It is difficult not to observe an implicit gendering in the categories of style Graham lays out; Szarkowski’s text—a collection of the work of various photographers—including one female photographer, Dorothea Lange, whose state-funded projects and heightened visibility is not necessarily reflective of the work of other female photographers of the time. While the gendering of these categories ultimately offers little critical perspective for McIntyre’s work, gender has been a formative factor in McIntyre’s career.

In interviews, McIntyre has noted that early in her career, she decided to take the figure out of her work after being frequently labelled a ‘woman’ artist rather than just an artist (Tuck 57; Holt 00:03:25-00:04:00). Her turn from more ‘feminine’ subjects—earlier installations with images of purses, shoes, and makeup—to landscape as a subject was in part due to her interest in the way landscape images hung indoors can serve as mental escapes (Tuck 58). She notes, however, that ‘at that time in Ireland if you wanted to be taken seriously as a contemporary artist, landscape was in some ways considered off limits’ (Tuck 58). In order to interrogate her understanding of how landscape images have traditionally been constructed, she turned to Dutch landscape painting, the British picturesque movement, and the Fontainebleau School. The return
of the figure to her work, she explains, was a choice made in order to ‘activate the
landscape in some way,’ a judgment she seems to have felt intuitively at some locations
and not others (Tuck 59). I will return later to McIntyre’s choices early in her career,
but given these gendered assumptions regarding the use of the figure, it is productive to
contrast McIntyre’s work with other work deemed ‘confessional’ and so further
consider the implications of the binary styles Graham has set up.

Diane Arbus (1923-1971) epitomizes a photographer whose work—often
deeled ‘confessional’—undermined the very use of generalizing labels. Her style was
rooted in a deep understanding that, ‘The camera as a tool does not evade or make nice’
(Arbus qtd. in Nelson 129). Arbus explains: ‘[the camera has] kind of scrutiny that
we’re not normally subject to. I mean that we don’t subject each other to it. We’re nicer
to each other than the intervention of the camera is going to make us. It’s a little bit
cold, a little bit harsh’ (qtd. in Nelson 129). Arbus thus focused on rendering what she
called ‘the gap,’ which Nelson describes as ‘the distance between a person’s intended
and actual self-presentation’ (127). Arbus explains:

Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out
looking another way and that’s what people observe. …. Our whole guise is like
giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there’s a point
between what you want people to know about you and what you can’t help
people knowing about you. And that has to do with what I’ve always called the
gap between intention and effect. (qtd. in Nelson 128)

Unlike the contemporary work of street photographers who relied on the irony and
chance of unexpected and brief interactions, Arbus depended on her subjects’ active
participation, either posing them or waiting for them to pose themselves, often talking
to them or connecting with them over the course of their lives (Phillips, ‘Question’ 51).
When she did make portraits on the street, they were often close-up and thus blurred
the boundaries between the portrait genre, the fashion photograph, and the abstract
painting; where her subjects may have been caught unaware—in a frown, a glare, a
moment of distraction—Arbus lets their consternation remain. She does not hide that her subjects might question their role in a portrait. That she often pre-selected the people she wanted to depict or looked for someone who fit a type she had already decided upon reveals that she was more interested in the subjects themselves than the sudden moment of artistic intervention so often prized in photographic work. Still, Arbus was often accused of voyeurism, exploitation, and intrusion even though ‘the gap’ she sought was in fact extremely ordinary and public, even obvious (Nelson 128). Given Barthes and Sontag’s assumptions that a camera renders reality so accurately and transparently, Nelson notes that the interesting theoretical or technical problem should have involved how to avoid photographing something so obviously there (129). Arbus, therefore, ‘had to work against something in herself and against the fabric of sociability that allows this gap and/or flaw somehow to go unnoticed by the camera’ (Nelson 128-129). The very reliance of fashion, media, and entertainment on photography illuminates the extent to which cameras are often used to obscure, cover, alter, or erase the awkward, unintentional gaps of appearance common to day-to-day life. Whereas Nelson views Arbus’s use of ‘the gap’ as existing somewhere between hyper-real representation and fantasy, Graham’s focus on Arbus’s realism indirectly highlights the importance of realism in Northern Irish photography. In his necessary aim of disentangling photography in the North from national/political/religious identity, Graham also unintentionally flattens the potential for images such as McIntyre’s to move and exist between the binaries of ‘aftermath’ and ‘confession.’

Alone, prevailing modes of reading fine art photography in Northern Ireland thus cannot shed light on what is radical and inventive in McIntyre’s use of place, the figure, and her subtle blurring of reality and fantasy. For while Sloan, Seawright, and Doherty have all, to varying degrees and in creatively distinct ways, engaged and
reckoned with their connection to the salient identities in the Troubles and post-
Troubles era—Catholic/Nationalist/and/or Republican and Protestant/Loyalist and/or
Unionist—McIntyre has not. Even in photographs without figures—images of urban
redevelopment, rural landscapes, and the physical divisions of communities (walls,
fences, murals, flags, neighbourhood boundaries)—a local viewer can often recognize
in Sloan, Seawright, and Doherty’s work an identifiable landmark or a reference to an
event. Claudia Battistella attempts to read McIntyre’s nocturnal scenes—such as the
Describing the image as an investigation of place ‘where murders were committed or
bodies [might have been] found,’ she accurately observes that locations can have
hidden and difficult associations, or she may be assuming an implicit connection with
Paul Seawright’s *Sectarian Murder* series, which directly addresses this issue (3). Yet
unlike Seawright, McIntyre leaves few indications of local context. ‘A Complex
Variety of Greens (from Emerald to Viridian)’ (2011), though made near Stormont
Castle, does not depict to the parliament buildings or refer to anything political (Tuck
65). In ‘Untitled (after Caspar David Friedrich) I,’ one can recognize the Belfast
harbour, yet the iconic symbols—the shipyard, the Harland & Wolff cranes, Cavehill—
are photographed from such a distance that they are swept up into one visually dense
plane along the horizon line. One must be familiar with Belfast to recognize it, and
even then, the image’s composition focuses the attention on the lower two-thirds of the
frame, where a figure stands, looking toward the horizon.

In a 2013 discussion of peer artists at The MAC Gallery in Belfast, Mhairi
Sutherland notes the ambiguity of the locations of McIntyre’s landscape images, as
evident in the titles (Tuck 65). McIntyre explains that she does not mind viewers
knowing the locations of her images, but as the location is not the subject, it is not in
the title (Tuck 65). The subject, she clarifies, is ‘the notion of psychological space rather than the actual geographical context in which it was made’ (Tuck 65). David Farrell, whose work explores excavations undertaken to find ‘The Disappeared,’ those taken hostage and killed by paramilitary organizations throughout the Troubles, postulates that the political weight of some locations—if known—might ‘push the image into a remit’ where McIntyre does not want people to go (Tuck 65). McIntyre responds:

So in making work in Northern Ireland there’s practically nowhere that you can go that hasn’t had some traumatic or violent event linked to it, every corner, everywhere you turn. But I’ve never felt that I could directly reference that violence in the work despite the fact that I’ve been based in Northern Ireland all my life and lived through the worst of that period, although we’re by no means out the other end at all. But I do think a sense of that history comes through the work in terms of the atmosphere that’s created. (Tuck 65)

McIntyre’s response belies a different understanding of working with a lens-based medium, and implies that rather than aiming for direct mimetic expression of location or history, she instead strives for a more indirect, evocative rendering of ‘atmosphere’ that may suggest violent loss or death to some viewers but not to others. Farrell reframes the question, seeming to approach McIntyre’s work with the expectations of a confessional style. He asks if McIntyre explores the landscape as a way of escaping ‘what has been going on here’ (Tuck 65). McIntyre responds that the work is never an escape, but Farrell persists, ‘Not even the process?’ (Tuck 66). What follows indicates the extent to which McIntyre’s work is not documentary and focuses more on formal, aesthetic choices of composition, light, and exposure than on content. She notes that
Night Building (2003),
colour lightjet photographic print, 122 cm x 152 cm

The Underpass (2003),
colour lightjet photographic print, 122 cm x 152 cm
‘there has to be a kind of connection to the location or subject,’ and explains how she might ‘go past somewhere and not find it at all interesting and then on a particular day when it’s illuminated in a certain way it just presents itself to me as something that I should photograph’ (Tuck, 66). She continues, ‘I then have to go home and try to recreate or recapture that’ (Tuck 66). Light, then, is her true subject, and her process relies on a combination of planning and attention to chance fluctuations in light that other photographers might alter.

Still, violent associations to many locations remain, and are a central concern for many of the artists in the conversation, a concern which often guides critical standards. In the same discussion at The MAC, John Byrne notes the power in a Willie Doherty video that recreates the scene of a sectarian murder on the road to Armagh. He expounds:

There was a guy in our school who was killed in a sectarian murder and taken and dumped in a forest here in Belfast and Willie Doherty’s work demanded that we look at this place, it was powerful. Whereas some of these images [McIntyre’s] leave me, I wouldn’t say cold, they just leave me disinterested. Perhaps it’s because of that lack of identifying the place. (Tuck 67)

In comparison to Neil Jarman and Mark Hackett’s styles, which incorporate journalistic and activist modes, McIntyre’s is clearly an outlier. In response to Jarman’s question of whether she is struggling with the title of ‘Northern Irish artist,’ McIntyre widens the conversation to consider the limits of defining lens-based art in strictly mimetic ways:

I think if I’m perfectly honest I would probably avoid the title ‘photographer’ more than I would avoid the title ‘Northern Irish artist.’ … I’m not making work about what you’re talking about, so I actually feel like it would be disingenuous and exploitative of me to kind of piggy back on something because it’s Northern Ireland. I could have so easily have done that. (Tuck 68)

Colm Campbell’s suggestion that McIntyre’s work examines how sites are ‘appropriated’ and how such appropriation is an act of self-creation, begins to offer insight into what is truly innovative in McIntyre’s work (Tuck 68). ‘The identity being
created through this work,’ he suggests, ‘is the identity of the photographer which
doesn’t fit neatly into boxes’ (Tuck 68). McIntyre affirms that is what she is ‘getting at
by talking about psychological approaches to space’ (Tuck 68). As an example,
McIntyre shares the story behind the making of ‘The Mound, I’ (2009):

… I was on my way to take a photograph in the fog and I stopped at the side of
the road and came across piles of freshly turned earth and I think—getting back
to that idea of Northern Ireland—I felt disturbed by something that appeared to
be a kind of burial ground at the side of the road, so I felt I should photograph
it. (Tuck 71)

McIntyre thus admits a connection to place in the vein expected by her peers; yet the
site’s meaning remains vague, and McIntyre’s response is a spontaneous reaction to
concepts evoked by the fog, not the documentary exploration of site-specific or
historically bound burials. Moreover, the resulting image differs greatly from peer
work, especially those in the conversation at The MAC. The composition is
geometrically simple, only slightly disrupting the rule of thirds.\footnote{The rule of thirds is a pictorial and aesthetic convention in which the subject is placed in a balanced relationship with intersecting and equally-spaced horizontal and vertical lines which divide the image into thirds.} While the darkness of
the foreground and the exposure suggests the image was made when there was an
excess of light, the layers of fog obscures the time of day and the farther landscape; it is
as if time has paused, as if something is incomplete. Whether a viewer sees, for
example, a burial site, a neglected field, or the start of a building project depends
largely on the viewer’s expectations and experience; nothing in the composition,
subject matter, or title controls the viewer’s affective response. Some viewers may
respond with anxiety, some with a sense of fear, some with a sense of contemplative
calm. Jarman suggests that McIntyre’s use of figures necessarily introduces narrative
into her images, yet McIntyre notes that she is very cautious about the idea of narrative
within photography, stating, ‘Of course everything has narrative potential’ (Tuck 78).
Refusing to accept binaries between narrative and lyric time, McIntyre notes that while there is no figure in ‘The Mound,’ the viewpoint is constructed such that the viewer can experience the space in solitude. ‘There’s a contemplative aspect in that,’ she says, ‘to just allow the place itself to resonate rather than ‘speak’” (Tuck 77). There is an experimental aspect, too, in positioning the viewer as an active participant in the photograph—as a figure engaged in the act of seeing.

Despite McIntyre’s aims and her own conceptions of her work, it is natural that some images might strike Irish, Northern Irish, and British viewers differently than other viewers. ‘The Underpass’ (2003) is one such image. Two weeks after McIntyre made it, a loyalist murder was committed at the site (Tuck 65). Though McIntyre’s framing and exposure resists immediate identification of the site, two weeks after the murder a television news crew filmed the site using the same framing McIntyre chose, but with the area cordoned off (Tuck 65). Though McIntyre’s image is most immediately representative only of an underpass lit with sodium light, the image’s colours, location, and low light may still trigger traumatic memories for some viewers, perhaps especially for family members and friends of the victim. Within a phallocentric model of aesthetics and trauma, in which the return of repressed trauma necessitates sublimation and mourning in order for the traumatic ‘event’ to lose its hold on the individual, ‘The Underpass’ would act as a trigger and a transgression. The reactions which it can summon become limited, and the diverse human experiences of grief and loss become flattened.

‘The Underpass’ shares formal elements with another image that has taken on new meanings from its wider context. In ‘An Object which Tells of Loss’ (1997), an unoccupied, single hospital trolley stands just off-centre in a large, empty room
The Mound, I (2009),
colour lightjet photographic print, 80 cm x 100 cm

Rocks, Forest, Descending (2008),
colour lightjet photographic print, 122 cm x 152 cm
framed with tall, blue curtains. McIntyre describes the varied responses the image has evoked, depending on context:

When the work was exhibited in Amsterdam, viewers there looked upon it as an image that related to human suffering in a universal way, a general struggle for existence. But when the work was shown in Ireland, people assumed that the work was made in direct response to the Omagh bombing. The press had reported incidents of the numbers of dead and dying being so great, that the hospitals couldn’t cope. The staff had to make the difficult decision to take the people who had died, off trolleys and place them onto the floor. That kind of poignant story stayed with people and so in this country, my image became charged, even though it was made a year before the Omagh bombing took place. (McTigue 13-14)

Other unanticipated readings have diverged farther from the images themselves and have depended more on the variables involved in installation-work. Discussing McIntyre’s 1998 series ‘Resonate,’ installed as billboard-sized prints of still life images mounted on trucks and moved around Belfast, Susan Philipsz remarks that the placement of an enlarged image of red leather gloves beside the City Hall in Belfast evokes the regional symbolism of the Red Hand of Ulster (McTigue 13). McIntyre admits she never expected the work to have a political meaning, but also acknowledges the intentional ambiguity in other images within the series—close-up (or tightly cropped) images of shoes, letters, and books, shot at unusual, diagonal angles. Even these still lives, though brightly lit and consisting of ordinary, domestic objects, could evoke unexpected memories for a viewer.

These responses all highlight the extent to which artists cannot entirely control responses to their work, yet it is noteworthy that unlike the ‘Resonate’ series, which took on additional meaning because of its installation, with ‘The Underpass’ and ‘An Object…,’ either the image itself or the title evokes a sense of uncertainty or loss. Still, the ambiguity of the titles and the subject matter of her images allows room for varied responses. ‘An Object…’ does direct the viewer toward contemplating loss, and the image of a hospital trolley may evoke memories of health crises. Yet the absence of
figures, the simple, linear arrangement of objects, and the subdued colour scheme allows viewers to bring their own conceptions of loss; for some, the room may refer to the pained moments before or after tragedy, for others, the relief when danger has passed. The unusual diction, ‘tells of,’ invites viewers to consider the tensions between the silence of empty rooms and still images and the noise of voices and lives that may no longer be present. Thus, the images do not direct the viewer toward contemplating only fear, or only loss. Instead, they invite the viewer to pause, and to consider, to remain in the suspension of not-quite-knowing. It is important that McIntyre allows the viewer this room. For viewers who know of the murder committed at the site depicted in ‘The Underpass,’ the image may become a place in which to encounter the other’s suffering and one’s own suffering. In Ettinger’s model of aesthetics and trauma, one need not choose between repression, catharsis, and redemption. As Judith Butler articulates the impact of Ettinger’s theory: ‘loss is neither prior to representation nor redeemed and cancelled through representation’ (iii, ix). In viewing art as incarnation and process, as a space of co-emerging subjectivity, we can begin to re-envision the relationship between artistic practice and ethical representation. In doing so, Pollock writes, we move closer to:

a future that can reconstruct a basis for ethical existence, founded … in the aware-ness of matrixial trans-subjectivity … between partial-subjects, I and non-I, me and the stranger, not just at the borderspaces of becoming but also of disappearance and of dying. (‘Thinking’ 20)

In such a future, both private and public loss might be transformed at this borderspace—conceived of not merely as a distant ‘other’ that is too painful to recognize but an ‘other’ to which we are innately linked and called to wit(h)ness.

Often intimately tied to issues of identity, psychoanalytic readings constitute the other dominant mode of critical analysis for photography made in Northern Ireland. Given the facts of widespread trauma and mental health issues after the Troubles, such
an approach can illuminate the way artworking enables individuals and communities to consider the varied ways trauma has affected their lives. When over-relied on, however, psychoanalytic readings, especially those which do not consider feminist psychoanalytic theory, can offer constricting and circular dialogues for artists who do not conform to preconceived categories. These categories often require that McIntyre’s engagement with ideas of the sublime, traces of human presence, and temporality operate in phallocentric models of trauma highly dependent on binaries. For example, when Graham summarizes that McIntyre’s work asks viewers to consider ‘if they can manage to see this view’—a landscape of the Belfast shipyard—‘as sublime,’ he presumes viewers will see banality and traces of conflict rather than the rich colours and the resilience of the natural landscape (30 Years 14). Relying on binaries between abjection and the sublime, Graham indirectly presumes that viewers must rationalize and sublimate through explicatory language the experience before them. An affective response thus becomes merely a step in a larger process, not a value in and of itself. Before Ettinger and Pollock wrote extensively on the role of affect in aesthetic theory, Kristeva began to reveal the falsity of the binaries which have driven much of Western art theory. In Powers of Horror (English transl. 1982), Kristeva returns to Platonic philosophy and diverges from the strict dualism of artistic representation and emotional affect often read in his work:

… the final Platonic lesson has been understood, one does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity. It is a repetition through rhythm and song, therefore through what is not yet, or no longer is ‘meaning,’ but arranges, defers, differentiates, and organizes, harmonizes pathos, bile, warmth, and enthusiasm. (28)

Through their working process then, artists can incorporate the vastness of human experience—pure, impure, banal, sublime—and use structure, form, and traditional modes of composition to seek new orders, new forms.
Veil I (2006), colour lightjet photographic print, 80 cm x 100 cm

Withdrawing Veils of Sound II (2010), colour lightjet photographic print, 10 cm x 13 cm
Kristeva’s earlier theory, however, often perpetuated binaries set up by Sigmund Freud, binaries which remain powerful, particularly regarding views of repression. Suzanna Chan adopts this repression-focused lens, viewing ‘Veil, III’ (2006) as the depiction of ‘the uncanny fullness of a threshold,’ appearing to open up a space in which to consider a reading of McIntyre’s work as one of borderspace and encounter (126). In the artist’s images of liminal, fogged-in, often figure-less spaces, Chan, however, ultimately sees the effects of repression, and reads the images as external spaces onto which the viewer can project their anxiety and so ‘achieve a secure, defined self-image’ (126). It is unclear whose self-image is being achieved—the viewer’s or the artist’s; it is also unclear whether said individual might be repressing trauma from the Troubles, structural trauma (in a psychoanalytic sense), or another form of personal trauma. Regardless, such a reading remains fixed in the phallocentric model of separation/individuation and depression/psychosis in which the feminine and the maternal must be rejected.

Given that McIntyre’s titles rarely offer any literal insight into the place or space rendered in the work, and indeed often imply something more psychologically intense than the image alone might suggest, Chan’s attention to the effect of titling on the viewer’s experience is well founded. Examining the exhibit which predated the book, Slavka Sverakova has written that the exhibition title, *A Contemporary Sublime* (MAC, Belfast, 16 November 2012 to 20 January 2013), ‘expresses the artist’s long term conviction that words are keys to the meaning of the visual’ (18 Jan. 2013). Seeming to concur, Chan considers such emotionally imbued titles as ‘The Construction of a Utopian Model’ or ‘The Mournful Inevitability of Lush Summer Greenery as It Fades with the Onset of Winter,’ ultimately focusing on an apparent conflation between the artist, where she lives, and her work. ‘There is a daring,’ Chan
notes ‘in claiming sublime aesthetics for locations laden with associations of conflict and steeped in its histories, to present them in unexpected ways by organizing aesthetics to surprise us that ‘Northern Ireland’ can look like this’ (127). Echoing Graham, Chan begins a critical engagement with the intentional ambiguity of McIntyre’s work but remains limited by her assumption that human experiences of conflict and the sublime are in fact mutually exclusive, and that it would be surprising to feel or experience a sense of grandeur or awe in post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

Haunting is another key theme in readings of post-Agreement photography—another model rooted in psychoanalytic readings of conflict and violence. ‘McIntyre’s photographs,’ Chan argues, ‘are not an archive of ghosts but an art alive with the spectral, the uncanny, with doublings, and their unruly temporality’ (125). Echoing McIntyre’s 2013 comments at The MAC, Chan observes a sense of disinterment in the freshly turned earth of ‘The Mound I’ and ‘The Mound II,’ but implicitly acknowledges that, unlike some of her peers, McIntyre does not appear to be referring to a specific political or social event (125). Even as Chan recognizes in McIntyre’s landscapes an ‘unruly temporality’ and traces of the past co-existing with the present, she admits that if they offer any trace of ‘ghosts and secrets’ it is not explicit to what these traces may refer.

In Ghost-Haunted Land: Contemporary Art and Post-Troubles Northern Ireland, Declan Long situates McIntyre’s work among other ‘spectral’ works: ‘determinedly indeterminate ‘after-images’ that may prioritize fretfully subjective forms of viewing or precarious modes of composition and display’ and that are ‘strategically uncertain in forming an account of the historical moment’ (5). Writing specifically on McIntyre’s ‘highly aestheticized images,’ Long identifies stylistic commonalities between ‘the urban-nocturne style’ of Rut Blees Luxemburg, ‘the
austere, uncanny images of institutional interiors’ of Candida Höfer, and ‘the constructed everyday scenarios’ fellow Belfast photographer Hannah Starkey (*Ghost* 69). He cites these influences as integral to McIntyre’s ‘self-conscious play on uncertainties regarding spectatorship and location’ (*Ghost* 69). While gender appears, implicitly, to be shaping Long’s critical perception, he does not acknowledge its potential influence. He does note, however, the integral role of McIntyre’s examination of space, affective encounter, and the limits of representation. He highlights a common concern across many of her photographs with ‘the subjective encounter with place,’ and a blurring of ‘the borders between what is real and what is imagined’ (69). It is unclear whether Long intends ‘place’ in an indexical sense—proof of McIntyre’s engagement with the regionally focused, place-based style of many of her peers—or in a general, possibly metaphorical sense. In the implication of ‘sublime’ possibility,’ Long writes, the images situate the viewer ‘on the verge of nebulous spaces beyond—indistinct realms that cannot be wholly grasped by representation,’ a space filled with a sense of oblivion that ‘may threaten the supposed coherence of the observing subject’ (69).

Though Long’s aesthetic observations astutely emphasize the ethical and fundamentally formal concerns in McIntyre’s work, his maintains that her work, too, is essentially ‘spectral,’ and thus in fitting with broader trends in contemporary art in the region (70). Long’s overall framework offers insight into the role of formal experimentation and aesthetic concerns in these ‘offbeat aftermath studies,’ but he remains guided by a repression-focused paradigm of trauma: ‘It has been an art,’ Long writes, ‘of compulsive repetition that at times resembles … [a] wayward ‘ghost-hunting,’” and a ‘tentative investigation of how we might access or address what has been repressed in
order to facilitate progress’ (3,5). Long’s socially focused reading particularly suits the works of Willie Doherty, the central artist in Long’s study. Generalizing from the overt social engagement of Doherty’s work to contemporary art in Northern Ireland, however, returns critical discussion to a now familiar space. When Long proposes that ‘the art of the post-Troubles period addresses itself to a speculative ‘public space’ in which certain spectres, often unwelcome elsewhere in the culture, might be accommodated or confronted,’ he sets rules of public and cultural engagement which depend on a certain identification with trauma and the Troubles (4). McIntyre has discussed this identification as a choice, not an automatic aesthetic concern, and her articulation of the influence of personally harrowing experiences recalls Sontag’s contention that harrowing images ‘are not much help’ when the aim is to understand. Through their lyrical criticality—their ‘unruly temporality’ and refusal to build narrative clarity for their viewers—McIntyre’s images can generate a dialogue with harrowing experiences without resorting to traditional notions of narrative construction.4

When invited to participate in the Art of the Troubles exhibit at the Ulster Museum in 2012, McIntyre shares in an interview with curators that while she was surprised that people were reading a connection to the Troubles into her work, it did prompt her to think about her own history. ‘I don’t talk about it a lot,’ she admits, ‘because it just sounds so sentimental, and almost as if you’re taking a really traumatizing subject and looking at it really nostalgically, and that makes me very uncomfortable’ (00:01:30-43). Yet McIntyre’s first childhood memory is of a bomb

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4 Long uses Foster’s idea of a ‘lyrical kind of criticality’ to explore the work of other artists in the region, particularly those with more overtly postmodern aesthetic values; he does not apply the term to McIntyre’s work, as I suggest we should (74).
blast, of ‘glass blowing in around [her]’ after a shop opposite the bar her father owned had been blown up (00:02:18). Noting that her family eventually had to move due to the frequency of the bombings, she recalls the perpetual sense, throughout her childhood and into her time in art college, of ‘tit for tat killings,’ shootings, and army searches (00:02:35; 00:02:46). While noting there was ‘a kind of urgency about it,’ McIntyre concedes that to get through it, ‘you kind of suppressed it’ (00:02:40-49). ‘At the time you didn’t know you were suppressing it,’ she clarifies, ‘at the time you just dealt with it, it was your normality’ (00:02:51-53). The effects of growing up with this sense of normality were thrown into sharp relief when McIntyre attended the Belfast Film Festival in 2007 and saw Robin Wylie’s short film In the Name of God (1972), a ‘film collage’ of Belfast during the Troubles that she describes as ‘quite experimental’ (00:03:39; 00:03:24). Overlaid with ‘snatches of overheard conversations coming and going,’ the electronic soundtrack, she notes, invokes ‘a real sense of chaos’ (00:03:29-36). She recalls feeling ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘unsettled’ without knowing why, and feeling as if she was going to be sick or cry (00:03:59-04:18). ‘It took something like that,’ she notes, ‘which seemed so real and so visceral, that … just kind of brought me back to all of the things I had just thought were normal, even though they were absolutely diabolical things’ (00:04:22-37). Though the work overtly depicts aspects of life in Belfast during the Troubles, Wylie’s formal experimentation prevents the film from serving as a strictly mimetic, documentary account of horrific events and so is instructive of the choices that make McIntyre’s work not always fit existing critical paradigms.

Wylie’s In the Name of God, shown on January 11, 1972 on BBC Northern Ireland, includes footage of a bomb blast within the first few minutes of the 24 min film. The first aural experience, however, is that of an elderly woman, stating, with an
exasperated sigh, ‘In the name of God,’ and a recurrent visual and aural refrain in the piece is the depiction of evangelical signs, street preachers, and folk singers, interwoven with the exhortation, ‘What does it mean to be born again?’ The film is partially documentary in style, yet uses unusual angles, often looking up at people walking through the streets, suggesting the camera was held at hip level, perhaps surreptitiously. When a series of bombs go off in the first few minutes of the film, the framing is more distant; it may be news footage, but is edited in and juxtaposed so directly against ordinary scenes of city life that it appears like another visual display of Belfast. As McIntyre recalled, one of the most unnerving elements of the film is the score. When sounds are identifiable—ambulances, shouting, radio communications—they are complemented or even undermined by digitized, almost carnivalesque beeps and distorted melodies. At the end of the film, the elderly woman from the start of the film returns, her voice juxtaposed against the image of a black British soldier. ‘I just felt so miserable,’ she says, ‘How could you have enjoyed it in those days, I know. I hope he was enjoying his stay.’ Aired in one of the most violent years of the Troubles, Wylie’s film likely mirrored a familiar atmosphere for residents of Belfast; for viewers in the rest of the UK, it likely offered a slightly divergent take on the city, a move away from events-focused photojournalism. The combination of low-level, persistent droning, the hypnotic and diegetic audio punctuated and intensified by the return pitch of an ambulance, and the repeated visual panning to bombed buildings, British soldiers patrolling the city, and shoppers milling around evangelical preachers, create an unnerving auditory and visual experience. At the end, the elderly woman’s voice—and the sheer sincerity of her hope that the black soldier is comfortable in Belfast—momentarily takes the viewer outside of the immersive experience of the preceding 23 minutes, raising questions about identity, race, and belonging. This subtle distancing of
a woman looking back on a violent time which is still unfolding adds an emotional note not otherwise evident in the filmmaker’s apparently scattershot editing of street-level footage. With its layers of distance and controlled emotion, Wylie’s work shares more in common with McIntyre’s than one might expect.

Later in the interview, McIntyre acknowledges that what curators and viewers reading her work as a response to the Troubles may have picked up on her unconscious capacity ‘to tap into a sense of something sinister or an atmosphere that had a sense of foreboding about it or a sense of desolation’ (00:05:11-21). ‘It was almost too deep,’ she says, ‘to recognize in a very upfront way’ (00:05:45-49). In Ettinger and Pollock’s aesthetic framework, the fact that McIntyre may be implicitly working in dialogue with traces of trauma does not necessitate any clear revelation in her work of these traces. Though using a medium often highly associated with mimetic representation, McIntyre has shown that she is not interested, in her practice, in rendering personal experience in a mimetic way. The self-awareness of the artist’s articulation of her past experiences reveal that her decision not to depict bodies suffering or any overt signs of violence should be read as an unsentimental, aesthetic, and formal choice—not the ‘cold’ response of an artist unaffected by her region’s history.

Though generally focused on the role of identity, community, and history in the work of photographers in Northern Ireland, Graham implicitly hints at why McIntyre’s work has proven challenging to existing critical paradigms. Examining ‘Afterwards’ (2004), Graham observes ‘[t]here is little to see here, but much to assume,’ proposing that the image may depict the scene of a crime or a haunted place (30 Years 278). He notes how the sheer act of photographing a scene may create the expectation of

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5 ‘In the Name of God,’ viewed by the author 17 November 2018 at the NI Digital Film Archive at Queen’s Film Theatre in Belfast, Northern Ireland.
significance. ‘And does this then tell us about our own visual conditioning?’ he asks. ‘In this post-Troubles era, do we yet have the capacity to see Northern Ireland without the intercession of the spectre of the Troubles?’ (30 Years 278). He proposes that ‘Afterwards’ ‘asks if those memories are always revenants,’ potentially offering an aesthetic paradigm not dependent on prescribed notion of trauma and history. Graham’s consideration of McIntyre’s work within a section focused primarily on the work of female photographers (and younger male photographers), including Victoria Dean, Hannah Starkey, and Sylvia Grace Borda, invites the question, again, of the role of gender—if not in Graham’s critical focus then in the work itself (30 Years 266, 278). Dean, Starkey, Borda, and McIntyre’s work, however, is aesthetically diverse. That they generally feature more female figures and few (if any) references to Troubles or post-Troubles violence suggests that prevailing methods of representing the region are insufficient to encompass the increasingly diverse relationships individuals might have to the land, violence, community, and the dead.

Though McIntyre’s images do not bear direct traces of the photographer’s personal history, they do bring an element of physicality and artistic presence not necessarily evident in more documentary styles. The sheer length of many of McIntyre’s exposures—often made at night or in dark rooms—and thus her necessarily careful timing, translates to an intimate relationship between the artist and her process. This fact, combined with other elements of McIntyre’s process, affirm Sontag’s claim that even without evident traces of the artist’s self, ‘A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence’ (Photography 16). ‘Like a wood fire
Afterwards (2004),
colour lightjet photographic print 122 cm x 152 cm

Nightfall IV (2003),
colour lightjet photographic print, 122 cm x 152 cm
in a room’ she continues, ‘photographs—especially those of people, of distant 
landscapes, and faraway cities, of the vanished past—are incitements to reverie’ 
(Sontag, Photography 16). The role of reverie in McIntyre’s landscape images, which 
Graham astutely observes ‘tend to abstraction,’ invites an aesthetic, critical framework 
focused on the importance of painting and technical experimentation in the artist’s 
work.

In the preface to A Contemporary Sublime: Photographs 1998-2012 (2013), a 
selection of McIntyre’s images across a wide span of her career, Christopher Riopelle 
notes that her work reflects a dialogue with ‘significant form’ as rendered in 
Pictorialism (through lines and contours of trees, hills, mountains, human figures), a 
Symbolist use of often mute and ‘suggestive’ images, and an abstract emphasis on 
‘pure form, pure colour’ without the demand of representation (2-3). This interplay, he 
writes, contributes to ‘the fertile tension’ between the ‘local commitments’ of 
McIntyre’s life in Belfast and wider trends in international art over the past century (3). 
He observes of her deep engagement with tradition: ‘The click of the shutter is merely 
one step of many, and the resulting image not so much the product of unmediated 
observation caught on the fly … as of a long, slow contemplation, nurtured by respect 
for her predecessors …’ (1). Chan also considers McIntyre’s images as ‘the fruits of a 
practice of painting through photography’ (125). ‘Veil I,’ she notes, ‘is rendered with 
the soft diffusions of watercolour and a shifting tonality takes precedence to stress the 
pictorial and eschew the idea of the photographic index, of what-has-been’ (125-26). 
Chan refers to a prevailing belief in the essential difference between painting and 
photography, which Sontag summarized: images made by the camera are able ‘to usurp 
reality’ because photographs are not images as paintings are images, that is, serving as 
‘an interpretation of the real’ but are instead ‘a trace, something directly stencilled off
the real, like a footprint, or a death mask’ (Photography 154). Sontag thus insists that one cannot escape the fact that by virtue of the mechanistic workings of their tool, a photographer cannot create an image without being in contact with the experience rendered in the image and without transferring a real ‘trace’ of that experience.

McIntyre’s work, however, reveals an engagement with painting that moves beyond the ways in which the painting is often invoked to question or affirm the artistic value of photography. Writing on McIntyre’s work, Slavka Sverakova recalls Julian Stallabrass’s proposal that it is standard for museum photographers to refer to paintings as a means of claiming the realm of art for their ‘mechanical product’ (19 Jan. 2013). Sverakova’s writings show, however, that McIntyre’s work engages on another level—through titles which announce visual or conceptual parallels to European painters; compositional forms derived from landscape painting; and a focus on the physicality of the encounter between subject and artist, as well as viewer and image.

McIntyre’s engagement with visual art and landscape is diverse, spans the length of her career, and blurs the boundaries between visual art and sculpture. Reviewing McIntyre’s ‘Catalogue of Necessities’ exhibit (Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast, 1993), Sverakova compares the artist’s juxtaposition of large, oversized colour prints of a handbag in ‘Container’ with three sculptures—a mahogany carving of a handbag, a metal cast of a pink lipstick and a plaster cast of a purse, all installed in a glass cabinet mounted on the wall with back-to-back mirrors—as Surrealist, not in its evocation of any dreamlike state but in the way it invites the viewer to contemplate the uselessness of the objects (Circa 1993 50). Gender, she adds, is a pretext for the viewer to consider the interplay between advertising and self-expression in an individual’s personal experience (50). She traces McIntyre’s consideration of ordinary objects and gender in the 1993 exhibit to the artist’s 16mm film, ‘Stunted’ (1991) and a photograph
made the same year, which depicted an open cupboard with a velvet dress and real hands with the inscription, ‘This is not a woman’ (*Circa*, 1993 50). Alluding to Rene Magritte’s ‘The Treachery of Images’ (1929), a photo-realist painting of a pipe with the phrase, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (‘This is not a pipe’) underneath, McIntyre not only invokes the Surrealists’ play but also questions the historical objectification of women through painting. Her juxtaposition of an object, the hands of a real woman, and a negative declarative statement confound the viewer’s expectations of a complete, embodied or ‘real’ female figure represented from ‘reality’ via the photographic image.

Examining McIntyre’s ‘Fugitive Associations’ exhibit (Context Gallery, Derry, 1997), Sverakova charts new artistic influences, making connections to artists as stylistically diverse as Camille Pissarro, Titian, Jacopo Tintoretto, and Marcel Duchamp (*Circa*, 1997 57). The exhibit included ‘Supposition: once the smallest detail has been understood’ (1997), one of McIntyre’s earlier landscape images in which a small, easy to miss figure crouches, gardening, just below the middle of the frame. Later included in *A Contemporary Sublime*, the image marks McIntyre’s earlier experimentation with ‘activating’ the landscape with the careful placement of a small figure; like her later, more minimalist images, ‘Supposition…’ is composed of a series of intersecting, parallel lines, yet unlike the later images, it features an immense amount of detail and a wide expanse from foreground to horizon. In her installation choices at the Context Gallery, McIntyre’s style moves more closely to the conceptual practices of Duchamp; in mounting the images on three sets of lightboxes, McIntyre disrupted the viewer’s expectations of gallery photography and imbued the images with another layer of light both external to the images and amplifying the artist’s formal decisions regarding exposure.
As McIntyre’s 1991, 1993, and 1997 works show, her concern with the physicality of her images, and the physical encounter engendered by their display, developed throughout the nineties. She describes conceiving of the ‘Resonate’ series (1999) as ‘traditional still lives’ (McTigue 12-13). Deciding not to construct the composition of the objects—happening upon them, instead—and choosing to photograph mundane objects ‘make the banal extraordinary and worth of notice,’ McIntyre subverts expectations of the still life as a form through which to reveal the signature mark of the artist (McTigue 13). Yet in photographing the objects at unusual angles and creating diagonal lines that cut through the composition of the images, McIntyre inflects her images of domestic objects with a subtle imprint of the artist’s style. In response to Susan Philipsz’s description of the image of the red gloves as ‘sumptuous,’ McIntyre explains that she ‘used lighting in a theatrical way,’ noting that ‘like being in a kitchen at night, the fluorescent light makes everything seem heightened, dramatic’ (McTigue 13). The series’ installation both highlighted and disrupted expectations of painted still lives and documentary images. ‘Blowing the image up to such a large scale,’ McIntyre notes, ‘meant that the pictures [sic] pixels created a texture to the colours where the light and the shade seemed more pronounced’ (McTigue 13). Aware that she was challenging challenges viewers’ expectations that ‘the mechanical process of photography’ is unrelated to ‘direct physical manipulation of making a painting,’ McIntyre also challenged viewers’ expectations of their physical encounter with an image (McTigue 13). In moving the billboard-size images around Belfast, viewers were at once confronted with the exhibit and distant from it; while the size of the images evoke the easy-to-see but easy-to-ignore nature of advertising billboards, the ‘sumptuous’ colours, ordinary objects, and unusual angles make the images hard to ignore.
McIntyre’s engagement with the physicality of photography and her focus on light are, somewhat paradoxically, the two most innovative elements of her work—paradoxically, because in the twenty-first century, physically printed images and a technical focus on aperture are often deemed unnecessary or superfluous elements of photographic images, especially as images are often distributed only in digital form. Sverakova observes that ‘McIntyre uses artificial light to make an illusion of textures as if projecting from the depth onto the picture plane,’ creating the sense of an oscillating plane and ‘simulating the divided brushstroke’ (19 Jan. 2013). The exhibit’s use of large-scale colour lightjet photographic prints, several of which are 122 centimetres by 152 centimetres and require the viewer to stand at a distance, ‘define their own status by reference to a cultural habit expected when looking at paintings’ and dissociate from the tradition of drawings and images held in the hand (19 Jan. 2013). This play with intimacy, Sverakova writes, is important:

Picking up McIntyre’s early smaller photographs enables me to catch something from the moment of her connecting with the image, the enchanting sincerity of that. The encounter celebrates the fugitive moment of response, hers to the view she chose, mine to her image. It is a beautifully coded conversation of a special kind. (19 Jan. 2013) 6

The tension between intentional plainness and beauty in McIntyre’s images reflects the tension between ‘the world presented to the lens’ and ‘the world presented through the lens (Sverakova, Circa 1997 57). In McIntyre’s choice of subjects, ranging from wastelands and water containers to sheds and electricity lines, Sverakova makes the case that ‘A denial of significance is affirmed throughout: composition, colour, framing, light—all collaborate in disappointment, whose energy is supposed to sharpen our perception’ (Circa, 1997 57). Requiring that viewers either look closer or stop

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6 A Contemporary Sublime includes eleven images measuring 10 centimetres by 13 centimetres, easy to hold in the hand in print form.
looking altogether, McIntyre’s work troubles our assumptions about perception, and our tendency to seek identification and empathic connection via clear, direct representations of the artist’s self.

This refusal to directly imbue her work with evidence of a ‘self’ is an essential aspect of McIntyre’s minimalist aesthetic. While Rankine does not overtly render her personal life in her work, *The End of the Alphabet* and *PLOT*—and to a degree, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*—bear the mark of an artist attempting to encompass, juxtapose, and convey multiple levels of experience, sound, visual imagery, and concepts. McIntyre’s, however, bears the mark of an artist striving for increasing simplicity—in her choice of camera, subject, and framing.

For McIntyre, these choices derive from a serious consideration of the ethics of the photographer-subject relation. In ‘Beckett: The Failure Sense’ (2017), McIntyre draws attention to Kappeler’s analysis in *The Pornography of Representation* of the 1984 newspaper photograph of lynchéd, 18-year-old South African farm labourer, Thomas Kasire (McIntyre, ‘Beckett’ 358). Included in a footnote tying together Samuel Beckett’s play *Catastrophe* (1982), and *Come and See* (1985), Elem Klimov’s film depicting the 1943 Nazi occupation of Byelorussian SSR, McIntyre places these references after her own image, ‘Veil IX’ (2008) and ‘The Path to the Distribution Point of Light’ (2015). Through the juxtaposition of her figure-less image of fog and references to texts and films depicting acts of submission and dehumanization, McIntyre causes the reader to she began to make landscape images (Holt 00:00:19). ‘I think people make a lot of assumptions that they just accept what you’re showing
Veil IX (2008),
colour lightjet photographic print 80 cm x 100 cm

Veil XV (2008),
colour lightjet photographic print, 122 cm x 152 cm
them as being somehow naturalistic or found in the world in a very immediate way,’ she explains, ‘but in actual fact the act of picking up the camera is an act of construction—the way you frame things’ (Holt 00:00:28-51). Echoing Szarkowski’s emphasis on the role of framing in the act of making an image, McIntyre views this fact of her medium as a cause for ethical concern. ‘I don’t feel like picking up the camera is an innocent act or an unthinking act,’ she expands, ‘it’s something that’s very knowing’ (Holt 00:02:17-28). Acknowledging there is always an element of surprise, McIntyre qualifies, ‘But the act of photographing, I think, is a very controlled, almost performative thing for me’ (Holt 00:02:46-58). This control is reflected in her choice of camera, lens, and other technical consistencies.

For the past thirty years, McIntyre has worked with the same camera—a medium format transparency, 6x7, Pentax with a normal lens (Holt, 00:10:47-50; 01:06:09). ‘I came from a sculpture background,’ she explains, ‘and as a fine artist using photography, to me it’s a means to an end’ (Holt 00:10:36-40). Acquiring her ‘cumbersome’ Pentax before digital photography became common, McIntyre saw no reason to change when the latter become more widespread (Holt 00:11:10-13). She notes that it has taken digital camera developers many years to come close to the quality and level of visual information that comes with medium format scale and transparency film, particularly in regard to fineness and grain (Holt 00:11:18-48). Her appreciation of physical detail goes beyond the film itself and constitutes an important part of McIntyre’s practice. ‘I, as an artist, am used to working with physical materials,’ she says, ‘so to me the idea of the physicality of the film and getting the films back and putting them on the lightbox and viewing them in that way is part of the process’ (Holt 00:11:49-00:12:03). McIntyre describes her working practice as ‘very

7 “Normal” meaning not wide-angle or optically distorting.
intuitive’ and though working in a medium that enables easy mass reproduction,
McIntyre sees a correspondence between analogue photography and the physical
processes of fine artworking:

I also like the surprise. You know, very few things surprise you in life now,
everything that we have is immediately accessible in terms of the internet and
so forth and there’s actually something nice about the mystery of photography,
where you take the photographs, you send the film away and you get them back
and you don’t know exactly what’s coming back at you in terms of atmosphere,
quality of light etc. You know there’s only so much you can do on the day in
terms of technical know-how, [and] bracketing, to make sure you get what you
want. So the idea of that stuff coming back in the post and me looking at it for
the first time and encountering the image afresh, like a new experience,
divorced from the act of taking the photograph, that’s all very, very important to
me as part of my process, and that’s why I’ve not ditched film. (Holt 00:12:42-
00:13:33)

These choices enable McIntyre to achieve aesthetic values often associated with
photography, such and transparency and realism: ‘In terms of depth of field, … I really
want a huge amount of detail to be visible. I want things to be defined and clear and
crisp and almost hyperreal … because to me all of the little details are vitally import-
 ant in terms of the overall image’ (Holt 00:13:39-00:14:06). While these choices are partly
idiosyncratic reflections of a particular artist, who describes herself as ‘indecisive’ and
admits that if she were able to see a preview of her image on a digital screen, she would
never take a photograph, they have aesthetic implications that challenge an easy or
straightforward relationship between subject and viewer (Holt 00:12:13-15). Sverakova
writes of McIntyre: ‘She cherishes the photographic negative as an active contributor,
foregrounding its ability to reveal, i.e. place into consciousness ‘many things’ (not
noticed before), layering surprises over the recognized and selected’ (19 Jan. 2013).
Sverakova breaks McIntyre’s process into four stages: selecting ‘a cluster of subject
matter, place and time before the lens reads any of it’; framing; waiting for the negative
and receiving it; and making the print’ (19 Jan. 2013).
It is in this third stage that Sverakova locates the key to McIntyre’s innovative break from prevailing modes of photographic realism. ‘Waiting for the negative to be processed inserts a fallow period, doing nothing, she explains. ‘This nothing is not a complete nothingness, the afterthoughts, associations, questions come and go, as in any other episode of work in progress’ (19 Jan. 2013). The ‘high intensity’ returns with the arrival of the negative, she continues, and the search for the ‘significance of the image,’ a process of scrutiny and surprise. ‘Her four stages of constructing an image differ,’ Sverakova argues, ‘from the hegemonic ‘decisive moment’ coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1952’ (19 Jan. 2013). While photographers and curators such as Szarkowski have read this moment as a moment of visual drama, not event-based or personal drama, Sverakova rightly notes the extent to which McIntyre’s use of varied print sizes and interactive installations amplify her break from the documentary style often associated with Cartier-Bresson. Printing images ranging in size from 10 centimetres by 14 centimetres to 122 centimetres by 152 centimetres, McIntyre disrupts viewers’ expectations regarding small, handheld photographs and large landscape paintings in art galleries.

Constructing the viewer’s moment of encounter is vital. ‘No matter what space I’m in—exhibiting—I’m very conscious of … where the viewer’s positioned in relation to the photograph,’ McIntyre says (Holt 00:16:37-46). Her concern with the ‘act of looking’ plays out in unexpected ways in a current (2018) exhibit at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, Ireland. Installed on the left-hand wall, near a corner, ‘The Path to the Distribution Point of Light’ (2015) depicts a ledge, some piping, an outlet, and moulding in a corner of a room with white walls and a grey floor. Accompanying text explains that the room is an empty studio in an art school following the ‘frenetic activity’ of end of year student exhibitions. The image is installed with a low, grey
platform that forms a shallow ramp and spills out from the corner of the exhibition room. The platform appears similar to a stage, and viewers are invited to walk onto it to view the image more closely. The grey platform and the white walls of the exhibit room, and grey floor and white walls in the image, create an uncanny doubling of the image and the act of looking in which the viewer is engaged. Moreover, the forced perspective in both the image and the installation creates sets of parallel lines between the two sets of floors and walls, naturally drawing the viewer’s attention to the corner of the image and of the room. Their attention is thus drawn, in a literal sense, to an empty space. This play between emptiness, complex visual composition, physical interaction is born out in the varied reactions of museum visitors. This variety, she notes,

strangely plays out the things that I’m exploring, which is how the viewer becomes very aware of their own physicality. When you integrate photography with an installation in that way people suddenly become very mindful or very aware of themselves within the proximity to the work or in the work itself. (Holt 00:18:09-30)

McIntyre’s images are often structured by the intersection of a few horizontal or vertical lines, and the IMMA exhibit takes that stylistic mark to another level.

Geometry has been a particular concern of her recent work. In the last few years, the interiors McIntyre has been making ‘all seem to be corners,’ a concern that she says ‘is as much about geometric composition as it is, as well, about the space and the atmosphere in the space’ (Holt 00:19:00-10). This comes, she conjectures, from her interest in abstraction and abstract painting (00:19:16-17). Through the layering of subject matter, location, and elements of design that ‘you would also encounter in painting,’ McIntyre blurs the lines between photography and painting (Holt 00:19:37-40). She has not drawn or painted since she was in art school, but in recent years, McIntyre has used written notes to draft ideas for an image (00:19:47-00:20:08).
The Path to the Distribution Point of Light (2015),
colour lightjet photographic print, 122 cm x 152 cm

The Path to the Distribution Point of Light (2015),
mixed media installation, author’s photo, July 2018
‘To me that would have been a form of drawing,’ she explains, ‘but not drawing in any traditional sense’ (Holt 00:20:10-12). Reflective writing has become an important part of her process, taking longer form in ‘Beckett: The Failure Sense,’ a text which exemplifies her interest in accessibility, layering, and the role of reader/viewer engagement. While the footnotes unravel the interconnected nature of her influences, they also complicate the accessibility of the text—an affect that was very intentional. McIntyre hopes that after reading and ‘absorbing’ everything in the text, the reader will ‘make sense’ of the interconnections; but it is important to her that she not force them together or explicitly clarify one set meaning (Holt 00:22:28-49). ‘I like the idea of ideas just oscillating around each other,’ she says, ‘cause [sic] that’s what my practice is like, really’ (Holt 00:22:51-57). Beckett’s influence has kept returning, spontaneously, and highlights the minimalist nature of McIntyre’s aesthetic, particularly in recent images.

In a 2006 interview with Jacqui McIntosh, McIntyre responds to the repeated tendency of critics to associate her work with Beckett’s, particularly in light of the exhibition of her ‘Space of Doubt’ diptych (2000) at the Goethe Institut’s Return Gallery in Dublin for the Samuel Beckett centenary celebrations in 2000 (38). McIntyre shares:

Beckett’s work seems full of words, but at the same time it can seem emptied of meaning; it has that duality. To me it has always seemed to constantly fluctuate between something seeming mammoth and yet at the same time, diminutive, important and unimportant—and I think that has always been a characteristic of my work. (38)

Twelve years later, considering ‘Beckett: The Failure Sense,’ McIntyre says she is most interested in Beckett’s plays, ‘the context his work operates in,’ and ‘his general sensibility’—that is, ‘the senselessness’ and ‘the way he conveys feeling, how we encounter things’ (Holt 00:24:13-48). McIntyre acknowledges that Catastrophe may
seem ‘a little bit absurd or nonsensical,’ but she highlights the play’s focus on ‘the idea of control … [and] the way that people subjugate each other’ (Holt 00:25:21-36). At the start of the essay, McIntyre describes being drawn to Beckett’s attendance to ‘the space between things,’ in which he made ‘tangible the intangible … in a way that could only be understood through feeling, feeling that is impossible to find expression for in language’ (McIntyre 352). These remarks invite further examination of Beckett’s highly minimalist play. Dedicated to Václav Havel, the Czech dramatist, prominent activist in the 1968 Prague Spring, and president of Czechoslovakia from 1989 until 1992 and of the Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003, Catastrophe was publicly performed for the first time in Avignon in 1982 during a ‘night of solidarity’ with Havel while he was in prison (Beckett 203). After hearing of the performance, Havel described ‘a great joy and emotion which helped me to live on amidst all the dirt and baseness’ in prison (Beckett 203). The play’s tension turns on the increasing uncovering and manipulation of the protagonist’s body, likely resonating with Havel’s experience of control and objectification in prison. The play opens with a male director, D, and his female assistant, A, dissecting the set up and attire of their ‘protagonist,’ P, who stands on a plinth in a black dressing gown and a hat ‘To help hide the face’ (Beckett 199). There is an uptick in tension one-third of the way through the five-page play when the director decides that the protagonist’s ‘[c]lawlike’ hands should be taken out of his pocket and ‘exposed’ (Beckett 200). When the director requests that the assistant remove P’s gown to reveal ‘old grey pyjamas’ the colour of ash, Beckett writes in the stage notes that P ‘submits, inert’ (200). In a footnote to ‘Beckett: The Failure Sense,’ McIntyre writes that ash ‘conjures up much more than merely the colour, but the very essence of that particular quality of bleakness, often signified by the colour grey in so much of Beckett’s work’ (McIntyre 355-356).
colours in the play—black, ash, and white—are the primary colours both in McIntyre’s ‘Veil’ series and in ‘The Distribution Path of Light,’ yet the resonance between the two artists’ work is more than visual. When the assistant observes, ‘He’s shivering,’ and, seeming concerned about the man’s comfort, tentatively suggests, ‘What about a little…a little…gag,’ revealing her concern about the noise, the director laments, ‘This craze for explication! every i dotted to death!’ (Beckett 201). The play’s tension increasingly rides on the director’s prioritization of his aesthetic vision over P’s comfort or free will. The director continues to dictate how the man’s body is displayed, first requesting that his hands be revealed and hung limp at his sides, then deciding that his hands should be joined ‘breast-high’ (Beckett 201). This gesture, placing the man in a position reminiscent of prayer or worship, combined with the director’s insistence that the assistant ‘[w]hit[en] all flesh’ suggests that Beckett is mirroring a religious ritual of purification; yet in characteristic Beckett style, no such clear meaning arises, and the drama remains focused on the minute actions of a few characters (202). Eventually stepping back into the theatre where the audience will sit, the director requests that the man’s head be lowered and notes he ‘Could do with more nudity’ (Beckett 202). This flippancy toward P’s possible concern for modesty or his sense of shame is heightened by the director’s acute attention to variations in lighting. Luke, who is in charge of lighting, enters in the final third of the play, when tension increases with each fading in and out of ‘general light’ and each adjustment of light until it falls on his head alone (Beckett 202). Interestingly, only Luke has a full first name, giving light a certain prioritization in the play. The ‘catastrophe’ referred to in the play’s title arrives when the assistant suggests that they raise the man’s head and the director exclaims, ‘For God’s sake! [Pause.] Good. There’s our catastrophe. In the bag’ (Beckett 202-203). The director declares he can hear the audience’s applause, to which P ‘raises his head, fixes
the audience,’ after which the applause ‘falters, dies’ (Beckett 203). Beckett thus ends
the play with an ambiguous moment which can be read as an act of resistance on P’s
part, or his final acceptance of his submission. The ways in which the director, and
Beckett, downplay and aestheticize P’s suffering raise questions about the artist’s
manipulation of others for their own gains, a concern which underpins McIntyre’s
approach to ethical photography during this age of social media and mass visual
spectacle.

In many ways, McIntyre’s move toward increasingly minimalist work as
exemplified by the 2018 IMMA exhibit is the result of her concern with how social
media and mass consumption have resulted in our increasing objectification of
ourselves and others and our overvaluation of surface appearances (Holt 00:26:40-
00:27:07). McIntyre acknowledges that our hunger for spectacle is not new, citing
Franz Kafka’s short story ‘A Hunger Artist’ (1922) as an example of this historical,
human desire for visual drama (Holt 00:29:03-10). But she is fascinated by the ways in
which social media has encouraged a distancing from experience—‘recording
experiences whilst you’re there, rather than just experiencing the experience’ (Holt
00:29:29-43). She contrasts her earlier, highly-detailed work—evident in images such
as ‘Rocks, Forest, Descending’ (2008) and ‘A Complex Variety of Greens…’ (2001)—
with the more recent ‘emptying out’ seen in ‘The Blank Realm’—collected images of
empty rooms, dead-end corners, and blank walls (Holt 00:30:16-27).\(^8\) Series such as
this one require the viewer’s ability to engage, and to contemplate, as well as the
artist’s. ‘[It is about] this idea of blankness,’ she says, ‘not being given anything to go
on, [a] lack of information, and really having to investigate and pore over something to

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\(^8\) In ‘Beckett: The Failure Sense,’ McIntyre titles the third section, ‘The Blank Realm,’ and describes
making images of empty rooms in an art college after end-of-year student exhibitions (353). ‘The Path to
the Distribution Point of Light’ is one such image.
try and find meaning’ (Holt 00:30:28-42). Her images of fog—such as the ‘Veil’
series—are concerned with a similar emptying out of visual information, pushing the
limits of ‘how little subject can you actually have to present the viewer with’ (Holt
00:30:43-55). In ‘Beckett: The Failure Sense,’ McIntyre juxtaposes ‘Veil, IX’ against a
quote from Beckett’s *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*
(1984) beginning, ‘[M]ore and more my own language appears to me like a veil that
must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. …’ (358-
359). In photographing the ‘intangible’ object of fog, McIntyre experiments with the
very idea of physical presence in an image. Through her reference to Beckett’s concept
of language, McIntyre also pushes the limits of her secondary medium. She offers that
‘not giving an easily defined subject’ and photographing ‘something
phenomenological’ serves as ‘a kind of reaction against objectification’ (Holt 00:31:00-
18). She adds, ‘There are a lot of things I see photographically where I think, I
wouldn’t have been able to photograph that’ (Holt 00:38:38-42). She cites one project
in which the photographer depicted people sleeping on the street, and contrasts the
approach with Philip Lorca diCorcia’s (Holt 00:38:44-00:39:08). In one series, she
explains, diCorcia photographed ‘rent boys’ and paid them what they charge for an
hour of their services, giving their details (name, age, location, etc.) as the title of the
photographs. In utilizing their services, diCorcia was thus ‘acknowledging the
commercial transaction between the subject and the photographer’ and raising
questions about the viewer’s role as well (Holt 00:39:17-44). While McIntyre’s images
are less documentary than diCorcia’s, when she does include the figure, she is careful
not to create or encourage a transactional relationship between the subject and the
viewer.

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9 McIntyre’s capitalization.
McIntyre, of course, does not have to go far from home to find work directly representing suffering and social violence. She explains her rejection of being identified with a ‘head-on’ engagement with Northern Ireland or the Troubles as a ‘reticence to create something that can be seen as quite sensational’ (Holt 00:53:41-57).

She is hesitant to ‘jump on a bandwagon’ created by some of her peers:

- a lot of male photographers and videographers in the north of Ireland … have made quite a healthy living out of … making work about the Troubles, and I’m not criticizing them for it, they’ve obviously felt very strongly motivated to do that, but I just felt like I couldn’t. Maybe it’s that idea of the camera and the barbaric act again. I just felt like I couldn’t deal with it head on, or I didn’t want to deal with it at all, really … I think things come out by degrees in my work. They come out over a long period of time. But I tend to come at things from an oblique angle. (Holt 00:54:03-00:55:40)

Noting that she does sometimes appreciate direct, issue-based work by other photographers, she explains that the approach does not suit her practice (Holt 00:55:53-00:56:02). Her comment on the financial advantages of creating work that directly with expected topics surrounding the Troubles and Northern Irish politics echoes her concern with the transactional nature of the subject/photographer and subject/viewer relationship, but her articulation of her formal choices reveals the extent to which her work is the result of a primarily intuitive response to place:

- It’s almost like the work is having a dialogue with me, it’s happening of its own volition and I’m just kind of, not a receptacle but I’m a receiver, I’m putting the work out. You know, I’ve been to locations which seemed completely unremarkable and I’ve wondered, what is it about this place—it’s very ordinary, it’s very banal, it’s very ugly, potentially people would see it as ugly, as disturbing, unpleasant, of no real interest to anybody—why am I photographing it, why am I photographing an empty space? (Holt 00:58:09-50)

Whatever the motivation behind her interest in empty spaces and minimalistic compositions, the result is a constantly evolving interest in the most essential element of photographic images—light. In reducing the number of variables with her camera, not bringing additional lighting, and not eliminating objects from a scene, McIntyre remains focused on exposure and the physical interplay between transparency film and
McIntyre has spent years photographing in situations with extremely low light, sometimes exposing for up to several hours, and as a result, her final images rely in large part on the interplay between the photographer’s physical controls and the chance elements of atmospheric conditions. This paring back effects a withdrawal from objectification, and, to some extent, from representation entirely. Viewers who rely only on what is represented in McIntyre’s images—trees, water, buildings at night—may come away wondering what the images are ‘about’; viewers who see in the images a metaphor for the viewer’s affective response to an encounter may glean more. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Leith has argued that ‘a lazy characterization of McIntyre’s work might describe it as poetic—meaning something like ‘haunting and evocative’ (6). Instead, he contends that her work is ‘in fact profoundly prosaic’ in its preference for metonym and realism over metaphor and symbolism (6). When Sverakova summarily describes McIntyre’s oeuvre as ‘visual poetry,’ she is not, however, ignoring the elements of metonymy and Realism evident in the work (19 Jan. 2013). Instead, she is astutely tracing McIntyre’s career-long concern with the blurred boundaries between genres and forms.

Rather than ‘poetic,’ one might describe McIntyre’s work as ‘lyric.’ By lyric, I borrow poet Ellen Bryan Voigt’s definition: ‘In the lyric, you can stop time; you pick that moment of intensity and hold it. The narrative moves through time’ (‘Song and Story’).\(^\text{10}\) Sontag’s dictate that all understanding is rooted in narrative and in the ability to say no is overturned in McIntyre’s work, which challenges the very structure of representation, in which the subject is objectified by the photographer and thus the viewer. McIntyre’s work thus enables a moment of lyrical criticality and encounter.

\(^{10}\) While Voigt makes this brief summation in an interview with The Atlantic, she provides a larger, book-length analysis of the lyric in her 1999 text, The Flexible Lyric.
While time functions differently in poetry and in photography, both forms enable artists to capture, distil, or create a sense of stopped or paused time. In this way, McIntyre’s images are akin to Ettinger’s work, which interweaves traces of photographic images with elements of painting, and which Pollock describes as a ‘paintorial act’—‘not an imaging of emotion, figured through body and gesture, but the incitement to a co-affectivity distilled’ from a deep engagement with visual art traditions and with the ‘caesura’ of our post-traumatic era (‘Thinking’ 17).
Conclusion

For Rankine and McIntyre, their respective maximalist and minimalist aesthetics represent a continuum of formal choices regarding the representation of the self and the figure. In emphasizing the role of the landscape, or the background, each artist highlights the extent to which the self and the figure are a part of their context, without being entirely bound by it. In this, they echo Woolf in the start of a memoir, ‘Sketch of the Past’ (1939), when she considers how to render the self in the text:

If I were painting myself I should have to find some—rod, shall I say—something that would stand for the conception. It proves one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says or does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. (85-86)

Rankine and McIntyre’s aesthetics diverge not only because of idiosyncratic elements of their practice and different lived experiences, but also because of the experiences they wish to explore. In PLOT, Rankine’s exploration of the ways in which the ambiguity, duality, and conflicting desires of maternity and motherhood defy representational norms demands a fractal aesthetic able to break the poem plane, incorporate multiple levels of aural experience, and juxtapose conceptual engagement with other literary writers alongside playful, rhyming scenes included to provide the reader a physical and aural connection to the text. While her use of fractal form contributes toward the later development of a postlyric poetics in Don’t Let Me Be Lonely and Citizen, Rankine’s formal innovation in PLOT is distinct and should be further explored as such. Writing ‘not to a plot but to a rhythm’ Rankine develops her own visual rhythm. Moreover, her engagement with Woolf is unique in her work to date. Further scholarship which considers Woolf’s innovative writings on visual art, motherhood, and the self—particularly research which builds on Diane Gillespie and Colin Dickey’s careful work on these subjects—will only reveal greater nuance in
PLOT’s engagement with Woolf. For example, Woolf’s ‘Sketch of the Past’ reveals that her mother was a highly influential force in her work. Woolf shares that until she wrote To the Lighthouse, ‘the presence of my mother obsessed me’ (Woolf, ‘Sketch’ 92). Woolf admits the sheer difficulty in trying to depict her mother in prose: ‘Yet if one could give a sense of my mother’s personality one would have to be an artist. It would be as difficult to do that, as it should be done, as to paint a Cézanne’ (‘Sketch’ 96). Woolf’s choice of a post-Impressionist painter reveals not only her association with the Bloomsbury Group and her long friendship with influential painter and critic Roger Fry, who coined the term Post-Impressionism, but also the extent to which directly figurative work cannot match the intensity of her emotional feeling or her desire for precision (‘Sketch’ 96). As Rankine does in PLOT, Woolf explores the tension between a woman’s own desires and her being-for her child. ‘I see now,’ Woolf writes of her mother’s intense commitment to others, ‘that she was living on such an extended surface that she had not time, nor strength, to concentrate, except for a moment if one were ill or in some child’s crisis, upon me, or upon anyone …’ (‘Sketch’ 94). As Woolf argued in ‘The New Biography’ (1927), ‘The life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act’ (Essays 100). Attending to the surface tensions of a life can illuminate ‘the true life of [the] subject,’ and the nuances of one’s inner landscape (Woolf, Essays 95). The approach Woolf outlines for writers of biographies is an innovative approach for critics as well.

In PLOT, Rankine dramatizes this reality by troubling the surface clarity of her language such that, to borrow Woolf’s language, words ‘cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them’ (‘Sketch’ 103). Rankine thus explores

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‘the content of form’—that nuanced interplay between diction, image, rhythm, and line that, defying many critical approaches, reveals the interdependence between content and form (Fulton 69). In McIntyre’s work, this intensity and formal play is rendered not through words and sounds but through the manipulation of light. In A Contemporary Sublime and ‘The Path to the Distribution Point of Light,’ McIntyre not only disrupts local expectations of activist and socially engaged photography, but the very expectations of visual representation and the role of narrative in photography. This is not to say that McIntyre’s art could not be socially engaged in its own way; rather than saying ‘Belfast can look like this,’ McIntyre’s images reveal that contemporary photography can look like this. Highlighting the inherently constructed nature of photography, McIntyre’s attention to an ethical use of the figure demands that viewers consider their own participation in the act of seeing and in deriving meaning from images. Her re-envisioning of landscape imagery not only shifts critical attention away from viewing Northern Ireland only as a site of conflict, but also disrupts contemporary assumptions about the split between photographic and painted representation. As revealed in her reflective writings on the influence of Beckett’s Catastrophe, McIntyre is attuned to the role of gender and objectification in the history of representation and dramatization; while her work engages only obliquely with issues of gender, her images offer alternative ways of engaging with the body. When figures appear in McIntyre’s work, they are often at a threshold moment—standing on a bridge, at the water’s edge—or are encased by forest, foliage, or fields. Where one viewer might identify with the figure, another might wish to distance herself; where one might feel a sense of foreboding or menace, another might experience tranquillity and safety. McIntyre’s comfort in allowing these dualities and ambiguities enables the viewer to enter a moment of lyrical pause, a brief, nearly imperceptible moment in which time stops. Yet
this lyrical moment remains a critical one; working against the mass mechanization of
photography, McIntyre’s images—and the highly physical, intimate practice behind
them—poise the viewer at a threshold that is difficult to find in contemporary life. As
Chan has argued:

… photography is an embalmer only so long as it is thought of as a mechanical
eye passively recording and storing the trace of the person or the scene. A
notion of such passivity, which brings it to a chance relation with what is
photographed, with the what-has-been and so with death, is only conceivable if
photography is eviscerated of the artistry of the photographer. (125)

By imbuing her work with physical traces of her slow, analogue practice, McIntyre
enables her images to break free of the longstanding assumption that photography is
only a twilight art.

Poised in a place which is ‘all threshold,’ fractal poetics and minimalist
photographic images derive from a place akin to Ettinger and Pollock’s matrixial space
of becoming (Fulton 63). Rankine and McIntyre’s work does not engage directly with
traces of trauma in the artists’ lives, even though traces may be present; their work
engages with trauma in the aesthetic sense—in the human capacity for being with the
other through and in her pain. Any parallels between the artists’ lives and texts, or
images, do not invite a direct conflation of the two, but rather a careful consideration of
how an artist selects, develops, and inflects her formal choices with aspects of their
self. This process of selection reveals the extent to which directly mimetic rendering of
an artist’s self in a text, or an image, is never fully possible; to do so would be to limit
both the artist’s life and the work. Moreover, a certain holding-apart of the two enables
the text, or image, to be more than the self—as the adage goes, ‘the poem is smarter
than the poet’ or as Joseph Brodsky was fond of saying, ‘The rhyme is smarter than the
poet’ (Foer). A critical approach which values the artist’s influence can appear limiting,
can suggest that the text, or the image is bound to the artist’s finite self and historical
moment. Rankine and McIntyre’s aesthetic innovation works against this limiting, without swinging the other direction and arguing for a purely transcendent art.

Challenging the drive for transcendent art is essential to a fractal aesthetic. Fulton explains: ‘Although a fractal poem might offer transcendence at the local level—in a line, a phrase—like a complex adaptive system it does not try to sustain a sublime optimum throughout’ (67). Through the juxtaposition of ‘high lyric passages’ and ‘vulgar or parodic sections,’ the diction of a fractal poem ‘can range from gorgeous to caustic’ without a change of speaker (Fulton 67). Reed’s examination of Rankine’s postlyric style also emphasizes the importance of avoiding a transcendental aesthetic. He argues that through the subtitle ‘An American Lyric’ in Don’t Let Me Be Lonely and Citizen, Rankine insists ‘on a claim to ‘lyric’’ that is nonuniversal and, insofar as America is a historical construction, nontranscendental …’ (Freedom 108). Similarly, Rankine offers readers of PLOT moments which reach toward the sublime—towards moments where there are no clear boundaries of the self, where dream-time and lived time blur, where one can wish to pause and ‘call forward the infinite in the / self to love all that survives and / is her, is here, all that is existence’ (PLOT 89). Rankine does not rest in these moments; she juxtaposes the harsh realities of a body ‘in its horror of explosion. stretched to house what / is not her’ against the near sublime connection between self, the land, and the breadth of human existence:

… For she loves below the full sun the sustained sequence, the interlocking earth, an ocean of hardened water dazzling its fixed terrain of love arriving before existence in the exploited blur of her cratered understanding of our soul’s intimacy within the opportunity that is life. (PLOT 91, 90)
In order to fulfil their expectations of a text, readers of *PLOT* wishing to make ‘sense’ of such moments must attempt to put themselves *inside* such moments; this radical act of self-othering—and mothering—so essential to Rankine’s characterization of being black in the U.S. is also seen in McIntyre’s disruption of the sublime in landscape paintings. While many critics observe in McIntyre’s work a deep engagement with the sublime, they often assume this engagement to be based on transcendence, or a desire to move beyond or escape the physical limitations of place. Interviews with McIntyre, and close readings of images such as ‘Untitled (after Caspar David Friedrich) II’ (2002), reveal that while McIntyre alludes to a famous Romantic painting of a man poised on a cliff over a mass of swirling fog, both she and her figures ultimately go deeper *into* the landscape, rather than trying to break free of it or rise above it. ‘Untitled…’ places a woman almost mid-way through the frame; she is small in comparison to the width of the field she walks through, and to the buildings in the background running along the horizon line, particularly one tall, concrete and austere structure. She walks away from the viewer through what appears to be a thin ditch in an otherwise unbroken field; it is unclear where she has entered the field, as a fence cuts off the lower left-hand corner of the frame, making it appear impossible for her to have entered without climbing the fence. The woman seems as if to have appeared from somewhere beyond view—or possibly to have trespassed—and may be heading toward an undefined destination, perhaps an ordinary one such as work or home, or perhaps fleeing from something beyond the frame. McIntyre has set this image, unlike many of her others, on a clear day, and the interplay between light blue sky, subtle clouds, and lush grass evoke pastoral landscapes, possibly a sense of tranquillity. Such a peaceful reading is undercut by the figure’s ambiguous movement, her potential backstory, and associations viewers may have with the scattered urban development behind the field.
Even with the field foregrounded and thus taking up nearly half the frame, the figure is oriented toward the urban. McIntyre’s decision not to place herself or the figure at a distance or shutter speed which would have created the blur of movement before the camera is telling—like Rankine, she offers the viewers a moment of suspended time, and suspended consequence. Viewers are left contemplating the ‘faint lines of the land which some day perhaps [they] may reach’ (Woolf, *Essays* 74). Critics of Rankine and McIntyre’s work are left considering a time in which one might envision other ways of rendering and relating to the self, a natal memory of a time and place which can be imagined if not claimed.
Untitled (after Caspar David Friedrich) I (2002),
colour lightjet photographic print 122 cm x 152 cm

Untitled (after Caspar David Friedrich) II (2002),
colour lightjet photographic print 122 cm x 152 cm
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