Re-member Theology: A Theopoetical Reading of Three Irish Poets
Oana Sânziana Marian

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin
The Loyola Institute/ School of Religion, Theology and Peace Studies

24 April 2024
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

I agree to deposit this thesis in the University’s open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

I consent to the examiner retaining a copy of the thesis beyond the examining period, should they so wish (EU GDPR May 2018).

Signed: [Signature] Date: 30 September 2023
SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the corrective, fortifying, and ultimately healing possibilities of a more mutual engagement between poetry and theology in the context of Ireland, with wider implications for the study of Western Christianity more generally. It underscores the potentially transformative contributions of Irish poetry written by women whose poetics were shaped by their social formation in Catholic Ireland. I allude to a wide range of historical periods for contextualisation, but the primary period of poetic production on which I focus is within the last 40 years, from the 1980s to publications in the last three years. I explore two essential questions: what does it mean to read poetry theologically? And how can theological readings of poetry contribute to a critical, contextual Irish theology? I emphasise the importance of interpreting Ireland’s cultural, social, and religious narratives within theoretically reflective frameworks grounded in lived, ordinary experience. In doing so, I also highlight the nuances and limitations of academic theology, which often seeks clarity and definition and which, I argue, can greatly benefit from engaging with the more formally ambivalent properties of poetry, both writing and reading.

My research methodology is multi-disciplinary, drawing from the tools of literary analysis, theological reflection, cultural and especially postcolonial and decolonial critique, and creative practice. I also invoke specific theological frameworks, such as liberation theology, feminist, and Womanist perspectives, theopoetics, the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet, the Vatican II-informing theology of Karl Rahner, Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and Thérèse of Lisieux’ “Little Way” theology, though this study is most interested in models for a critical contextual theology in Ireland, rather than theoretical explorations by giants of the Western Christian canon. I refer to the theological anthropologies of Willie James Jennings and M. Shawn Copeland as foundational for my inquiry. I also engage with Catholic theology in Ireland and its broader context. My methods are deeply informed by my experiences with poetry, both as a writer and a long-time reader, especially of Irish (Anglophone) poetry. This personal
engagement with poetry is a foundational touchstone, guiding the research process and shaping the analytical lens through which I interpret poetry and theology. I repeatedly employ side-barred interventions of personal reflection to draw attention to the embodied aspects of both creative practice and scholarship.

The research ultimately exposes the present paucity of (and need for) a renewed contextual theology in Ireland and the transformative potential of Irish poetry to help theological discourse remember—and re-member—the sacred, relational, and interdependent nature of bodies, matter, sensory experience, and difference, on the one hand, and divine creativity, ethics, and love, on the other. This re-membering is not to codify a definitive “Irish Catholic theology” but rather to demonstrate that theology is most meaningful when, like poetry, it exercises the capacity to reflect critically on its forms and communicates its meanings without anaesthetising, domesticating, or bypassing its ineffable aspects. In this sense, poetry’s non-dualist, fluid, porous, and embodied properties can offer fresh theological perspectives, especially in historical and colonial trauma contexts, leading to new and healing cultural possibilities. The implications of this process are significant: contrary to many other postcolonial contexts, Irish people have been historically racialised as “other” within British colonial logics, but they also could assimilate into whiteness in those places outside of Ireland where other communities have been racialised as non-white (even if not immediately, not everywhere, and not in every instance). Within the mechanics of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism, and without pathways to healing, Ireland’s capacity as a state and Irish people’s capacities as individuals to reproduce racist harm increases.

Finally, this study sheds light on the challenges and benefits of engaging with religious discourse in Ireland. I emphasise the need for religious nuance and more humble, critically reflective, and grounded theological approaches. Such approaches embody compassion towards (rather than bypassing or rushing to fix away) the messy, indeterminate complexities of lived experience. I conclude by emphasising the importance of embracing vulnerability in theological discourse through openness to the transformative potential of interdisciplinary engagement with poetry.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For care of body and spirit: Maria, Marion, Kirsty, Carrie, Odile, Thérèse;

for material and other support in thin times, physical and mental space: Domnitsa, Lucian, Liviu, Sarah, Prudence, Dragana, Lelo, Fiona, the Elschlagers, Ivanna, Teresa, Cath, Trinity Long Room Hub, Jesuits in Ireland, The Loyola Institute, Dublin Friends, Coffee Hour, Br Frank;

for accountability and encouragement: Hannah, Caleb, Peter, Bianca, Meltem, John, Andrew, Abigail, Dolunay, Sophie, Danica, Joshua, Becca, Rachel, Elisabeth, Sabina, Siobhan, Conor, Jessica K., Key Jo, Claire, Sundara, Claudia, Clare, Lorna, Fenela and Dani, Sidsel, Dagmara, Bethany, Glenn (1965-2020);

for home, hearth, and belonging: Anne-Elise, Souraya;

for patience, persistence, and grace: Gillian, Linda, Beth, Aideen, Helen, Carlo, Jake, Elena, Michael, Martine, Kieran, Trinity College Dublin library staff;

for the invitation, supervision, and exemplary model of what embodied relational theology looks like and can do in the world: Siobhán Garrigan,

and for my brother Rareş (1976-2020) and his 593 answers and 156 questions on Quora,

thank you.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**DECLARATION**  
2

**SUMMARY**  
3

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**  
5

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**  
6

1 **INTRODUCTION**  
9

1.1 First remarks  
9

1.2 A lack of religious nuance in public discourse  
11

1.3 Christianity and desire in Ireland  
14

1.4 Intervention 1  
19

1.5 How I came to this work: poetry and absence  
20

1.6 Some introductory definitions  
25

1.7 Decolonial thinking and the situated experience of poetry  
28

1.8 The one-sided relationship  
36

1.9 Outline of chapters  
40

1.10 Conclusion  
41

2 **METHODS AND FRAMEWORKS**  
43

2.1 Introduction  
43

2.2 Jennings’ *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*  
44

2.3 Intervention 2  
47

2.4 Theo/poetics: risking new forms to say old things  
48

2.5 Karl Rahner and Louis-Marie Chauvet’s theology of language and embodiment  
61

2.6 Poetry’s modes  
68

2.7 Why this is not (exactly) a women’s studies or practice-based project, and Hans Urs von Balthasar  
70

2.8 Intervention 3  
76

2.9 Methods for selecting the poets  
78

2.10 Vexed relationships to language beyond national borders of poetry  
83

2.11 Critical feminist methods and embodied perspectives  
86

2.12 Autistic readings  
89

2.13 Conclusion  
91
### 3 IN LIEU OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Questions and methods that mutually guide each other</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 What this thesis is not doing</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Conclusion</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4 PAULA MEEHAN’S EMBODIED WORDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction to chapter</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Place and time ‘and no one knows it like I do myself’</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Unstable bodies coming in and out of focus</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 The Invention of Women</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Historical parameters</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Destabilising the fixed view</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Paula Meehan’s poetry as decolonial counternarrative</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8 Theological sequences</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9 Theopoetics, process theology and the body</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10 Paula Meehan’s locality and ritual poetics in Ireland</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11 Intervention 4</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.12 Conclusion</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5 EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN’S FEMINIST CATHOLICISM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Intervention 5</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 An aesthetics that dissolves a simple idea of Irish Catholicism</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Not so post-Catholic Ireland</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 The freedom of religious life</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 On being religious</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7 White cis North Atlantic criticality beyond virtue signalling, or how to write about gender in a non-essentialist way</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8 Conclusion</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6 COLETTE BRYCE’S POROUS BORDERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Historical Context</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 We have choices concerning troublesome terminology</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 The help and the limitations of existing trauma theology</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 The poems</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 The helpful failures of language are taken up in poems</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7 Conclusion</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Introduction</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Contributions to the field: praxis</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Contributions to the field: poetry</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Definitions, uses, framing, sources, answers, and new questions that have emerged</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 Limitations and further study</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6 Conclusion</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

1.1 First remarks

This study explores the transformative power of contemporary Irish poetry for Christian theology, beginning with the possibilities it offers to Catholic theology. More specifically, I position poetry written by Irish women as an undervalued resource for theological inquiry. In doing so, I make the case that when theology scholars engage seriously with this resource, there is excellent potential to render the discipline of theology more meaningful, theoretically, and practically, partly by dissolving false hierarchies between theory and praxis (Garrigan 2004, 39). I also make the case that this particular dynamic between poetry and theology has salience in the Irish context, where both poetry and theology have contributed so significantly (for better and worse) to Irish cultural identity and where, except for struggles over the management of healthcare on the island, understandable outrage over clerical abuses, and "the 'problem' of interfaith relations", as Siobhán Garrigan points out (39), theology has largely receded from public discourse.

This study, which engages with the poetry of Paula Meehan, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Colette Bryce, is neither literary-critical accounting of religious themes within Irish poems—Andrew Auge, Lucy Collins, Catriona Clutterbuck, Gail McConnell, and others have made significant contributions in this regard (Auge 2013; Collins 2015; Clutterbuck 2021, in Darcy 2021; McConnell 2014) nor an apologetics—the discipline of theology's term for the defence of (generally, Christian) doctrine through systematic discourse. It does not intend to assert the value of Christian theology for its own sake. Instead, this study makes the case that the capacity to think critically and constructively about Christian theology, not just theoretically or reactively, but practically, is a powerful tool for the self-understanding needed for collective healing. This self-understanding can begin with theologians and enter society through the institutions of higher education, publication, media, and the arts; in reality, the transfer and development of theological knowledge, modes and skills happens in multiple directions and multiple areas feed into and nourish theology, if the discipline can be open to this.
As such, my study makes the case that serious engagement with poetry can transform theology. I am, again, speaking specifically about the Irish context, where poetry and theology have special positions within Irish cultural identity; however, there are real implications for all places and people where Christianity has played an active role in shaping society and culture. As the capacity to grasp and interpret theological dimensions grows scarcer, speaking intelligently and informed about religion and theology still matters (Ward 2019).

However, a considerable impediment to the broader development and usage of this capacity to think and debate theologically has to do with the inherent prerequisite of any intellectual pursuit: desire and, to some degree, intimacy. My desire to undertake this work as a scholar is not matched by desire in Irish society to encounter theology, through my work or otherwise, and there is little shared understanding of intimacy outside of sexual intimacy. However, intimacy, in the sense of trust and vulnerability plus proximity, is needed in other contexts, for example, for authentic platonic friendships or, as in the way that I mean here, for a deep understanding of a subject. In this case, intimacy implies my willingness to be transformed by the material with which I engage and to be transformed in writing about it. Consequently, to develop a theologically informed critical capacity, one must first nurture the desire to spend time (and possibly material resources) thinking and learning about something that is publicly associated with considerable pain and shame at a time when Irish people (and Western European people in general) are actively turning away from Christianity (Pew Research Center 2018). While this study will not treat the sociology or pedagogy of Christian formation, I raise the issue primarily to invoke desire. Because of the profound, collective trauma of sexual abuse (within the institution of the family, as well as in the clerical context), it is undoubtedly challenging to discuss theology and desire in the same breath in contemporary Ireland. It may even be harmful in some cases. As a queer, female, non-Irish researcher in Ireland, I often have to justify to Irish friends and colleagues outside of my field my desire to study theology, as if merely giving the subject attention were akin to evangelism or stupidity. The consensus among communities to which I belong (environmental activists, the queer community, artists and writers, my
former neighbourhood in the Liberties) is that Christianity is irrelevant to the future of Ireland; it is a traumatic past to be overcome, mainly by amputation or wilful amnesia.

1.2 A lack of religious nuance in public discourse

A recent event that powerfully brought this fact to light was the marked reticence about the overt and lifelong religious commitments of Shuhada’ Sadaqat (the Muslim name adopted by the artist better known as Sinéad O’Connor) in the aftermath of the Irish protest singer’s death on 26 July 2023. At the same time, she will be remembered primarily as a singer and rebellious public figure; Sadaqat is, in some illuminating ways, a very pure example of the intersection of poetics (from the Greek poiesis, "to make", from which the words poet, poem and poetry are derived) and theology that I explore through poets whose names and work will never be as widely known as the name and music of Sinéad O’Connor. One significant difference is that while Sadaqat declared her religious commitments and consciously addressed her faith in her art and public conversations, the poets I study do this to a much lesser degree (Ní Chuílleanáin) or not at all (Meehan and Bryce). Despite this, the media’s response to this particular aspect of her creative production, and her individual and communal life experience, contributes generatively to the case I am making about why this bridge between theology and poetry is needed, even though "its intellectual purpose in contemporary society is not always understood", as Graham Ward points out in his 2019 text Theology and Religion: Why It Matters (Ward 2019, Introduction). Even though Sadaqat spoke openly and often about religion, which undeniably shaped her music and politics, few of the many tributes elaborated on or even mentioned this aspect that was so practical and central to who she was, except through oblique language that evoked the more transcendent aspects of religion and spirituality, i.e. otherworldliness, divine inspiration, exaltedness: on Instagram, the artist Suzanne Walsh called her voice a "vessel for divine transgression" ([@suz.walsh] 2023) and among tributes shared by The Irish Times, the writer Sinéad Gleeson referred to “the cathedral of her voice” (Doyle 2023), and the poet Annemarie Ní Churreáin called her “a high priestess” ([@annemarienichurreain] 2023), gesturing evocatively to what ultimately remains unsaid.
The reticence on the part of people who might publicly disavow religion is meaningful if somewhat expected. Part of that reticence surely has to do with language itself. Spirituality, religion, belief, theology, trauma, healing, hope, and compassion are not irretrievable concepts. However, one would need to rehabilitate them, by which I mean what the theologian Willie James Jennings intends when he writes that the word and "concept of reconciliation is not irretrievable", but before it can be used, he continues, "we must first articulate the profound deformities of Christian intimacy and identity in modernity" (2010, 10). Without this action, all mention of reconciliation would distort its true meaning. As another example, the word faith, for the Jewish theologian Joshua Abraham Heschel, can retrieve some of its currency if thought of as the process of maintaining an active remembrance of moments when we felt something like the presence of the sacred (Heschel 1955). I give these examples to show that reviving the currency of words is possible. However, the reticence around Sadaqat’s religious commitments may have more to do with the fact that it is simply difficult to refer openly to religion in Ireland without immediately assuming a position of defensiveness.

However, the reticence of actively religious public voices is meaningful in other ways. A week after Sadaqat’s death, a cursory search of major publications produced only two articles by active religious thinkers who seriously considered religious commitments. One was by a professor of theology at Fordham University (a Jesuit institution in the United States), and it appeared in a secular publication (Moore 2023). The other was a more personal reminiscence, in the Jesuit publication America (Cortese 2023), by a young American Jesuit priest who had been studying abroad in Dublin in 2007, when Sinéad O’Connor (she had not yet changed her name) released the album Theology, which she dedicated to her Catholic mentor, Fr. Wilfred Harrington. Notably, The Christian Century published a feature article in 2022 (following the release of Kathryn Ferguson's documentary about Sadaqat, Nothing Compares) in which Jessica Mesman positions Sadaqat as a "secular saint", drawing comparisons between the Irish singer’s actions and those of St. Clare of Assisi (who shaved her hair to follow St. Francis’ model of service and poverty), St. Gianna Molla (who refused to have an abortion), and
St. Catherine of Siena, who "scolded the pope and called powerful clergy 'agents of Satan'”, and who, Mesman reminds the reader, is a doctor of the church (Mesman 2022). Conspicuously, the first article I mention here quietly downplays Sadaqt’s Muslim faith (which she adopted in 2018), and the second and third examples ignore it altogether. Indeed, subsequent articles in Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera and New Agencies 2023) and the Religion News Service (Piela 2023) address the media’s erasure of Sadaqt’s Muslim faith following her death, not just in the explicit failure to employ her Muslim name and images of her wearing a hijab and abaya but also implicitly, in focusing exclusively on her conflictual relationship with Catholicism, rather than, as the author of the last article says, "the religion that eventually brought her peace" (Piela 2023).

Putting aside prejudices of the genre, i.e. biases that religious scholars, theologians, and clerical figures may have about a protest singer's faith declarations and public theology, Piela is right that obscuring the singer's Muslim faith is a missed opportunity to demonstrate interfaith mutualism, as well as solidarity with queer and female Muslims; as stated in the Al Jazeera article, Sadaqt was an inspiration to many queer Muslims, having come out publicly as a lesbian, later claiming fluid sexuality—a common enough journey for one's sexual identification, in her case, it was received with suspicion under the scrutiny of fame. I argue that the failure to engage with, honour, or, in many cases, even mention Sadaqt's religious commitments represents many missed opportunities, but more so represents the chasm of "epistemic injustice", to use the language of philosopher Miranda Fricker, that is made ever deeper and wider by general lack of religious literacy and a scarcity of voices within the academy who are both prepared and oriented to address such matters in the public square. Fricker breaks down her framework of epistemic injustice this way:

Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences... we might say that testimonial injustice is caused by prejudice in the economy of credibility; and that hermeneutical injustice is caused by structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources. (Fricker 2007, 1)
The relevant application of these two types of injustice would be: Sinéad O’Connor's criticism of the Catholic Church and Irish society at large not being taken seriously on account of her being young and a woman (testimonial) and on account of Irish, and maybe even more so American Catholic society not having practice with or frameworks for thinking critically about systemic abuse (hermeneutical).

I have elaborated on the case of Shuhada’ Sadaqat at length to illustrate that the limited capacity for nuanced public conversations about religion in Ireland is not just lamentable but harmful. In the singer's case, it was individually and collectively harmful in that it was easier to dismiss a "disturbed young woman" than to contend with the appeal she was making. In some other contexts where Christianity has played an active role in shaping land, culture, and society, critique has been focused and theologically informed, giving rise to frameworks for liberation, both within and without the circle of Christian faith (Gutiérrez 1973; Cone 1969; Williams 1993; Daly 1968). However, Ireland has not followed this trajectory for reasons that this study explores. Moreover, while it is difficult to speak publicly about theology and desire, it is possible, even salutary, to speak about poetry and desire, and there is considerable cultural capital in championing the work of contemporary Irish female poets. That being said, I do not aim to instrumentalise these bodies of work to validate theology. Rather, I argue that the language of theology can be made more meaningful and more relevant to the project of collective healing by engaging with Irish poetry and Irish poetry written by women, specifically (for reasons I will explain in more detail in the second chapter).

Let us first consider the roles that desire and intimacy play in Christian dynamics, and particularly how these dynamics are activated within the matrix of Irish Catholic mythos and material reality.

1.3 Christianity and desire in Ireland

A Christianity born of [the realities of submission, desire, and transformation] but historically formed to resist them has yielded a form of religious life that thwarts its deepest instincts of intimacy... the intimacy that marks Christian history is a painful one, one in which the joining often meant oppression, violence, and death, if not of bodies then most certainly of ways of life, forms of
language, and visions of the world. What happened to the original trajectory of intimacy? (Jennings 2010, 9)

The significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall has always seemed to me to be crucial. It is one emphasis that has been lacking—except where it has been part of a very unfortunate corruption of the missionary impulse, which is, in a sense, the very heartbeat of the Christian religion. (Thurman 1996, 12)

At the heart of the popular, if mythical, origin story of Catholic Ireland is the figure of St. Patrick and, along with him, the gestures of Christian evangelism; in particular, the drawing near of the "unbeliever" through the use of inspired language, or, to lean into the Christian lexicon, language "breathed into" by the Holy Spirit. To be clear, to investigate how such gestures, retold over millennia, shape society and culture, one does not have to accept the story as "literally true" any more than one has to "prove" the "facts" of the life of Jesus Christ to explore the impact of the story of Jesus Christ. What is important is the symbolic power of the story in words and gestures.

Implicit in the story of St. Patrick is the dynamics of migration motivated by a missionary impulse, and, in this aspect, the symbolic power of the story of St. Patrick both draws strength and nourishes the missionary impulse that both Thurman and Jennings above describe as the core of the Christian religion. As the story goes, Patrick was captured and enslaved in Britain and taken to Ireland. From that place, he escaped, fleeing home to Britain, only to return, this time voluntarily, to convert the Irish to the Christian faith. There is reliable evidence that Christianity was already extant in Ireland at the time of St. Patrick's ministry, but that is the story, and we examine its symbolic currency, which we also remember has been, in some part, consciously constructed (Scally 2022, Chapter 3).

The story offers several powerful symbolic gestures that have contributed to the origin mythos of Catholic Ireland. First is the naturalisation of an outsider whose presence is justified by a holy purpose. In this gesture, there is a particular movement (Patrick's going forth from Britain, as well as his drawing near of others) and the use of a particular language (referring to scripture, exegesis, liturgical language) that is born from "the realities of submission, desire, and transformation", in the words of the
African American systematic theologian Willie James Jennings, above. In this formulation, "submission, desire, and transformation" are the prerequisite internal conditions Patrick would have encountered to join the Body of Christ (again, to lean on Christian language) and gain entry to Christian belonging. While these internal conditions are implicit also for the evangelist Patrick, in that submission, desire, and transformation concerning God are what gives him the power to evangelise, the focus generally falls on the one being converted, submitting to the word of God, desiring God, being transformed, by God, through God's messenger Patrick, into a Christian and the full reward that that Christian belonging entails, on earth, but primarily in the afterlife.

What I have described is the missionary impulse that the African American mystic theologian Howard Thurman calls "the very heartbeat of the Christian religion" in the quotation above, and to which Jennings ascribes the possibilities of "intimacy" and "love of differences" and the expansion of "new capacities to imagine their reconciliation". In both instances, however, Thurman and Jennings invoke the betrayal and corruption of these possibilities alongside the possibilities themselves. There is an awful certainty in that formulation. The Christian impulse to reconcile (as in "to hold together", not "to do away with") differences by intimate joining has not just potential for corruption; the proof of corruption realised is visible everywhere, particularly in the accumulated ruination of colonised land and the bodies of colonised peoples over the last four centuries (Jennings 2010).

Meanwhile, the original possibilities of the "deep wisdom and power of joining, mixing, merging, and being changed" that Jennings names have also existed and continue to exist. Returning briefly to the example of Shuhada' Sadaqat and her explorations of faith before Rastafarianism and Islam, consider the language of her dedication to Fr Wilfred Harrington in the publication of her 2007 album Theology (under her performing name Sinéad O'Connor):

Around the year 2000, I went to college for a brief period to study theology. The books of the prophets were where my passion lay. We had the most beautiful teacher, a priest, who was able to bring God off the page when he was discussing the prophets. Particularly Jeremiah: he’d be going, “My poor people, my poor people”, and his eyes would be streaming tears ... I wanted to do the same thing musically that he was doing when he was teaching, bringing God off the page.
Let everyone see the humanity of God, the vulnerability, the moodiness, the emotionality ... There's a very fine line between corny and cool when it comes to writing religious songs, and I grew up in the 1970s with all these terrible charismatic Christian songs on the airwaves. So I didn’t want to risk making that mistake. (O'Connor 2007, italics mine)

The presence of desire is clear in the italicised text, most literally in the expression of wanting, which we do well to remember carries the dual meaning of desiring and lacking, indicating an implicit distance between what one wants and what one has. Borrowing from the psychology of eroticism popularised in recent years by the sex therapist Esther Perel, desire requires separateness. Perel writes, "With too much distance, there can be no connection. But too much merging eradicates the separateness of two distinct individuals. Then there is nothing more to transcend, no bridge to walk on, no one to visit on the other side...Thus, separateness is a precondition for connection" (Perel 2007, 25).

Perel's consideration of intimacy and desire, while referring to individuals, is meaningful to considerations of religious desire, at least as humans experience it with a desire for God. In O'Connor's description of her teacher, she simultaneously witnesses his desire for God ("to bring God off the page") and experiences her desire, both for God and for the capacity to emulate her teacher, with enough aesthetic instinct to know that the form of the expression matters. Expression matters especially in the Irish context, which, since at least the birth of the Irish Free State in 1922, and until more recently than many other Western nations, has been simultaneously saturated with religion and impoverished in theoretical frameworks through which to engage religion critically, whether through the arts or otherwise (Scally 2022; O'Toole 2021; Mac Curtain 2008). O'Connor, like the poets that I consider, was motivated by the desire not just to represent something serious and meaningful in the forms readily available for that purpose (the "terrible charismatic Christian songs on the airwaves") but to create art that can lead the listener to embodied experience, recalling the American poet Adrienne Rich:

A poem can’t free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us, have accepted as our own.
It’s not a philosophical or psychological blueprint; it’s an instrument for embodied experience. But we seek that experience, or recognise it when it is offered to us, because it reminds us in some way of our need. After that rearousal of desire, the task of acting on that truth, or making love, or meeting other needs, is ours. (Rich 2003, 10)

Rich’s is a formulation of free art that liberates through invoking rather than representing experience, as Sadaqat did with her music and as the poets I explore do with their poetry and performances. Without wanting to twist the poet’s intention for my own purposes, I would argue that with "instrument", Rich does not mean the Platonic interpretation of instrument; rather, it is something more akin to Louis-Marie Chauvet’s idea that "language is not an 'instrument' but a 'mediation'" (Chauvet 2001, 3). The language model he is refuting is one wherein the human speaker, standing apart from the world, as it were, apprehends the world directly and then uses language as an instrument for expressing the experience of the world. Obscured in this model, which is so normative in the West as to seem natural, is the fact of "human beings' desire, largely unbeknownst to themselves, that reality be transparent, and they be fully present to themselves by evading the contingency of the sensible, bodily, social, historical mediations" (4). In other words, we can desire so fervently to contract the distance between both ourselves and the world (which includes others), as well as between the self we call "I" and the self we might call "the higher Self" or God, that we operate under the false certainty that we readily apprehend both the world and God, using language to describe them; Chauvet is saying, we experience separateness from the world, ourselves, and God. Therefore, language and desire are mediations via which we experience intimacy with the world, ourselves, and God, mediations which "resist instrumentalist versions of religious belonging" (Garrigan 2023, in conversation).

There is much more to say about Chauvet in Chapter Two, but it is important now to introduce his understanding of language, and, by my extension, poetry, as mediation to lay the foundation for how serious engagement with poetry can renew the language of theology, particularly in the context of Ireland. I will also take some space in Chapter 2 to unpack the complexity of the word Ireland (and its derivatives Irish, Irishness), the meaning of which appears straightforward but quickly slips out of focus, whether one is
referring to a political identity, a citizenship, a land mass, a language, or, as this study will do, a literary work. For the moment, given this study's commitment to context and the guidance it takes from M. Shawn Copeland's five convictions of theological anthropology—among which, these, in particular: "the body shapes human existence as relational and social" and "solidarity is a set of body practices" (Copeland 2010, 2)—it is important to name that this research was conducted in Ireland, by a person who is not Irish, who has studied Irish poetry (in the English language) for two decades. I do this to acknowledge immediately the complexities and limitations of discourse and language when talking about theology and poetry in the context of Ireland.

1.4 Intervention 1

In the first of several such interventions, which I will justify explicitly in my discussion of my methods in Chapter Two, I pause to name the thorniness of this endeavour: exploring Irish Catholicism, academically, in a so-called post-religious age, amid repeated cycles of revelations of abuse and subsequent outrage, and doing all of this as a queer, middle-aged, white-bodied, migrant (non-Irish), late-diagnosed autistic, cis-female-identifying researcher. I will also make the case that this listing of identity markers is an imperfect praxis but one that is, in this particular historical and political sequence, to borrow an idea from Asad Haider (Haider 2020), necessary to make visible identities that have been so "naturalised" as to become invisible, and by becoming invisible, obscuring power dynamics. The naming of identities (which, Haider reminds us, are never ontological definitions, but, rather, prescriptions of meaning) is the practical application of an ethics: post-structuralist feminist insistence on acknowledging one's embodied reality and shifting position within structures of power, which are also shifting. At the same time, it violates personal aesthetics; the task of making identitarian claims runs contrary to a poetic and theological disposition that does not give language full authority as a container or instrument for meaning (rather, language is a medium, much like spirits might be called a medium for certain medicines). As such, this practice of naming is imperfect. This list is neither exhaustive nor fixed.
I observe, within the parameters of this interventionist sidebar, how difficult it is to remain with the aforementioned embodied sense of the thorniness: how it is difficult to speak constructively about Catholicism in Ireland in dimensions other than the ones named above (it is difficult also in those dimensions), and how even naming the difficulty risks simultaneously either causing offence, as if any public discussion of theology constituted implicit support of oppressive institutions, or eliciting apathy, as if theology were a moot subject. While the first possibility makes me most uncomfortable, it's the latter that motivates this study, and that, in my view, is the greatest impediment to healing in Ireland.

1.5 How I came to this work: poetry and absence

Think of the Greek preposition πρὸς Θεόν. When used with the accusative case, this preposition means ‘toward, upon, against, with, ready for, face to face, engaging, concerning, touching, in reply to, in respect of, compared with, according to, as accompaniment for.’ It is the preposition chosen by John the Evangelist to describe the relationship between God and The Word in the first verse of the first chapter of his Revelation:

πρὸς Θεόν.

‘And The Word was with God’ is how the usual translation goes. What kind of withness is it? (Carson 1999)

My interest in exploring the possibilities of theology that takes contemporary Irish poetry seriously emerged through the practice of writing and reading poetry and, later, through the experience of physically being in Ireland. Locating myself socially and autobiographically alongside this research is not only helpful for contextualising my bringing together of what may at times appear as unrelated fragments—Irish poetry written by three very different kinds of Catholic-formed poets, with Catholic theology from France and the United States, or from before Vatican II, with Black theology, Womanism or theopoetics (expanded in the chapters that follow), it is also integral to the feminist scholarly praxis in which my research and writing are grounded. In the words of (Oyêwùmí 1997), I, too, "argue for a cultural, context-dependent interpretation
of social reality" (xv-xvi). According to Oyěwùmí, this "includes the social identity of the researcher, the spatial and temporal location of the research, and the debates in the academic literature", as well as "the fundamental question of the relationship between research and social reality, an important question given the policy bent of research—particularly in women's studies (xv-xvi)".

I arrived at these research questions about poetry and theology via what initially seemed like sequential forays into poetry, then theology, and also through what the Canadian poet Tim Lilburn described in an interview as "katanyxic" events (2023). Biblical scholars have translated the term (and, indeed, the term does not seem to appear in secular texts) from the Greek κατάνυξις this way:

κατάνυξις, κατανύξεως, ἡ (κατανύσσω, which see);
1. a pricking, piercing (Vulg. compunctio).
2. severe sorrow, extreme grief.
3. insensibility or torpor of mind, such as extreme grief easily produces; hence, πνεῦμα κατανύξεως, a spirit of stupor, which renders their souls torpid, i.e. so insensible that they are not affected at all by the offer made them of salvation through the Messiah, Romans 11:8 from Isaiah 29:10 the Sept. (where the Hebrew חוער המדְּרַת, a spirit of deep sleep, is somewhat loosely so rendered; οἶνος κατανύξεως for ניָי הָלֵﬠְרַת, wine which produces dizziness, reeling, German Taumelwein, Psalm 59:5 (Ps. 60:5)). (Blue Letter Bible n.d.)

It is not necessary to be a practising poet to appreciate the polysemous nature of a word or the way its multiple meanings even seem to contradict each other (more common words that do this to cleave, to want, to sanction), but are indicators of both boundless contingency and salience in language, as this particular, ancient word contains within itself many modern-day explorations into the complexities of grief, for example, Deb Dana's theory of the "polyvagal ladder" (Dana 2018), which would support the idea that a piercing or severe experience of loss leading to grief would overwhelm one's nervous system to the extent that it would move into a shutdown state, a torpor. However, poets often draw out the fuller currency of words, in this case, a word to describe a spiritual state within which both crisis and clarity are implied. In the interview, Lilburn describes his spiritual crisis in plainer language: "The transformative blow was that I didn't know how to be where I was" (Lilburn 2023). I give this example by Lilburn to demonstrate one of the extraordinary powers over (and by way of) language that poets have, even in the
practice of spoken prose, which is the power to conjure strangeness and unfamiliarity into common speech and then simultaneously infuse plain language with greater depth and complexity, while maintaining the communicative accessibility of the language. This dual, dynamic mode of poetry readily maps onto the dual, dynamic nature of theology—a material (the common, the earthly, the human) medium for truths beyond language (the uncommon, the transcendent, the sacred).

One of my own katanyxic events occurred in 2012, when, after a nearly 15-year personal engagement with poetry, a desire to study with the poet Christian Wiman led me to apply to the Master of Arts in Religion programme at the Institute of Sacred Music (a joint programme of Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Music), where Wiman had just been hired after leaving editorship at *Poetry Magazine*. Though I understood from Wiman's publications that he was living his Christian faith actively and publicly, I was primarily interested in the craft and practice of poetry. In other words, I was applying to this programme *despite* my lack of interest in Christian theology, worship, or spirituality, all of which was, in fact, the religious tradition within which I had been formed (specifically, Romanian Greek Catholic and, after emigrating to the US, Roman Catholic).

I now consider this lack of interest in the same terms that a modern psychotherapist might consider a patient's lack of interest in her estranged parents or family of origin: it is not necessary to have participatory "faith" in one's family as an institution, to be willing to acknowledge that parents or other caregivers and family of origin (biological or not) leave a tremendous imprint on one's early development. Nevertheless, for many people born and raised in the Christian tradition, family and church are the first experiences informing their conception of an institution and where they belong inside (or outside) it. The family is an institution more implicitly, but all the same, effectively, and legally, and the church—so frequently referred to as "institutional religion" to distinguish it from presumably freer forms of religious practice or belief—explicitly. This consideration has important implications, on the one hand, for how taking Irish poetry seriously can deepen theology and, in turn, how a more critical and culturally grounded theology can open new perspectives and opportunities for self-
understanding and collective healing in Ireland. Another way to say "critical and culturally grounded theology" would be to use the term contextual theology, which, Angie Pears explains, "explicitly places the recognition of the contextual nature of theology at the forefront of the theological process" (Bergmann 2021, 2).

Within a few weeks of the two-year-long Master of Arts in Religion programme, two things became clear. The first was that the questions (of form, existence, aesthetics, ethics, and tradition) I’d been exploring within the practice of writing and reading poetry, with rather inconsistent and unsatisfying results, were better suited for a theology programme. The second was an insight into why, while I had an active interest in Eastern spirituality and practices, it had never occurred to me to look to the tradition that had shaped my values and my initial understanding of the world. Most importantly, I was not versed enough in the tradition that had formed me to be able either to challenge it intelligently or to gain an understanding that could aid in healing the wounds that tradition had caused me. The best I had done up to that point was turn away from it, as from a collapsing building, as many people in Ireland have done.

Following these insights, I transferred to the longer three-year Master of Divinity programme, faced now with a new problem: compared to my classmates who had specifically applied to study theology, I had very little idea about what theology was or did, or could do, that is, until I began to take seminars in feminist and liberation theology, Black Theology, Womanist and queer theology (some of which I audited, as I’d already nearly finished the course). Reading theology by Rosemary Radford Ruether (1998), Delores Williams (1993), Howard Thurman (1996), Linn Tonstad (2016), Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973), Emilie Townes (2006), James Cone (1969), and taking courses with Willie James Jennings and Eboni Marshall Turman, both of whom were first-year faculty members during my third and final year (in response to student protests on the paucity of instructors not identified as white), produced yet a new epistemic crisis: that while I could now suddenly discern the meaningfulness and even urgency of studying theology, I was most convinced (or, "convicted", to use a term I often heard in divinity school) by theologies that spoke directly to communities to which I could not claim to belong. I was
still not well versed enough to make sense of where I could belong or contribute within frameworks that were—to a great extent, by necessity—essentially identitarian.

Again, tracing key aspects of this journey has an important bearing on this study, as it led me, finally, to see theology in the Irish context as a space within which I could explore and constructively develop these questions. The identitarian problem, especially, can be uniquely explored within the Irish context and Ireland's relationship to modern developments in postcolonial, gender and racial identity studies. Furthermore, while I was not yet well enough versed in theological hermeneutics, I was, however, versed in poetry, particularly Irish poetry (again, in English). As an undergraduate English major, I had detected an affinity for poems written by Irish poets, though I would not have been able to articulate the qualities that defined that preference over bodies of work by American, British, or other English language poets.

At the time that I chose to write my final thesis for the English major about the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon, I did not have nuanced enough historical knowledge or political frameworks to understand the complexities of the words "Irish" and "Northern Irish", used interchangeably in the United States, with a preference for the former (in courses on contemporary Irish poetry, Louis MacNiece, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley were all just "Irish poets". They were also all male, another analysis point for which I did not have adequate hermeneutical structures.

I mention these details to continue to catalogue some of the qualities that make poetry a powerful resource for theology; in this first instance, it is that, even without nuanced contextual knowledge, Irish poetry already communicates something about itself as a corporate category, on a level that involves multiple faculties, intellectual, affective, social, and spiritual. Here, I mean "Irish" poetry less as a nationalistic category, referring more specifically to Irish poetry's complex relationship to the English language, language more generally, and poetic tradition(s).

In this sense, poetry is closer to the communicative action (Garrigan 2004) of prayer or liturgy, and, just as theologians have argued convincingly that worship is a form of theology (Saliers 1994; Foley 2004; Garrigan 2017), it can be argued that poetry has a similar capacity—although this is not my main argument. I explore this mutual
capacity of poetry and theology, for example, in the work of Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin, who has asked, "[Is] a poem in some way, and if so in what way, a substitute for something else? Can it be a substitute for ritual, for an element in the culture that is proscribed or perhaps obsolete, at any rate, an element that is under some kind of pressure?" (2019, 45), but I am not proposing poetry as a substitute for theology in Ireland. Indeed, I imagine Colette Bryce and Paula Meehan, and other poets with whose poems I think throughout this study, would baulk at such a notion. Rather, at the core of my main argument is that poetry and theology share a deeply contingent nature, which poetry acknowledges in nearly every aspect of its form and which theology, by nature of its form, must make intentional efforts not to suppress. One such notable effort is the growing body of work that falls under the title of theopoetics, to which this study is a preliminary contribution. I offer a brief introduction to the field to begin to map the relationship between poetry, poetics, theology, and theopoetics and indicate how I will rely on this diverse mode of theology.

1.6 Some introductory definitions

While poetry and poetics come from the same root ποιεῖν/ poiesis, that is, “to make”, it is generally understood that poetry can refer to the literary genre of poetry, which, beyond its contemporary category, was important to the Greeks and in early sacred Semitic texts, including those that comprise the earliest texts of the Bible, about which Hans Urs Von Balthasar has said, "the very source of theology, which, if not in its entirety, for the most part, is a poetical book;" (1983, Chapter 2); to the body of work of a particular poet, i.e. Paula Meehan’s poetry; to a particular—quiet, transcendent, even magisterial—quality, i.e., “the landscapes of Terrence Mallick’s films are pure poetry" (the auteur director is reputed for capturing sweeping vistas and skilfully harnessing natural light in his films). I invoke Von Balthasar, a troubling figure for many feminist theologians, not uncritically, but, as with much of the content in this introduction, to map future arguments; discourse about poetry, poetics, and Catholic tradition is incomplete without mentioning Von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics (1983), for example. Moreover, while Balthasar's theology veers too much from my foundational
premises about sex and difference (as I am more persuaded by Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí’s formulations, about which I will say more later), I acknowledge that he has been valuable for others pursuing questions about aesthetics in theology, and I will attend to his influence on theopoetics in Chapter Two.

In any case, if poetry can have multiple meanings, definitions of poetics appear downright innumerable and kaleidoscopic, its colourful reflections contingent on the preoccupations of the reflective surface, the interpreter, as, for example, Lyn Hijenian’s definition: “an artistic and also meta-artistic practice [whose] methodology is additive”, and “the art of making connections—whether by discovering them... or by inserting them into a scene or event amenable to creative connectivity”, in *Inciting Poetics* (Heuving 2019, 3), or, for Édouard Glissant, according to Mayra Rivera in *Poetics of the Flesh*, “poetics refers not only to styles of writing, but also to modes of knowing, being, and acting in the world” (2015, 2).

Theology, too, must be defined to complicate, destabilise, and further nuance later. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, theology is:

1. The study or science which treats of God, His nature and attributes, and His relations with man and the universe; ‘the science of things divine’ (Hooker); divinity.
2. A particular theological system or theory.
3. Applied to pagan or non-Christian systems.
(Oxford English Dictionary n.d.)

Apart from its explicit, uncritical universal masculine (whereas developments in contemporary theology make it possible to say, “God’s nature and attributes, and God’s relations with humans and the universe”) and uncritical usage of the word "pagan", this definition also does not contain the word's material implications: its embodied aspects, its power dynamics, its relationship to language more generally (that "study" often involves reading and writing, which implies time, space, resources and bodily capacity to do so), but also its relationship to sacred text, i.e., according to Louis-Marie Chauvet, "theology is at bottom nothing else than the orderly and critically organised elucidation of the difficulties present in our foundational texts" (Chauvet 2001, 29). Nor does the definition indicate theology's vast plurality beyond "non-Christian" possibilities (that is, even within Christianity, theologies say and do vastly varied things); its relationship to
religion and worship; whether faith is assumed or required on the part of the student (or an agenda, such as in the case of apologetic); nor that the "study or science which treats of God" requires both distance (the ability to critique), and intimacy (the desire to wrestle) with the material. However, all these considerations are contained here.

Finally, a very brief introduction to theopoetics. In the introduction to a special issue on theopoetics in the journal *Literature and Theology* in 2019, Heather Walton (who edited the issue) writes:

[Theopoetics] has opened up space for exploring the transformative spiritual, political, and cultural significance of creative making. It brings art into an intimate connection with theory and theology and into a generative relation with imagination. It is a contemporary movement that is open, noisy, and extremely diverse... (2019, 229)

The openness and noisiness Walton refers to incites and invites engagement in a spirit closer to Jacob’s wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:24-29) than Scholastic efforts to systematise. As with Jacob’s wrestling, intimacy is necessary for the interdisciplinarity Walton describes elsewhere. For example, Walton writes about approaches to literature and theology taken together. She remarks, "Better scholarship on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* is produced when we take account of her evangelical period and her encounter with the work of Strauss and Feuerbach" (2007, 27). In the process of this study, it is more that "better theology might be produced when we take into critical account the poetics of Irish women". Theopoetics can hold both directions of inquiry, though some distinction between poetics, theology, and theopoetics is worth considering. David L. Miller has distinguished theopoetics from theopoetry (2010), a division contingent on where one positions oneself in relation to the Nietzschean notion of “the death of God”.

Miller writes:

[Theopoetics] can refer to an artful, imaginative, creative, beautiful, and rhetorically compelling manner of speaking and thinking concerning a theological knowledge that is and always has been in our possession and a part of our faith. I should like to refer to this perspective as "theopoetry", i.e., as the poetising of an extant religious faith or theological knowledge. But if one thinks that "after the death of God" signifies the continuing impact of an understanding of the times as severed from any dependencies on transcendental referents, then theopoetics will have to refer to strategies of human signification in the absence of fixed and ultimate meanings accessible to knowledge or faith. (7,8)
In offering a starting definition that already positions itself polemically, I mean to indicate the deep resistance to fixed definitions of theopoetics and theopoetics’ open invitation to reframe, rephrase, and reiterate. For example, Lacey Jones adds to and challenges Miller in her reading of Denise Levertov (2019). It is with Jones' close reading of Levertov's poem, "The Tide", that I align my study of poetry and theology in Ireland. Again, this is just a brief introduction to terms that will be developed later.

1.7 Decolonial thinking and the situated experience of poetry

To return to Irish poetry for the time being, however, I insist on specifying that the Irish poetry I read for two decades was written in English because the idea of Irish poetry as automatically written in English is not frequently questioned. This Irish-English naturalisation continues to be a point of contention between Irish poets who write in Irish and those who write in English; for example, debates, ongoing since the late 1980's, involving figures such as Eavan Boland, Katie Donovan, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and others around the question of foremothers and the seemingly continuous “emergence” of Irish women, including their poetic production, all well documented in *A History of Irish Women’s Poetry* (Darcy and Wheatley 2021).

One of the best explorations of this subject is Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s essay “Níl Cead Isteach ag an bPobal/ Public Access Denied”, which appears in her collection *Cead Isteach/ Entry Permitted*, written during her tenure as the Ireland Chair of Poetry, an institution established in 1998, of which Ní Dhomhnaill was the second recipient (Paula Meehan and Eiléan Ní Chuilleannán, two of the three poets on whom I focus in this study, have also been Ireland Chair of Poetry). Of eight poets who have held this position (inclusive of Paul Muldoon, who is the current chair, in 2023, despite being permanently and for a long time based in New York), Ní Dhomhnaill is the only poet whose primary writing language is Irish, and whose essays as the Ireland Chair of Poetry appear in both Irish and English. In “Níl Cead Isteach ag an bPobal/ Public Access Denied”, she writes:

One of the timeworn clichés about literature in Ireland is that it is very much a literature of place...And Dublin of course is a noted literary city. But in Dublin itself, I notice an absence. A loss of a whole literary dimension. The literary
dimension of the Irish language. A small example: up by St. Patrick’s Cathedral there is a large plaque dedicated to the ‘Writers of Dublin’. It gives many names but not one single Irish-language writer is mentioned [although] this particular area of Dublin, especially the nearby Liberties, was a veritable hotbed of Irish writing and scholarship going back as far as the start of the eighteenth century”.

(Ní Dhomhnaill 2017 (previously 2008), 19)

I point out this particular passage, as I lived in the heart of the Liberties for three years while working on this project, during which time I was not aware of the rich history of Irish language poetry that existed around me until reading Ní Dhomhnaill’s essay in 2020. This experience, in turn, closely mirrors my experience growing up in the United States after emigrating from Romania, in that, although I regularly encountered place names derived from Indigenous languages (including the name of the state to which we moved, Connecticut), it was only through engaging with the intentional efforts of decolonial thinkers (Deloria 2003; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Wenger 2009) that I could start to see, and experience with other senses, what had been made absent (in plain sight, as it were) by colonisation.

While Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us that "decolonisation is not a metaphor" and that the literal aim of decolonisation, from its appearance in the work of Franz Fanon to Tuck and Yang themselves, is to bring "about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (Tuck and Yang 2012), I briefly raise the subject of decolonisation here for three reasons. The first reason is to acknowledge that when I talk about Irish poets and Irish poetry, I am aware of what these designations cannot help but erase and that referring to poets who write strictly or primarily in Irish (such as Ní Dhomhnaill, Biddy Jenkinson, Máire Mhac an tSaoi), as Irish language and the others Anglophone poets, does some work, however unsatisfactorily, to make this erasure visible.

The second reason is to locate myself as one whose experience of migration factors into a vulnerability concerning the mythos of particular places, Ireland certainly being no exception, for which reason poetry proves a more reliable tool for orientation than, for instance, historical texts, which are deeply contested in Ireland. I do not mean exactly that poetry offers history in the conventional sense; it merely leads one to the right questions about the land, culture, and people from which it comes. The fact that I
was neither born nor schooled in Ireland also means that my research about poetry and theology in the Irish context is delimited by my lack of knowledge of Irish (as any research in Canadian poetry and theology, for example, would be delimited by a grasp, or lack thereof, of French and any number of Indigenous languages relevant to the geographical area in which the research was being conducted). This is one reason that I chose the poets I chose and not others (one could extrapolate that any study of theology, even without poetry, in the Irish context is also circumscribed to an extent by knowledge of Irish, and while that is not primarily my project here, naming absence is a key aspect of the scholarly habits that have developed out of my practice in poetry); I will explore and justify the reasons for the selection of particular interlocutors, both poets and theologians, in Chapter 2. Finally, the third reason for raising the subject of decolonisation is to demonstrate, as I have attempted to do in this paragraph, just how difficult it is, at least initially, to frame the Irish context within decolonial or even postcolonial terms, a framing that could contribute significantly towards the development of a truly critical contextual theology in Ireland, rather than a de facto “local” (nationalistic) Irish Catholic one.

According to Steve Bevans, one of the theologians most often associated with contextual theology, “All theology is contextual”. He writes:

One can even say that there is no such thing as “theology,” because there is only contextual theology: African American, Latino/a, Asian, Liberal Protestant, Neo-orthodox, Congolese, feminist or womanist, Thomist, White U.S. American or European... Augustine theologised in the context of controversies that raised key questions for Christianity: the validity of Baptism, the necessity of grace, the instability of the present world. Aquinas’s context was the new culture of thirteenth century Europe and the recent re-discovery of Aristotle; Luther’s context was widespread corruption in the church and emerging individuality in Western thought; Teresa of Ávila’s was the Catholic Reformation. De las Casas did theology as he argued for the rights of indigenous Americans; Schleiermacher theologised in dialogue with the Enlightenment’s “turn to the subjective;” Karl Rahner tried to make sense of a world torn apart by war, and Rosemary Radford Ruether theologizes with the conviction that Christianity must include women’s flourishing. (2018, 1)

Bevans brings together numerous different strands of theological thinking and illustrates how a particular context shaped each. I have quoted this passage nearly in its
entirety because it serves my next point to show the generous yet still stymied attention he has paid to the matter of context. Although he does describe wider criteria for what might constitute a context, naming “present human experience (a personal health crisis, a presidential election), social location (being a woman, being young), one’s cultural identity (sometimes closely connected with a particular religion, like Buddhism in Thailand), and change within a context (globalization, democratization)” (1), what he considers contextual location refers primarily to a coordinate in time, or within historical movements. And while Bevans addresses the need to reform the Western European male tendency to universalise theology, in his explanation of the notion that “all theology is contextual”, he refers to the period in which Teresa of Ávila lived (the Catholic Reformation) but not to where she was, geographically, in Spain, or why or how that might matter, as is the case with the other examples he gives. The apparent ambivalence toward physical and social space – and to be more direct, ambivalence toward the theologian’s relationship to a particular land and particular people’s bodies – reveals theology’s persistent reluctance to approach that which is, nonetheless, intimately involved in the production of theology: the land, the body.

In a lecture from his course on Compassionate Inquiry, the Hungarian-Jewish doctor and author Gabor Maté offers a clue about why this might be so. Maté works with and has written and lectured extensively about the disproportionate trauma in First Nations communities in Canada. He remarks that while the Canadian government formally apologised for the Indian Residential School system, which, for over a century, “separated over 150,000 Aboriginal children from their families and communities” (2008), it has never apologised for colonisation and the seizure of land and resources; this is, according to Maté, because, while the physical Residential Schools themselves are a closed chapter, the Canadian government is still in the process of seizing Indigenous land and resources (Maté, accessed 2024). Pope Francis apologised on behalf of the Catholic Church for the genocide of Indigenous People in Canada only in 2022, and, as I will further explore later, there has been little evidence of Christian institutions forming the necessary connections between colonisation in Canada and other places, and the material implications of these connections. Within Christian
institutions, I include academic theology, with a few exceptions, such as Panotto and Andrade’s *Decolonising Liberation Theologies* (2023), which speaks helpfully to my study even though Ireland is mentioned only once and in a quoted text about European Christians’ initial demonisation of corn and potatoes (72). It is also for this reason that the thinking and writing of Willie James Jennings is so important to this study, despite also not directly addressing “the Christian imagination” in Ireland. I will delve more deeply into why Jennings’ text *The Christian Imagination* (2010) was the impetus for this study. I introduce this important text through his short summary essay “Overcoming Racial Faith”, where Jennings describes the violent process by which European Christians altered relationships between land, people, and faith. He writes:

> When early European Christians entered [Indigenous] places, they fundamentally altered the relation of land to peoples. From positions of unimaginable power, they renamed the land, reorganised common life, and reformed the ecologies of native peoples. At the heart of this transformation was a world-altering reconfiguration of the relationship between land and identity. (2015, 7-8)

In demanding a greater acknowledgement of the importance of land and embodiment on the part of contextual theology, I do not wish to identify the limitations of Bevans’ conceptualisation in isolation but to insist that if, as he says, “all theology is contextual”, then all theology is also either colonial or a gesture toward decolonial. And not all contextual theology is gesturing toward the decolonial. Decolonial practice requires us to consider people’s bodies and their connection to land. As an illustrative example, in scrutinising the framework of contextual theology in Nigeria and the Eastern Cape of South Africa, Chammah J. Kaunda concludes that without a "decolonial kenotic theology of authority", the contextual theology of "African neo-Pentecostalism reinforces and legitimises authority...[giving] unquestionable and unaccountable power to their clergy" (Bergmann 2021, 34-55). However, this kind of approach in the Irish context is made difficult by the lack of a prerequisite, established postcolonial or decolonial hermeneutic landscape within Irish theology with which to navigate such possibilities. As Joe Cleary has clearly outlined, while postcolonial scholarship does exist in Ireland, it has also "provoked persistent resistance, most obviously from Irish revisionists but also from liberal centrists... for being too abstractly theoretical, for being wholly misapplied to Irish
contexts, for being too ideological, too Manichaean, or for being too ‘literary’ or not sufficiently so” (2022). This resistance is already common within theology and philosophy, especially in Ireland, where Garrigan’s work is among scant examples.

As I explain in Chapter Three, I am not implying that no theologians in Ireland are doing contextual theology according to Bevans’ definition. In that chapter, I will name some of the scholars who have done or are doing this important work¹ to articulate more precisely what critical Irish contextual theology looks like for this study, given the influences of decolonial and trauma theory. For the moment, it is possible to say more generally that decolonial and trauma studies have not yet been integrated into much of the contemporary contextual theology of the North Atlantic, or North American and European (Irish, British, continental) theology, and for this reason, this is not a uniquely Irish problem. However, contextual theology in Ireland is not possible without better articulations of Ireland’s postcolonial identity. I propose that this resistance be eased via Irish poetry, where witness, critique, identification, shared experience and, importantly, feeling co-mingle.

Returning briefly to my path from poetry to theology, and, finally, both at once, all these were present in Derek Mahon’s poetry, but when I was writing about Mahon as an undergraduate, I did not give much thought to the relationship of either of these designations (Irish or Northern Irish) for a poet from Belfast writing in English and living in New York, then London, finally moving to Kinsale, Co. Cork, in those Good Friday Agreement years (I was an undergraduate between 1998-2002). I had heard the (Northern) Irish actor Stephen Rea performing the entirety of Derek Mahon’s long sequence “The Hudson Letter” on RTÉ on Christmas Day in 2001, at the end of a semester abroad at University College Cork. It is, again, a matter of importance to scholarly praxis and to arguments I make about Ireland, poetry, and theology that this experience took place in the home of near strangers who had invited me to their family’s Christmas dinner (as most of the other abroad students had gone home, and I knew no

¹ With acknowledgements to Linda Hogan and Siobhán Garrigan (in conversation in 2024) for understanding the limitations of my outsider position, in the sense that, had I always lived and studied in Ireland, some names, trends, themes, and projects might have been more readily available to me, culturally, if not so easily in the course of traditional library research.
one else in Cork). My request must have seemed odd: though I was their guest, I asked if I could sit somewhere quietly by myself to listen to the programme on RTÉ (which I also intended to record on a blank cassette tape). Not only did they honour the request by setting me up with a radio tape recorder in the warm kitchen, but they also furnished me with a plate of food and a tumbler of something appropriate for the season, both of which seemed to refill of their own accord throughout the evening. This experience, instanced by a poetry "event" and made possible by the deference with which poetry is regarded in Ireland, remains among the most powerful experiences I have had of all of the following: poetry, the kindness of strangers, and a kind of holy sense of hospitality that pointed beyond these human connections.

It was that affecting experience with the poem that compelled me to select to write an undergraduate thesis about the "importance of elsewhere" that is so present in the poetry of, particularly, Northern Irish poets, and in this case, in Derek Mahon's poem "The Hudson Letter". I say experience with the poem, rather than of the poem, deliberately, with reference to Anne Carson's question from the start of this section: "'And the Word was with God' is how the usual translation goes. What kind of withness is it?" Like Carson, I want to draw attention to another quality of poetry that makes it a powerful resource for theology: poetry's economy (the book from which this quote comes is titled The Economy of the Unlost), its attention to the currency of words, i.e., what words do individually and together, depending on where they appear on the page, in a poem, in a corpus. This level of attention in poetry, which I have attempted in my own practice of writing and reading poetry, both to the ordering of meaning and to the utter contingency of all words, I claim, has both a liturgical and liberative aspect, in that it orders the body and the breath (I explore this in Chapter 3, about Paula Meehan) and in that poetry's economy (I have invoked the language of "currency", of "paying" attention) counters the constraints of the other economy, our lives bound by neoliberal capitalism.

Another way to ask Carson's question, "what kind of withness is this?" is to ask: what is the relationship of language to holy hospitality that is born out of an intricate set of contingencies, i.e., the holiday, the strangers, the poem, the sense of homelessness I
felt throughout that period of my life? The poem, which Mahon constructed as a letter "home" of an Irish "exile" in Manhattan, both instanced and also mediated an experience of belonging at a level of heightened awareness that researchers in the philosophy of mind might refer to as "qualia", or "haecceity", the "thisness" of things, or as Daniel Dennett has put it, "the way things seem to us" (Dennett 1988). In my case, this quality described "what it is like" to be a migrant and a person of a kind of faith that resisted being called religious but was faith all the same.

As a final example, perhaps a minor katanyxis, several months after the semester in Cork, I was once again in Ireland, this time spending two months on the island of Inis Méain as a kind of docent in the cottage that belonged to the family that had hosted John Millington Synge after W.B. Yeats had advised him to go West and learn Irish. To the disappointment of the scarce but impassioned visitors to Teach Synge, and as mentioned above, I did not speak Irish. I did, on one occasion while in residence there, experience a profound feeling of connectedness, similar to what I had experienced on Christmas Day in Cork, only this time the feeling came from the simultaneously domestic and otherworldly landscape of the island, and my voice reading out loud the poem "Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens. Even if it were relevant to this thesis to describe this and other similar experiences I have had with poetry, it would not be possible. Therefore, I mention them as a gesture towards poetry’s relationship to the more mystical aspects of theology, moments of revelation and clarity. Tim Lilburn, again, writes, "Around everything is an epidermis of narrative, a layer of hypotheses, orders, causal grids by which the world is rendered intelligible. Poetry's fundamental appetite is ecstatic; its curiosity yearns beyond this barrier of intelligibility to know the withinness of things" (2019, 40). It is this ecstatic nature and this desire both for "withness" and the "withinness" of things that makes poetry a counterbalance to the more discursive modes of theology.

While personal, I draw on these anecdotes to articulate how my experiences with poetry, Irish people and Ireland have led to the foundational methods and frameworks that tie this project together. I have long suspected that the ease with which Ireland is viewed sentimentally, especially by Americans, operates as a protective dissemblance
against codification. My interest searches "beyond this barrier of intelligibility;" I have been much more informed by being in Ireland, and, at the same time, I have been very aware that the lived experience of being in Ireland in the early 2000s and then the late-2010s is nearly like being in a completely different Ireland than, certainly, the Ireland where Paula Meehan (born in 1955) and Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin (born in 1942) spent their formative years, or the period of conflict that spanned most of Colette Bryce’s life (born in 1970). However, given the simultaneously personal and collective nature of poetry, and especially its embodied properties, I argue that engaging with poetry, especially if one engages widely, deeply and for a long time, does bring one closer to a sense of lived history in Ireland.

1.8 The one-sided relationship

Poets seem not to have too much trouble reflecting on or comparing poetry and religion and drawing strength from that comparison. The metaphysical poets, as T.S. Eliot first named them (Eliot 1951), John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and George Herbert, followed by Gerard Manley Hopkins, Christina Rossetti, and later R.S. Thomas, appear frequently in studies about poetry and theology and religion, mapping the terrain of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. W.H. Auden took Kierkegaard seriously to the point of publishing selections from the Danish theologian in the form of the text The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard (1999) and many others number among 20th and 21st-century poets, particularly in the Catholic, Anglican and Anglo-Catholic tradition: Denise Levertov, Annie Dillard, David Craig, Dana Gioia, Geoffrey Hill, and Richard Wilbur, who, speaking to Joan Hutton in 1968, articulated the mutual ground of poetry and religion this way:

Most poets are up to the enforcing of such resemblances as they see as having some truth in them. This is one reason why I’ve always felt, and annoyingly said, that poetry is essentially religious in its direction. I know a lot of people, poets, who are not consciously religious, but find themselves forever compromised by their habit of asserting the relevance of all things to each other. And poetry being a kind of truth-telling, (it’s pretty hard to lie in poetry), I think that these people must be making, whether they like it or not, what are ultimately religious assertions. (Wilbur 1968)
While religion might be thought of as what one practices and theology what one studies, I am talking about poets’ engagement with religion and theology without making a great distinction between them at this point, as I am making a more general point. However, more recent publications such as A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith (Kaminsky and Towler 2012) provide great insight into more contemporary poets' religious leanings, including this examination of Catholicism by the poet Fanny Howe, whose mother was the Irish novelist and playwright Mary Manning, and who converted into (or, as she puts it, married) the Catholic Church later in life:

In the 1970s, when Liberation Theology was developing and we were receiving its early writings, I believed that this was the most profound analysis of social imbalance I had ever encountered. I had not yet married the Catholic church, but I was counting my steps on the way around the streets of Jamaica Plain, pushing babies in prams. At that time Jews were the only people I knew who would talk to me seriously on the mystery of God. Reading Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutierrez was certainly part of my passage. As did lots of people, I also read texts from the Gnostic tradition, Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Rumi, the Bhagavad Gītā and Buddhism. The visions of these texts suffused my readings of Saint Paul and Hildegarde Von Bingen. These are robust and poetic visions that give heft and depth to my experience of the Mass and ideally will eventually come to find their way into the Mass itself. (Howe, in Kaminsky and Towler, 110-111)

The text evidences the poet’s engagement with both religion and theology. It speaks intelligently and critically about the mysterious and practical dimensions of the Catholic faith. It does this from within the poet's faith while not flinching from naming that its "presiding culture (what is left of it) is often repulsive" (110). Other poets address Christian faith in poems and interviews. Mary Karr has written collections of poetry about specific Catholic sacraments and symbols in Sinners Welcome (2009), and in 2018, the former US poet laureate (2017-2019) Tracy K Smith wrote:

Poetry’s devotions are many. But, if I back up far enough, I see that the two [Christianity and poetry] share a mode. I think the creative state which is beholden to something unseen lives both outside and within the self and is similar to the state of openness, humility, compassion and receptivity at the root of Christ’s message about the kingdom of God, which also lives both outside and within the self. (Leontaras 2018)

My examples here are predominantly American publications because English language poetry has been more assiduously studied in the United States than in Ireland; there
may also be a greater openness to acknowledging one's religious faith publicly within the discipline of poetry in the United States than in Ireland or Britain. Even so, Pádraig Ó Tuama’s poetry collections explore (among other things) intersections of Irishness, Catholic faith, queerness, and conflict (Ó Tuama 2012; 2013; 2015) though he may be more widely known as the host of the popular podcast *Poetry Unbound* (which he created under the umbrella of Krista Tippett’s and *On Being’s* public theology work on American public radio. As a southern Irish-born poet whose life and work are based in Northern Ireland, Ó Tuama’s work—as a poet, theologian, and mediator—crosses the North Atlantic border (between the United States and Ireland/ Northern Ireland), as well as the border between South and North on the Irish island. Certainly, had this thesis taken a slightly different focus, it would have included his Ireland-focused practical theology and poetry.

The Northern Irish poet Nick Laird repeats some of the previous formulations about poetry and religion while also introducing a further aspect:

I've been reading Robert Alter's magnificent new translations of *The Book of Psalms* and 'My heart is astir with a goodly word.'

The relationship between poetry, those goodly words, and religion is hard to quantify. Both involve the hidden, working at the borders of the sayable. They share an experiential dimension. Personal religion involves a private speech act (prayer), chanting (psalms), heightened states achieved by ritualised words. The Lord’s Prayer is one of the first poems I learned. Leached of its import by years of mindless recital, it’s almost a Sitwellian sound poem to me. (Laird 2008)

These have been examples of poets taking Christianity seriously and exploring its force within their work. The relationship between poetry and Christian theology is one-sided, however. Aside from exploring aesthetics more theoretically in relation to divine attributes, only some theologians have engaged the *matter* of poetry. By matter, I mean the labour, the craft, the conditions, the voiced and the embodied mediation of poetry. With few exceptions, theological studies about poetry use scholarly methods, rather than literary or poetic or even theological methods, to think theologically and poetically through *poetry’s* methods, which are, unsurprisingly, much harder to define or systematise than theological methods.
To be clear, I am not suggesting that no Christian theologian has considered poetry in a significant way (in Chapter Three, I will explore contributions by Anne Thurston and Enda McDonagh, and others, to a critical contextual Irish theology that engages with the arts, if not in the same way that I am proposing). It is worth taking some space to look at various examples of such engagement, even if I will argue ultimately that these exceptions are difficult or unhelpful in application to the Irish context (though it is hoped that they may inform and inspire future work). Alongside the work Laird mentions above, one has Robert Alter’s excellent work on Biblical poetry (1985), which investigates the modes and function of Hebrew poetry in the Bible. Again, I focus on the Catholic theological matrix, not in an essentialist delimitation of Christianity in Ireland. Rather, I do it from the necessity of some helpful boundaries and in the hope of a constructive conversation between Catholic theology and poetry shaped by the experience of Ireland as a Catholic country, as it certainly was during the formation of the three poets in this study. In thinking about the relationship of Catholic theology to language and the sacramental potential of language, more generally, I rely on Louis-Marie Chauvet’s attention to the ‘linguistic turn’ in Catholic theology and its implications for my readings of contemporary Irish poetry. For this reason, the influences of Karl Rahner, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, and Thérèse of Lisieux on a potential critical Irish theopoetics are of interest. Rahner’s *Theological Investigations* (1961), elucidated helpfully by Gesa E. Theissen (2023), and Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Theological Aesthetics* (1983), particularly the first and third volumes, take human creativity and aesthetics seriously, and I will spend some time with them, in chapters Two and Three, respectively, primarily as a way to locate the conversation of aesthetics within Catholic thinking; however, I insist that Rahner’s and Von Balthasar’s forms of attention to poetry are of an entirely different order than the one I propose, which is closer to the theology of Thérèse of Lisieux (Lisieux 2003). I invoke Therese of Lisieux’s "little way" to indicate the considerable merit of a single study that attends deeply to a few poems alongside multi-volume treatises that speak more generally about poetry as an expression of divine inspiration. Lacey Jones’ corrective theopoetical work on Denise Levertov (2019) (corrective in that it re-joins what Miller divided, as mentioned earlier) and Andrew
Cunning's fascinating exploration of Marie Howe's Catholic aesthetics (2019) both represent this category of theopoetical attention (as, in fact, both Jones' and Cunning's essays appear in the above-mentioned issue of Literature & Theology (2019)).

1.9 Outline of chapters

In opening this inquiry into the transformative potential of contemporary Irish poetry for Christian theology, I have emphasised in Chapter One the particular value of contemporary Irish women's poetics, arguing that, in light of the prominence of poetry within Irish cultural identity, these bodies of work represent an undervalued resource for theological inquiry in Ireland. I reflected on the one-sided relationship between theology and poetry, making the case that there is a relationship between uncritical (or inadequately critical) theological inquiry, the lack of religious nuance in public discourse, and harm to particular bodies and communities. Finally, I have narrated some of my pathways into this project, from my deep interest in Irish poetry as an undergraduate student to how I now see poetry and theology in relationship. In doing so, I've also offered some preliminary definitions, touching upon the importance of decolonial thinking and the situated experience of poetry.

In Chapter Two, I will describe some of the methods and frameworks that underpin this study, including poetics, theology, theopoetics, liberation, feminist, Womanist, process, and practical theology, as well as my own experience as a writer and reader of poetry as foundational. Only through a decades-long, embodied practice of reading and writing poetry have I discerned the operational modes of poetry that make it such a profound resource for theological reflection. In Chapter Three, I will demonstrate that, given the uniqueness of my approach to this subject in the context of Ireland, a standard literature review is not applicable; not only has this project demanded a wide survey of disciplines and areas within disciplines, but, due to the time-disorientation of Irish historical trauma, I also cannot apply normative temporal parameters to the primary and secondary literature that informs this study. I have consulted what other disciplines might consider state-of-the-art sources. However, for reasons I explore throughout this thesis, in the context of Ireland, it is important to
distinguish its particular theoretical trajectory and not conflate particular epistemic movements in Ireland with those in the US or Britain, something that is too easily done based on false equivalences in which American, British, as well as Irish thinkers, engage. As a simple example, contemporary social justice frameworks from the US or Britain do not truly map onto the Irish context, and a great deal of confusion is created when actors are unaware of this.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I claim this is a theopoetical project. At the same time, this chapter will show that, while an Irish theopoetics (a project ostensibly already begun by the work of Richard Kearney on Eriugena (2019), for example) would bring much to bear to the wider field, given how integral Irish poetics and theology have been to shaping cultural identity, there are "local" and practical matters about Ireland that must be better articulated before a more speculative and theoretical reading of Irish theology and poetry can be properly rooted. This is, in fact, consistent with the hopeful, expansive, and inclusive nature of theopoetics, that it can take diverse forms and can grow organically and branch out, nourished by such varied sources as Rubem Alves' liberation theology (Keefe-Perry 2019), Catherine Keller’s process theology (2007), Richard Kearney’s anatheistic philosophy (2009), Heather Walton’s theological reflection methods (2014; Graham, Walton and Ward 2019), and Édouard Glissant’s Poetics of Relation within Mayra Rivera’s considerations of what flesh has meant in Christianity (2015), to name just a few examples.

In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I focus more closely on the poetics of Paula Meehan, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Colette Bryce. I provide overviews of particular knots within Irish theology, history, and society that their works address, examining their significance within Ireland's so-called post-Catholic theological matrix. Finally, I conclude this study in Chapter Seven and offer further resources and a creative reflection.

1.10 Conclusion

In this introduction, I have reflected on the thinkers and questions that have motivated my study of the transformative potential of contemporary Irish poetry for Christian theology. The emphasis on the unique contributions of poetry penned by Irish women
is not merely an academic exercise but a calling forward of the experiences and practices that allow me to make a unique contribution to the discipline of theology. Although my questions have evolved from those with which I began (as is common, especially in our discipline), the spirit of the first question (inspired by Jennings’ *The Christian Imagination*, as cited at the start of this chapter): "What happened to the original trajectory of intimacy?" remains within the DNA of my projects two central concerns: first, the theoretical question, what possibilities emerge from giving poetry serious theological consideration—and the practical dimension, what does it look like to read poetry theologically? Secondly, what do three Irish women poets contribute to Irish theological hermeneutics? The complex relationship between Christianity and desire (in the sense that Jennings means) in Ireland, combined with the challenges of addressing gender in a non-essentialist manner, underscores the need for a more nuanced and critically reflective Irish theological discourse. Furthermore, while the need for this involves looking at the past, the stakes are high in both the present and the future.

On the one hand, critical studies of Ireland's past are necessary as a way to remember what has been lost or obscured; for example, Derek Scally very helpfully reminds us that the image of intensely devotional Catholicism that is generally associated with Ireland is not an Irish reality from time immemorial, but the result of the initiative of one Archbishop, Paul Cullen, and a Synod at Thurles, following the Great Famine in the mid 19th century (2022, Chapter 15). On the other hand, it is not just the past that we must consider. Contemporary Irish theology, to be truly contextual, would also have to be better equipped to honour and incorporate the experiences of "alterity" in the present. Against its self-image as the land of *céad míle fáilte*, “one hundred thousand welcomes”, in the Irish, Ireland has largely failed to be hospitable to both those who have arrived in Ireland seeking asylum (since globalisation, neoliberalism, and the Celtic Tiger era elevated Ireland from a place struggling people leave to a place struggling people seek as refuge), and Irish Travellers who have always been in movement in Ireland.
2 METHODS AND FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Introduction

In the Introduction, I began to sketch some of the causes (and effects) of an ultimately harmful dearth of literacy and nuance in contemporary public discourse on religion in Ireland, and I also proposed that serious engagement with Irish poetry could open new and needed theological perspectives, a critical Irish theology that does not currently exist as such, barring a few important outliers that I will address. In this chapter, I will chart the methods that underpin this study, including the following: discussing the importance of Willie James Jennings’ work to this study; exploring the thorniness of white feminist theology and risking new forms to say the same things as others; deepening engagement with theopoetics; giving some entries into aspects of the sacramental theology of Karl Rahner and Louis-Marie Chauvet that are most relevant to my study; saying something about the modes of poetry that have potential to bolster theology; pointing out the importance of the theological anthropology of M. Shawn Copeland and tracking other frameworks with which I am in conversation, such as liberation, feminist, Womanist, process and practical theology; touching on postcolonial and decolonial theory; and justifying autoethnographic and other situated methods.

In doing so, I will document how my social location and relationship with language have shaped this research. I justify autoethnographic interventions that borrow from practice-based research methods. This project is not practice-based; however, I am arguing for hybrid methods at every turn to make the case that the Irish context necessitates this approach. I will also establish why I have chosen to think theologically through the poetry of Paula Meehan, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Colette Bryce. I will say something about the critical landscape in which these poets exist in service of my greater aim: to show that Irish poetry written by women can offer something valuable to theology in Ireland and elsewhere. Before moving forward to these points, I want to specify that when I am talking about Christianity, I am only talking about Christianity in contemporary Western society or the Global North. I rely on a consensus-based
understanding of “Western” and “Global North”. However, I hope this study will show that the Irish context itself exists somewhere between Stuart Hall’s very helpful formulation of "the West and the Rest" (Hall 1992, 275-320) and that the intersection of theology and Irish poetry is a richly generative entry into that challenge. As such, a "localised" study can have wider implications.

2.2 Jennings’ *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*

An important example of this kind of dynamic between the "local" and the "global" appears in the introduction of Willie James Jennings' *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (2010), the text that sparked the foundational research question for this study: Why do different kinds of Christians not recognise one another? This question goes beyond, or, more accurately, comes before, the question of ecumenism—the mutual regard and acceptance across differences among denominations, as, for example, between Catholics and Protestants on the island of Ireland—since to have regard for another, one must first not just recognise the other, but recognise the other not as a stranger, since, as Lucy Collins notes with the help of Sara Ahmed, “the stranger is not someone we do not recognise but rather ‘someone we recognise as a stranger’” (Ahmed 2000, 49; in Collins 2015, 83). In his introduction, Jennings describes the encounter of two members of a Reformed Church with his mother, "one of the pillars of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church”, instanced by their missionary visit to Jennings' family. Jennings writes:

I thought it odd that they never once asked her if she went to church, if she was a Christian, or even if she believed in God... I remember this event because it underscored an inexplicable strangeness embedded in the Christianity I lived and observed. Experiences like these fuelled a question that has grown in hermeneutic force for me: Why did they not know us? They should have known us very well. (3)

It's worth establishing overtly that the encounter takes place in the United States, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the wake of the Jim Crow era; that the Jennings are Black, and the visitors from First Christian Reformed Church are white, and as such, the encounter serves as one of the autoethnographic seeds for the entire project of *The*
Christian Imagination, which is to trace the roots of racism back to Christianity's early supersessionist impulses and how this move then manifests during several stages of historical Christian development, from the pre-modern era of the colonial project, through the 19th and 20th centuries.

What is immediately notable about Jennings' project is his willingness to examine recent developments and the very root of a tradition to which he has remained faithful. The critique is both rare and powerful as it comes not from the outside but from inside the tradition, from someone who knows it very well. His willingness to do this came from both his love of Christianity and a painful clarity about how Christianity had facilitated (and continues to facilitate) such violence against people from whom he is descended. Mary Daly had done this with feminist readings of theology, of course, with the result that she ultimately could not reasonably justify (according to her own logics) remaining a Catholic (the future of Jennings' faith is, of course, still unwritten). In Jennings' work, however, I could see that my desire to know the tradition I was putatively rejecting (in that I was not attending Mass or services, and therefore, not partaking in the ritual that most Catholics would consider the ritual that connects us as one body: the Eucharist) had a deeply ethical dimension. It could be a kind of bridge from a wounded and largely ignorant dismissal of Christianity to a more informed position of an indeterminate orientation.

What this would require, and what was required of Jennings to explore and write about and publish The Christian Imagination, was a deep level of vulnerability, the kind that Jennings risked in the face of his subject. I argue that engagement with poetry, particularly if one does not consider oneself a poet (even if one does), is a continual mental and bodily practice of exactly that kind of vulnerability. It is what I mean by reading poetry "theologically", and Jennings can, again, help with unpacking this adverb. Later in the introduction, he describes with moving clarity the intimate gestures of "connection and belonging and of a freedom to claim, to embrace, to make familiar one who is not" (6) on the part of his Dutch Reformed professors, upon his (Jennings') first sermon as a student at Calvin College. In those gestures, Jennings identifies Christianity's powerful capacity "to enact the social, to imagine and enact connection and belonging"
and he describes how, immediately after the chapel service, upon returning to class, his professors once again "assumed their proper pedagogical form" (6), which is to say, one infers, something opposite the former intimacy, not violence or hatred, but a kind of intellectual distance. Jennings writes:

What I observed in the theological academy was fundamentally the resistance of theologians to think *theologically* about their identities. It was the negation of a Christian intellectual posture reflective of the central trajectory of the incarnate life of the Son of God, who took on the life of the creature, a life of joining, belonging, connection, and intimacy. Such a posture would inevitably present the likelihood of transformations not only of ways of thinking but of ways of life that require the presence of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with being in the social, cultural, economic, and political position to be transformed. (7)

This study does not treat theological pedagogy *per se*, nor do I think that is the limit of what Jennings describes. As a young Black preacher at an institution likely helmed predominantly by older white male professors, Jennings would have been attuned to such shifts in formality and affect as he described. And while Jennings has not had to specify the racial dimension in the above-mentioned anecdote and reflection, it is painfully apparent because it is the subject of his project in *The Christian Imagination*. I make this explicit, however, as it is necessary to illustrate how Jennings' project on theology and the origins of race ignited (and continued to inform) a thesis exploring Irish poetry's value to Christian theology. I mean to demonstrate that I have not strayed too far from the original question: Why do different kinds of Christians not recognise one another? Taken outside of Jennings’ exploration of North America and the transatlantic slave trade, this question finds resonance in Ireland, as Noel George Irwin explored in his doctoral thesis *When Christians Fight: Ecumenical Theologies and the Troubles in Northern Ireland* (2009), particularly in Chapter 6 (112-129), where Irwin examines the inertia following a 1976 study on violence in Ireland undertaken by an ecumenical delegation of churches. Recognising the report’s important recommendations, Irwin remarks that the report “should be seen as one of the great opportunities lost in trying to produce an agreed ecumenical theology in response to the ‘Troubles’” (116). Irwin’s study, which draws on the work of theologians Glenn Jordan, Cathal Daly, Terence
McCaughey, and Johnston McMaster, effectively asks the same question: Why do different kinds of Christians not recognise each other?

2.3 Intervention 2

I am treading troubled waters. As a final year student at Yale Divinity School, I audited a Womanist Theology seminar. I would have taken the seminar for credit had I not already reached the limit of degree requirements in theology the previous two years, during which time the faculty included no theology professors who were not white or male, and no Black or Womanist theology courses were available—one demand of nationwide college student protests in the wake of highly publicised anti-Black police violence in 2014-15 was a commitment to hire and retain more Black and Brown faculty. In one meeting during office hours, I discovered I had no language to articulate what I wanted to convey to my professor that she was the first professor in my life as a student to require a social location essay at the start of the semester and that engaging with Black and Womanist theology had, for me, made theology matter in ways it had never mattered before, and that, as a white-identified student who was born in Romania, raised in the United States and was now doing a second degree at Yale (and thus inhabiting white institutional power), I didn’t know where to go from there. I was keenly aware that these theologies had developed out of conditions of suffering, death, and survival in the midst or wake of transatlantic slavery and the Jim Crow era. Nothing in the list of hybrid identities that I had named in my social location essay qualified me to be entrusted with even a small part of these theologies’ legacy. I knew and could feel that it was wrong to desire otherwise or to use these frameworks for any purpose other than for what they had been intended: for the liberation of Black and Brown people. I also knew that if aspiring to call myself a “white feminist theologian” was the only option (however accurate those qualifiers seemed to be), my situation was, indeed, dire. The process by which I learned to examine my own socialisation more deeply (including how my desire to be “good” to belong is both gendered and racialised), is beyond the scope of this study, but I include such interventions because the very neatness of analysis without them begins to accumulate into what George Yancy has called “sutured” being:
To be sutured also implies a state of being free from a certain kind of “infection”. In other words, within the context of critically engaging whiteness, the concept of suture functions as a site of keeping pure, preserving what is unsullied. Moreover, to be sutured within the context of white identity is indicative of “the narrative authority” of the white self that occludes alterity. (Yancy 2015, xv)

Interventions conveying discomfort (without victimisation) and unresolved positioning a way to practice being unsutured, something with which, I am arguing, poetry aids considerably.

2.4 Theo/poetics: risking new forms to say old things

To do theology theologically is to do precisely what academic convention tells us we should not do: risk vulnerability and admit to our view's incompleteness, instability, and intermediacy. However, the capability for risking vulnerability within the doing of theology has significant precedents within theologies that have informed this study. For example, practising a risk of a deeply personal form of writing that deviates from the convention of the “objective” academic, Catherine Keller writes in language that performs the depths it describes in The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming (2003). Ethicist emilie townes bookends her systematic study of the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” (2006) with her own poetry. Within the strict forms of Catholic scholarship, M. Shawn Copeland offers methods for risk with her five convictions of theological anthropology:

that the body is a site and mediation of divine revelation; that the body shapes human existence as relational and social; that the creativity of the Triune God is manifested in differences of gender, race, and sexuality; that solidarity is a set of body practices; and that the Eucharist orders and transforms our bodies as the body of Christ (2010, 2, emphasis mine)

I will return to Keller and a more in-depth analysis of contemporary theopoetics. However, for the moment, I want to highlight Copeland’s theological risk as it illuminates the methods of this study. One “body practice” available in producing a thesis is to return to and remain with the body, its intimate and localised particularities, and its social conditions, especially when the terrain of inquiry is not straightforward. This study
uses Copeland’s formulation and acknowledges that placing specific historical atrocities alongside each other risks a kind of empathic fallacy. If comparing or substituting one atrocity for another, one commits the violence of instrumentalising and, in a sense, erasing one violence to explicate another. Saidiya Hartman’s understanding of "the precariousness of empathy" is crucial to this point. In *Scenes of Subjection*, she writes, "Empathy is a projection of oneself into another to better understand the other... and in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (Hartman 1997, 19).

Hartman’s words on empathy help to calibrate the relevance of Copeland’s words to my project. Copeland’s theology of the body situates the Black female body within the violence of colonisation and enslavement, additionally revealing how all bodies have been caught up in the economies of that violence. While there are limits to the comparison of colonial projects in different contexts, the oppression of the Irish under British colonisation is a historical reality that continues to shape Irish society today. Therefore, before I can analyse contemporary theopoetics, its authors, and where this project stands in relation to the theopoetic project, there is a need to particularise some of the specific conditions in which Irish people lived under colonisation. Keeping in mind that in all colonised societies, there are people who are closer or further from the centre of power, colonisation for Irish people included violent rebellions at the turn of the 18th century, An Gorta Mór (the Great Famine) of the mid-19th century, during which Ireland suffered the greatest losses in Europe, due not to the lack of food, but to the ruling British’s management of resources, the Easter Rising in 1916, the Irish Free State's violent struggle for independence, the Civil War that followed, and the thirty years of conflict up to 1998 (problematically) referred to as “the Troubles” (Jackson 2014). One can plot colonial trauma in Ireland further back to the 16th and 17th centuries, with the various plantations of Ireland, the period of Cromwellian conquest, and over a century of Penal Acts suppressing the Irish language and systematically shifting land ownership to Protestant settlers, primarily through suppression of Catholicism. These last events occurred along the same timeline as the establishment of transatlantic slavery and genocides of the Indigenous populations in
North America, often through the deployment of similar tactics as first tested in Ireland. Furthermore, the grievous reports, since 2020, of abuses within Christian-run Indian boarding schools in North America (for which, as previously stated, Pope Francis has begged forgiveness after a “pilgrimage of penance” (Cecco 2022)) echo similar reports in Ireland beginning in the 1990s (Reuters Staff 2021), including more recent findings of the “Tuam babies scandal” (Corless 2021), and yet these associations are not frequently, or easily made, for reasons that I am arguing, have to do precisely with what Jennings calls the "diseased social imagination" (2010, 6) of Christianity and its “social performances” (10). This is a shame, as one can highlight several examples of bodily solidarity between the colonised peoples (one can explore the meeting of Daniel O’Connell, the Catholic “Liberator” with the African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass in Dublin in 1845 (Douglass 2021); the funds sent by the Choctaw people to the Irish during the famine in 1847 (O’Loughlin 2020); the instance when the Irish civil rights leader Bernadette Devlin was given the golden key to New York City by the city’s mayor in 1970, and she gave it to the Black Panthers “as a gesture of solidarity with the black liberation and revolutionary socialist movements in America” (The New York Times 1970).

Returning to the thorny subject of American academic normative nomenclature and white feminist theology from the intervention above, I argue that tools for breaking through the barriers to speech and finding entries into solidarity can be explored through Irish theology (for example, Garrigan’s relevant article, "Irish Theology as White Theology: A Case of Mistaken Identity?" (2014)) and that taking Irish poetry seriously can create the hermeneutic space for this to happen more normatively. One approach to this is through theopoetics, and although it is not helpful for my study to draw rigid boundaries between what might be called theopoetics and what might be called theopoetry, it is important to point out that treating poetry is just one of the many capacities of theopoetics.

A functional definition and analysis of contemporary theopoetics would serve to locate this project within it. According to L. Callid Keefe-Perry, the term appeared first as theopoiesis and was “used by Stanley Romaine Hopper in a 1971 speech that grew
out of conversations that had been taking place within the Society for Art and Religion in Contemporary Culture and the American Academy of Religion” (Keefe-Perry 2009, 579; Miller 1987, 3). The term comes from a combination of the Greek words for God (Θεός) and the root word for poetry (ποιεῖν), which means “to make”, and in Greek philosophy, to make something that did not previously exist, through the imagination. However, as previously stated, it is against the spirit of theopoetics to insist on a single definition, and, as a researcher who is also a poet, I have an embodied resistance to offering such a definition and a rather apophatic impulse to enumerate all the things it is not, as a kind of negative theology approach to defining theopoetics (notably, Catherine Keller engages in exactly this kind of linguistic and theological play in her own approach to a definition for theopoetics). And because theopoetics resists straightforward definitions, I invoke the terminology of the Marxist theorist Asad Haider. He writes, “The problem that definitions are intended to solve is that words are polysemic”, referring primarily to the thought of the French philosopher Sylvain Lazarus, who “instead proposes an ‘anthropology of problematic words,’ in which polysemy is suspended by the opposition of prescriptions, which operate not on what is or what was but on what is possible” (Haider 2020, 237). Definitions arise from an impulse to fix meaning. They make claims and have a static quality, detached from the fact of having been constructed; they also remain outside of mutuality with what is being defined, and outside of ethics and accountability. Being timeless, outside the bounds of relation, definitions recall something of the ontotheology Heidegger resisted. In his article on ontotheology in the Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Matthew Halteman writes:

The main problem with ontotheology, according to Heidegger and his heirs, is that it is driven by a desire to ‘master’ reality that masks a deeper anxiety over the challenge of existing as finite beings vulnerable to a world that resists and confounds our life projects. Critics maintain that this existential mood of stability-seeking angst disposes humanity to experience the world primarily as something to be subordinated to human intellect and will. (Halteman 1998)

Prescriptions imply agency, as well as consent, in a way that definitions do not. In other words, one prescribes (falling somewhere between invitation and request), and another consents (or doesn’t) to the meaning offered by the prescriber. Even though theopoetics does not use Lazarus/ Haider’s vocabulary, this is, in a sense, how theopoetics positions
poetry and theology, whereby theopoetics generates prescriptions for what may be possible within the scope of each. The work of Catherine Keller, to whom I will turn with more attention momentarily, offers just one example of the field of theopoetics’ engagement with the work of Heidegger (others are John D. Caputo, Stanley Hopper and Amos Wilder, important figures for the nascent corner of theological inquiry) – it is worth mentioning that Keller herself, though engaged overtly with theopoetics, does not define the field, but rather gives it “four theopoetic oscillations”, indicating the movement and musicality that theopoetics represents in her own work:

1. Theopoetics is not theology-as-usual nor is it “not theology”. It rhythmically destabilizes the certainties of traditional theological inquiry.
2. God-talk is mindful of its own edge, e.g., the unspeakable vs. the word, or between silence and language itself. Process theopoetics is the steady work of auto-deconstruction: the critique of abstractions in order to keep discourse vibrant and relevant.
3. This discourse occurs in a space between theopoetics and theopolitics. Poiesis is the making of something that previously did not exist, a creative practice. It is an action, a poem.
4. Theopoetics is not just involved with theology-as-method, but also with the Logos of scripture. There is a multiplicity of oscillations waiting to be unleashed. Theopoetics is in one sense polyphilia: the love of and for multiplicity. (Keller n.d.)

One could almost approach Keller’s text through the methods of poetic analysis; there is a sense of great pressure exerted onto language, both to communicate as well as to withhold some element of mystery or, at the very least, to indicate that, from the point of view of theopoetics, the language of theological inquiry is neither stable nor static. As for prescriptions, the project Art Religion and Culture (ARC), about which I will say more momentarily, resists claiming a single definitive declaration of what theopoetics is and instead offers fourteen variations on what it does. ARC, as a collective body, offers the following for what theopoetics might be and do:

(1) an emphasis, style, and positive concern for the intersection of religious reflection and spirituality with the imagination, aesthetics, and the arts, especially as
(2) it takes shape in ways that grows community,
(3) focuses on material change, and
(4) affirms the importance of embodiment.
More generally, theopoetics is not an alternative to theology. It’s a way to do religious and theological reflection that gives greater attention to form, genre, and method. It validates art, experience, and the body as a source of religious reflection and is concerned with the emotional and “pre-rational” impact as well as the concrete consequences of religious reflection. Art and ideas should matter. (Arts Religion Culture n.d.)

The collective explanation uses the most accessible language, representing the welcome and inclusivity of theopoetics. Having established the usage of prescriptions rather than definitions, we can now examine the contours and some figures (creative prescribers) in contemporary theopoetics.

Two centres of gravity for work in theopoetics currently exist on each side of the Atlantic. Taking the North American context first, theopoetics has an intellectual home in the project Art Religion and Culture (ARC), which was initially a simple site created by L. Callid Keefe-Perry to expand on North and South American liberation theology and, in particular, the work of Rubem Alves and Melanie May (Keefe-Perry 2009, 589). This branch of theopoetics is concerned with aesthetics, style, the arts, and preoccupations present in all theopoetical projects, with differences primarily in the methods of exploring these preoccupations. While Roman Catholic theologians Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez are most often cited as the forefathers of Liberation Theology (Gutiérrez 1971; Boff 1973), it was Rubem Alves, a Brazilian Presbyterian, who wrote the first “extensive monograph that focused on historical and social liberation as the central hermeneutical key to conceptualise the Christian faith” (Rivera-Pagán in Panotto and Martínez 2023, 18). Alves’ dissertation, which he defended at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1968, was titled Towards a Theology of Liberation, published in 1969 as the book A Theology of Human Hope (18). Consequently, the North and South American branches are also rooted in considerations of coloniality. The legacy of Alves' concerns can be found in the work of Mayra Rivera, whose Poetics of the Flesh (2015) draws on Afro-Caribbean liberationist thinking in the work of Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter while exploring the significance of the body for Christian thought. Like Glissant, Rivera positions poetics as a mode of resistance and liberation in the face of the continuing brutality of colonisation and theopoetics as a tool to critique theologies that don’t consider the materiality, the fleshiness, of existence.
Another strand within North and South American theopoetics sees a more theoretical development through the work of Caputo, Hopper, and Wilder (mentioned above), Scott Holland, David Miller, Matt Guynn, and Roland Farber. Their work, though important for the theoretical foundation of the field, primarily in the engagement with postmodernism, is less concerned with the matter and practices of liberation, and, therefore, has less relevance for this project. In the same vein, Anne M. Carpenter’s *Theo-Poetics: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Risk of Art and Being* (2015) follows a more theoretical strand of theopoetics, looking primarily at Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, her thesis being that Balthasar “uses poets and poetic language to make theological arguments because this poetic way of speaking expresses metaphysical truth without reducing one to the other” (2). Carpenter’s work is most interesting to this project in the experimentation with scholarly convention, in that she opens each chapter with her own poems, which, as she writes, “prepare the reader for the text in a hieroglyphic fashion: that is, as an image and a word only made sense of in context, and, indeed, best understood once the chapter itself has closed” (6). Only one of these poems receives commentary from the author, and the reader is meant to allow the theological function of the poems to emerge in the completion of the reading. While Carpenter’s approach to Balthasar illuminates his investigations of beauty and divine truth with admirable innovation, its limited applicability to my study is to be found directly in the way Carpenter describes what Balthasar does: uses poetry and poetic language to make theological arguments, wherein poetics serves the construction of theology (neither Balthasar nor Carpenter needs to apologise for being invested in apologetics – it is simply not the investment of this study, which requires much more contextual models of inquiry).

Bridging the practical and the theoretic, Catherine Keller’s combination of poststructuralist thought with feminist and process theology, however, has nourished the thinking that influences this project, even if indirectly. Combining poststructuralist theory, feminist readings of scripture, and a deep commitment to relational thinking, Keller has critiqued patriarchal interpretations of Christian doctrine from the beginning of her publishing career. Her first book, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and*
Self (1986), challenges the individualistic and patriarchal assumptions in Western thought, offering as an alternative the interconnectedness of process theology. Her expansion of process theology deepens in *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (2003), where she questions the traditional Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), proposing instead a theology of becoming that draws on the biblical motif of the deep (*tehom*, in Hebrew) as a “primal oceanic chaos” (26) from which creation emerges. A significant feature of Keller’s work, her linguistic muscularity, matures in this text. She writes in the book’s “pre/face”:

> While critically engaging history and scripture, my argument remains a project of *constructive theology*. Offering like most theologies an account of “the creation,” this one (unlike most) lets creation itself emerge from the *topos of the Deep*. I had *begun* elsewhere, *in medias res*, writing of relationality as a beginningless process; then of apocalypse as an endless dis/closure. So this becoming theology continues a *deconstruction* of the paradigm and presumption of linear time: the bottom line of origin, the straight line of salvation history, the violent end of the line of time itself. I mark “the beginning” instead as a beginning-in-process, an unoriginated and endless process of becoming: *genesis*. Here the figure of *tehom* answers—as deep calls to deep—to the watery chaos almost terminated in the Apocalypse: “there shall be no more sea”. This theology continues an attempt, necessarily from the inside of the biblical tradition, to heal that desiccating hope. As constructive work, therefore, the present archaeology of the deep becomes *ipso facto* a tehomic theology. (xvii)

Keenly aware of the instability of written text – bound up with the instability of reading and interpretation – Keller introduces linguistic practices into her work that regularly appear in poetry that is intended to be performed, such as the slash between “pre” and “face”, and “dis” and “closure”, in a sense making visible the divergent readings that are already inherent in these words. There is also a proximity to poetry in the way that the text above (and most of her writing) seems continually conscious of its own forms and which conventions are in the process of being deconstructed (“the paradigm and presumption of linear time” and all the assumptions of beginning and ending folded into her initial start “*in medias res*”). The articulation of her wrestling with this consciousness creates a density in her work that, for this reader, threatens to undermine the obvious simultaneous playfulness – and desire for playfulness and lightness – that runs through her work. Her splicing impulse also activates the other capability of the word “to splice”,

55
the recombinant, as well as the separating, and words like “Afferyank” appear out of the “Afro/Asian/Euro/American complexity” (xvii) in which she is situated as a scholar and theologian. This particular work, thus, reflects her broader interest in the relational ontology of Alfred North Whitehead and the love for linguistic play that draws her closer to theopoetics in her later works. In *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (2015), which recalls the mystical text, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (anonymous 14th century), Keller weaves negative theology, quantum physics, and ecological ethics to articulate a vision of divine mystery and relationality that challenges ontotheological assumptions about God and the world, specifically about the separation between God and the world. Her growing concern with ecological justice becomes even more pronounced in Keller’s recent publications, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (2018) and *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* (2021), where she shifts her focus towards the climate crisis and political theology, drawing on her process theology and relational frameworks to advocate for a more sustainable and just public theology. If I’ve spent more time with Keller than with other thinkers in theopoetics thus far, it’s that her work has been particularly important to the seeding of theopoetics across the Atlantic, through Heather Walton’s appraisal of it in her own thinking and writing (I will say more about Walton momentarily). Geographical, as well as conceptual, cross-pollination is critical for this project. However, Keller’s work becomes a limited resource for this project in that it is contextual in the sense Bevans means above, as in responding to the theological and global urgencies of Keller’s time, but it is not contextual in the way that I mean.

Academic theology’s appraisal of recent developments in trauma theory has been slow, but emergent explorations in the theology of trauma have entered this branch of theopoetics through the work of Shelly Rambo (about whose work I will say more here and in Chapter Six), Serene Jones, Stephanie Arel, Nancy Pineda-Madrid, and authors within Rambo and Arel’s selections of essays collected as *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* (including work by Willie James Jennings, and which I mention to demonstrate the emerging intersections of some of the only-seemingly disparate thinking that
informs this study). Rambo has been an important voice in bridging the turn to the somatic and theology’s narrative and literary concerns. In *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (2015), Rambo puts contemporary trauma theory in conversation with the theologies of Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Adrienne Von Speyr and Grace Jantzen. Although it has limited applicability to my project (for reasons I will expand on in Chapter Six), *Spirit and Trauma* is still one of the most significant theological treatments of trauma, along with Serene Jones’s *Trauma and Grace* (2009) and, on the other side of the Atlantic, Karen O'Donnell's *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary and the Body in Trauma Theology* (2019).

From the outset, Keefe-Perry offers some of the defining contours of theopoetics within the work of Alves and May by primarily referring to their style of writing, remarking that “Alves writes in such a sweeping language that it borders on poetry itself, while May tends toward a more narrative expression of experience” (589), citing May’s *A Body Knows: A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection* and Alves’ *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (2002), both of which, Keefe-Perry claims, are “theological without being formulaic, systematic, or closed” (589). The implication is the contrast to a theological approach that is all those things, to which theopoetics is, alternately and simultaneously, a response, a challenge, an addition, a refusal, anything but apologetic. In a more recent appraisal of May’s work, Shelly Rambo refers to her “pioneering book in theopoetics, *A Body Knows*... [wherein] May refuses to divorce her bodily experience from Christian teachings about the bodily death and resurrection of Jesus” (Rambo 2019, 258). Rambo’s work, which focuses on trauma, the body, breath, and the senses (perhaps in reaction to a disembodied theological tradition), is in many ways a development of May’s work exploring the meaning of the traumatised and healed (resurrected) body of Jesus.

And yet, early and later attempts to establish theopoetics are themselves in a mode of apologetics, a vying for legitimacy, with its attending lexicon of the military or colonial “pioneer”. The language of coloniality, exploration-as-conquest, and domination seems inescapable when discussing the fore-kin of any current within academic theology. But towards this aspect, theopoetics does have an attitude, even if
it is not the attitude most likely to “establish” it in the form of a canon. In typical theopoetical spirit, nothing stays fixed, and Alves, who is so strongly associated with the formalisation of theopoetics within the emergent structures of ARC, soon distanced himself from academia and any form of institutionalised knowledge. As Keefe-Perry writes in Literature and Theology, Alves represents the need to grapple “with the impact of coloniality on theopoetics and how this may have influenced the aversion to ideas like ‘rationalism’ and ‘objectivity’ in the Alvesian stream” (Keefe-Perry 2019, 321).

While there is no single way in which ideas travel across oceans (in all directions) in contemporary theopoetics scholarship, the initialising work of Rubem Alves (seeding theopoetics in the ground of South American liberation theology) both expands and becomes more theoretical in the work of Catherine Keller (cross-pollinating theopoetics with process theology, feminist theory and poststructuralist philosophy in the Northeastern United States) and becomes more discursive and inclusive in the work of Heather Walton (grafting theopoetics to feminist practical theology, life writing and literary theory). Walton’s significant contribution to broadening the horizons of theopoetics outside of the North American context is through both her own writing and her editing projects and pedagogy, in particular the journal Literature and Theology, and the practice-based programme in literature and theology (a rarity, if not a unique example, certainly the first of its kind in the UK or Ireland) at the University of Glasgow. Walton’s earlier works in A Tree God Planted: Black People in British Methodism (1985), White Researchers and Racism (1986), An Ethnographic Study of a Moss Side Pub (1987), and My Mother is Ill: An Experiment in Feminist Research (1987) focused on issues of race, gender, social justice, feminist research methodologies and the challenges of social research, addressing life-as-it-is-lived through a theological lens. This (non-exhaustive) list of works led to her examination of feminist, practical theology and life writing as a theological practice, with accessible yet rigorous publications such as Imagining Theology: Women Writing and God (2007) and Writing Methods in Theological Reflection (2014) and Not Eden: Spiritual Life Writing for This World (2015). However, it is her essay “A Theopoetics of Practice: Re-forming in Practical Theology” addressed to the International Academy of Practical Theology in 2017 that fully combined her
theoretical, aesthetic, and practical interests in an engagement with Catherine Keller and theopoetics (though, Walton had been doing this kind of recombinant work throughout her career). “A Theopoetics of Practice” is a beautiful, evocative meditation on experience, text, tradition, and art (Botticelli, Picasso), and despite existing outside of the Catholic tradition, serves as a model example for critical Irish contextual theology and practice that engages with the arts. Finally, the special issue on theopoetics, which I have already mentioned, edited by Walton, draws together thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Richard Kearney, whose life and work cross boundaries from Ireland to the United States, from philosophy to theology, literature, and politics. As with several others I have mentioned, Kearney’s work is important more as a theoretical companion than as a model for the engagement between poetry and theology that I am suggesting (his study of the Irish monk Duns Scotus Eriugena in *Literature and Theology*, which I will discuss in Chapter Three, is nearly a contextual piece of Irish theopoetics, and other writings do deal with Ireland, but less so with theology).

Finally, before moving on from the contours of theopoetics to the contextualisation of this work within Catholic theology, I recognise a need to say something about where this theopoetic project stands in relation to the greater project of theopoetics and what kind of theological methods it might offer. In doing so, I am also describing what this project offers to other theopoetics projects and, ultimately, to Christian theology now. Theopoetics is a capacious enough field to have already imagined the possibilities of this project’s attention to language, its thinking of creative practice as a theological tool for liberation, its focus on the experience and expression of faith (whether or not one calls it religious faith), its engagement with seemingly disparate interlocutors across seemingly disparate disciplines (and seeing mutuality threading through the disparateness). So, in a sense, this project does not invent a uniquely new method, and it certainly does not do constructive theological work. Because a dual commitment emerged in the process of this research and writing – one, to the subject, theology and poetry, and an equally important commitment to the context of Ireland, the healing of land and people in the wake of colonial trauma and in the present, the spiritual fetters of neoliberal capitalism – this project does represent a
hope that theopoetics can draw new energy from its liberationist roots in the work of Rubem Alves, by bringing aesthetics, contextual theology together with trauma studies and decolonial practice.

However, while this may be a hopeful prescription for all of theopoetics, and ultimately, all of contemporary Christian theology, in thinking about where this study fits within the bigger project, I want to invoke the work of Deepa Iyer as a way to think in terms of systems rather than hierarchies. Iyer’s Social Change Ecosystem Map comes from her lived experience as a facilitator and activist and draws on systems theory. Her map suggests a sustainable system for transformation – and what is religion but the practice of transformation, and theology the study of, and the practice of transforming religion? – is made of actors in different roles, “Weavers, Experimenters, Frontline Responders, Visionaries, Builders, Caregivers, Disrupters, Healers, Storytellers, and Guides” (Iyer, n.d.), whose functions all contribute to a common aim of creating equity, liberation, justice, and solidarity. Seeing theopoetics playing several roles (Visionaries, Disrupters, Experimenters, Healers, Weavers – and others) within theology, as well as building bridges between theology and other disciplines, one might also think about what these roles look like within the category of theopoetics. In this way, there is no need to dismiss one project or another for failing to meet one another’s standards of what theopoetics is and does; rather, we might identify Alves as a Visionary, Keller as an Experimenter, Walton as a Weaver, and so on, allowing that they perform multiple roles. In this framework, my study of the possibilities of contemporary Irish poetry for theology and theopoetics feels most at home in the categories of Weavers and Healers, in the effort to bring together an Irish-grounded interpretation of contextual theology, poetry, decolonial practices, and something of the Catholic tradition, primarily as a tool of Irish self-understanding rather than an effort to renew institutional commitments. Consequently, the theological method this study proposes is a weaving of several practices: close, even exegetic, readings of literary texts written in the physical place where the theology is being examined or developed, or by writers who have some kind of investment in that place; somewhat controversially, the diminishing of the academic preference for canonic figures as the only primary sources of theoretical foundations for
research (in my case, also canonic figures in poetry as the only primary sources of creative production); the automatic incorporation of feminist and decolonial practices within theological study (with the understanding of the prerequisite work required to understand these practices); interdisciplinarity (not a novel method, but important to name); and, also controversially (but not new, given the previous suggestion of feminist and decolonial practice), this study proposes a method of holding lived experience – in this case, translated into poetry – with the same regard as theological interpretation. Having stated the above, while I recognise that the Catholic *magisterium* is not Iyer’s social change map, I want to say a few things about some of the Catholic theology that has influenced my thinking about poetry in the context of Ireland.

2.5 Karl Rahner and Louis-Marie Chauvet’s theology of language and embodiment

Promising to revisit Hans Urs von Balthasar later, I turn to two Catholic thinkers whose reflections on language establish the grounds, and thus, the methodological foundations, on which I think through theology and Irish poetry. These are Karl Rahner (1904-1984), a Swiss Jesuit priest and theologian whose theology of the symbolic nature of the body, language, and Christian community deeply influenced the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council (Kilby 2011), and Louis-Marie Chauvet (b. 1942), a French Catholic theologian who has challenged the prevalence of onto-theology, a way of thinking about God as ultimate alterity (Ambrose 2012), that has persisted in Catholic theology since Aquinas.

Beginning with Rahner, it’s important to say at the outset that this is in no way an appraisal of the entire body of theology in *Theological Investigations* (Rahner 1961), or even volumes within this compendium (neither do I engage with the entirety of Chauvet’s thought). Although Rahner did not write extensively on art and poetry, his work is helpful for this study as a grounding in the Catholic tradition in the context of Ireland for two main reasons: one, very practically, because of his tremendous influence over the Second Vatican Council and the way Vatican II’s changes impacted Ireland specifically, and two, because of this way of thinking about aesthetics more generally,
the imagination, and symbols as means of approaching God as a human being with agency. Taking the former first, Morwenna Ludlow has provided an important study of Rahner’s work, clarifying the much-disputed notion attributed to him of “anonymous Christians” in *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (2000). Ludlow remarks, “Rahner’s ideas on this issue are controversial, and the term ‘anonymous Christians’ is particularly so. However, Rahner did not coin the term himself. His article ‘Anonymous Christians’ was originally a review of a book by A. Röper called *Die anonymen Christen*” (178). That being said, Rahner’s impact on the Second Vatican Council was pivotal in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, which was a seismic event in Ireland. Proceeding between 1962 to 1965, it brought about profound changes in the Church’s liturgy, ecclesiology, and approaches in its relationship to the modern world. Its influence on Irish society through its liturgical reforms, its emphasis on ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, and its address to the laity and specifically to women can be directly connected to the thinking and writing of this Swiss German Jesuit priest. Geoffrey Watson writes:

Rahner helped guide and shape the revitalizing spirit of the council, holding ‘at least twenty-three public lectures on various topics,’ while drafting and revising speeches, improving texts and working to sway theological opinions... Although Karl Rahner did not directly write any of the sixteen Vatican II documents, he worked tirelessly behind the scenes, and the fingerprints of his theology influenced the Church in three vital ways. First, he helped shepherd the ecclesial body from a monarchical hierarchy to a collegial structure. Second, he contributed to the Church’s transition from an institution of eminent holiness to a ‘church of sinners,’ and finally, he helped broaden the Church’s scope from a narrow, Eurocentric institution toward a wider, global community. (2023, 3)

All of the above point to a theology of the human in more relational and active participation with both God and the Church, the core of Rahner’s theology, and his principal contribution via *Lumen* Gentium (Rahner was one of seven theologians involved in drafting this key document articulating the doctrine of the Church (Boston University Collaborative Encyclopaedia of Western Theology)). While these observations are true concerning what Rahner’s work was able to activate within the global Catholic Church, there’s a need to particularise this assessment to consider the specificity of the Irish experience and, furthermore, to make visible the experience of Irish women in
relation to the changes of Vatican II. As Margaret Mac Curtain points out, Vatican II’s “call for aggiornamento, had released spiritual energies among priests, laity, and religious women and men...” (2008 166-167), but she notes that “to a society as highly sacramentalised as the Catholic Irish”, and a society which was not prepared in other ways for modernisation, the changes were a shock to the system and created a sense of loss. She adds that women, in the middle of their own cultural awakening to patriarchal oppression, found this new engagement with vernacular liturgy especially perplexing. Mac Curtain writes, “The splendid mutterings of the Latin Mass became the vernacular whose language was, to ears sensitised by consciousness-raising exercises, disconcertingly sexist” (167). In other words, Rahner’s thinking directly influenced the society in which the poets I engage have lived and written. In the case of Paula Meehan, the shock to the Irish Catholic system was absorbed by the women in her life and Meehan, who would have been a young girl. This is best represented in her poems about faithful people who eschew clerical structures and traditional piety, as in her poem “Hannah, Grandmother”, to which I will attend later. Colette Bryce was born after the Second Vatican Council’s proceedings, in 1970, but the Council’s (via Rahner) attention to ecumenical dialogue would have been very important for her Catholic context in Derry. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s work could have been influenced differently from Meehan’s in that her work takes up women’s lives within religious institutions. Vatican II encouraged religious orders to return to their original missions of ministering to society, one main shift being away from enclosure toward more active engagement with the world, with a review of the governance of the orders and a greater emphasis on education. Margaret Mac Curtian, a Dominican nun and feminist scholar, is a key example. Louise O’Reilly’s terrific study, The Impact of Vatican II on Women Religious: Case Study of the Union of Irish Presentation Sisters, offers an excellent insight into the effects on just one order.

Moving from this more practical consideration of Rahner’s relevance to this project, Rahner’s theology of the symbol is particularly significant in thinking about the symbolic nature of language and can be considered a source for Louis-Marie Chauvet’s thinking about the symbolic nature of language in Sacrament and Symbol, which I will
soon discuss, as well. In Karl Rahner’s Theological Aesthetics (2014), Peter Joseph Fritz makes the case that Rahner brings Heidegger’s thought into modern theology “refounding theological language” (157). For Rahner, symbols are not just illustrative or decorative; they participate in the reality they signify and can thus be a means of encountering the divine. Thus, his "Realsymbol" or "real symbol", refers to symbols that do more than just point to a reality beyond themselves; they make that reality present in some way, and, consequently, the imagination that produces symbols (in this case, poetic imagination) is not a transcendence out of reality, but a deeper engagement with it and simultaneously with the sacramental nature of reality. For those whose task is not to encompass the entirety of Rahner’s monumental Theological Investigations, Rahner scholar Karen Kilby has suggested that Volume Four is the best entry into his theology (Kilby 2011), and, in particular, the section on the “Theology of the Symbol”, where Rahner explains the necessity of understanding the symbolic element of devotion to God:

> From its beginnings to the present day, the theology of devotion to the heart of Jesus, as understood by the simple faithful, by the theologians in their discussions and by the magisterium in its pronouncements, teaches that the heart of the Lord is a symbol of the love of Christ. Whatever answer is to be given to the question as to what is the proper object of this devotion, what is the relationship of the physical heart of the Lord, as object of devotion and as symbol of the object of devotion, to the love of Christ, which is certainly implicated in the object of this devotion; the word symbol cannot be avoided in the theology of the devotion. (Rahner 1961, vol 4, part 5, nr 9, emphasis mine)

However indirect the formulation, Rahner establishes the inseparable relationship between the symbol (the heart) and that to which it points (the love). Of most interest to this study, however, is how this inseparability nourishes his formulation about the symbolic nature of the human being, a formulation that substantiates my claims in Chapter Four, that healing is needed in theological thinking about the inherent sacredness of the body (rather than the punitively conditional notion of sacredness that has too frequently operated, for example in Irish Magdalene Laundries, where poor women were meant to be working to purify themselves—these points will be drawn out further in Chapter Four and Five). About the human being, Rahner states, “All beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily express themselves in order to attain
their true nature” (1961, vol 4, part 5, nr 9, I). In other words, when thinking about
poetry in conversation with theology, one can certainly consider the writing of poetry
as a process by which one can attain one’s true nature; and while the writing of poetry
is not the only way by which one can express oneself, the dedication and attention
expended in the process of writing poetry offer much by way of instruction (again, as I
shall demonstrate more concretely in Chapters Four, Five and Six, the chapters
dedicated to my poetic interlocutors).

Bob Hurd helps elucidate Rahner’s thought and the connection of Rahner’s
thought to Chauvet’s theology, further in his discussion of how both theologians
conceive of the body, language, and the Sacraments (and thus, liturgy) as mediating,
rather than instrumental, forms. Hurd writes, “For Rahner and Chauvet, mediation
means that some reality is rendered present and formative, revealed and efficacious,
through another” (2021, 304). Before turning to Chauvet’s work, I pause to note that it,
like much Western Christian theology, suffers from particular harmful formulations that
make uncritical use of African and Indigenous examples, often to demonstrate a kind of
ontological difference (Chauvet 2001, 9, 14). As Rachel Muers has acknowledged in her
use of Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s thinking alongside her own on queer theology (Loughlin
2007), there is much in Chauvet’s thinking that helps one navigate the connections
between poetry and theology (and even those aspects that I have critiqued above, to
some extent, justify one of the premises of my project, that contemporary Western
Christian theology needs decolonial tools in as many forms as is possible). This study is
primarily interested in those contributions to the theology of the Second Vatican Council
(via Rahner) that Chauvet takes up in his theological treatment, The Sacraments: The
Word of God at the Mercy of the Body (2001), condensed from his earlier text Symbol
and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence (1994), in a
movement towards greater access and communicability to readers who may not have
the scholastic background of lifelong Jesuit study.

Turning now to Louis-Marie Chauvet, a contemporary French Catholic theologian
deply influenced both by the linguistic turn in contemporary philosophy and by the
changes of the Second Vatican Council, which, he notes, “is the first council which
officially declared (although many theologians had said so for a long time) that ‘the holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery’” (2001 xxi). The three theoretical models for the sacraments that Chauvet offers at the outset of *The Sacraments*, the objectivist, subjectivist and Vatican II models (2001, xiii-xxv) give a useful framework for diagnosing the functional Catholic theology in Ireland that most influenced the poetry that I examine. Chauvet situates the objectivist model during the Scholastic period and the work of Thomas Aquinas (xiii), the subjectivist as a (misguided) reaction to the objectivist model, and the Vatican II model as both faithful and corrective to the first model. Furthermore, he emphasizes the role of language in shaping human understanding and experience, especially in relation to experiencing life through religious faith. He endows language with a sacramental capability, and sacraments as part of the symbolic structure of the Church, not merely instruments of grace but media for formation in Christian identity, along with Scripture and Christian ethics. To background a theological discussion of contemporary Irish poetry, returning to Chauvet’s three theoretical models is helpful. While the objectivist model treats the sacraments as “instruments”, “remedies”, “channels”, and “germs”, according to Chauvet, emphasizing personal piety, I can offer a way to experience, rather than merely think through, Chauvet’s subjectivist model (or, at least, one aspect of it), a poem by Paula Meehan, which I shall share, as I do in most cases, in its entirety, and without line by line literary analysis; the reasons for this are discussed further in the next section of this chapter. But first, Chauvet’s description. In general, the subjectivist model of theology is, in Chauvet’s terms, “the reaction against the church as institution”, (xvii).

Here is Meehan’s poem:

Hannah, Grandmother

Coldest day yet of November
her voice close in my ear—

tell them priests nothing.

Was I twelve? Thirteen?

Filthy minded.
Keep your sins to yourself.

Don’t be giving them a thrill.

Dirty oul feckers.

As close as she came to the birds and the bees.
On her knees in front of the Madonna,

Our Lady of the Facts of Life
beside the confessional—
oak door closing like a coffin lid

 neatly carpentered
waxed and buffed.

In the well made box of this poem
her voice dies.

She closes her eyes

and lowers her brow to her joined hands.
Prays hard:

woman to woman.
(2020, 200)

As Chauvet rephrases, “the gospel, yes; the church, no” (xvii). But also, the body as the mediator of the act of devotion, in the last four lines, yes, but sexuality, no, given that juxtaposition between “the birds and the bees” and Hannah kneeling in front of the Madonna. For my project, it is as if Catholicism in Ireland simply never received the “upgrade” to the Vatican II model, at least as Chauvet conceives it, in which:

On the basis of faith in the incarnation of God in Jesus, Christians confess that they go to God not in spite of the heavy ambiguity of their humanity but at the very core of it; not in spite of their bodies—of desire, of tradition, of culture, of universe... but in their very bodies which through faith in Christ have become “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19; therefore, not in spite of historical and social mediations but within them. (113-114)

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this discussion of Rahner and Chauvet’s writing, and by beginning to bring in the poetry with which I have been reading and
thinking about Rahner and Chauvet’s theologies, is that the poetry offers entry into Christian theology as it was lived out, rather than simply as it was proscribed in theological documents. Indeed, a core part of my methodology considers that the poems are primary, as both records and mediators of embodied experience.

2.6 Poetry’s modes

Before examining the presence of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the matrix of Catholic thought surrounding this study, I want to pause for a moment, both to recentre the inquiry in the equally shared space of poetry and theology, as well as to exercise an artistic practice that alternates between different faculties, intellectual, reflective, creative. I turn briefly to a more detailed discussion of how poetry does this. In over twenty years of writing and reading poetry, some of poetry’s modes have crystallised for me, and as I describe them below, I want to argue that within each of these properties is a mode that can strengthen theology, sometimes in the most practical ways, as the American writer and United Church of Christ pastor Matt Fitzgerald describes:

I am a preacher who has benefited greatly from reading poems. Poetry’s forcefully expressive language and capacity for concise intelligence could benefit any minister, pressed as we are for time, and inevitably lacking wisdom adequate to the odd and intense task before us. (Fitzgerald 2006, 133)

Fitzgerald’s admission of inadequacy, ensuring humility, describes the only orientation with which one can approach poetry. Poetry’s communicative capacity and simultaneous obstinate lack of transparency make it so, as often poems refuse analysis, and rather, as Fitzgerald puts it, “just sits there and shimmers and points past itself”, meanwhile sharing with Christianity, a “basic elusiveness; both testify to the fact that we see and don’t see, seize and don’t seize” (133). As such, through poetry, one can be trained to remain longer within the realm of the ambiguous, where doubt and belief wrestle with one another, a wild theological space, where the only method possible is faithfulness to what is unfolding.

An example is Colette Bryce:
Itch

I believe that Jesus lives
dee in the ditch of my mother’s ear,

an unreachable itch that never leaves.
And I believe when Jesus breathes

a million microscopic hairs
lean in the breeze like sapling trees.

Things I begin to tell her,
I believe sometimes she cannot hear

for the whispering like wishes
of Jesus softly breathing there.
(Bryce 2000, 13)

What does this poem, with its creed-like “I believe,” have to say about belief? One cannot say that the words “I believe that Jesus lives” constitute a confession of faith if one has taken such an interest in the poet, or at least the speaker—and yet, one cannot say they don’t. The poem itself embodies this ambivalence and undergoes it, and in writing and reading, the writer and reader do, too. Thus, another method of poetry is to look askance, as a kind of respect for the mutual ultimate unknowability of things. In looking askance, one again acknowledges a position of humility, not dissimilar to Jennings’ position of the eavesdropper.

Yet other poetry methods include repetition, attention to the ordinary and emergence. Repetition is rolling a particular word or phrase in one’s mind, or in a notebook, allowing it to be there, like a gift, acknowledged but unopened, and maybe even to begin, playfully and seriously, to test it against other words or phrases, until it starts to gather a kind of gravitational field. This is one of the most common experiences I have with writing poems. Rarely do they begin with a particular message, even less often, the need to express a specific idea or feeling (though, there are exceptions). Generally, there’s a word or phrase for days, weeks, months, one case, years, and as I begin to house it in language, other words, images and even stories in which it might have been unconsciously rooted, emerge. While the poem is in progress, it seems as if
any new insight or image or interesting turn of phrase is immediately drawn into the orbit of that particular poem.

“Christ is contingency”, writes the poet Christian Wiman, “but what relief it can be to befriend contingency, to meet God right here in the havoc of chance” (2013, 20). What this means, in Wiman’s formulation (and mine), is that living, relevant, meaningful theology is as much about how God dwells in the human (in embodied sacredness) as it is about the human desire to dwell in God (transcendence) (Rahner 1961, vol 1, nr 4). Or, to make another example, drawing on the theological architecture of Teresa of Ávila, if theology is to have any meaning for contemporary life in Ireland, God and theology must dwell in all the castles, not just the seventh (Teresa 1979).

2.7 Why this is not (exactly) a women’s studies or practice-based project, and Hans Urs von Balthasar

In talking about a lack of literacy and nuance, I also don’t wish to conflate public discourse (in media, in the legislative assemblies of the Oireachtas Éireann or Stormont, and in all the unrecorded spaces of social interaction) with discourse in academic Christian theology and the various secular and non-secular disciplines that both nourish and challenge it. However, my situated research methods (Haraway 1988) dictate the importance of acknowledging that “the relationship between research and social reality [is] an important question given the policy bent of research—particularly in women’s studies” (Oyewùmí 1997, xv-xvi).

I argue, however, that despite a focus on three female poets, this study no more constitutes a women’s studies project than Gail McConnell’s *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology* (2014), a literary critical and theological study of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, and Michael Longley, consciously constitutes a men’s studies project. This is not in any way to disparage either McConnell’s work or the important work of women’s studies; and neither is it to shy away from more complex (less binary and essentialist) ways of speaking about gender, particularly given how much exciting work has been done in queer theology in the last decades (Loughlin 2007; L. M. Tonstad 2018; Cornwall 2022). Rather, it’s to point out that, given the near total exclusion or devaluation of
female voices over two millennia of Christian intellectual tradition, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pursue this particular thesis as a women’s studies project with the necessary practical moves that might entail, i.e., centring female experience, expression, ways of knowing, as well as thinking and synthesising theology.

Indeed, I confronted this problem early on as it became clear that, while my poetic interlocutors were all female (and Irish), all of the theologians with whom I was putting their work in conversation were male (and French, American, Swiss), which amounted to a problem well noted by Lucy Collins concerning Irish women’s poetry, that there is a “tendency to attribute to women experiential rather than textual memories and therefore to confine them to a relationship with the past which is stripped of its cultural significance” (Collins 2016, 14). This problem in poetry has a correlation in Catholicism’s four to thirty-three ratio of female to male Doctors of the Church, the tendency to call female mystics spiritual writers rather than theologians (a point Denys Turner takes care to correct in his (2013) study Julian of Norwich, Theologian), and many other examples that can be traced throughout history, from Classical thought on gender to the Enlightenment’s bifurcation of reason and nature. This is not new, but it is thorny. I can choose only female poets because their work too often suffers from inadequate critical attention within patriarchal structures, with all the accompanying material consequences of such limited attention, but I cannot as yet explore theological aesthetics in a Catholic matrix without reference to von Balthasar’s work, for example, and all who refer to his work must perform critical framings to do so (Beattie 2006; Muers in Loughlin 2007; LaCouter 2021, 7-32). This is even true in the case of wanting to show that theological attention to poetry might look more like the theology of Thérèse of Lisieux’ than von Balthasar’s; scholarly conventions require that I think with, build on and challenge secondary sources and Von Balthasar is one of the few, and better known of thinkers to write about Thérèse of Lisieux.

Though his theology is not contextual in the way that I mean (and though he was not allowed to participate in the development of the theology of the Second Vatican Council), von Balthasar is an inescapable source for theopoetics because his theological aesthetics, which expound his concern for beauty, alongside goodness and truth, as
reflections of the divine. It may be hard to imagine now, given the richness of contemporary theological work, but Balthasar was doing this work when beauty, goodness, and truth were not central subjects for serious, Catholic theological inquiry. Von Balthasar’s fifteen-volume trilogy "The Glory of the Lord," "Theo-Drama," and "Theo-Logic," explore these themes. According to von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, beauty (alongside goodness and truth) reflects the divine, form can facilitate divine revelation through the possibilities of human perception, and art itself can function as a source of theological transmission, a capability that Anne Carpenter takes up in the study mentioned earlier, Theo-Poetics (2015). Alongside Anne Carpenter’s work, Gerard O’Hanlon’s study on The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1990) offers some perspectives on von Balthasar’s use of poetry and poets in the construction of theology. O’Hanlon argues that von Balthasar attempts to introduce the modalities of poetry into theological discourse and:

in doing so, he is shaking off the tyranny of an overly narrow philosophical In doing so he is shaking off the tyranny of an overly narrow philosophical approach and seeking to replace it with a language whose greater imprecision means more faithfulness to the Scriptures, without sacrificing the rigorous demands of a more broadly conceived philosophy and the challenge to speak about God in a way which includes, but transcends, the level of symbolic consciousness which is proper to poetry (85)

If von Balthasar’s aesthetics have helped shake off one kind of tyranny, feminist scholars have pointed out the many ways in which his contributions to Catholic theology have entrenched other tyrannies, particularly concerning gender, attitudes toward sexuality, his opposition to women’s ordination and his general masculinist view of the church. When this study considers his work foundational, it is to say foundational in the way that scholarship is constructed, works built on works of predecessors, and not in the sense that it is foundational to an understanding of the interplay between theology and aesthetics. In limiting the attention I pay to his work, his supporters, and his detractors, I hope simply to make space for other citations.

That having been stated, it could be argued that any conscious citation practice (Smith, Christen A.; Williams, Erica L.; Wadud, Imani A.; Pirtle, Whitney N.L.; The Cite Black Women Collective 2021) that centres marginalised voices within existing textual
limitations does constitute women’s studies. One aspect of my methodology in such a
case is a citation practice that acknowledges von Balthasar’s work on Thérèse of Lisieux
while also seeking out any female theologians who have treated the same subject (this
example is fortunate, as Mary T. Malone, who has written on the four female Doctors of
the Church, also happens to be an Irish Catholic theologian, who, although she has
returned to Ireland, spent most of her research and writing career in Canada). Pairing
the treatments of Thérèse of Lisieux by Malone in *Four Women Doctors of the Church*
(2015) and von Balthasar in *Two Sisters in the Spirit: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of
the Trinity* (1992) offers interesting insight that reflects as much (if not more) about the
authors as about the subject herself. It is through their combined appraisals (and
dissimuls) that one gets a fuller picture of Thérèse’s contribution to the Catholic matrix,
and, as I will discuss, her particular reception in Ireland and the influence of this
reception over the social and private lives of women. While both Malone and von
Balthasar value the depth of her faith, one gets the impression from reading Malone’s
slight, and Balthasar’s sizeable studies that the former is treating Thérèse the human
woman, while the latter is treating the dogmatic theologian and the saint Thérèse. Last
to be sainted, last to be treated in Malone’s study, Thérèse receives a peculiar
introduction:

Turning to the life of Thérèse of Lisieux after exploring the lives of the other three
women doctors can be something of a shock. Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of
Siena and Teresa of Ávila strode across the world stage attracting the attention
of popes, emperors, kings, bishops… when we turn to Thérèse of Lisieux, we
enter a much smaller world bounded only by family and convent. Nevertheless,
it is a world that was, for Thérèse, larger than the universe, because it is there
that she sought and found her God. (99)

Malone’s text seems both to want to honour the woman and demystify the saint, for
reasons that will soon feel duly appropriate for the feminist scholar. On several
occasions in the study, Malone refers to the discrepancy between the popular esteem
within which Thérèse is held and how little people know about her difficult life and
harrowing decline into tuberculosis and death at a young age, little soothed in her pain
by anything outside her own faith. Malone describes her last days, “Thérèse would not
ask for help and Mother Gonzague [the prioress] seemed to ignore that one of her nuns
was dying on her feet” (112). Whether Malone is implying masochism or neglect, or both, she is certainly speaking to a Catholic culture that glorifies martyring piety when she writes, “There is no doubt that the death of Thérèse was a boon to the Lisieux Carmel. The tripartite autobiography was published the year after her death... was an instant success and the convent had to keep churning out more copies” (113). At least in this narrative, there is a recognition of how, too often, women of the church are held to sacrificial standards of piety while the institution profits, but it is hard to get any satisfaction from Malone’s account or to feel that Thérèse’s theology, however beautiful comes at too high a cost. In von Balthasar’s study, Thérèse is exactly the perfect example of unquestioning childlike devotion that has made her popular globally – he writes, “There can be no doubt that Thérèse of Lisieux was directly entrusted by God with a mission to the Church” (von Balthasar 1992, 28) – and nowhere more than in Ireland. This is not to say that one should dismiss his serious attention to her theology, though perhaps to highlight that the quality of attention, too, has consequences. Siobhán Garrigan notes, “The effect of ‘pietising’ children instead of protecting them is profound” (in conversation 2022).

Thérèse’s development of unquestioning devotion, von Balthasar’s elevation of her doctrinal mission, and Malone’s wounded attention to Thérèse’s physical existence are all important aspects of Thérèse’s legacy, but in some ways, they are little useful for an appraisal of Irish women’s poetry. It is her own theology of the “little way”, the process of living into sanctity through everyday acts of love and faith, Thérèse’s theology has the most to offer to this project’s appraisal of poetry’s modes. Thérèse writes:

You know, Mother, I have always wanted to be a saint. Alas! I have always noticed that when I compared myself to the saints, there is between them and me the same difference that exists between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and the obscure grain of sand trampled underfoot by passers-by. Instead of becoming discouraged, I said to myself: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires. I can, then, in spite of my littleness, aspire to holiness. It is impossible for me to grow up, and so I must bear with myself such as I am with all my imperfections.

But I want to seek out a means of going to heaven by a little way, a way that is very straight, very short, and totally new.
We are living now in an age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, an elevator has replaced these very successfully. I wanted to find an elevator which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection.

I searched, then, in the Scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires, and I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: “Whoever is a LITTLE ONE, let him come to me” [cf. Mt 19:14]. And so I succeeded. I felt I had found what I was looking for. (Autobiographical Manuscripts, MsC 2v–3r)

There can hardly be a more contemporary expression of the pressures on women (and people with other marginalised identities) than to aspire to impossible standards and, hopefully, to summon courage and resilience to thrive. Thérèse’s valuing of small, consistent effort and belief in one’s own gifts is an ingenuous path to self-acceptance, and at least a spiritual form of self-compassion, even if it falls short of compassion for one’s own material form. This “little way”, taken in an aesthetics sense, is the essence of poetic production, the fractal nature of seeing the universal in the mundane, the great in the small, and it’s for this reason that Thérèse proves such an abiding help to this project, as well as the opportunity the reception of her work offers to model a citation practice. Thus, I have attempted to offer due diligence while highlighting that a feminist citation practice in reading theology is not as simple as representation. This practice of looking beyond the first source, beyond the most canonical or authoritative source, repeats for nearly every theme and source and often involves first reading the citations of any text to trace genealogies of thought and develop an orientation toward the work I am consulting. I certainly do not claim that this is an original practice. However, it is noteworthy, in the context of this thesis, that I first developed this habit within the practice of reading poetry. I wrote about this and a long, complex relationship to Derek Mahon’s poetry (Marian 2019).

This is also not a practice-based project, although it borrows from such projects. My practice, in literature, is the writing of poems. For this project, I have not written a poetry manuscript but an analysis of how a practice of reading Irish poetry theologically can aid theology in the places where it has historically failed and caused harm, in its devaluation of the body, and particular bodies, in its disregard of the “little” lives of
women in exchange for grand, heroic narratives, as in the Irish preoccupation with the (male) heroes of the Easter Rising, and in its failures to honour the women imprisoned within its Magdalene Laundries. As I explain, I also practice reflecting on my own apprehension of Irish life, alongside my reading of Irish poems, and my own writing practice. Often, how I interpret, academically, what I apprehend bears some connection to my creative writing practice, but often conflictually. As such, the process of academic writing has encountered challenges I know well from writing poetry—for example, getting the scent of an emergent insight, sometimes from a new discovery in someone else’s writing, a phrase, or a single word, or an image that begs exploration or interpretation, and then being held at the limits of opacity and exclusion.

2.8 Intervention 3

One such image, nearly at the very start of this project, was the alluring figure of a barely robed, seated woman cast in white plaster (now and then, the drapery that conceals her breasts is painted, but more frequently, it is not), positioned decoratively in the street-facing windows of numerous terraced houses and council estate flats in Dublin, particularly the part of Dublin that comprises Dublin 8, Inchicore, the Tenters, and Liberties, where I lived for the majority of the time working on this project. This figure is opaque in every sense, first in its material composition, its flat white plaster, but more importantly in the sense that none of the 76 people I have asked about it can say exactly why this figure is so ubiquitous in this primarily working-class (and precarious class) part of Dublin, particularly how this figure has come to grace the windows of residents all walks of life, including a daily Mass attending neighbour in the Liberties, a woman likely between the age of 70-75. The figure engages my imagination and intellect but ultimately remains opaque, and my intellectual curiosity about it will not contract the cultural distance between me and this neighbour; it would only rouse suspicion. In this way, my apprehension of this figure is both a portal, as my attention is drawn into it, and into the questions it raises about the people who select to feature this figure in their windows; for example, is it true, as an acquaintance has suggested, credibly, that the placing of one figure in each window of one’s home leads back to the days of the old
multi-family tenements of Dublin, where, identical objects in each window of the home could establish that it was occupied by a single family? And at the same time that it is a portal, it is also a kind of impenetrable surface. Apprehension of poetry, particularly Anglophone Irish poetry, on the part of an Anglophone reader, functions in much the same way, it “sits there and shimmers and points past itself”, and, as such, is instructive to theology, whose linguistic orientation ought to be the same.

At the core of this project is a paradox: as a writer of poetry, I find it both fruitful and impossible to write a doctoral thesis on theology’s need for poetry using normative academic writing approaches, i.e., practices that rely on or innovate, terms and definitions; discursive, linear genealogies of thought; dialectical argumentation; and citation practices that at least orbit the original discipline within which the research is being conducted. Poetry has no such ambitions. If it can be said to have any ambition, it’s to circumvent expectations of intelligibility. In an interview, Eiléan Ní Chuíleáin makes the following comment on the open endings to many of her poems: “These come from my unconscious not having anything else to say, but they also come from the fact that I don’t want to say too much. My definition of poetry is a form in which you never have to say more than what you mean” (Ní Chuíleáin 2017, 228). So, the fact that poetry can sometimes tend to obfuscate has less to do with wanting to exclude the reader and more to do with something like a simultaneous suspicion of and surrender to language, both written and spoken.

It's precisely in this tension that poetry is most like theology. While religion and spirituality can happen without language (often, it doesn’t), theology, which is the critical study of these, and of the experience and nature of the divine, relies heavily on language. By reading poetry in parallel with theology and exploring the implications of each for the other, but especially of poetry and poetics, for theology, I am joining many other thinkers (who are still in the minority in Christian thought) who consider that there is an ethics of language in theology.
2.9 Methods for selecting the poets

While I came to the doctoral process already holding an ambivalent orientation toward language, I will show that it is in faithfulness to tensions within the work of the poets I write about and their contribution to a critical Irish theology that I address this question of positioning as an aspect of methodology. In the following section I address the selection of poets I have made for this study, and then frameworks for thinking through some problems of language that concern both poetry and theology. To do this, I continue to draw on my readings and experience of poetry, in relation to Irish and non-Irish poets, as a practice of demonstrating poetry’s ethical, rather than national, affinities. The other poets I mention illuminate possibilities for reading Irish poetry beyond the Irish/ British poetry canon (as they are so often anthologised together).

There are many rather subjective reasons for selecting the poetry of Paula Meehan, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, and Colette Bryce, but, generally, in all three cases, the selection was made as a combination of having found meaningful some poems that I had read by each poet and venturing that there would be intellectual and emotional enticement in spending months, and years, living with these poems, as I had done with the poetry of Derek Mahon. However, strategic considerations also figure into my methods of selection. Having found deeply useful Gail McConnell’s exploration of theology in the poetry of Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, and Seamus Heaney (2014), I was nonetheless left with questions: what is expressed, assumed, declared—and what is lost—in a title such as Northern Irish Poetry and Theology, that treats three male poets? There has been no extensive, theologically-informed treatment of female Irish poets, and the reasons for this are complex, having as much to do with patriarchal aspects of poetry publishing as well as patriarchal aspects of religion. Without wanting to gloss over the systematic and patriarchal suppression of women’s voices in Ireland, I am forwarding poetry written by Irish women as an undervalued resource for theology, because, while there are already many lenses through which diverse theological frameworks approach contemporary concerns (usually by prioritising the embodied realities of particular identities), I contend that the practice of poetry is not just a lens, but a mode, and that it is worth attending to this mode in the expression of women
poets. It is a means for learning how to “befriend contingency”, as regular meditation might be a means for learning how to confront the vicissitudes of life, and, as such, it is a practice that theology needs, if it is to have anything relevant to say to contemporary Ireland. While I am speaking from my own experience of poetic practice, this sentiment is frequently shared by poets, inclusive of the poets whose work I am exploring in this study. For example, in an interview conducted not long after the publication of her first collection, *The Heel of Bernadette* (2000), Colette Bryce responds to a question about the political engagement of her poetry by saying:

Poetry is political because the people who write it are. I think it was Yehuda Amichai who said that even to live in an ivory tower is a political statement... Everything I write is coloured by who I am. I wouldn’t say that I attempt to engage with Irish politics through my work, it’s not what I’m after. If I wish to engage with politics there are far more direct and effective avenues. However, it’s impossible to separate the political from the historical, the social and the moral, and these are things I must engage with in my work. (2001, 313-314)

In saying this, Bryce indicates that all poetry is political, if by different methods than those that are explicitly political in the sense of having policy changes in view, and methods by which to achieve those ends, whether legislative or through armed struggle. In doing so, Bryce’s sentiments mirror those expressed by the American poet Elizabeth Alexander, that “Who we are in the world affects our aesthetics” (2006, 427), meaning that who we are, our aesthetics, form and meaning, sound and sense, are too intertwined to be able to be examined in any way except as inter-relations. Further in the same interview, Bryce continues, “Poems discover their own forms, to communicate their own music. Sound and rhythm dictate them” (Bryce 316), sentiments shared by Paula Meehan and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, the other two poets whose work I engage in depth.

One of the most illustrative examples of this in Meehan’s work appears in a sequence of six sonnets called “Six Sycamores” from her eighth collection, *Painting Rain* (2009), the penultimate of which, “THEM DUCKS DIED FOR IRELAND”, (caps are poet’s) regularly appears, individually, on Irish Leaving Certificate curricula. While it is entirely possible to read and apprehend both music and meaning from the sequence or individual sonnets from it, knowing very little about the poet’s (and poems’
circumstances and motivations, I argue that the experience of Meehan’s poetry can become richly layered with increased context, despite Roland Barthes’ demand that such authorial information be suppressed (1977). In an interview with Jody Allen Randolph (Meehan 2009), Meehan reflects on the sequence, which resulted from a commission by the Office of Public Works, in relation to work to be done on two Georgian houses along Dublin’s historic St. Stephen’s Green. It is worth quoting Meehan at length here, including her reflections on the trajectory of the sonnet form into the English language (from its Italian origins), as she both covers a great deal of history that is relevant to this study and demonstrates some of the associative properties of poetic reading and writing. She writes:

Because I grew up in a Georgian house, albeit a tenement slum, I know how they work. I know how the shutters work; I know how the great iron clasps on the shutters work. Even though they broke my heart as a child, I love those buildings; the intricacies of the craftwork, and the imagination, the ceilings, the stuccodoring work and yet what they stand for, the ascendancy class, the class privilege of the whole colonial adventure, I have real problems with. That tension between something I loved and something that oppressed me interested me, so I tendered for that commission.

I thought that the sonnet would be a good form to mirror something of the architectural complexity and the ornamentation of the houses themselves and how they had been shells for many different kinds of lives, for office workers now, for tenement families, for the rich, for the original owners of the houses, for the merchant and professional classes. I think of the sonnet as a kind of a shell in the literary tradition. Both house and poem are received forms that can be re-inhabited and are re-inhabited, that can be played with and changed.

And yet the sonnet, if you know any of its history, it came into English with the Elizabethan courtier soldier poets some of whom were also the agents of colony here in a policy of ethnic cleansing in Munster. Paddy Bushe has a wonderful poem, “Poets at Smerwick”, where he has Spenser and Raleigh going back to their tents at night having organised on one day the execution of six hundred people—they apportioned out five prisoners to each soldier so they could share the burden of killing—so he has them going back to their tents after a day’s campaigning cleaning the gore off their swords and getting out their quills to pen a few lines. The last line of the last sonnet in his sequence is “such tidy minds could make a sonnet scan”. So I thought that the sonnet would be the ideal form to bring some of that energy in; even if that’s never stated, it’s there in the karma of the form. (261-262)
Even in instances where the poems are occasioned by a particular prompt—let’s call the Office of Public Works commission the sequence’s “research question”—the form (or methods) and the content are on continuous equal footing in poetry writing; neither is subordinated to the other; neither can exist or be examined outside of its relation to the other.

Letting my initial question underpin the research methods would be akin to starting to write a poem with a goal and using the poem’s form to reach that goal teleologically. What I read in the ways these poets talk about form is not external information for me; it is something I recognise from my own practice. On occasions when I have tried to write poetry with a specific goal in mind (to make a particular political point; to express, or expel, a particular emotion), the result is more therapy than art—possibly useful to me in the moment, but not a medium for relation, as poetry (and theology), ought to be. The poetic process retains mystery, playfulness, and humility in the face of language and meaning. Even the muse is not to be pursued explicitly, recalling Emily Dickinson’s adage “tell the truth but tell it slant” (Dickinson n.d.), or as Colette Bryce writes in “Negotiating the Muse”:

Clocking you across a room
I leave immediately.

I feign disinterest
at your latest news

and live abroad
just to avoid you.

Awareness
can be a dreadful thing...

...Meeting you
would horrify.

You are nothing like
what I have in mind.
(2008, 33)

Bryce is not afraid, here, to play with an ancient figure that has been at the heart of so
much gender trouble (Butler 2006) from Homeric time to the Irish nationalist present, where the muse, always a woman, has been conflated with the Virgin Mary, and in both cases, mythical women have been venerated at the expense of real flesh and body women. But the playfulness is also a form of respect for the muse’s sovereignty. This practice of recognising the sovereignty of mystery, inspiration, and the sacred, is common to poetry but is often neglected in theology’s efforts to parse, explain, catalogue, systematise, enforce, enclose, and ultimately wield the sacred as a kind of spiritual weapon. We may need Karl Rahner’s *Theological Investigations* (1961) (Rahner 1961) Balthasar’s *Theological Aesthetics* (1983) series, and other examples of the grand German arc of theology, though, in their sheer scale and scope, these texts declare their trust in language in a way that poets, from respect and awe, would never do. McConnell’s study of Derek Mahon’s poetry (2014), for example, helpfully uncovers the Calvinist roots of his impulsive revisions (selected editions of Mahon’s previous publications invariably included different versions of the early poems, sometimes even just a word or punctuation); but when one has spent years reading and rereading these poems, as I had after writing my undergraduate thesis on Mahon, the habits and tendencies simply form part of the experience one has with the poet and poetry. Poetry is always aware, sometimes painfully, of its ultimate failure to grasp the meaning it attempts to articulate, and this awareness is a kind of respect for the mystery that has not been grasped. As Maria Johnston writes about Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem “War Time” (Ní Chuilleanáin 2022, 178), “I’ve read this poem so many times I know it by heart; yet its mystery remains undisturbed”. Theology too often disturbs the mystery in the effort to control it.

As a final example of poetic humility from the poets I explore, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has said:

As to how and where these otherworldly people come from, I don’t think I made them up. They come into my mind, particularly the nuns, because when I started writing poetry seriously I found that I had spent my childhood and youth evading the suggestion that I might like to go into a convent. The nuns of course thought I would be a suitable recruit, as a reasonably well-behaved, intelligent girl. But I was quite sure this was not the life that I wanted, and then when I was writing poetry, I would suddenly find that there was a nun somehow in the mix. I would also find that, in other cases, somebody would appear as it were. There is a poem
called ‘The Informant’, that is really about a folklore session, where you have the academic who is collecting the information, and the woman who has actually seen the phenomenon she describes, which is in fact death. When I started writing the poem I had no idea who she was going to be, or what was important to her. I think it does come from my unconscious. As regards the open endings of my poems, these come from my unconscious not having anything else to say but they also come from the fact that I don’t want to say too much. My definition of poetry is a form in which you never have to say more than what you mean, so it would be wrong for me to pretend that I know what the end is. (Ní Chuílleáin 2017, 223)

I’ve included these specific quotations by Bryce, Meehan, and Ní Chuílleáin, privileging interviews rather than poems at this stage. The passages in prose offer introductions to the commonalities and diversity of these three Catholic-raised poets.

2.10 Vexed relationships to language beyond national borders of poetry

Many poets have written about a vexed relationship to language, but it seems of particular interest to those poets for whom the language in which they write is not their maternal language, or for whom their writing language carries a historical burden. Paul Celan, who was Jewish, was born in Romania, lived in France and wrote in German, comes to mind, as does the Indigenous poet Layli Long Soldier (Whereas would be a master class in negative theopoetics, without needing to be classified as Christian, of course), as do several Irish language poets, such as Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Biddy Jenkinson, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Michael Hartnett (who ceremoniously gave up writing poems in English for ten years). In the case of Celan, this shift from mother tongue to writing tongue happens within his own lifetime; for the others, the mother tongue signifies something multigenerational, a language lost (or, more accurately, taken) in the lifetimes of ancestors, but with the wound still pulsing in the poet’s present.

I want, strategically, to cite the example of M. NourbeSe Philip, a Canadian poet of Afro-Caribbean descent, whose work frequently navigates this vexed relationship to language. I say strategically because it will be important to reinforce the notion of Irish poetics as both a domestic and an international poetics (think, too, of Irish Catholicism’s relationship to the global Church), and to do this, it’s necessary to imagine Irish poetry’s
correspondences beyond the Irish-British canon. In the genre-bending piece “Interview with an Empire” (which readily recalls Neil Jordan’s 1994 *Interview with the Vampire*, and if this was not the writer’s intention, as I found no evidence to suggest it was, the unintentional echo is still full of meaning), Philip admits to a distrust of language (2017) at the foundation of her writing. This contrasts with poets for whom language—and one could extrapolate, nationality, citizenship, land, and belonging—is a given. She acknowledges the peculiarity of this position: “…it’s like an artist distrusting colour, a sculptor distrusting stone, or a musician distrusting sound. With one difference. Neither the painter nor the sculptor nor the musician needs his medium to function on a daily basis” (Philip 2017).

In making such allusions, Philip positions language as a sensual matter to be apprehended by the senses, like colour, stone, and sound. As soon as one can conceive of language as matter, it becomes easier to accept the impact that theological language has on bodies. It is a switch that is flipped in cognition where before there was a barrier to comprehension, in the same way that the mind-body connection, so often minimised, becomes ordinary, even mundane, and irrefutable in the face of one simple fact: it happens regularly, and people find it easy to accept, that when bad news arrives, the knees buckle, the blood rushes from the head, and people faint, and that words can feel like “a punch in the gut”. The impact doesn’t require it to be spoken words; a letter with bad news can have as much force, as I will explore in Chapter Six when I discuss the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. However, I quote Philip at length, as her relationship to language helps to position Anglophone Irish poets vis-à-vis the English language. Philip writes:

Essentially what I’m saying is that the potential seductiveness of language is dangerous. I believe many of those poets who are described as language poets begin from this premise. But for me there is another layer of distrust—historical if you will. After all, this was a language that the European forced upon the African in the New World. So that the exploitative plantation machine could be more efficiently run. It was a language of commands, orders, punishments. This language—english in my case, but it applies to all the languages of those European countries involved in the colonialis project—was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. And irony of all ironies, it is the only language in which I can now function. And therein lies the conundrum—“english is my mother tongue”,
but it is also “my father tongue” (She Tries her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks). I begin from a position of extreme distrust of language and do not believe that English—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A decontaminating process is probably more accurate, since a language as deeply implicated in imperialism as English has been cannot but be contaminated by such a history and experience” (2017).

What Philip is saying here might be applied to Irish poets, and yet one needs to go through the trouble to specify what one means, in fact, by “Irish poet”. McConnell’s book title commits two kinds of erasure, surely not intended by the author, but more the kind of reflexive erasure I am much too aware of not wanting to make (I am again referring to her excellent study of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, Northern Irish Poetry and Theology, where all the Northern Irish poets are men, but also where the Northern Irish poets are all writing in English). The Irish-language poets (and it’s remarkable that it’s here that extra descriptors are needed) Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Biddy Jenkinson have questioned the expectation that Irish poetry should be intelligible in the English language, or that female poets in Ireland existed as mere symbols and sibyls, as Eavan Boland claimed (Theinová 2020). But even those Irish poets writing in English have a particular relationship to the English language. In the case of Paula Meehan, it’s her relationship to a particular inner city Dublin vernacular which reflects both loyalties to Irish diction and syntax, as well as its own identity. Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin translates from Irish, Italian, Romanian and French, and often words from other languages (particularly French) appear in her poems. Colette Bryce, as in all other aspects, is the hardest to pin down, but for Bryce, the tension in language has more to do with particular forms and traditions, as she is often closely linked with a Northern Irish idiom.

But I take (and offer) something else from Philip’s text, an exemplary demonstration of language’s untrustworthiness: that in the very act of talking about a mistrust of language, language fails, in the imprecision of the word "European". It's not my intent to engage in "whataboutism" or to protest Not All Europeans, but when she says that she does "not believe that English—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through
some sort of transformative process”, I simultaneously submit to what she means by "english" language and pause at her use of "European" languages, even if she specified earlier that she means "all the languages of those European countries involved in the colonialis project”. Most importantly, how is one to think about the English of the Irish, when the word "Irish" conceals the erasure of the Irish?

2.11 Critical feminist methods and embodied perspectives

These considerations are meaningful in the context of this research. Critical feminist methods (applied to theological research), which centre women’s experiences, perspectives, and ways of knowing and relating (Russell 1996), affirm that one cannot do theology from a non-implicated position. The personal is political, and the political is embodied (Hawkesworth 2016). Even those perspectives historically assumed to be neutral and normative are political, which is to say that critical feminist theological methods, while centring women’s experiences, perspectives, knowing and relating, actually mean that no theological project, even those by male-identifying researchers, is apolitical or disinterested. But it’s lived and relational experience that matters, not identity. In the case of this project, it is not my identity as a woman or a poet that matters, but the fact that my identity leads me to relate in particular ways: to the world, to myself, to place, and to language.

In this study, I am committed to the ethical usage of language. By this, I mean that I consider that words have the power to enact and have an impact on bodies. I am committed to language that informs, argues, and where possible, repairs, or, at the very least, intends strongly not to enact or perpetuate harm; ultimately, language that also speculates, with all the risk the word implies: “to observe or view mentally; to consider, examine, or reflect upon with close attention; to contemplate; to theorize upon” (OED online, 2023) But I do this while exploring the nature and power dynamics of the insufficiency, following Saidiya Hartman’s example of “critical fabulation” (2008) and Joan Retallack’s “poethical wager” (Retallack 2003). Hartman coined this term in her ground-breaking essay about the impossibility of narrating the lives of various Black women named Venus from the archive of transatlantic slavery, and while her term refers
to Black women specifically, it is possible to use this methodology to gesture to how access to the lives of Irish women has been obscured, particularly under British colonial and then Roman Catholic control. Like any poet, I think a great deal about individual words, often agonising over how to be more precise, as I am aware that meanings shift depending on context, and that harm may be inevitable.

One example of harm in theological language is anthropomorphic universalism, the tendency to universalise divinity as both human and male-gendered, the tendency to universalise the human as Man – even the word to anthropomorphise, which means to bestow human qualities and desires on non-human things, contains the root *anthropos* to mean human, but the Greek root refers only to male humans. It is a well-researched and documented speculation that, when possibilities of the sacred and holy are limited to maleness, how women are considered — belittled, denigrated, dehumanised, or simply NOT considered — in the material world becomes a problem, not least of all in literature, a problem then largely taken up by women, who, in acts of self-preservation and self-actualisation, must then will themselves into existence by giving attention to, in their writing, the subjects of their daily existence, with the inevitable outcome that their writing is criticised as “not universal” since it concerns matters that of no concern to men. Even this is a gross generalisation, but one that has to be stated at the foundation of an argument about the harm of universalising language.

It is a problem that women are constantly having to revisit, and which can rend women writers as perpetually “marginalised” or “emerging”, which has been the case in Ireland, and for which reason I have chosen to write about three women but resist the category of women’s studies. One case example is the literature of Karl Ove Knausgaard, who, between 2009-2011, published his six-volume *Min Kamp/ My Struggle*, almost instantly popular not just because of its predictably controversial title, but because of the strange enchantment of what Amy Shearn referred to as “Knausgaard’s focused attention to the minutia of his life” (2015), in response to which James Wood in the *New Yorker* wrote, “There is something ceaselessly compelling about Knausgaard’s book: even when I was bored, I was interested” (2012). Shearn, while admitting that she very
much enjoyed reading the books, points out, through the voice of a friend, that "this incredibly beloved, six-volume-long stream-of-consciousness, an autobiographical novel about a stay-at-home dad” has possibly been “done before”—by women, and then introduces readers to Pilgrimage, a three-volume series of books by Dorothy Miller Richardson, first published in 1915, to great acclaim by the likes of Virginia Woolf and H.G. Wells. It was even a project that targeted sexist markers of validity directly, and Shearn offers from a biography of Richardson that Richardson set out on the project to (in her own words) “produce a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism”. The books had been out of print for decades when I first read Shearn’s article in 2015, and the single copy I found in Yale University’s library then had a cracked back, held together with a ribbon, and I see, on a more recent Orbis search, that now it is viewable as a first edition restricted to the Beinecke Reading Room. I see, too, that in 2022, Richardson’s series has met the modern indignity of being read out loud on a YouTube channel called “Neglected Books”, run by the writer Brad Bigelow; the hour-plus-long video, which seems to be a zoom event of the covid pandemic era—it has 13 views.

Toni Morrison has famously stated, “The function, the very real function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being” (Morrison 1975). I have no intention to equate sexism with racism, though, of course, the two are often interlocking. I risk this citation in the context of the sexism that keeps women in a cycle of necessity to continually “emerge”, rather than develop an existing tradition. While Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin suggests in one of her early essays that one need only access to a library to see that women’s contribution exists (1995), I argue that it is not so simple. Access has become a buzzword, and yet it is something real. Not every young writer has access to Trinity’s library. Even as a doctoral student, it was sometimes difficult to access certain volumes, as they were housed in the Rare Books and Manuscripts room, which requires particular procedures. This was true for the search for some of the younger poets as it was true for finding texts by more established poets such as Paula Meehan, whose poems frequently appear on the Leaving Certificate exam. Eavan Boland, whose poetry was well known to me as an undergraduate student in the US, is what I would call the Irish glass ceiling poet. I say
this not to disparage her success, but, apart from the fact that her international reputation was likely solidified by her extended appointments at prestigious American universities, it’s as if only one, or at most, a small handful, of female poets can break through the barrier of the Irish-British poets canon. It should be noted that there are multiple copies of Boland’s, but more conspicuously, the expected male poets (Heaney, Longley, Mahon, Kavanagh), presumably present in multiples for courses that feature them. Therefore, access is also shaped by pedagogy, though the machinations here can certainly seem like a chicken-and-the-egg problem, i.e., poetry by women enters the commons through pedagogy, academic study, critical attention, more than through anything the poet herself does (aside from publishing in the first place, of course). Once the poet’s reputation is established, it is more likely that she will be taught, which will drive the need to keep the books in print and supply multiple copies on library bookshelves. Once more books are available, there is greater access, in the sense of ease of discovery. So are we marginalising ourselves or making spaces where we can grow and be without interference, asks the poet Katie (Donovan 1991).

Without wanting to come to too neat a resolution concerning the challenges of access and representation in the Irish literary world, and how these challenges might be considered through the lenses of women who are marginalised both as female and as Black, I want to build a cognitive link between the embodied aspects of research (in the act of looking for library books, coming or not coming across other books, etc.), and another aspect of embodiment that has shaped my research, thinking and writing about Irish poetry and theology, and that is a new (to me) framework for understanding myself as autistic since a recent diagnosis. While I have not been accustomed long enough to this new framework to consider both my strengths and challenges as a researcher, one concept from the world of autism has been very generative and may help explain how I have approached my methods. The Predictive Coding Theory offers a lens through which we can understand the differences between autistic and neurotypical brains.

2.12 Autistic readings

There is a Predictive Coding Theory of autism that runs generally like this: in perception,
emotions, cognition and motor control, one part of the mechanisms for interacting with
the world is attributed to whatever we consider the world — in the case of perception,
external stimuli, for example, a sound or a scent — and the other part is the prediction
of what that experience should be, based on previous experience. In this theory, the
predictive coding in autistic brains works differently from the coding in neurotypical
brains, and this difference is thought to be at the foundation of all other differences. In
both neurotypical and autistic brains, the function of predictive coding is to help the
brain know what it needs to pay attention to, what is new information, and what must
be learned and integrated. In neurotypical brains, this predictive coding can be very
efficient; encountering the same or even remotely similar experiences, the brain
discards a good bit of detail, needing greater differences to trigger the brain to “learn”
something. The necessity of learning, so the theory goes, is connected to novelty, and if
we combine this theory with theories about the human tendency toward homeostasis
and reduction of certainty, then the need to know the world, to some extent, is the need
to reduce uncertainty, to catalogue things as known and familiar. Meanwhile, in autistic
brains, this filtering system allows more detail in, uses less shorthand. To some extent,
the world is perpetually unfamiliar, which goes some ways toward accounting for
autistic people’s need for routine and the overwhelm that comes with either too much
or not enough stimulus.

Why does any of this matter for my study? Navigating language is a cognitive
process, and can even be considered a perceptive and emotional process, and so,
according to the Predictive Coding Theory, expression and argument in language is
subject to this process by which the brain is deciding all the time if, upon encountering
a word, phrase, terminology or abstract theory, it needs to learn something, or if it can
simply employ the language content as expected and move on. This is a major problem
for me when using certain common terms, such as “theology”, “Christianity”, “the
Church”, “poetry”, or even “Irish”. Yet, as it turns out, this is a good problem to have in
the context in which I am working and writing, a context largely about identity. It is good
to question these terms while using them, to endeavour to be precise and to remind the
reader that these terms are never, in fact, fixed, that they are, maybe more than some
other words, very volatile and vulnerable to misinterpretation, and a great deal of harm has been done by exploiting this vulnerability.

2.13 Conclusion

At the outset of this chapter, I offered Willie James Jennings’ project in *The Christian Imagination*, as a foundation for the questions I have been asking in my study, namely: Why do different kinds of Christians not recognise one another? Jennings’ question led him to ask further, through an exploration of the pre-modern era, why did European Christians not recognise other human beings they encountered outside of Europe as human beings? By that failure to recognize the human, Jennings argued in his 2010 text, that they were able to justify making conversion to Christianity the condition to being recognised as human. And yet mechanism still did not create, in Christian missionaries, a regard of honour and kinship toward the people they encountered, a calculus that has played out, iteratively from the pre-modern era to the present day. I have considered Jennings’ work as one of the foundational theological treatments for my own study because it asks difficult questions that are at the heart of the contemporary Christian experience, and the so-called post-Catholic experience in Ireland. These are questions about the construction of race and about the impact of colonisation on land, people, and languages. The history of the British colonisation of Ireland, combined with the often violence-reproducing assimilation into whiteness of Irish people in places to which they have emigrated (where the Indigenous population was not also white, consequently, not England) unsettle simple narratives of colonisation and racialisation, and Jennings’ work allows for an exploration that goes to the root of these concerns.

I also proposed that, given the thorniness of discourse on racial identity, serious engagement with Irish poetry could open needed theological perspectives, a critical Irish theology that does not currently exist as such. Samuel Schiffer has described Irish cinema as a “low-stakes arena for the interrogation of volatile narratives” (Shiffer 2023, 919), and I would describe poetry in the same terms, possibly even more so, given the smaller reach of poetry, comparable to cinema. Certainly, it is not to suggest that the stakes are low for those who create cinema, but rather to indicate that these art forms
instance and sometimes facilitate deeper and more nuanced conversations about contentious subjects, which are very needed for a contextual Irish theology.

I have argued that the thinking and writing process that produces doctoral work is not easily compatible with the poetic process, but that this tension can be fruitful instructive, and beneficial to a multi-disciplinary research methodology that recruits the tools of literary analysis, theological reflection, cultural and, in the case of this study, importantly, postcolonial and decolonial critique, and creative practice. I have also invoked specific theological frameworks, such as liberation theology, feminist, and Womanist perspectives, theopoetics, the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet, the Vatican II-informing theology of Karl Rahner, and the theological anthropology of M. Shawn Copeland. Furthermore, I have described the critical process by which I selected the poets that I have put in conversation with theology, to valorise a conversation that could be incredibly rich in Ireland, given the cultural importance of both poetry and religion, with poetry as, currently, a much more palatable subject for most Irish people.
3 IN LIEU OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

Given that there is no exact theological work of the sort that I am proposing, the literature review for this interdisciplinary project is constituted across the first two chapters; the first has included the literature that establishes a “proof of concept”, and the second has considered those theological works that have methodological implications for my project. It is not within the scope of this project to discuss any one particular theology in extended detail; however, I have attempted to create some parameters around what might be considered “Catholic thought”, including the work of Willie James Jennings, since relevant aspects of his project in *The Christian Imagination* (2010) deals in pre-Reformation theological movements. In this chapter, however, I explore the various categories of secondary texts relevant to this multidisciplinary approach.

3.2 Questions and methods that mutually guide each other

The standing convention of theory-based doctoral research is that one’s research questions guide one’s methods and course of reading. And while, invariably, unexpected elements emerge during the process of every research project, sometimes leading to entirely new questions, the implication of methodology-guided-by-the-questions is that, once one has identified and settled the final questions, one chooses the most appropriate methods and lenses through which to explore those questions, setting in motion the rest of the research, analysis of sources, and conclusions. While this is an oversimplification, to be sure, it is still reflected, through convention, in the final form of the doctoral dissertation.

This process, I argue, is completely anathema to the poetic process, reading as well as writing poetry, both of which involve considerable contingency, in reflective and associative, rather than discursive and dialectical activity. Furthermore, I argue that the
poetic process, which informs and shapes this study to a significant degree, by nature of precisely those contingent properties (and others, such as poetry’s reaching for music and embodiment), has profoundly nourishing possibilities for Christian theology. Contemporary theological imperatives in Ireland are like theological imperatives everywhere where Christianity has been a force of social transformation, in that theology must deal as much with embodiment (the sacredness of all bodies, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, citizenship status and class), creation (care of the earth in the midst of human-made climate crises), and social ethics (responding to systemic injustices in the present, working for ecumenism and interfaith mutualism, as well as atoning for past abuses of power) as it deals with the questions of transcendence and piety. In distinction to other places where Christianity has been a force of social transformation, however, theology in Ireland has been shaped by specific conditions and forces, which are, for very complex reasons, underexplored, and we must not assume that the spirit of liberation can hover over Ireland in the same way it has done over other places. By liberation, I mean both what the Liberation theologians meant, that “there is no innocent theology” (Gutiérrez 1973), and that state and religious forces must never collude to marginalise some people while centralising power within the hands of others. I also mean something more spiritual and internal, the liberation I feel having exercised my capacity to express myself through poetry, for example, is a form of liberation.

However, for different reasons in each case, frameworks such as Liberation, feminist, and Womanist theology, have not found adequate footholds in the Irish context, as evidenced by scant, vaguely hopeful, cautious attempts in the 1970s to adopt an Irish theology of liberation (McVeigh 1999). Furthermore, those liberative possibilities that might have grown rooted in the Irish matrix have also been stymied, for example, Irish tendencies towards nostalgia for a pre-Christian Celtic past that fails to acknowledge nationalist motivations articulated during the emergence of the Irish. There is also the matter of Irish feminist theology snagging on essentialist ideas of womanhood. Grounded as feminism has often been in feminist writing and publishing, as well as simply having space and opportunity to be published as a woman, whether one considers oneself a feminist or not, and the critical hermeneutics to be considered

This tendency, while prevalent in many second-wave feminist spaces, is all the more challenging in the Irish context, where there are not many feminist theologians to begin with. There is need, in perhaps another project, to look critically at the important contributions to Irish theology in the work of Mary Condren, for example. Her text *The Serpent and the Goddess* (Condren 2002), which considers alternative visions for theology in Ireland, is based on feminine, regenerative qualities, rather than the (male) hero’s journey and blood sacrifice. And yet, constructive inroads are needed to update some of the essentialist ideas that date it and can serve to justify a kind of Catholic feminist space that too easily fails to recognise the inherent sacredness of trans bodies. A practical reason for resistance in Ireland to the development of critical theology is the power of the hierarchy of the Catholic church, and the many examples of priests and public figures who have been suppressed.

3.3 What this thesis is not doing

I also want to point out that this thesis is *not* doing particular things. Firstly, it is not literary criticism in that any close readings of poems exist to say things about theology; however, literary criticism that examines the religious dimensions of Irish poetry, particularly Andrew Auge’s and Gail McConnell’s studies, have been immeasurably useful for this study (Auge 2013; McConnell 2014; Collins 2015), including some of Ní
Chuilleanáin’s own literary criticism and contextual coverage of Irish poetry more generally (Darcy 2021). Secondly, it is not a sociological or historical study of Irish women, Irish Catholicism or Irishness, although, again, these (O’Toole 2021; Mac Curtain 2008; Mac Curtain 2019; Ruane 2018; Robinson 2013; McAleese 2021; Raughter 2005; McKenna 2006; Raftery, Delaney and Nowlan-Roebuck 2019; Luddy 2007), and, in particular, Derek Scally’s *Best Catholics in the World: The Irish, the Church, and the End of a Special Relationship* (2021), the essays within *Are the Irish Different?* (Inglis 2014), and Claire Mitchell’s *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief* (2006), have been essential for understanding the context in which I am writing. Thirdly, it is not a practice-based study, as I do not produce a collection of original poetry for this project, and any personal critical reflection about my own poetic practice serves to illustrate, at times to perform, methods for theology; it is not reflection strictly about my own practice. In this final example, my approach is not new in others (Keller 2003; Rambo 2010; MacKendrick 2004; Kearney 2021) and others have blazed the trail, particularly through the lens of theopoetics. In contrast to these, however, this study limits itself to more recent theological traditions, rather than reflecting extensively on scripture or early Christian texts, as is a common practice.

This is because my contribution lies in the orientation of a theopoetical approach toward theology in Ireland. As this study argues, the context of Ireland in the current stage of the Christian sequence (Haider, again), wants accounting more than apologetics. Recalling previous reflections on desire and intimacy in the work of Esther Perel, it’s as if the distance between being Irish and being Christian has been contracted for too long; it needs unblending—not the same as separating—before much sense can be made of the relationship I say “theopoetical approaches” rather than theopoetics because other digging must be done before the ground is epistemologically prepared for theopoetics to be useful as well as beautiful in the Irish context.

In Ireland there has yet to be the kind of focus paid to land, language, and cultural expression as there is in, for example, Kelly Brown Douglas’ *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (2012), which writes Womanist theology alongside verses from blues songs, Eboni Marshall Turman’s *Towards a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black
Bodies, the Black Church and the Council of Chalcedon (2013), which considers theology through the embodied forms of classical dance; nor attention akin to Indigenous-led studies of Christian theology, such as James Treat’s study of native fiction and Western Christianity (Treat 2007). Makoto Fujimura’s explorations of the spirituality of making in Art + Faith: A Theology of Making (2021), Justin Ponder’s Art Cinema and Theology: The Word Was Made Film (2017), Michael Hurley’s Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief (Hurley 2017), Jennifer Reek’s A Poetics of Church: Reading and Writing Sacred Space of Poetic Dwelling (2018), and Making Nothing Happen: Five Poets Explore Faith and Spirituality, by Gavin D’Costa, Eleanor Nesbitt, Mark Pryce, Ruth Shelton, and Nicola Slee (2018), have been helpful references on how theology can engage with creative practice; however, these are not strictly studies of a particular contextual theology.

There are a handful of examples of theological explorations that treat poetry similarly to my study, three of which appear in a special issue of the journal Literature & Theology (2019): Andrew Cunning’s work on Marie Howe, Lacey Jones’ treatment of Denise Levertov, and Elizabeth S. Dodd’s engagement with the performance poetics of Tony Walsh and Kate (now goes by Kae) Tempest. In their close attention to both content and form, in close readings of particular poems, and concerning context (less so Jones; Cunning does address Marie Howe’s Catholic poetics, 308; Dodd’s mention of “historic values of Mancunian identity”, about Tony Walsh, 298), these readings model some of what this study is doing, but again without the Irish focus (and let us assume that the kind of work I propose does not yet exist in the Irish context, in the way I propose it).

In a different vein, J Kameron Carter’s Black Rapture: A Poetics of the Sacred holds promise for my research focus, but it has not yet been published; however, another example of the mode in which I work—and a projection of what this kind of theology could do in the future—is a long dialogue between J. Kameron Carter, a theologian, with Ross Gay, a poet (Gay and Carter 2020). It takes the form of an interview between the two Indiana University colleagues, on the occasion of Ross Gay’s publication of Be Holding (Gay 2020), a book-length poem ostensibly about the
American basketball player Julius Erving, known as Dr J, whose famous volley in the 1980’s NBA finals elevated him to athletics sainthood. In the poem, and in the conversation between Carter and Gay, basketball and Dr J are central and also just the starting point of a deeper, wider conversation about the communal ethics of pick-up basketball, photography, systemic violence, African spirituality, the Middle Passage, an exegetic exercise with the word *ekklesia*, the theology of Charles H. Long, faith of all kinds, and the active, radical practice of care. I suggest that the mutual nourishment of poetry and theology in this conversation, if hermeneutic space could open and allow for it in the Irish context—both within the academy and outside of the cloistered symposia—could be transformative, despite difficulties that any public dialogue about religion faces in Ireland. A recent example of a tentative foray into such dialogue, albeit in visual art rather than poetry, was the *Magdalene Series*, a programme of five commissioned works curated by Maoliosa Boyle for exhibition at the Rua Red Gallery between 2021-2022, exploring the figure of Mary Magdalene in the Irish context. The exhibition *The Magdalene Series* (Boyle 2021-2022) included artistic works by Irish artists in conversation with contemporary theologians who could speak to the Irish context.

There are theologians on the island of Ireland doing essential contextual theological work. I will highlight some of these and, in doing so, set out what I mean by a “critical Irish contextual theology”, specifically one that engages with the arts. Recalling Bevans, contextuality, as a way of thinking about theology, could be seen as a way to make visible what theology is always already doing, which is, simply, responding to its placement in history, amid the theological, social, and philosophical movements and conditions of its time. For example, feminist theology responds to the absence or denigration of women within dominant theological traditions, and Womanist theology responds to the same absence or subjection of Black women in both feminist and Black theology. Even systematic theology, as Willie James Jennings has shown in *The Christian Imagination*, responds to or within dominant understandings of theological themes, creation, salvation, the incarnation, eschatology, and others. However, Jennings’ work demonstrates that it is not enough to make the conditions visible and explore new
formulations in response, but that there must be rooting in other forms of context, that
of land and people; *The Christian Imagination* models this both in the Introduction –
where Jennings locates the seed of his study in the literal earth that his mother tended,
as well as in the conceptual ground of his childhood experience of not being seen as
Christian – and in the dimensions of context as place, time, and language that he
explores throughout the book. It is for this reason that, although there *have been* and
*are* scholars in Ireland (and Irish scholars outside of Ireland) doing contextual theology,
they are doing this work in a different way and mode than those I have been proposing.

The categories may seem to limit at first glance: the work must be contextual in
the way I have described Jennings’ work; it must give evidence of an intentional feminist
and/or Womanist citation practice (notably, *The Christian Imagination* does not) that
demonstrates a valuing of the existence and thinking of women and non-binary people,
even if it means bypassing the most readily available source material, thereby
recognising the material bias against the production and validation of marginalised
thinkers; it must have a conscious (even if undeclared) decolonial sense, demonstrating
an understanding of the need for Christianity’s reckoning with its role in colonialism and
how that legacy continues in the present (recalling Tuck and Yang’s insistence that
“decolonisation is not a metaphor”, as previously cited). An additional category for this
study is an engagement with Irish poetry that speaks to the Catholic history and
conditions of Ireland, but poetry is just to mode of artistic production that I have chosen
to work with, specifically poetry by women, and male poets’ contributions to Irish
identity have tended to universalise the conditions of Irishness in unhelpful ways.
Finally, these categories for a renewed critical contextual Irish theology might be seen
not as limiting, but as expansive in their demands for the inclusion of all human beings
within theological inquiry.

Notwithstanding the fourth criterion (engagement with poetry, Catholicism),
there are contextual theologians in Ireland, Terence McCaughey, Cathal Daly, Johnston
McMaster & Cathy Higgins, Gerard O’Hanlon, Kevin Hargarden, Declan Marmion,
Geraldine Smyth, (and two to whom I will attend momentarily with a bit more partiality,
as they also meet the fourth criteria of engaging with poetry, Anne Thurston, and Enda
McDonagh). Siobhán Garrigan’s cross-border examination of Christian worship in *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics, and the End of Sectarianism* (2010) and Pádraig Ó Tuama and the late Glenn Jordan’s important meditation on the Book of Ruth (Ó Tuama and Jordan 2021) are responding to very contextual Irish conditions that, nonetheless, have important implications for global Christianity. Linda Hogan has championed feminist theology, despite the challenges to this focus in Ireland, as Ruether explains below, in *From Women’s Experiences to Feminist Theology*, and her co-edited (with Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator) volume *Feminist Catholic Ethics: Conversations in the World Church* (DATE) brings diversely feminist Catholic voices to the fore. Mary Frances McKenna has published a defence of Joseph Ratzinger’s and Benedict XVI’s theologies in relation to women (2015) (McKenna lives and teaches in the UK). It is also important to acknowledge reasons for why there may not be much Catholic feminist theology happening in Ireland, given Rosemary Radford Ruether’s insights into possibilities for Catholic feminist theology. She writes:

“In the historically Catholic areas of Western Europe (France, Italy, and Spain) there is still no real conversation between feminism and theology. The Vatican has made contraception and abortion and women’s ordination indiscussible topics and has required new bishops to take oaths not to be open to change on these issues.

Although a feminist theologian might not focus on these topics as her primary issues, this means that hierarchical Catholicism views feminist theology with deepest suspicion. This has made it very difficult for Catholic women to teach it in Catholic theological faculties. (2011, 158)

Ruether’s project focuses on women, and logically her section on Catholicism and feminism names three female theologians: “Kari Elisabeth Børresen from Norway, Catharina Halkes from the Netherlands, and Mary Grey from England”, all of whom, she points out, “come from historically Protestant European countries” (158). The point, while well taken, illustrates exactly the unusual positioning of Ireland in the debate. Not only is it not named among “historically Catholic areas of Western Europe”, an odd omission, to be sure, given Ireland’s history, both long and recent, but it would be difficult to apply her formulation fully to the Irish context, for one, because Irish Catholic
feminist theologians are prone to do what many Irish people have done, which is to emigrate to North America or Australia, or elsewhere. Mary T. Malone, already mentioned for her work *Four Women Doctors of the Church* (2015), also authored a three-volume, illuminating (and difficult to purchase) series *Women & Christianity* (Malone 2000, 2001, 2002). Malone was born in Wexford but lived her career as a theologian in Canada, moving back to Ireland only after retirement from her post. There could certainly be a whole subsection of Irish American and Irish Australian Catholic women theologians (and one often forgets that the greatest direction of migration from Ireland has been directly to the East, to the UK). Another way that it is difficult to map Ruether’s formulation directly onto the Irish context is that there do not seem to be ways to include the actions of Irish Catholic men, few as they might have been in the great scheme of things, who spoke and acted in support of essentially feminist goals and who were censored, suppressed, or defrocked as a result, James Good (O’Toole 2021) and others who publicly opposed Pope John Paul II’s *Humanae Vitae*, in 1968, reinforcing the Catholic Church’s ban on artificial contraception, effectively rolling back hopes that Vatican II would sufficiently modernise the Church. Seán Fagan, Seán Freyne, Tony Flannery, Gerard Moloney, Brian D’Arcy, and Owen O’Sullivan were also silenced by the Vatican, and it was only on Mary McAleese’s request that Pope Francis personally intervened and lifted all sanctions against a very ill Seán Fagan (McGarry 2016).

Finally, I return to two theologians who, in their varying breadth of production and public life, have contributed to a critical contextual Irish theology that takes poetry seriously. I begin with Enda McDonagh, who died in 2021, and whose commitments to moral theology, ecumenism, and social ethics contributed significantly to the social, political, and ecclesiastical fabric of Ireland, earning him international esteem, not just among religious figures but, among politicians and diplomats. As a close friend or chaplain to Irish heads of state, his proximity to power did not stop him, however, from being critical of the Church’s teachings, particularly on human sexuality, despite the risk of censure that he and his more outspoken colleagues in Ireland faced. McDonagh’s moral theology responded to historical and contemporary challenges facing the church and society in Ireland during the twin cataclysms of the Second Vatican Council and the
cross-border sectarian conflict popularly called “The Troubles”. While McDonagh’s theological work did not directly engage with poetry in a direct or sustained way, his ability to speak and live actively in the ambiguous spaces between “poetry and politics” (Hogan (quoting McDonagh) in Hogan and FitzGerald 2003, 7) and between “prayer and politics” (Freyne in Hogan and FitzGerald 2003, 67) demonstrates some of the energy of the theopoetical position, one of mutual and polysemous resonance. Poetry and prayer, of course, share affinities, specifically, language working in the realm of the ineffable, and thus, I found Sean Freyne’s commentary on McDonagh’s 1979 essay (in a festschrift to McDonagh) helpful for this project:

Prayer is provocatively described as ‘the liberation of God’ insofar as the active recognition of God’s self, which is the essence of prayer, “allows, even enables God to be at home in God’s own world” ...to pray for the kingdom of God is to pray for the realisation of the values of the kingdom now in the society where we live. Thus, politics, understood as our efforts to realise those kingdom values through our actions and our witness, leads us back to prayer. (Freyne, 67-68)

The key element of theopoetics (in the Alvesian sense that interests me most) that Freyne identifies in McDonagh is the transmutation of the mystical power of prayer and prayerful space into the ordinary world, reorienting it towards liberation, not just of the spirit but of the body that lives in a material world that is unjustly ordered.

Liberation is at the core of the doctoral work of Anne Thurston, a theologian who, despite treating theology very differently than this project does, forms a touchstone for a critical contextual Irish theology, as with McDonagh and others above. In her dissertation’s title From the Tears of Things to Play of Grace: Discerning Textures of Faith through a Practice of Reading Contemporary Literary Texts (2014), Thurston makes plain the centrality of practice in her work, as I also do. In it she organises her close readings across disciplines, drawing from poetry, fiction, and literary non-fiction to re-envision the possibilities of conversations about faith, destabilising binaries of “sacred” and “secular” while demonstrating that literature can be a valid and valuable primary resource for theological inquiry. Similarly to the American religious author Marilynne Robinson who writes about Scripture with ekphrastic attention, Thurston brought fresh readings to the gospels in Knowing Her Place: Gender and the Gospels (1998) and
brought her feminist sensibility to an embodied theology in *Because of Her Testimony: The Word in Female Experience* (1995), considerable publications at a time in Ireland where feminism and theology have little to do with one another. It is worth noting that while McDonagh’s theological career is marked by public life as a priest, theologian, and adviser to many, Thurston’s publications are few, and the Catholic institution where she was teaching after the completion of her doctoral work was twice absorbed by other institutions as the reputation of the Catholic Church and interest publicly serving it has declined. This is not in any way to disparage one or the other, nor to speculate on the social or private factors that might make this so, but simply to make visible that full membership to the Church through ordination has implications for the lives and work people can pursue.

3.4 Conclusion

In 2016, *The Irish Times* featured an editorial essay by Fr. Martin Henry titled, “Why is there no intellectual tradition in Irish Christianity?” (2016). While venturing some answers to his own question, namely that Irish people are primarily good at talking rather than writing, Henry skews the intellectual tradition in Irish Christianity somewhat, and in ways that are relevant to the questions of this study. I focus on this essay for several reasons. To start, Henry’s discourse highlights the challenges of theological language in contemporary Ireland, given the linguistic gymnastics the author had to perform to articulate the question. For example, what distinction is being made in saying “intellectual tradition in Irish Christianity?” To have said, more plainly, “Irish Christian tradition” would have been to open debates beyond the scope of his essay, and mine, but the question of intellectual tradition has been explored explicitly by others (Kearney 1984). Secondly, the leading question implicitly underscores the potential of Irish women’s poetry for theological studies in Ireland. On the one hand, there are good reasons not to accept this formulation, drawing parallels with Linda Nochlin’s question, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (Nochlin 2021), which demonstrates that the category of “greatness” is constructed by structures that systemically make it impossible for women to achieve it. However, if one accepts the premise of a lack of
intellectual tradition in Irish Christianity, can other intellectual traditions bridge this gap? This study proposes that Irish poets could offer such a bridge.

However, even if one doesn’t accept the premise, the article is unintentionally helpful. Henry asserts that in its long Christian history, Ireland has produced only one significant theological interpreter, John Scotus Eriugena. The omission of Richard Kearney’s work, despite discussing the same thinker, John Scotus Eriugena, indicates the broader trend of knowledge fragmentation within Irish Christian intellectual traditions. Again, Jennings’ question (paraphrased): why don’t we recognise each other? The fragmentation brings us nearer to the complexities of Irish national and religious identity, which contemporary Irish poetry by women can address. And one major problem in Ireland is language and names, for example, what might constitute an “Irish” thinker? What language would an Irish thinker speak? And where does an Irish thinker need to be located to be considered an Irish thinker? Eriugena, for instance, was undoubtedly produced by Ireland but wrote his significant works in France, and while he is recognised as a theological interpreter, he is often classified under philosophy. This classification issue extends to other thinkers like Berkeley, Swift, Joyce, Wilde, Yeats, and Beckett, who, despite their contributions, are side-lined (from theology) due to disciplinary boundaries. This suggests a limited Irish theological tradition, with women conspicuously absent.

Poetry and theology share a common goal: they employ language to describe encounters beyond language. Both are about experience and encounter. In poetry, there’s a memory of song and story; in Christian theology, there’s a memory of the divine encounter. While there have been studies on the theological dimensions of poets’ work, few view poetry as an act of theology, or a theological process. It is for this reason that my approach employs close readings of poems by contemporary Irish poets, contextualised within their historical and literary backgrounds, to suggest the potential of creative practice as theology.
4 PAULA MEEHAN’S EMBODIED WORDS

4.1 Introduction to chapter

This body is not just something that came about by chance; nor was it fortuitous in the sense that God really intended something different. It is not merely a by-product... Space and time – and therefore history – and therefore the human body – and therefore human sexuality – are not things which God did not really desire. (Rahner 1961, Vol. 17, Part 2, No. 7)

In the preceding chapter, I provided an overview of the methodological frameworks and historical precedents for approaching the theological analysis of poetry. I also made the case that what I am aiming for is not analysis in the strict sense, where I use the tools of Catholic theology to unpack the potential usefulness of poetry to Catholic theology, but a more mutual engagement, akin to an embrace, the possibilities of which are not at present mutual. In other words, poets regularly engage with all kinds of theology, including Catholic theology, with seriousness and depth, but theology, in particular, Catholic theology, if it considers poetry, it’s rarely in its material form as the expression of actual poets; rather, it tends to treat poetry generally. In addition, I justified the selection of poets, in light of the availability of Irish poets whose formal, aesthetic, and political commitments are relevant to a communitarian, theopoet(h)ical investigation within the Irish context. As outlined in Chapter One, each chapter I have dedicated to a specific poet identifies and aims to address a point of contention within socio-theological relations in Ireland, drawing from a non-exhaustive list of issues. I acknowledge that these are not the only points of contention. I have also chosen broad categories rather than specific ones—for example, I don’t address the continuing impact of Irish Catholicism on women’s reproductive autonomy, despite changes in legislation in 2018 ending a nearly thirty-year constitutional ban on abortion. These concerns, about the body, about the interplay with feminism, and about the thirty years of conflict primarily in Northern Ireland (but also in the Republic and Britain) are just three that I can address in the scope of this dissertation. I do not claim they are the most important three, or the three that define “Irish poetry and theology”, as a normative example.
I will begin in the first part of this chapter by situating Meehan’s poetics within literary, religious, social, and political currents in Ireland, emphasising how those poetics are overwhelmingly speaking to this failure to consider the inherent sacredness of the body. This situational work can succeed only in essentialising Irishness, which I do not wish to do, without some attention given to how all of the above frames (literary, religious, social, political) rest inescapably on a particular foundation, in the Western intellectual tradition, for conceptualising the body, and, by Rahner’s formulation in the opening quotation for this chapter, space, time, history, human sexuality, and I will add, gender; for this reason, I also allude to what the sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí has called the "legacy of the age-old somato-centricity in Western thought" (Oyèwùmí 1997, xvi-xvii). This contextualisation provides a foundation for proposing theological frameworks (their applicability, as well as their limitations) through which Meehan’s work can be analysed and interpreted in the middle section. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate, in the final section, how Meehan’s work, when viewed as a case study, can contribute meaningfully to the advancement of a contextual—critical—Irish Catholic theology, and why such a development is necessary.

At the start of this chapter, my first task is to pinpoint the theological concern to which Paula Meehan’s poetics can be applied. By “theological concern”, I am referring to a combination of official church doctrine, its clerical application, and its reception and integration into private and public life; considering that official doctrine, clerical application, and reception are rarely perfectly and universally aligned, this “theological concern” is dynamic. The theological concern for this chapter is, specifically, the failure, in Ireland, to theologise and present all human bodies, and embodied experience, as inherently sacred. Given my contemporary focus, and that all three poets were alive during the 1970s and 1980s, links can be made from this failure to the effects, in Ireland, of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (*HV* 1968), which, as a doctrine of human life, dashed hopes for a true modernising of the Catholic Church following the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council in the earlier part of the 1960s (Harris 2018). However, its condemnation of artificial contraception (*HV*, 14), its emphasis on the procreative and unitive aspects of sex within marriage (9), and its punitive mood made
clear that women’s bodily sovereignty was not to be considered. This doctrinal tendency was not new, but with *Humanae Vitae*, it was firmly reinforced. And while the doctrinal text certainly impacted everywhere where Catholicism was widespread, in Ireland, “a single Catholic hierarchy straddles the border” (Murray 2018), south of which the less than fifty-year-old independent Irish State had integrated Catholic teaching not just into church life but into civil legislation.

Catholicism had long been a point of political contention; its presence having been used as a justification for British Protestant plantation and settler-colonisation from the early 17th century (Jackson 2014), and its influence surging following Catholic emancipation in the early 1800s, and especially in the post Famine trauma of the 1850s (Scally 2022). However, the process of the fusion of Catholicism with the newly independent Irish State had begun with Éamon de Valera’s political activity at the end of the 1930s. De Valera had initially been sentenced to death for his involvement in the Easter Rising, but he was spared in part due to his American birth. After the Irish Civil War of the 1920s, he went on to found one of the political parties still in power in Ireland today, Fianna Fáil, which strongly bore de Valera’s conservative Catholicism. Once in power as Taoiseach (from 1959 to 1973), his alliance with John Charles McQuaid (Archbishop of Dublin from 1940 to 1972) folded Catholicism into law and social life so completely that it was impossible to pry them apart (O’Toole 2021).

This has been all to say, finally, that while it is important to acknowledge that this phenomenon—the failure to see the body, and all bodies, as inherently sacred—is not exclusively Irish, in the sense that it carries neo-platonic, Scholastic and Enlightenment-era thinking about the subordination of material, enfleshed reality to spiritual transcendence (Copeland 2010; Jennings 2010), its realisation in Catholic social performance was particularly violent in Ireland because the Irish state was set up to realise it utterly. Consequently, it is not an essentialist Irish representation of Catholicism, but one constructed by political and clerical forces. On the receiving end of these constructions are Irish bodies, and particularly the bodies of Irish women, queer people, poor people, physically or mentally disabled people and those with mental ill health. Within the scope of this chapter, I focus primarily on women, all women, and
implicitly poor women (since women of all classes are affected by laws, but possibilities contract the lower down the social and economic scale one is found).

4.2 Place and time ‘and no one knows it like I do myself’

While the end of this chapter will cover aspects of Meehan’s biography and literary output in greater detail, I have offered some preliminary remarks about the historical and religious context into which she was born, to situate her work’s contribution to an Irish common understanding of the body as inherently sacred. I want to look a little more closely at her specific life circumstances and then at the generation in which her public activity as a poet emerged. While doing this I will invoke her poems, which, as she admitted during a public event, “are where truth is—outside of the poems, I am liable to drift” (Meehan 2022), a sentiment which echoes Richard Wilbur’s statement from the Introduction that poetry is “a kind of truth-telling, (it’s pretty hard to lie in poetry)” (Wilbur 1968). As in the next two chapters, I, at times, quote entire poems. This is with purpose, if somewhat against the convention of academic writing “about” poetry. I do this partly because I want to distinguish what I am doing (writing with poetry) from the practice of strictly literary analysis, and secondly, I want to emphasize that it’s the experience of poetry that is primary, rather than the analysis, even if it’s theologically motivated analysis. This way, I respond to Jennings’ challenge to “think theologically” about identity (Jennings 2010, 7).

I have given two public readings with Paula Meehan and have witnessed a handful of other events in which she was involved. It is less that one “sees” or even “hears” Meehan “read”, and more, rather, that one experiences her perform with her entire body, often swaying or rocking, at times with her eyes closed, her voice strong and rhythmic while reciting many of her poems from memory. That, too, one does not experience as something contained in the poet’s head, but rather in her body, her squarely rooted feet, her articulate hands; even, at this stage of her life, her long, often ornately plaited, white hair seems to radiate her poetic power. Born in 1955 into a poor working-class Catholic family in North inner-city Dublin 1955, Meehan spent most of her childhood up to the end of primary school in England, which marks her social location.
not only with the physical place of her birth, a part of Dublin that could claim some of the worst living conditions, overcrowding, and infant mortality rates but also with the necessity for migration during what came to be called the “lost decade” (J. Ryan 2004), as tens of thousands of Irish people migrated to England yearly during the 1950s. According to John Archer Jackson, “approximately three out of five Irish people growing up in the 1950s were destined to leave their native land, and most of these left out of necessity rather than by choice” (quoted in Murray 2012, 34). This would have made Meehan a very unlikely candidate to study Classics at Trinity College Dublin and become a major voice of the contemporary Irish poetic imagination.

Some of the elements of her early formation and circumstances appear within her sixth poetry collection Dharmakaya (a Sanskrit term meaning “truth-body”, dharma – “body;” kaya – “truth”), notably in the poem “The Exact Moment I Became a Poet”.

The Exact Moment I Became a Poet

for Kay Foran

was in 1963 when Miss Shannon rapping the duster on the easel’s peg half obscured by a cloud of chalk

said Attend to your books, girls, or mark my words, you’ll end up in the sewing factory.

It wasn’t just that some of the girls’ mothers worked in the sewing factory or even that my own aunt did, and many neighbours, but that those words ‘end up’ robbed the labour of its dignity.

Not that I knew it then, not in those words – labour, dignity. That’s all back construction.

Making sense; allowing also the teacher was right and no one knows it like I do myself.
But: I saw them; mothers, aunts and neighbours
trussed like chickens
on a conveyor belt,

getting sewn up the way my granny
sewed the sage and onion stuffing
in the birds.

Words could pluck you,
leave you naked,
your lovely shiny feathers all gone.
(2020, 133)

Before moving into analysis, I want to linger within the experience of the poem, and
which the poem creates. Titles of poems being a rather late literary development, the
contemporary usage of the convention of the “incipit”, meaning, in Latin “it begins” (and
also a favourite form of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin) has the effect of dropping the reader into
precisely the moment the poem evokes. But what is most remarkable for me in the
experience of this poem is how, for Meehan, the “back construction” reveals the
relationship between a wounding in language (the sting of which young Paula Meehan
felt), a budding social ethic (she felt it on behalf of herself equally as on behalf of the
women she knew), and a sensory-based, embodied form of perception (the horrifyin,
and true, conflation of fungible chicken and human bodies).

The “back construction” provides the moral value of the young poet’s early
encounter with the power of words to do things, meaning, to have an unjust bearing on
the material world, to rob, to humiliate, and to pluck. However, what happened to that
child was much more immediate, affective, and revelatory: she saw them, and she saw
them plucked. This is a terrible and yet creatively rich first encounter with language that
is functioning in an extraordinary mode: Miss Shannon’s words become, in a sense, the
flesh that the poet imagines “trussed like chickens/ on a conveyor belt”, but they
become flesh in another sense, in that they create an affective experience, the loss of
dignity; finally, the flesh, or the affective experience, becomes words once more, in the
poet’s language, the poem itself, but especially the final stanza, where the experience
she has been describing is expressed by language that can transmit the affect/ effect to
the reader. The blunt force of the line, “Words could pluck you/ leave you naked”, comes
partly from the single-syllable, hard consonant words, like “could”, and “pluck”, in the first line, and partly from the meter. These two lines are in trochaic dimeter, meaning there are two feet, or two beats, per line (each foot has two syllables: “Words could”, and “pluck you”), and the first syllable of the foot is stressed, i.e., *words could pluck you*. Meter in poetry carries affective charge.

The meter also evokes a formal, dirge-like, incantatory feeling. The extra-lingual meaning of the elegy--grief--is in the sound itself, and in the way this sound is internalised and, for a moment, felt. Similarly, in contrast to the more common, iambic meter, where the second syllable is accented, and which is poetry’s easy walking pace (alternately the “workhorse” of so much English verse), the trochaic meter of the lines beginning Meehan’s last stanza brings home the brute conclusion of how Miss Shannon’s words were functioning, which is simultaneously the narrator’s recognition of the profound possibilities for harm within the capacities of language. This is in no way to imply that the poet made the decision consciously thinking about how trochees function; it’s the language itself that reveals this meaning back to the reader, and often to the poet. This is one way of illustrating how poetry works as language and one important relevance it has for theology: poetry works not in the descriptive modality of a deductive knowing, but in the modality of direct revelation. From this point stems also one of the irreducible tensions within theological thinking and writing, that one uses a modality of deduction to talk about revelation. Hybrid forms of discourse are needed.

Rather than simply describe what poetry has to offer theology, or catalogue religious content within a selection of poems, this thesis engages with (primarily Catholic) theology poetically and reads poems theologically. In the first case, by “reading theology poetically”, I mean that I acknowledge the linguistic horizons of theological language, i.e., that theological texts of M. Shawn Copeland or Louis-Marie Chauvet, represent only what can be said/ written about their subjects with a degree of necessary certainty (one must claim things), and that other uncapturable modalities are at work. Already, what can be written, recorded, preserved, or even said, is governed by material constraints and social power structures, so, it is important that one not take a discursive text as a complete representation of what is real. And by this irremediable
incompleteness, theology shares something with poetry, which points beyond what its own language expresses. In the second case, I mean that it is neither necessary for a poet to identify as a religious person (although one of the poets I am looking at, Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin, publicly identifies as such), nor for the poem to be about a religious subject, or didactic in any way, to meet criteria to be read theologically. It makes a certain formal sense that the poets I have chosen to focus on all come from a Catholic background, but I did not choose them because they write “Catholic poems”.

While it may be easy to say that this poem is ostensibly more about class than religion, the point I want to make, through the poem, is that class and religion, in Meehan’s youth, especially, could not have been pried apart. One could trace these fused identities even by such seemingly inane details as the name of the teacher, but more given the litany of female figures in Meehan’s community of accountability; if Meehan’s “mothers, aunts and neighbours” were women whose labour in the sewing factory Miss Shannon’s words would rob of dignity, then the dynamics of class are being slightly opened with the warning that points “the way out”. Meehan, famously kicked out from St. Michael’s Holy Faith Covent in Finglas, a suburb of Dublin developed in the 1950s as a release valve to inner-city overcrowding, for organising a march against the administration, found her own ways out. When Meehan narrates the story of her expulsion, in prose, this time, writing as the President-appointed Ireland Chair of Poetry in 2013, the nemesis is now Sister Philippa. Meehan writes:

Being thrown out of school was the best thing that could have happened to me. Not that the frightened child who stood before Sister Philippa thought so. Not after the ritual humiliation of being brought into every single classroom and made apologise for bringing the whole school into disrepute. (Meehan 2016, 8)

And from there to grandparents in another part of Dublin and the discovery of Emily Dickinson, and Conrad Aiken, followed by Yeats and the rest of her beginnings as a poet. There’s a kind of presumed understanding in these texts, however, about the Catholic Church, which, on account of being religious, slips out of public class consciousness, where in truth, the Catholic Church dominated education, health care and government bodies. And as I will explore further in Chapter Four, where I take up the poetry of Eiléan
Ní Chuilleanáin, there is also the matter of class within religious institutions in Ireland, and among Jesuit, lay, and ordained orders.

Along with the Georgian houses-turned-tenement buildings of Gardiner Street, other Dublin sites that figure in poems and mark Meehan as a poet with a working-class consciousness are South inner-city Dublin’s once innovative council housing, where Meehan was the first poet or artist in residence commissioned by the city, now a role available in nearly every sector of Dublin, and in greater Ireland. The social, religious and physical spaces of Meehan’s early life are relevant to this study to the extent that they profoundly informed her literary—which is also to say, ethical—commitments, often in overt and direct critique of the ways institutional Irish Catholicism shaped public and private life, particularly the 1980’s and 90’s, and for the purposes of this study, "institutional Irish Catholicism" refers not just to clerical structures, Catholic theology and praxis, but to these plus the legislative power of the Irish state. At the centre of the public and the private, although it is not often explicitly acknowledged, is the body, private in its intimate capacities (what bodies do, biologically), in its relationships (familial, romantic, platonic), and in its self-conceptions (including the extent to which one has a sense of inherent worth), and public in its social positioning (class), its possibilities for mobility (along class lines, but also geographically), and its power to shift all of these categories (including the ability to affect political change through activism as well as legislative processes). In Meehan's Catholic Ireland, Catholicism collapses the private and the public, for example, through its influence over the legislation of the social role of women, their autonomy over their own bodies, their possibilities of employment, their possibilities for eternal salvation in light of their sexuality, their possibilities within the organisation of the church. The patriarchal form that Catholicism takes impacts even their ability to access grace and proximity to God as sacredness or holiness since these are embodied in the male person of Jesus and the male figures of the twelve disciples, as Mary T. Malone has shown in her work on women and Christianity (Malone 2001; 2002; 2003).

4.3 Unstable bodies coming in and out of focus
One of the complexities involved in theologising, in the present, the status of bodies in different historical periods of Ireland's Catholic past, is that there are contradictions and irregularities in acknowledging bodies. One way a state or religious institution can acknowledge the existence of bodies is in the rules it creates to govern them. In this way, the bodies most "visible", in terms of discourse, are generally also the ones that are the most regulated, and in the case of Ireland, as in many places, but in particular, in Britain, from which society the new Catholic Irish state appropriated so much of its Victorian character (Scally 2022), those bodies belong to: children, women, non-heteronormative people, the physically or intellectually disabled, the mentally ill, the poor, and, in more recent decades, the bodies of non-Irish and non-gender-conforming citizens (Cannon 2020) The bodies of Irish upper-class men, for example, or the actions that those bodies can take, are legislated in ways that can be considered "universal", in the sense that laws about taxation or physical harm such as homicide do not pertain to the maleness of the bodies in the way, that, say, laws around reproduction, pertain to the biological femaleness of women's bodies. This is currently shifting, however, around questions of transness, though, overwhelmingly, public discourse (which influences the creation and implementation of legislation) often snags on received conceptions of femininity, its presence in transwomen's bodies, its suppression in transmen's bodies.

In the mid-1980s, when Paula Meehan first began publishing her poems, the dead bodies that figured strongly in public discourse about Catholic Ireland, the Kerry babies, the bodies of Ann Lovett and her new-born baby, and also the weeping statues of Mary (Auge 2013, 194-216) emphasised just how complexly dire the legislation of living women's bodies had become, and how much more ready Irish Catholics were to recognise the inherent sacredness of the mother of Jesus than that of living Irish women, mirroring ways in which the female figure had been mythologised in the creation of Ireland's national identity, an image that the poet Eavan Boland had fought, in poetry and prose spanning her career, to dispel.

More globally, Christian theology's turn toward the body was happening in ways that I will explore in the second section of this chapter, but suffice it to say, Ireland remained fairly untouched by feminist, ecofeminist, and other forms of more critical and
contextual theology that were being developed elsewhere. Meehan published her searing indictment of the Catholic state and society of the 1980s, in "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks", a decade after the most energetic activity on the part of Irish feminists, in the 1970's. I've spent some time already talking about the problems of "emergence" on the part of female Irish poets, and, equally, the difficulties faced by female Catholic theologians in the field. It is worthwhile here to pull the focus to create a wider frame and consider the Western patriarchal foundations on which these discussions of the body are based.

4.4 The Invention of Women

In her book *The Invention of Women*, the sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí presents the problem this way:

> The cultural logic of Western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organisation of the social world. Thus, this cultural logic is actually 'bio-logic.' Social categories like 'woman' are based on body-type and are elaborated in relation to and in opposition to another category, man; the presence or absence of certain organs determines social position. (Oyèwùmí x)

Extrapolating from further chapters, I understand Oyèwùmí's references to Western "somato-centricity" and "bio-logic" to describe an objectivist interpretation, wherein "gender has been ontologically conceptualised" (7). The important distinction between this naturalised (in the sense that it is assumed to be natural) Western logic and the Yoruba way of thinking about bodies is that in the former case, bodies are discreet, and in the second, they are relational, or, to use a word from vocabulary appropriate for this study, they can be seen as perichoretic, in that they are only meaningful as relations.

> It should be noted that Oyèwùmí’s study is about the "epistemological shift occasioned by the imposition of Western gender categories on Yoruba discourse" (Oyèwùmí x), wherein she attempts to "understand the epistemological basis for both Yoruba and Western cultures". Referring to previous discussions about deploying frames designed by or about people with identities that are very different from mine, it is Oyèwùmí’s characterisation of Western culture that interests me, but I can best
understand it in the comparative aspects of her study of Yoruba culture, not as an opposition to Yoruba culture, but a framework that exists at the same time and subsumes the other (the other framework, and also the “other”). While interesting, it would not make sense to speculate about Indigenous Irish culture before British colonisation, as the temporal shift would be much greater (Oyěwùmí locates prolonged exposure to Western thought in the 19th century, whereas to write about Ireland before Western thought would mean going back to the arrival of King John’s men in the eleventh century, or even earlier, to Christian arrivals during the 5th century. The cultural shifts are too numerous to fit within the scope of my study.

The first characterisation is that Western thought conceives of bodies as central to social organisation, but it would be helpful to clarify that what she means is individual bodies, bodies conceived as subjects. Meanwhile, in Yoruba culture, social position, according to Oyěwùmí, is created by bodies in intersubjective relationships, ordered primarily by seniority (age) and then relationship to other bodies. Interestingly, this social order is not devoid of hierarchies; it is simply not based on individuals of a particular body type, which can be taken to mean gender, but also other features such as race, height, weight, particular features. "Paradoxically, in European thought”, writes Oyěwùmí, “even though society was seen to be inhabited by bodies, only women were perceived to be embodied; men had no bodies -- they were walking minds”. (6) This is because of the second distinction Oyěwùmí illuminates between Western and Yoruba cultures, one of sensory preference. That is, Western cultural subjectivity is constructed visually--she gives the example, in language, of "worldview"—whereas Yoruba culture is constructed via multiple senses, with a priority given to sound—and here she gives the example, in language, of "world-sense". Again, it will be the work of another project to dig into Irish history and see if it is possible to find such traces in Indigenous Irish culture (if that exists). However, it is a useful reminder and a practice of questioning one’s foundational epistemology. I don't give the example to essentialise or idealise Yoruba epistemology, simply to say that the Western notions applied to subjecthood, womanhood and bodies in this study are not givens. And yet, it is interesting that the tendencies toward intersubjectivity within some of the Catholic theologies that I will
explore, as well as the communitarian tendencies within Paula Meehan's poetry, seem to point into directions similar to how Oyéwùmí describes Yoruba culture before prolonged Western presence and influence.

In any case, her scholarly praxis (described below) is also becoming more common within certain feminist theological methodologies, and it is a positioning that I assumed before coming across her work within the work of Nigerian Irish scholar Emma Dabiri (Dabiri 2020). Describing her praxis, Oyéwùmí writes:

It cannot be overstated that in African studies a careful evaluation of the genealogy of concepts and theoretical information must be integral to research. Ultimately, in research endeavours, I argue for a cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality. The context includes the social identity of the researcher, the spatial and temporal location of the research, and the debates in the academic literature. There is, of course, the fundamental question of the relationship between research and social reality, an important question given the policy bent of research—particularly in women's studies. (xv-xvi)

4.5 Historical parameters

In We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland Since 1958 (2021), Fintan O'Toole, who writes about both Irish literature and politics from within lived experience of growing up in Ireland in roughly the same period as Paula Meehan (O'Toole was born three years after Meehan, albeit in a different social class than Meehan), offers several facts about Ireland at the time of Meehan's birth: the year 1955 marked Ireland's admission into the United Nations, a decade after the organisation's establishment (he notes, too, that Ireland did not join the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for another two years, which meant that American financial investment, and all its modernising potential, side-stepped Ireland as it accessed European markets—this proves an important factor in the glacial, then suddenly rapid, modernisation of the Irish economy, producing the equivalent of a kind of social whiplash, the human cost of which has long been a concern of Meehan's); secondly, only two students in the entire country attempted the Spanish Leaving Cert exam, both of whom failed; by contrast, approximately 90 percent of (male) students undertaking the foreign language Leaving Cert opted for the Latin exam; finally, O'Toole notes that, “As
early as 1955, London County Council had so many Irish babies left in its care that a dedicated children’s officer was appointed to spend six months each year in Ireland to try to find homes for them” (O'Toole 2021, 190). Combined with the fact that an estimated 500,000 Irish people emigrated between 1945 and 1960 (to Britain, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), O'Toole's sampling of events creates a picture of a politically, financially, linguistically and culturally inner-facing state, the stability of which is predicated on strong delineations between reality in Ireland and outside Ireland, excising large parts of the population and wilful ignorance of the reasons for vast human export, either through emigration or births abroad.

Meehan's birth year, furthermore, occupies a significant position between two events of the 20th century the impact of which on contemporary Irish society can hardly be overstated. The first of these events is the establishment of the Irish Republic (and, in tandem, Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom on the island of Ireland) through roughly a decade of violent revolution and subsequent civil war, between 1916 and 1922 (arguably until the start of de Valera’s government and the constitution of 1937), which sought to establish independence from British rule, but with strong disagreements about the terms of such independence, including a bloody and divisive Irish Civil War, which demarcated the political parties that govern to this day. The second event, in the early-mid 1960s, was the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church, which sought to redefine the Church's relationship with the modern world.

Stretching the parameters further, both into the past and the future, Meehan and her work are also situated between the Great Famine of the mid-19th century (which would have been only three or four generations in Meehan's past), the outbreak of three decades (from the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1990s) of sectarian violence (the period controversially called 'the Troubles'), and the rapid—and for many people who shared Meehan's social location, disastrous and traumatic--economic and cultural changes precipitated by the rise and fall of the period called the Celtic Tiger. This last historical parameter, and specifically its collective human and spiritual cost (even if she would not necessarily so name it), shaped and continues to shape Meehan's aesthetics and ethics every bit as much, if not more, than her own origins.
4.6 Destabilising the fixed view

There is, of course, a great deal that can be said about each of these widening historical parameters and the impact they had on the society in which Meehan has lived and worked (it is important to acknowledge that Meehan's social milieu is not fixed across her life and work; rather, it shifts, figuratively and even geographically, but her aesthetic and ethical commitments always return to her origins). The benefit of such an approach, i.e. always placing my subject in relation to moments in history, and, in cinematic terms, zooming in and out, and panning between two or more events, is to disturb productively the perception of linearity, stability, and even intelligibility. Derek Scally writes in The Best Catholics in the World (2021) that the "Sacred Heart Catholicism" that many consider the traditioned Irish Catholicism since the return of St. Patrick to Ireland bears no resemblance to Catholicism in Ireland before the Famine. Scally writes, "What many assume is age-old Irish Catholicism is nothing of the sort. It is nine years older than the Irish Times and thirty-four years older than the GAA. Like the Gaelic Athletic Association, it recodified and formalised a much older tradition" (2021, 199).

The revivified Catholic ethos of "Augustinian ecclesiological piety" (Rahner 1962, TI, Vol 5, Part IV, no. 14) after the Synod of Thurles in August of 1850 predisposed Irish history to a kind of patina of permanence that mirrors the sense of uninterrupted tradition in the Catholic church, which in turn entered public and private life in Ireland in innumerable ways, as Marianne Elliott reasons that, "while the Catholic Church itself may have interfered less in state affairs than once was thought, it did not need to when the ethos of that state was Catholic and public officials were culturally predisposed to act accordingly" (Jackson 2014, 176) As I will show in a discussion of the work of French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet, the poems can also be considered for their symbolic function within the Logos-sphere of particular theological sequences in Irish Catholicism. In the following pages, I will discuss these critiques, the nature of the symbolic and what I mean by "theological sequence" in greater detail.
4.7 Paula Meehan’s poetry as decolonial counternarrative

When I say that Paula Meehan’s work might fruitfully contribute to a critical Irish Catholic study and practice, I don’t mean that Paula Meehan’s work can or should help to restore a Catholic understanding of the inherent sacredness of the body in Ireland. I will later expand on what I mean specifically by decolonial, and both the potential and limits of decolonial frameworks in relation to Ireland, remembering that, “decolonisation brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life [and] is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1); for the moment, it is simply important to note that approaches that are critical may not be decolonial, though decolonial approaches are critical and practical by nature. I draw on the language of the colonial and decolonial here so that I can refer to coloniality’s core logic, that of growth and expansion by way of domination, and how it coincides with Christianity’s “original trajectory of intimacy” (Jennings 2010, 9), and, finally, how coloniality and Christianity’s evangelical impulse relate to poetry’s capabilities. In other words, I am referring to the Christian impulse to evangelise, missionize, and, eventually, to increase in number the bodies that make up the body of Christ, in the best cases, based on example, conviction, transformation, rather than coercion, but it is important also to acknowledge the other, more problematic methods of what is termed conversion. According to the theologian, philosopher, mystic and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, “the impulse at the heart of Christianity is the human will to share with others what one has found meaningful to oneself elevated to the height of a moral imperative”, but Thurman is also clear on the “lurking danger in this very emphasis”, that Christians encounter “the various peoples of the world and those who live as our neighbours as objects of missionary endeavour and enterprise without being at all willing to treat them either as brothers or as human beings” (Thurman 1996, 2-3). The “lurking danger” realised, then, is the colonial narrative that Jennings and Carter and others explore, and I am positioning poetry as decolonial counternarrative, as “backward miracle”, in the words of Kay Ryan:

Every once in a while
we need a
backward miracle
that will strip language,
make it hold for
a minute: just the
vessel with the
wine in it-
a sacramental
refusal to multiply,
reclaiming the
single loaf
and the single
fish thereby.
(Ryan 2005, 69)

Poetry’s affective power bears some resemblance to spiritual transmission, in that
poetry’s primary capacity—in contrast to prose’s, which is to describe, inform, persuade,
narrate, etc—is to transmit within the reader, in a “trajectory of intimacy”, something
that the poet has found meaningful to herself elevated to the height of imperative, not
just aesthetics but, thinking alongside Joan Retallack’s *The Poethical Wager*, poet(h)ics,
in Retallack’s words, “what we make of events as we use language in the present, how
we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood” (Retallack
2003, 9) In other words, aesthetic imperative, for the poet, becomes synonymous with
moral imperative. However, I have made this comparison between poetry and the
Christian impulse to draw in and transform the “other” (non-Christian, as defined by the
Christian) not to suggest that poetry be put in service of Christian theology or towards
forwarding the idea of a Christian Irish society. After all, poetry “fails” at the very thing
institutional Christianity aspires to succeed in, namely, multiplying itself and preserving
its institutional aspect. Rather, I am suggesting that contemporary Christian thinkers,
and scholars of Christianity, can account for and work towards healing social wounds
inflicted and endured in the name of Christianity, and I am particularly interested in
those thinkers working within Catholic theology because of the exceptional courage and
creativity required to simultaneously critique and remain inside of Catholicism’s long-
established hierarchical structures.
4.8 Theological sequences

To move beyond this quite tenacious conceptual barrier, it’s helpful to apply a specific way of looking at historical events, namely, to borrow from the Marxist thinker Asad Haider the language of prescriptions and sequences (Haider 2020), rather than definitions and events, language which he has adapted from the French semiotician Sylvain Lazarus. I have already discussed prescriptions and sequences in the methodology section, but here is where their applicability becomes concrete, as applied to the two major historical events I have described. Haider explains Lazarus’ idea of historical or political sequences (rather than events) as “particular ways of doing politics that respond, for a finite duration, to their historical situations” (237) and then demonstrates how while the memory of the 1960s in the United States is generally viewed through a prism of later events, it is possible, through an understanding of historical and political sequence, or a “mode of politics”, which has a beginning and an end. Quoting Lazarus, Haider states, “The mode’s categories are not utilisable anywhere except in the mode which they created; they are not generalisable... they are said to be worn out or saturated in their usage and their existence when the mode ceases” (239).

Applied to Catholic theology, what we might call “theological sequences” would seem to fly in the face of an understanding of deep, continuous tradition. And yet established theologians do acknowledge what could be called sequences, with an important example in Louis-Marie Chauvet’s work on the sacraments. What could be read as a passing comment on the catechism, in his introduction to The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body (Chauvet 2001) is, in fact, an excellent example of theological sequence:

First of all, let us underline that while the following development, based on the catechism of 1947 is on the whole in agreement with the theology of the great Scholastics of the twelfth ad thirteenth centuries, it considerably hardens their thoughts. Thomas [Aquinas] would recognize the matrix of his theology but certainly not the flexibility which, like every great thinker, he knew to inject into his discourse. (xiv)

What is notable, though not obvious, in this minor example is that the catechism of 1947 to which he refers is a specifically French publication. So, the theological sequence in
question here—ways of conceptualising the sacraments—is already subject to a particular time (1947) and place (France). Drawing from such specific theological contexts and nuances, I turn to how broader theological movements intersect with multiple disciplines and geographies.

4.9 Theopoetics, process theology and the body

The emergence of the theopoetics is one such challenge, bridging theology, philosophy, ethics, and the creative arts, and, depending on which corner of the field one considers, drawing connections to liberation theology. As elaborated previously in Chapters One and Two, theopoetics is best described as an interdisciplinary mode, rather than a field, of theological study that explores the experience and expression of faith through aesthetics, poststructuralist theory, postmodern philosophy, and theology, in most cases process theology, a school of thought, rooted in the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, that treats the dynamic natures of God and creation as a constantly evolving collaboration, rejecting notions of God as “cosmic moralist”, “unchanging and passionless absolute”, “controlling power”, “sanctioner of the status quo”, and male (Cobb and Griffin, 1976, pp 8-10). Theopoetics and process theology are not separate, distinct fields, but different lenses, the first focused on experience and expression, and the latter on the relationship between God and creation. Often used by the same theologians and in combination with liberation, feminist, Womanist and ecofeminist theologies (Copeland 2010; Coleman 2008; McFague 2021; Keller, 2021), both lenses resist fixed categories, although process theology, because it is more concerned with relationships than expression, more easily accepts a single definition for how it functions (if not for what it is), though it should be noted that even while trying to define process theology, John Cobb and David Ray Griffin rely first on a list of five conceptions of God that they are rejecting, i.e. what God is not, in their process theology. Meanwhile, as stated in Chapter Two, theopoetics shows a greater discomfort with definitions entirely, and its meanings rely almost entirely on an apophatic approach, either naming the various things it is not, with Catherine Keller’s playful example: “Theopoetics is not theology-as-usual nor is it ‘not theology’” (Keller),
and a plurality of definitions that cohere, rather than compete, for validity. Additionally, the literature available to attest to this rising theological attention comes from the United States, France, Germany, and the UK. It is Ireland’s particular placement in this conversation—specifically, one Irish poet’s work—that is of interest to me.

The need for this contribution, I suggest, arises from the uneven ways in which Irish Catholic theological performances, combined with the state power of a young nation with a traumatic birth, have shaped the lives of Irish people without imagining pathways for a reciprocal, mutual shaping (of Irish Catholic theology) through the acknowledgement and integration of, and loving response to, the lived human experiences of Irish Catholics. It’s to animate this lack of mutualism that I’ve included the quotations from Meehan’s official essays as the Ireland Chair of Poetry, Imaginary Bonnets with Real Bees in Them (2016). Meehan’s poetic works and biographical prose bear witness to this lack of mutual shaping, most often through instances in her poems and prose where she joins other Irish Catholic-raised female poets in actively reshaping what Andrew Auge calls “the watermark of [the] Catholic matrix” (Auge, 2013, 2).

As with the other poets discussed by Auge, when I refer to the presence of Irish Catholicism in Paula Meehan’s work, I am referring to what she is making of the imprint of a Catholic upbringing, rather than suggesting a declared or undeclared Catholic faith on the part of the poet. I don’t read her references to Catholicism as purely oppositional; rather, I consider how they articulate alternative constructions of self against an Irish Catholic background. Take, for example, the opening quatrain of her poem “Home”:

I am the blind woman finding her way home by a map of tune.  
When the song that is in me is the song I hear from the world  
I’ll be home. It’s not written down and I don’t remember the words.  
I know when I hear it I’ll have made it myself. I’ll be home.  
(2020, 119)

The interplay between inner and outer music here has many correspondences in theology, particularly in pneumatological theologies of the 1970s (Stephens 1970; Bruner 1971) and some more recent treatments (Gunn 2013). While this conversation between theological thinking about the nature of “indwelling spirit” and poetry’s understanding of “inspiration” does not get sufficient attention in theological publications, the connection is clear in an interview with Meehan. She writes:
Physically to make a poem is to shape breath in space. The text is the record of that... I think if breath is at the heart of poetry, and I believe it is, then the manipulation of breath, the changing of breath, the regularizing of breath, the disruption of regular breathing, all of these are technical impulses in poetry. The religious orders know it through chant, the shamans know it, the holotropic healers know it, like those researchers with the Esalen Institute...

In research done into bodywork over the last thirty years it’s pretty much accepted that grief, that trauma, can lodge in the body and one way of healing, one way of clearing trauma is through breathwork. So to me that mirrors things I would be doing in poetry before I even had that language for it. It was a powerful site for healing for me always, from the time I was a young teenager and started my first poems, it was a place I could really absolutely be myself in the way I believed in the way my body actually felt, unmediated by the culture around me; maybe only mediated by my own lack of craft and also by the sovereignty of language itself because the words themselves have power quite apart from you or what you do with them. As you learn to use them and to play with them and to explore them, to feel what Pasternak calls the “ghost of each word,” its own etymology, its specific gravity, you learn to value and respect the autonomy of words and their historic valence. The words are outside you, their external power meeting your body and your breath work and your rhythms of being. I believe that is the cauldron where the brew starts fermenting. Breath seems to be at the heart of all transcendental experience. Certainly meditation, the concentration of breath, in all traditions, leads to an ahistorical plenum, a transpersonal consciousness. Which is not to say the poet sits down generally and starts to concentrate so much on the breath, but the rhythm, seeking toward a rhythm, searching for a line, a cadence, a music, all of those involve breath. The great thing about poetry is that it’s the human voice, the one human voice breaking the silence. And how you make that voice powerful, trustworthy, capable of communicating, capable of changing other people’s energy, I think at the root of that is the manipulation of breath (Meehan 2009)

I have quoted Meehan at length here to demonstrate the depth and breadth of her thinking on poetry and the breath, how easily she links poetic expression with trauma, and the healing of trauma, through breath. The poet’s concerns are a kind of distillation of the concerns of the theologian: creation and creatureliness, the Holy Spirit, suffering, and redemption. She also speaks through the construction and healing of oneself through what Christian Wiman has called an “accidental theology” (Domestico 2014). Considering contemporary theological writing on the self that is relevant to this study, J. Kameron Carter argues compellingly that, “any gesture to constitute identity for
ourselves rather than to receive it as constituted in the God-Man Jesus will in some sense bear traces of violence” (Carter 2015), and that modernity is the effort to constitute ourselves. The violence, of course, is in constructing identity as opposition and supremacy, with the white male figure historically as the point of origin against which every other body is measured. In theory, yes, constituting ourselves in the God-Man Jesus might be the non-violent answer. The antidote to modern atomization and alienation might be a kenotic experience, emptying the ego to make room for the other, or a virtuous communion into the family of creatureliness, human and non-human. Letting go of the constructed self, to receive oneself as a ritual imitation of the incarnation. Two arising problems are matter itself and the irreducible subjectivity of countless living beings. Paradoxically, to let go of a violently constructed self-identity that always needs an oppositional other – one must first have the material conditions to think and be and move as a self, a direct experience of the self that one is renouncing. And then these liberative conditions must apply to every subject that exists.

When Paula Meehan was born in inner-city Dublin in 1955, an Irish woman could not work in the public sector once married, had no say if her husband wanted to sell the home she lived in, had no control over her reproductive system, could not divorce, if she was poor and unwed, pregnant or queer, God help her – some of which conditions persisted not just into the 1990’s but up to the recent referendum in 2018, repealing the 8th Amendment to the constitution forbidding legislation on abortion. When she writes in the poem “Home”, “When the song that is in me is the song I hear from the world/ I’ll be home.../ I know when I hear it I’ll have made it myself. I’ll be home”, this is not a self-constitution in opposition to another subjectivity, but in harmony with a communal song. Furthermore, in “The Age of Reason”, Meehan describes a possibility of selfhood where one’s self communes, intersubjectively, with the selves of others in a non-threatening way.

The Age of Reason

A garden, a privet hedge, the smell of fresh concrete.
A newly dug flower bed

is a black crescent moon
on a green sky.

My Grandmother Mary
is picking lilac and roses to place on her May altar.

I think grace looks like the mother of pearl cover
on my eucharistic prayerbook,

Later a broken window, raised voices, my uncle
out of his head; all of us

sleeping in my auntie’s bed.
(2020, 205)

This poem so deftly moves from the sensory to theosis in the contemplation on grace and that aesthetic appeal (rather than the content) of the prayerbook, and how quickly violence forces the speaker into a specific collective, “all of us”, a collective that needs to identify itself specifically for the purpose of protection, which they find in the shared safety of the auntie’s bed.

Undoubtedly, this lack of reciprocation is not exclusively an Irish Catholic problem, and Willie Jennings, building on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, has written compellingly about the “traditioned intellectual inquiry [that] constitutes the conceptual plateau” (Jennings, 2010, p 65-72) of the Catholic church’s social and theological performances since the Middle Ages. By “traditioned intellectual inquiry”, Jennings refers to a pedagogic pattern established by the Jesuits in the latter part of the 16th century, in the vision of its founders:

an order that would draw deeply from the intellectual well of Scholastic theology without imbibing its preponderant speculative and abstract character... a commitment to education as fundamental to moral formation and continuing with a strong appreciation for classic rhetoric and the study of classic languages—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. (Jennings, 2010, 66)

Notable in this description is the emphasis on the foundation of moral formation and the paring away of the speculative aspect. As I will discuss more in Chapter Four when I talk about class within church structure, it is important to note the gulf of difference between the classes of Jesuit formation and all the other orders in Ireland 400 years
later; for the purposes of this theopoetic reading of Meehan’s work, it is the problem of an Irish Catholic pedagogic theology that can only instruct and shape and never be instructed, shaped, challenged, reimagined within the boundaries of its own framework. When this theology is fused with state structures and laws regulating the private lives of Irish people, including their ability to work, own property, express their sexuality (heterosexuality, as well as queerness), and make decisions about their bodies (and the bodies that come from their bodies), eventually, it can only be adhered to or rejected wholesale. Meehan, like tens of thousands of others (Auge, 2013, 1) formally or less formally, appears to have done the latter, and yet the traces of that Catholic matrix are not simple biographical references, but part of the warp and weft of her creative output. Her work has been shaped by Irish Catholicism.

While studies such as Auge’s and McConnell’s do the important work of showing how deeply this is true of all of the Irish poets they treat (McConnell, of course, looking at how Protestant Christianity has shaped Northern Irish writers), these studies are not themselves theological texts; they are literary criticism that appreciates the presence and influence of Christianity on poetry. Meanwhile, I argue that contemporary theology, in particular Irish Catholic theology, can benefit from re-incorporating (corporeal language being key) and metabolising Meehan’s poetics of embodiment, non-violent self-making, public witness, and poetic situating moves that avoid appropriating the political space of Indigenous decolonial theory.

4.10 Paula Meehan’s locality and ritual poetics in Ireland

In this section, I will discuss some of the ways that Meehan’s poetry ritualises space and time, performing a communal role. Within environmental activist and academic spaces, I have observed that, when an Indigenous person is present, she (it is often a woman) invariably begins her work with ritual practices of thanksgiving, dedication, land acknowledgement and calling on ancestral support, as Lorena Cabnal (co-founder of the Association of Indigenous Women of Santa María Xalapán) did when she visited Trinity College Dublin in 2019, beginning her presentation by laying out a medicine wheel with the Xinca and Maya colours, flowers, and various objects, “to connect to the land of her
home while on distant soil”. These practices take time; some might complain, it is precious time away from issues to be engaged. Another interpretation, which I would argue, is that they make time, in the sense that they bear witness to what is at stake in the time of being gathered together, focusing on the how of engagement, as well as the content. In other words, these practices make time relational. They also initiate a spatial reorientation, from individual bodies in a physical or virtual meeting, to bodies-in-relation, to the land, to resources and other bodies.

Curiously while activists and academics who would not be identified as Indigenous accept, expect, or even admire these ritual practices, they do not generally think to perform them themselves, unconsciously allowing a form of othering within the social context of these meetings. In so-called post-Christian-specific secular spaces, it is very easy to see why this is so. One thinks of the legacies of sectarian Christian conflict in Ireland, for example, or the nationalist agendas of the Celtic Revival period in the early part of the 20th century, and the bloody birth of Ireland’s independent statehood. Outside of overtly religious forums, to begin an environmental policy lecture or an activist planning meeting with a Catholic prayer or an invocation of a Celtic deity would be courageous, indeed, but more probably foolish. Confessing religious poets could attempt to bridge this gap by writing prayers and blessings that can be of our time, but, while they may energize a popular interest in the sacred of the everyday, their unapologetic religious affiliations make them risky affiliations for actors in institutional spaces.

Poetry, in Ireland, offers one of the few remaining public possibilities for – in the language of this conference – “reclaiming one’s inner life”, and bridging the spiritual and the political, outside the Catholic State, Celtic Revivalist nationalism, and more recently, Celtic Tiger neoliberalism and all of its wellness capitalism. Revolutionary feminist spiritual technology exists within Irish poetic practice (such as initiating Freirean pedagogic engagements with working-class or incarcerated women, which Paula Meehan has done) and the content. And it is a technology to reclaim an Indigenous positioning characterised by unromantic care for the land and ritual of service to the commons, rather than a question of birthright citizenship. Poetry offers ways to resist
and sidestep this process. Poetics in the sense of poesis, from the Greek, “to make”, with its implied “power to make”, to make something that previously did not exist in the form that one has created. This kind of poetry restores a sense of the sacred into a desanctified and disenchanted world – disenchantment in the very serious way Silvia Federici means (2018), not in the sense of vaguely deflated. And if we think about the etymology of chant, to be disenchanted is to be deprived of song, to be un-songed. Mayra Rivera writes, “Poetics refers not only to styles of writing, but also to modes of knowing, being and acting in the world” (2015, 2). It is not necessary to be formally or even informally religious to explore how the sacred speaks. As a prophetic voice of Irish poetics, Meehan brings to bear some of the particular ways in which Irish poetry can do this now, and what it has to offer to decolonial movements. Consider one of the eleven poems that accompanies Dragana Jurišić’s photography in a small print run of Museum, a text published on the occasion of the opening of 14 Henrietta Street, a tenement museum in Dublin precisely in the formerly impoverished neighbourhood where Meehan was born:

Our Lady of the Apocalypse

Our Lady of the Apocalypse who never closed your heart to the dissolute, pray for us who gave shelter in broken down Georgian tenements, who kept the doors open to the demented ones, those who came in rags and miasmas of foul odour, in delirium tremens, the worn out old spunkers, the displaced relicts of imperial trauma. O sweet daughter of Memory, veiled in enigma, who brought longed for oblivion to the meths drinkers, the dipsos, the alcos, the put down no hopers, those who came in from chaos, from cold, from winds, from rain, to sleep it all off in hallways, in stairwells, who rent the long night with sobs, who cried out to you in the throes of their last agony, grant them eternal succour.

to Polyhymnia – Muse of Sacred Poetry
Ten sonnets and an envoi.
(Meehan and Jurišić 2019)
The line ending begins a hagiography with a negation, which is an affirmation, couched in another complication—never to close one’s heart is good, it is always to consider, to attend, but what does it mean for the Lady of the Apocalypse, a harbinger of disastrous revelation, to keep her heart open to the dissolute? What does it mean for the Angel of Death to love the lowly? She will tell us: one half of the sonnet describes how the poor survive, and the other half is how they are taken from life, in mercy. Form and language are important, of course—the form of the sonnet, its significance for Meehan, and the form of prayer, its old-fashioned irony (is this the prayer of the faithful? Who is speaking?), and the new life she breathes into it, as a reappraisal of tradition.

Consider the ethos of the poem alongside Chauvet’s description of “the mediation of the church” and his emphasis on “Christian identity, not salvation” (2010, 29). He emphasises the question of Christian belonging in contradiction to the notion of “anonymous Christians” for which Karl Rahner is known (Kilby 2011). He writes:

One can be saved without being a Christian, that is, without belonging to the visible church… but one cannot be a Christian without belonging to the church because Christian identity begins with the confession of Jesus as Christ, confession which from the origins has constituted the church. In this sense, there are no “anonymous Christians”.

Moreover, the circle is not closed; it is made up of dotted lines. This signifies that the church is not a ghetto, but that it has existence and meaning only because of its relationship to the reign, which in the world is wider than it… [the world] is not the reign; it is only its sacrament. (29)

Chauvet’s theology of Vatican II has hardly been felt in Ireland, however, where the experience is that the world, as constituted and regulated by the state and the church, acts as if it is the reign and has ultimate moral authority.

Returning to Meehan’s poem, the action is not obvious, though. The address is to Our Lady of the Apocalypse, of revelation, but when she says, “pray for us”, the “who” that follows belongs to the “us”, not to Our Lady of Apocalypse. Or at least, it is both. Pray for us/ who gave shelter… or Pray for us, Our Lady, who never closed her heart to the dissolute and gave shelter. Already the subject is troubled. As is the object of love. But there is no refuting that, while the sweep of the apocalypse affects everyone, this particular prayer attends solely to the dissolute and, possibly, the people the dissolute
themselves are caring for. During her talk at the opening of the Museum on 14 Henrietta Street, Meehan also mentioned that during the crash, it was the poor who were helping the poor and helping the immigrants integrate.

4.11 Intervention 4

I first encountered Paula Meehan’s name on a review copy of her 2000 collection *Dharmakaya* while working as an undergraduate editorial assistant at a literary journal. I knew a little that the word “Irish” was a both weighty and slippery modifier, because Seamus Heaney and WB Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon were all Irish, but there was this important business about Northern and Republic of, the Border, the Troubles, as Gailege and Anglo-Irish. It is noteworthy that whatever divisions registered in the hundred years between Partition and Brexit, churches and poetry on this island have more or less retained all-Ireland identities.

I was studying Irish poetry, and I still had yet to read Eavan Boland’s *Object Lessons*, in which she writes, “I know now that I began writing in a country where the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self-reflective individualism. Both states were necessary—that much the culture conceded—but they were oil and water and could not be mixed” (xi). I wanted to paint a picture of the great whole of what I didn’t know about Irish poetry when I found Paula Meehan’s slim volume and, expecting Yeatsian Celtic Twilight transcendence, or Heaney’s sacramentalising of rural life, or Mahon’s Calvinist restraint – I saw the title *Dharmakaya*, the Sanskrit word for “truthbody”, or “reality body” and thought “This is an Irish poet?” I didn’t read the book for years, yet I kept it. I grew into its talismanic power over the 20 years that I had it in my possession.

4.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on Paula Meehan's poetics, emphasising the failure of the Catholic church to recognize the inherent sacredness of the body in Ireland, in
accordance with the theology of Vatican II that Chauvet champions. Furthermore, Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, had significant implications for women’s bodily sovereignty, particularly in Ireland, where Catholicism's influence was so pronounced. Meehan’s poor working-class Catholic origins in the 1950s placed her at the forefront of that harm, yet Meehan has emerged as a significant voice in contemporary Irish poetry. I have wondered to what extent poetry served Meehan in ways that theology had not, in the ordering of her breath, and in the forms of embodiment that she has described. Were they the embodied instruction that nourished the social ethic of the poem "The Exact Moment I Became a Poet"? In my approach, I have aimed not merely to describe what poetry offers theology or to calculate the religious content in poems.
5 EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN’S FEMINIST CATHOLICISM

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the value of Paula Meehan’s poetry as something like redress and corrective to failings of Christian theology that didn’t originate in and are not unique to Ireland, but which have taken on very specific dimensions in the Irish context. These refer to embodiment, the inherent sacredness of the body, all bodies, and particularly the bodies of poor women. Without wanting to suggest that there is anything un-complicated about the category of class, I have discussed how Meehan’s trajectory as a poet, to a large degree, has followed a narrative of class “transcendence,” a word that requires quotation marks as to be sure to signify only the kind of transcendence I mean here, that from poor working-class beginnings to a more economically and socially stable middle-creative class, via the mechanisms of education, migration (and more education outside of Ireland), and a poetics that justly critiques the religious status quo in Ireland at a time when it was very risky, and therefore, very courageous, to do so. Class is far from irrelevant to theological formation in Ireland, associated as it has been with not just whether one was part of the Anglo-Irish (Protestant, settler-coloniser) ascendancy or the indigenous (Catholic, colonised) population. One cannot separate religion from class, and theology from religion, but these categories have not always operated uniformly. Under the pressure of colonisation, Catholicism performed its own class dynamics, whether in clerical, Jesuit, or lay configurations. I showed that the 1980s, when Paula Meehan’s publications were first emerging, were a particularly fraught time for the Catholic church in the Republic of Ireland, as both zenith and beginning of decline, to which Meehan’s poetry bore powerful witness.

In this chapter, I turn to the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuíleannáin to examine what it brings to the so-called post-Catholic theological matrix of Ireland. I argue that by being positioned somewhere between Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Romance languages, Republican politics, Renaissance aesthetics, Catholic hagiography of ordinary lives, and feminist
embodiment, Eiléan Ní Chuílleanáin’s poetry offers Irish Catholic theology greater complexity and deeper regard for women’s lives, beyond identitarian (nationalist or essentialist) feminism. Irish Catholic theology very much needs this. On the one hand, it needs feminism to diagnose within itself some of the concerns that I raised in Chapter Four, specifically the tendency to “feminise” all bodies that are not white cis straight and male, in a calculus wherein to feminise is to fail to see the sovereign sacredness of such bodies. The public (and initially very popular), political lives of two former Irish Presidents, Mary Robinson, and Mary MacAleese, both Catholic and feminist, would seem to demonstrate the hope that these can be compatible. On the other hand, if Irish feminism is to have any hope of contributing to (a contextual Irish) Catholic theology that doesn’t do harm to trans and non-binary people, it also needs its own diagnosis (and, ultimately, healing) of the reasons why, under the specific historical pressures of Irish politics dating back at least since the birth of the Irish state and the partition of the island, it has often resorted to essentialist ideas of womanhood. Ní Chuílleanáin’s work, in subtle ways, has resisted several different dangers posed to Irish women poets (particularly ones who admit publicly to being religious).

She has resisted the danger of silence within a masculinist, nationalist poetics that Eavan Boland described in Object Lessons as a space where “the word woman and the word poet were almost magnetically opposed. One word was used to invoke collective nurture, the other to sketch out self-reflective individualism. Both states were necessary... they were oil and water and could not be mixed” (2006, 15), and she has also resisted Boland’s claim that contemporary Irish women poets had no foremothers, citing the great influence that Speranza, the mother of Oscar Wilde (and once the better known of the two literary figures) on her work (Darcy 2021) and also drawing on Irish language poets, as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has done. This resistance, or insistence on writing and publishing, began with her first publication, Acts and Monuments, in 1972; Peter Fallon, who founded Gallery Press, was Ní Chuílleanáin’s undergraduate student at Trinity College Dublin at the time that he published her first collection, and Gallery Press has published every one of her subsequent nine collections, as well as a collection of translations of the Romanian poet Ileana Mălăncioiu (2011), a Collected (2020), and
Second Voyages (2022), an anthology of responses to her poems by fifty other poets, “one for each of the years Gallery Press has been publishing her work” (Fallon 2022, 11), on the occasion of her 80th birthday. To have been so championed by a publisher who has been a culture-maker of Irish poetics for over fifty years speaks both to her imposing talent and complex Irish aesthetics, which were apparent already in the first collection with the inclusion of “Lucina Schynning in the Silence of the Nicht,” a poem whose title is taken, as Paul Muldoon explains in Second Voyages (2022, 16), from “The Birth of the Antichrist,” a poem by the Scottish poet William Dunbar (1459-1530).

5.2 Intervention 5

I preface the treatment of her poetry with the reminder that I am less interested in the standard practices of literary analysis of poetry, which generally involve at least twice the number of words of analysis to words of poetry. Good analysis of poetry, of course, involves more than the intellect; the experience is sensory, often allusive (one seems always to be tempted to exit oneself and the moment and relate the unfamiliar to what one knows), but analysis of literature, generally, has come to mean something like explaining or unpacking the poem, and I am primarily interested in re-membering the experiences of both poetry and theology. This means that what I write about the poems is an archive of the experience that the poem has mediated, in Chauvet’s sacramental sense of mediation, rather than an explanatory text. In articulating this, I realise I am on the edge of articulating something theological, remembering the Jewish theologian Joshua Abraham Heschel, whom I mentioned in Chapter One. Heschel’s claim that faith is more faithfulness to an event or experience of the divine marks poetry as liturgical (again in the sense Chauvet means), in that the poem both mediates and signifies (as an archive) an experience that is ultimately ineffable. And yet words are spoken and have an impact and give voice, at least in poetry, to the individual and collective imagination.

Here is Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem:

Lucina Schynning in the Silence of the Nicht
Moon shining in silence of the night
The heaven being full of stars
I was reading my book in a ruin
By a sour candle, without roast meat or music
Strong drink or a shield from the air
Blowing in the crazed window, and I felt
Moonlight on my head, clear after three days' rain.

I washed in cold water; it was orange, channelled down bogs
Dipped between cresses.
The bats flew through my room where I slept safely.
Sheep stared at me when I woke.

Behind me waves of darkness lay, the plague
Of mice, plague of beetles
Crawling out of the spines of books,
Plague shadowing pale faces with clay
The disease of the moon gone astray.

In the desert I relaxed, amazed
As the mosaic beasts on the chapel floor
When Cromwell had departed, and they saw
The sky growing through a hole in the roof.

Sheepdogs embraced me; the grasshopper
Returned with lark and bee.
I looked down between ledges of high thorn and saw
The hare, absorbed, sitting still
In the middle of the track; I heard
Again the chirp in the stream running.

(2020, 19)

The embrace of the natural world, including the domesticated (the landscape, the moon, the stars, the rain, water, bats, sheep, mice, beetles, sheepdogs, grasshopper, lark, and bee) makes a kind of balance between exposure and safety. Knowing nothing about the history to which the poem refers, one can immediately register a kind of alterity in the voice, a different time or place, in the particular diction, “the heaven,” rather than “the sky,” and “without roast meat or music/ Strong drink or a shield from the air”. The poem still has music and imagination, and still mediates an experience. But knowing even something about Ireland, certainly the name of Cromwell and then certain images, if not immediately the “ruin” in the first stanza, then “the sky growing through a hole in the roof” (depicted in many Irish figurative paintings, showing the strategy of dispossessing
the Irish peasant by destroying the roof of the cottage, so that no shelter is possible), and three mentions of plague, history begins to emerge from aesthetics. And yet it’s not the most important aspect, and there are still layers of meaning to uncover. As I stated in my discussion of poetry’s modes in Chapter Two, this indeterminate and yet very real space the reader of poetry occupies between what the poem communicates, and what the reader apprehends (which are rarely ever the same thing, but there is, finally, some relationship between the two), can speak deeply to theology’s responsibility both to express and guard the mystery of the divine.

5.3 An aesthetics that dissolves a simple idea of Irish Catholicism

Returning to more standard analysis, I acknowledge that more is to be gleaned from this poem. The poet Paul Muldoon points out in his contribution to *Second Voyages* that the title is taken from “The Antichrist,” a poem by the Scottish poet William Dunbar (1459-1530). He also points out that the poem is in the form of “a dream-vision...” (better known to Irish readers as “the aising genre”). Muldoon continues, referring to an anonymous poem about the first Irish aising, “in which a beautiful woman appears to the poet and explains to him that she is Ireland, an Ireland that has been badly used by England”. (16) After this, Muldoon refers back to the title of Ní Chuilleanáin’s first collection, *Acts and Monuments*, which itself is a reference to a book by the same name published in 1593, a later edition of which is augmented to give an account of the horrific violence that took place in 1641 when Catholics planned an insurrection of Protestant settlers in numerous cities (Jackson 2014, 315-333). Muldoon draws the link from that history to Ní Chuilleanáin, thusly:

It was partly in response to such atrocities that Cromwell attacked Drogheda in 1646 and massacred what some estimate to have been 4000 individuals. The hanging, drawing and quartering in 1681 of Oliver Plunkett, the last Catholic martyr to die in England, was an extension of the same process. Saint Oliver Plunkett’s head is still on display in the cathedral in Drogheda. And it was another member of the same family, Joseph Mary Plunkett, who was shot by the English in 1916 for his role in the Irish Rising. Joseph Mary Plunkett just happens to have been Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s great-uncle (18)

It's tempting to try to tease out from Muldoon’s response to Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem
where his religious (at least formatively) and political allegiances might lie, given his Catholic Northern Irish upbringing, but it is precisely this kind of “figuring” along encoded binaries and oppositions, i.e., Irish/Catholic, British/Protestant, and even Irish but Protestant, or Northern Irish but Catholic, that Ní Chuilleanáin’s aesthetics destabilise. Though she is not generally referred to as a political poet, Ní Chuilleanáin admits the destabilisation herself in her essay, from the same period, “Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation: The Cailleach Writes about the Renaissance” (1995, 1), when she writes:

A Gaelic-speaking female papist whose direct and indirect ancestors, men and women, on both sides, were committed to detaching Ireland from the British Empire is found holding forth in the capital of an Irish republic about the heroic days of the Reformation and of God’s Englishmen... [and] like others who share my linguistic background, I am aware always of the presence of the past and of the strangeness, the untypical edge on the way I read history. We read with anger, anger forced through the narrow passages created by minority languages and small audiences. For a group of readers numbered in thousands, the English poet Spenser's claim that he was present at the execution of O'Brien in 1579 is not merely the depiction of a strange and barbaric scene:

... as namely at the execution of a notable traitor at Limerick called Murrogh O'Brien, I saw an old woman which was his foster mother took up his head whilst he was quartered and sucked up all the blood running there out, saying that the earth was not worthy to drink it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her hair. crying and shrieking out most terribly.

That demented hag speaks for a culture of intimate bonds, of bodily and verbal affections that we know closely with our tongues because we know the language and the poetic shapes, the keening formulae and the bardic idiom of praise, which gave them expression. Never mind for the moment the incompleteness of our knowledge: its exclusiveness prints it sharply. (1-2)

Ní Chuilleanáin does not clarify whether the “demented hag” is related to the “Cailleach” of the title, which does not appear in the Irish anywhere else in that essay. In Irish folklore, the Cailleach refers to the mythical An Cailleach Bhéara, or the Hag of Beara, a figure from Irish folklore, depicted as a wise old woman, or land-goddess, and a frequent figure, as with other Irish folklore, in the poetry of the Celtic Twilight, often in the translations of Lady Augusta Gregory (1919). The claiming of an Irish mythical designation comes with risk, as so much of what passes for “new,” non-Christian Irish
spirituality has its roots in the nationalist spiritualism of Lady Gregory’s time (Gibson and Mann 2016). Returning to my previous formulation about Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s resistance above, this, too, she resists; or at least, she shows that it is possible to be feminist, invested in Irish folklore and Catholic. As it turns out, this can be a very powerful positioning for attending to the women that Irish feminist women either don’t want to or don’t remember to think about: women who are religious, and “women religious,” as is the way in Ireland to refer to cloistered women or otherwise women who have taken vows (also known as choirs sisters), and lay nuns, as well. This is not a very popular figure in so-called post-Catholic Ireland.

5.4 Not so post-Catholic Ireland

By saying “so-called”, I don’t mean to deny the receding of Catholicism from its previous prominence. I only mean that, as with other Western nations, Ireland is not as post-Christian (or post-Catholic) as it would appear, or as Irish people would imagine. This is not because people are attending Mass or making their First Communions or Confirmations as much as they previously did, but because there is an entire older generation, those the same age as Meehan and Ní Chuilleannáin, even Bryce to some extent, that is trying to make sense of what happened in Ireland in the last decades (one can find many of them filling a lecture hall for talks at the Loyola Institute at Trinity College Dublin), and a younger generation that finds Ireland’s Catholic past embarrassing, without fully being able to understand conditions that have not been part of their own lived experience. Both populations find its abuses, understandably, outrageous. Many young Irish feminists (those born in the 1990s and later) with whom I’ve come into contact while living in Ireland find Catholicism, or any kind of organised religion, either abhorrent or, as one friend has asked, “Can’t it all just go away, and we start over and make something new?” It is explicitly because I have been invested in Christian theology (and poetry) through a liberation and decolonial lens for nearly a decade that I apprehend risk in proposals to “start over and make something new,” or put new wine in old wineskins (Matthew 9:14–17, Mark 2:18–22, Luke 5:33–39), particularly while social and civic structures pretend that the old wineskins are empty or
don’t exist (Garrigan 2010, xiii), in other words, that Christianity is no longer relevant in Ireland.

It is not my task, as I stated in Chapter One, to make a case for Christianity’s or Catholicism’s validity in Ireland, as an apologetics, and it’s for this reason that I refrain from invoking traditional, foundational Catholic sources, Desert Fathers (or Mothers), the Patristics, and so on. My task is, firstly, to make a case that while Catholicism and Christianity continue to be a shaping force—which would be true even if, in one generation, there were no more Catholics left in Ireland—wrestling with and becoming literate in its spiritual and social performances, like taking the time to understand one’s childhood, can be meaningful and healing for society; and secondly, to demonstrate that Irish poetry, which has a prominent place in Irish culture, and many enriching possibilities on its own account, can aid in the bolstering of this non-triumphalist, more socially grounded and embodied theology.

One example of the persistence of Irish Catholicism’s impact and presence, against rationalist notions of secularism was the veneration by reportedly three million Irish people of the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in 2001, during their eleven-week stop in Ireland, part of a wider European tour. As Andrew Auge points out in his treatment of relics and nuns in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry (2013, 145-167), this attendance by what amounted to seventy-five per cent of the Irish population, Catholics from both sides of the border, presumably, came after several events in the 1980s and 90s that would have both sealed and represented the decline of the Catholic church: the public outrage over the death of Anne Lovett and her baby, as discussed in Chapter Four; the first of several disclosures and subsequent investigations launched into sexual abuses within the church and church run institutions, as well as the systematic covering up of these; followed by the overturning of laws regarding contraception (1985) and divorce (1996).

Another example, which also has the possibility of performing the embodied and situated theopoetics that I claim in Chapter Two, as well as the possibility of connecting to the wider scope of exploring Irish Catholicism (as a measure of contextualisation, towards greater global accountability) outside of Ireland, comes from my experience in
Dublin during the final stages of the doctoral programme. In the two months before the end of this programme, I took residence in Inchicore, a part of Dublin not far from the Liberties, where I lived for the first four years. Adjacent to this residence is the Mary Immaculate Church, built in 1876 on property purchased in 1856 by French missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (National Inventory of Architectural Heritage n.d.), an order founded in France in 1816 by Eugène de Mazenod (The Vatican n.d.). I will return to some of the theological considerations that this site instances in the Conclusion, but it is relevant here, in the discussion of the obscured endurance of Catholicism, and fugitive efforts to work out its impact on aesthetic terms, efforts that can be very useful for theologians working to contextualise Irish Catholicism with all the tools of feminist, postcolonial and decolonial thinking. Returning to the physical site now, on most days, I walked several times around the garden joined to the structures that comprise the complex, the church mentioned above, a House of Retreat, the Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál (translated as Immaculate Conception School), a co-ed Catholic primary school, and a reinforced concrete replica of the grotto at Lourdes, which was built in 1928. The garden, called the “Rosary Way,” has a circular, paved path that features “twenty white porcelain ceramic panels portraying the mysteries of the Rosary in bas-relief,” commissioned by the Oblates and executed by the contemporary ceramicist Helena Brennan between 2001 and 2004 (The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate n.d.). I was familiar with the ceramic work, but this form was so surprising and out of context from the hand-thrown Japanese porcelain and stoneware I’d admired in pottery exhibitions, that I did not immediately recognise the work of an artist known to me.

However, it was very obvious that the ceramic “mysteries” were executed by an artist who had given quite some thought to the task, had brought forward the fullness of her critical art historical education, and had taken a risk that would be difficult to articulate (or defend—some of the pieces are cracked, from having been battered, according to a fellow park goer). But the risk was immediately apparent to me, even if it took me some time to conceptualise it: in every instance where human figures appear, sometimes as an entire bust of Mary or Jesus (the two of them together at Cana), or just Mary’s hand holding a tiny smaller hand, beneath which a small ceramic plate says
“BIRTH,” the physicality of the human form is unmistakable. In the plate, designated “KINGDOM,” which is meant to be one of the “joyful mysteries,” the bas-relief rendered figure lies supine, feet forward toward the viewer, an evocation of Andrea Mategna’s *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c. 1480). In the panel showing Jesus’ baptism, the scene at Cana, and the transfiguration, there is no mistaking the figure for Warner Sallman’s white European Jesus (1940); Brennan’s holy mother and son are definitively Palestinian Jews, in sharp contrast to the rest of the more standard figuration on the Oblate campus.

Not that such visual signs are always so open to interpretation, albeit interpretation that takes time. However, I cannot help, looking at those porcelain panels, thinking about the opacity of the white figures in the window, and how their popularity may have to do with the conventional European figuration of femininity, whereas the figures in the porcelain panels rail against that image. I draw this reflection, not quite intervention, into my argument to underpin the power of art to participate and critique, simultaneously, normative religious narratives and practices, not just directly, by declaring what needs to be corrected but demonstrating and embodying the correction. Both representing and mediating an experience of a different imagination. From here, I want to turn to the last form of resistance within Eiléan Ní Chuilléanáin’s poetics (the previous resistance named was against being silenced or the notion that she lacked predecessors, and against simplistic Irish nationalism): resistance to normative feminism that, in Ireland in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (arguably, still), would consider itself incompatible with religion entirely.

5.5 The freedom of religious life

Maybe because she strikes such a formidable and Cailleach-an presence, with her incredibly long white hair, Eiléan Ní Chuilléanáin may be the only woman in Ireland who can write for an entire poetic career about the minutiae of the lives of nuns, with gentleness and care, and who can cast, on the other hand, the option of feminine married life in an ominous tone; however if one recalls from the last chapter, until 1973, if a woman in civil employment married, she would have to give up her job. In 1973, Ní
Chuileanáin was already thirty-one years old. And whereas Eavan Boland’s work demythologizes the female figure, extracting it from nationalist symbology and claiming public space for motherhood as an appropriate as subject for poetry, Ní Chuileanáin has frequently chosen as subjects for her poetry female religious figures, historical and contemporary, sometimes her own relations. She presents their lives complexly as both privileged and circumscribed by the patriarchal structures of church, state and society.

Take “Sister Marina”, for example, from The Mother House:

‘Was there no drama in their lives?’
Once, it was almost Passiontide
and in Lent of course no letters arrived --
people knew better than to write.
So, when a letter landed postmarked Lancaster
for Sister Marina, Reverend Mother
opened it and read it and went to find her
just leaving an empty classroom. She closed the door
and handed over the letter. Reverend Mother
was by two years the younger;
now for the first time in her life she saw
a face dragged backwards, dragged down, and how
pain and fear come first, and only about
two seconds later the beginning of thought
weighing down on the heart. She saw the brother’s wife,
the brother grim-faced as ever, the sick child
as they printed on the other woman’s mind,
as plainly as if a light had flickered
and lit them up in a screened picture.
Nothing that happened after so clearly displayed
how the body is all summed up in a face,
in a flaw -- how knowledge travels all the way
down through a body and burns into the floor.
That was drama, she thinks, and hopes for no more.
(2019, 31)

I initially had to read the poem several times to repeat its prompt to gasp at the end; so startlingly intimate is this complete and total answer to the question of the opening line. It is rare in Irish poetry by any gendered poet to witness the embodied direction of “how knowledge travels all the way/ down through a body and burns into the floor” within a convent. The poem testifies to how poems, like theology, need language to exist and, at
the same time, locate knowledge in something other than language, but rather something that travels through the body. I can’t help but wonder how critical engagement with this poem might be informed by the Black Catholic theology of M. Shawn Copeland, for example, which names “the body as a site and mediation of divine revelation”, shaping “human existence as relational and social” (Copeland 2010, 2), whose understanding of the Trinity is a manifestation of difference of gender, race, and sexuality, and for whom solidarity is a set of body practices. Consider now the poem that Colette Bryce selected to reflect on in *Second Voyages*:

The Married Women

Yes. But you can have no idea
what she was runing from,
feared far more than the convent with its high stairs

it was those women with their bangles
their stiff new hats at Easter
their weddings and honeymoons in the Channel Islands.

Their daughters had ponies, their husbands
had business and whiskey. Their hair
was crimped in salons, they met each other for coffee

in town after ten Mass. To the child
they seemed made out of timber and steel,
stiffened by a dose that had penetrated their flesh,

poisoned and tinged them lightly purple.
She avoided them all her life:
then on a Monday morning in a pool dressing-room

she saw a woman, that timber face,
her towel as crips as ever, her jeans
so stiff and brisk on their hook she thought of the new hats.

The woman turned, and under the towel as if
shrouded by the mantled oxter
of a heroic bird was a girl’s mother of pearl sheen,

a girl’s hesitant body, sheltered by the bird’s broad wing.

(118)
5.6 On being religious

Where Meehan and Bryce publicly repudiate their religious upbringing, Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin does not. Asked how she explains persistent references to Catholicism in her poetry (shrines, relics, the lives of often unknown but also more documented religious women, convents, orders), and whether Catholicism is an empowering force, Ní Chuilleáin clarifies her position:

I am not talking about my personal beliefs or about what I think should be the role of religion nowadays. I am writing about what’s there. Religious beliefs are very much alive in Ireland in many different forms, as are our folk beliefs. All kinds of beliefs do exist, for example beliefs that certain people may be able to cure certain diseases. The people who do this would often refuse to take money and would say a prayer. So there is a mixture of custom, obligation and belief. These things are real. I am talking about the social and actual presence of religious observance in Ireland insofar as I know about it. Those are the things that I am writing about; I think you can’t pretend they are not there. And I have to say of course that I am myself a fairly religious person, but that is not what I am writing about. (Ní Chuilleáin 2017, 222)

Attention to "what's there" is not apolitical, but, as I will show, Ní Chuilleáin's poetry challenges the easy association that to attend is to condone. In a sense, what is remarkable about her poetry is the way it quietly insists that the lives of a systemically oppressed class (women) within a dominant class (Christians) are also worth attending to. Only she doesn't present women as inherently oppressed; she presents them as subjects of other powers. As the poetry will illustrate this more directly, I offer the example of the second poem, "She Was at the Haymaking," in her The Mother House (Chuilleáin 2019). The poem begins with the figure of a woman working a field, but the first three stanzas give the reader something of the interiority of this figure:

She was down in the small field
turning the last swathes of hay
on the slope facing the river mouth

(each time she came back up
she saw the wave so gently courting
the land with shallow pushes
and the curved edge of the tide
making its way upstream)
she was alone in the field --

The image is less labour, more reverie, in part due to the long vowels of "swathes", "slope", and "mouth," but also the sensual language of "gently courting," "shallow pushes," and "curved edge". The reader sees what the subject sees, and, finally, with "she was alone in the field," the total subjectivity of the female figure is established, as well as the direction she will take. She is "down in the small field," but:

they were up in the house with Mary
whose bag was packed, waiting for the car
to bring her on the first stage,

the start of her long voyage
away to the far shores
of America and the novitiate.

The naming of Mary lets us know that we are still in the point of view of the unnamed figure. Besides being a common name for an Irish woman of Ní Chuilleanáin's age, Mary cannot but make the reader think of religious Marys, and this now being a story about two women, one named Mary, anyone with a handful of stories from the Gospels might think of Martha's duty and labour, of Mary's devotion, the conversation generally reduced to who serves Jesus better. This is not imposing a narrative framing into Ní Chuilleanáin's poem; in the Catholic Ireland, the poem describes that narrative is, as Ní Chuilleanáin says, "what's there". But she doesn't write to confirm "what's there," as we see in the rest of the poem:

She worked on with the rake
thinking of the rolling wave,
an eye watching for the car.

When she heard it on the road
she brought the rake up with her
on the steep path to the house.

They were all there in the parlour,
Mary sitting in the middle,
her face amazed. ‘I can’t go.

Now that it’s time, I can’t go.’
Her parents said nothing. Her sister
had come to bid her goodbye,

now she said, ‘So I’ll go.’
She shook a small bit of hay
out of her hair. She washed her hands,

she took up the bag and went off with the driver
to a house full of rules -- so far away
that when she wrote to say she was happy

the letter took three weeks crossing the sea.
(2020, 312)

The title announces the narrative. The reader is given “She was at the haymaking,” reminiscent of medieval or early modern poems where the title is the incipit (titles of poems being a later convention). The poem begins its work even while announcing itself, i.e., John Donne’s “Batter my heart, three-personned God”. The expectation is: that she was at the haymaking when something happened. The something that happens is one sister is in the middle of work while the other, Mary, prepares to go to the US to become a nun, and at the last minute, Mary can’t go, and the first sister takes her place. But notice how she is already travelling, adrift, already on the sea, and so the poem has already brought her body (and ours) into the future, even before we know what will happen. The narrative has the quality of thinking while working, the idealised version of what it might be like to be a monastic, to be free in mind while hands are busy -- at least, before one is “enlightened” enough to think only of God, or to realize that one is already always thinking of God while attending to the world. But she is in motion while the rest of the figures are still. Only the sisters speak. They have the greatest agency. They speak, they decide. Mary decides not to go. The unnamed sister decides to go. The parents are part of a still life. The driver is instrumental. The sisters have agency.

Finally, as with the case study of Paula Meehan’s poems, it is important, perhaps, to say directly once more what I mean by reading this poem theologically, answering the question, what is this poem saying theologically? The reading of the sisters, Martha and
Mary, is just one layer, perhaps the more superficial one. And yet the referent is there. The deeper story here is about a willingness to be transformed, and about how, reading the world sacramentally, one is already oriented toward transformation, even before the movements become conscious. This is no identitarian view of being human. At the same time, it is important to examine where identitarian reflex arises. I turn now to the question of identity.

5.7 White cis North Atlantic criticality beyond virtue signalling, or how to write about gender in a non-essentialist way

I have shown in this chapter how engaging with the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin, besides having thematic theological interest, has particular value for feminist theology by complicating essentialist ideas about womanhood and femininity, a tendency to which Irish feminists may be more vulnerable, given the particular pressures under which Irish feminism has been constructed. However, to talk about femaleness as an identity marker, it’s important to say something about how identity categories function, beyond borrowed understandings in Ireland of North American-formed intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 1989).

Identity categories are dynamic, concentric circles, even when sometimes two or more categories seem to map flush on each other. Consider, for example, my poetic subjects: Paula Meehan, Eiléan Ní Chuillleanán and Colette Bryce. Among the identities that they share are the following: they are cis female, white-bodied, Catholic-formed, and Irish; and yet immediately, the impulse arises to qualify at least the last three of that identity with the adverb "complexly". Complexly white, Catholic, and Irish. Drawing on a disability justice consideration, they are also all "temporarily abled;" it is poignant in that, while no visible or invisible disabilities are apparent, this lens acknowledges a universal vulnerability to the incapacitating effects of illness and ageing; Ní Chuilleannáin was born in 1942, Meehan in 1955, and Bryce in 1970. As elder poets, Meehan and Ní Chuilleannáin are both members of Aosdána, a distinguished and life-time stipend-bearing (a little over 20,000 Euros per year) Irish association—within it, Ní Chuilleannáin is one of six Saoi, meaning "wise one," a position previously held by Samuel Beckett and
Seamus Heaney--and have both been appointed a three-year Ireland Chair of Poetry professorship by the President of Ireland, Meehan in 2013 and Ní Chuilleanáin in 2016 (honours that one can reasonably predict will eventually be bestowed on Bryce, as well).

The point of all this accounting is that even these initial circles are only incidentally mapping atop each other. In terms of class, while Meehan and Bryce may share the category of working-class, to an extent, these circles begin to pull apart, given the different conditions of the Catholic working-class in mid-20th century inner city Dublin and late 20th century Derry/ Londonderry; Meehan's poetics, she claims, draw, not from books, but from the oral tradition of the flats, "the stories, the singers, the old people... the sometimes very empowering lore" (Randolph 2009, 239), while Bryce's "mother was a teacher and had a strong belief in education, seeing it as a passport out of unemployment". For Bryce, "Poetry wasn't a central thing but song and prayer were," (Brown 2000, 311). Meehan and Ní Chuilleanáin have had long-term partnerships with men, the poet Theo Dorgan, and the late poet Macdara Woods, respectively, both of whom appear, named, in their poems. Bryce is queer and reticent, and, had I not read an early interview with her, I'd never have known that one of the poems of hers that I most love, "Itch", is both one of her oldest poems, written in the early 1990's nearly ten years before she published her first collection, and closer to my own experience than I'd previously surmised in that when she writes,

Things I begin to tell her
I believe she cannot hear

for the whispering like wishes
of Jesus softly breathing there"
(2000)

she is referring to coming out to her mother, "a more playful take," writes Bryce, "on who we are versus who we're supposed to be, in our parents' eyes (ears?), and how religious interference can deafen people to real experience" (2005, 4).

All three poets have spent personally formative and poetically generative time outside of Ireland for periods of time, Meehan in the US and Greece, Ní Chuilleanáin in Italy, Bryce in Spain and--to make the complexity more visible--she has lived most of her
adult life in the UK (in the "North of England," as it often appears in her author bios, Ireland) and is the current editor of Poetry Ireland Review, and, as such, is a shaper of what will, in a short time, be called Irish poetry from the early 2000s. Ní Chuileánáin, who also translates from Irish, Italian, and Romanian (all of which she learned) is a Renaissance scholar (referring both to her many activities and to the historical period) from Cork, which Irish people will claim is worlds away from Dublin and Derry. She is the daughter of a university history professor, Cormac Ó Chuileánáin and the Irish author Eilís Dillon, whose uncle Joseph Mary Plunkett was one of the sixteen executed for his involvement with the 1916 Easter Rising. Ní Chuileánáin’s close, familial Republican links are no more "historical" than Meehan's great-grandmother, who was "one of the big brothel keepers in Monto," an area of North inner city Dublin, where Meehan was born, considered by historians (2007) as previously the biggest red-light district in Europe during and towards the turn of the pre-Irish Free State of the 19th century. With a characteristically colourful economy, Meehan narrates personal and collective place and history:

That area, my old childhood zone, was a law unto itself. The police didn’t want to go in there, they didn’t want to find some lord in bed with some young one, or indeed young fellow. They didn’t want to find the soldiers in the same place as the revolutionaries, drinking in the shebeens. It was a no-go area where the laws pertaining to the rest of the country just didn’t hold, so the police didn’t go in. It was sort of a territory unto itself; it’s the night town that Joyce visits. He would have been seeing it just before its end. When the troops pulled out that was a lot of the customer base gone. Many of the old prostitutes ended up as meths drinkers, they came to terrible ends. At its demise, when the economic base was shattered and there was no political protection, Frank Duff was able to lead his Legion of Mary in with their crusades to ‘clean up’ the area. They went through daubing crucifixes on the doors of the old brothels. A lot of the old prostitutes ended up as Magdalenes, penitents, working in the laundries for the rest of their lives, for the religious. I remember those sad women the times I used to haul our family sheets down to the laundry up the street from us, with their brutal haircuts and their cowed spirits. My great grandmother went all religious at the end of her life and under Frank Duff’s influence left all the houses to the Legion of Mary and the Church. (241-242)

From British to Irish (Catholic) State reality, Meehan maps the rippling contingencies of colonial trauma: the military presence, sex, disease, death, addiction, and religious
exploitation of the vulnerable. This, too, is history, no more subjective for being one poet's personal account (the background details are well-documented) than being part of the more wilfully constructed, repeatedly re-inscribed, re-commemorated narrative of the Irish State in the last century, the period between 2016 and 2022 being particularly full of activity, with centennial commemorations of the Rising, Independence, Civil War, and Partition. As one example, while walking down Seán McDermott Street (formerly Gloucester Street, after Prince William Henry, Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh, in the former Monto, now more regularly called Dublin 1), several plaques pay tribute to Republican heroes, including Seán Mac Diarmada, also one of the sixteen executed after the Easter Rising, but, as of 2023, there is no public literature on or near the still existing building of the Magdalene laundry Meehan mentions to commemorate unnumbered victims enclosed therein from the institution's opening in 1887 until its closing in 1996.

In this chapter, I have been focusing more on gender, but in a way that aims to unsettle simple narratives of Irish women as victims. In contrast to Paula Meehan’s pointed subversions and refashionings of Catholic symbols, Colette Bryce’s restrained redirections toward both more personal and more formalised experiences of the sacred, and both poets’ acknowledgement of Catholicism primarily as inheritance rather than continuing confessional faith, Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems about nuns and religious life extend from her own publicly acknowledged active Catholicism. However, her poems are neither acts of religious devotion (though, in some cases, they could be interpreted as low hagiography), nor as catechism or apologetic. Rather, they attest to a sacramental view of language and a ritually compensatory view of poetry, as she writes, “It sometimes seems that poetry compensates for a historical loss [one] cannot conscientiously deplore in the real world, but which still aches and requires comfort in the fictitious world of poetry” (47).

This is especially true in the case of a historical loss present in Ireland, but not only in Ireland: the fact that religious women have, throughout Christian history, held up the church, not been recognised for doing so, and been excluded from formal leadership, and thus, excluded from formal participation in shaping how the church
shapes (and is shaped by) the world. I specify “formal” participation because I don’t wish to paint women as victims who merely supply passive bio-power (Foucault), without agency. Eiléan Ní Chuílleáin does not wish to do this either. Women religious, for Ní Chuílleáin, are agents, and it’s for this reason that I focus on the poems that treat specifically the lives of religious women, as well as her prose about poetry’s ritual possibilities, which she addresses most directly in the essay, “Instead of a Shrine,” given as a lecture during her tenure as Ireland Chair of Poetry. Her resistance to the pressures of writing about (secular) “women’s issues,” might be tacit opposition to (not disavowal of) the poetics of her contemporary, the late Eavan Boland, who is a foremother to many contemporary poets as the poet who demythologizes the female figure, extracting it from the nationalist figure of Ireland or the young, idealised moral symbols of triumph, and presenting motherhood as both valuable and appropriate as a subject for poetry. Eiléan Ní Chuílleáin frequently chooses as subjects for her poetry female religious figures, both historical and contemporary, her own blood relations, and presents their lives complexly as both privileged (in the opportunities for travel, education and maybe even escape from motherhood) and circumscribed by the patriarchal structures of church, state, and society. Ní Chuílleáin also makes religious women the subjects of her creative inquiry in *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989) and *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* (2001). Ní Chuílleáin was writing about ordinary religious women’s lives before Yvonne McKenna interviewed nuns in and returning to Ireland (2006). Hers was not a popular subject amid Irish feminism responding to church-state oppression, but she managed to “make it new”, in the modernist sense.

The title of her last single collection *Mother House* suggests religious life and community. A mother house is the headquarters of a Catholic religious institution, led by a superior general, for example, Arturo Sosa as Superior General of the Society of Jesus. In the case of religious women, this centralised community structure was not available until the 19th century, and in Ireland, it was a contentious affair, where most women’s orders were started by charitable middle and upper-class lay women who were not always interested in starting religious orders, but the social structure in Ireland was such that forming religious communities was the only way these women could do the
work they felt spiritually called to do. In notable cases, Catherine McCauley (founder of
the Sisters of Mercy) and Frances Ball’s (founder of the Irish branch of the Institute of
the Blessed Virgin Mary) enterprises were encouraged by powerful clergymen to
become religious, with centralised congregations, a mother-house and superior-general,
but then eventually all were forced to cut ties with the mother-house in Rathfarnham,
as the Bishops wanted convents in their diocese to be answerable only to them. A
mother house can also call to mind the Mother Church, the Catholic Church as a mother
to Catholics and the Bride of Christ. In contemporary Ireland, it is impossible to read
“mother house” and not hear the echo of “mother and baby home”.

In “An Imperfect Enclosure,” the poem that opens Mother House, Eiléan Ní
Chuilleannáin writes about Honora “Nano” Nagle, the founder of the first of many
women’s charitable orders during the 18th and 19th centuries in Ireland, to whom the
poet also returns in “A Map of Convents,” later in the collection. On the surface, this
poem, the entire Mother House collection, seems to serve the purpose of many of Ní
Chuilleannáin’s poems: to draw attention to the lives of women, particularly religious
women. This works on the level of representation. The second function, however, is to
draw readers into the lives of these women, to make them real in an intimate way, in
the embodied responses of the readers of the poems.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin writes:

I’ve always been fascinated by convents and nuns. Because of my family
background, I spent a lot of my time visiting convents, and I wanted the reader
to be aware of the kind of work that goes on, the way work happens in convents,
and the kind of regular, disciplined, predictable life there. Another reason why I
write about nuns and convents is that their history can be quite mysterious. In
Ireland, up to about the year 1800, convents were illegal, but they still existed in
a very small, private way. We know about them, and we know their history in a
very oblique fashion. We only pick up traces of what actually happened. (2017)

To understand the drama of Irish women’s contribution to the state and culture of
Ireland leading up to Independence, and their subsequent disenfranchisement, one
would need to examine an imaginative matrix of sources, including labour history and
literary studies.
The poem’s title comes from a quoted phrase by Nano Nagle, who wrote to one of her supporters: “Perfect enclosure is not possible in Ireland, and I own that I would not be glad to see it introduced” (Clutterbuck 2021). At Nano Nagle’s time, perfect enclosure would not have been possible for Catholic religious women because of the penal laws but might not have been possible for any women at all.

An Imperfect Enclosure

_for Nano Nagle (1718-1784)_

She was out in all weathers.  
She was tired, someone gave her a chair in a shop. Rested and then away, in the street, on the move.

The house she built first, giving on the street -- could she close up doors and windows on that side?  
It would be noticed as a convent.

She asked to be buried in the common cemetery.  
They broke through the wall of the nuns’ graveyard

and slipped her coffin inside.  
But she would not stay, so they built her a stone tomb nearer to Cove Lane

and opened a latch at one end so hands can touch the coffin.  
(2020, 311)

The first three words, “she was out”, already tell us a great deal about the subject of this poem. One way to read it closely is to look at all of the clauses that indicate her experience and agency: “she was out”, “she was tired”, and “she asked to be buried”. Everything else is in relation to others, in the third case (and likely in many cases not mentioned) in contradiction to her agency or desire. This poem is thinking about enclosure (religious and not), belonging, doing the work approved by religious spirit vs. the approval of the church, and passing through borders (literal walls, gaps inside of
stone tombs. What can be said about the significance of touching the coffin? As one touches relics. What is important, in a Catholic sense, about touch? Andrew Auge writes, “The willingness to invest the body with a heightened spiritual significance has long been a hallmark of Catholic women religious” (2013, 148).

Nano Nagle was educated in France, which was illegal for Catholics, and wanted to educate poor young girls, and start a religious order of women -- all illegal under penal laws), giving and being given, about breaking the penal codes, about life and legacy, honour, and intimacy (What does it mean to touch the coffin? What kind of sentiment is that? Is it particularly Catholic, like veneration of relics? Or something older?). It’s not entirely clear immediately what is meant by “The house she built first, giving/ on the street,” -- is this a house of an immaterial or supernatural nature, i.e., a community of giving, house of commons, houses in drag balls in New York, i.e. the House of Extravaganza, etc. or different kinds of oikos? The line ending does this work, suspending giving, before “on the street,” so, now multiple meanings are in play: house of giving, giving done by the subject, giving on the street, as in giving to the poor, and giving on the street, as in overlooking the street. The last meaning is brought to the fore in the following lines: “could she close up/ doors and windows on that side? / It would be noticed as a convent”.

This is also one answer to why an “imperfect” enclosure. There is confusion about this house that is like a convent but has windows to the street. A perfect enclosure would be a convent. Nagle was a laywoman. She “set about establishing a non-enclosed sisterhood which would teach in schools for the poor, and also carry out other missionary and charitable work with the old and the sick”. (p 107) These non-enclosed orders were common on the continent, but not in Ireland. It was “perfected” in 1805 (after Nagle’s death in 1784), when the group was formally approved by the Vatican (changed from the Sisters of Charitable Instruction to Presentation Order), and solemn (instead of simple) vows and enclosure came into effect, not allowing the sisters to go outside the convent to work among the poor.

The imperfect enclosure could also refer to the tomb, which still allows access for people to touch the coffin. What emerges from reading this and other poems in The
Mother House, is the active obscurity of Irish women’s contributions to religious and social life -- by becoming absorbed into the canonical tradition of the Catholic Church (under material and social pressures -- coming under the umbrella of the Church could secure access to funds), these women’s stories are now doubly obscured by the (very legitimate) social exhaustion and anger with the Catholic church. When one is interested in the marginalised, what about the marginalised who are also increasingly social personae non gratae, women of the church, particularly women of the Catholic Church of the generation that reached the terminal moraine of the 21st century? This kind of resistance to, tolerance of, absorption and suppression of lay women who are moved by the religious spirit to organise, form communities, share resources, and do social work is nothing new. One famous example is the Beguine communities in the Low Countries during the 13th-16th centuries. However, Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry allows readers to approach with curiosity and wonder, rather than the heaviness accompanying any consideration of religion in Ireland.

5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuileanáin, plumbing its potential contribution to Ireland’s post-Catholic theological context. Ní Chuileanáin’s work, positioned at the crossroads of various cultural, linguistic, and historical influences, allows religion and feminism to coexist in ways that don’t otherwise seem possible in Ireland, and for this reason it can help facilitate the communion between these two that theology very much needs. There’s a tendency in contemporary Ireland to view the nation’s Catholic past primarily as an embarrassment, but there are not very many nuanced ways to distinguish between guilt and shame, which would be an important step towards healing. While I no more defend Catholicism as Ní Chuileanáin does, I do argue that attending to and grappling with this history is needed, and that, given the place Irish poetry holds in the social imaginary, poetry can be a facilitating medium in this process.
6 COLETTE BRYCE’S POROUS BORDERS

6.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I have examined how the poetry of two writers formed by Catholic tradition in the Republic of Ireland might constructively inform and ultimately constitute a more critical-contextual theological hermeneutics. In those analyses, Paula Meehan’s writing (and public life) offered instructive tools for embodiment, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poems, particularly in *The Mother House* (2019) and other poems about religious women, demonstrated ways to make class visible within and without church institutions in Ireland. As so many of Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems explore the lives of religious women, they also attend to and honour lives obscured by the Irish Catholic Church’s arch narratives, particularly that of its decline, something that is very difficult to do in the prose of modern leftist social justice efforts, inclusive of feminist ones. Simply, in contemporary Ireland, as in other places, it is difficult to be feminist and openly sympathetic to anyone involved with the Catholic Church (Mac Curtain 2008). Of specific importance to this study are how the revelations of institutional abuses punctuating this decline have been particularly trauma-focused and traumatising in Ireland in ways that have not yet been properly explored by theology (for this to happen, a humbler, more critically reflective theological mode is needed) In summary, these poet-focused chapters highlight a particular knot within theology, a site of failure, even harm, and demonstrate how, through an engagement with poetry written by Irish women, one can open new perspectives and possibilities for critical Irish theology.

In this chapter, I turn to another socio-theological knot in Ireland: how to orient theologically towards the suffering and division caused by the inability to recognise the "other" as relative and neighbour in Christ. I am speaking specifically of sectarian conflict in the wake of and as a continuation of preceding colonial trauma(s), which, at least from the Cromwellian period, has made it impossible to separate religion and politics (Garrigan 2010; ). Here I will think theologically with the poetry of Colette Bryce (a poet approximately thirty years junior to Meehan and Ní Chuilleanáin). To make an important distinction here, thinking theologically is more than looking for evidence of religious themes within a particular poetics, or, alternatively, seeing how one discipline (poetry
or theology) can shed light on the other. And I have to be cautious to say, it is also not the case of investigating how poetry might function as theology, in the sense of replacing its function. What all of these formulations lack is the element of intimacy, and the momentary loss of self or the binaries that say “this; not this”. Earlier in Chapter Four, in the introduction to my discussion of Paula Meehan’s poetics, I described the kind of encounter I mean as akin to an embrace between poetry and theology. The image of the embrace provides the elements: the intimacy, the preservation of the alterity of each individual, yet in a space where there is a mutual orientation of the other and a holding. To think theologically about poetry is to renounce the position of the independent perceiver of the sound of poetry, or the images it conjures in the imagination. It is to resist the notion of capturing something fixed and instrumental, the poem as a vessel or container of meaning. The poem, like the Sacraments in Chauvet’s theology, mediates the experience; it holds, and remains itself and points, as a symbol, beyond itself, to the experiences of which it is also the archive, in language.

6.2 Historical Context

To talk about theology (or poetry, for that matter) in Ireland, one must talk about politics, and vice-versa, no matter how much resistance there is to this fact in the media, in government and among Irish people. In 2006, less than ten years after the Good Friday Agreement, which ended thirty years of violent conflict in Northern Ireland (primarily), Ireland and Britain, Claire Mitchell writes, “Conflict in Northern Ireland has not been, is not and will never be a holy war. However, religion is much more socially and politically significant than many commentators have presumed”. (Mitchell 2006, 1). Four years later, Siobhán Garrigan writes, “Contrary to popular perception, the two [religion and politics] are not separable: in an Irish context, religion and politics are the warp and weft of the same piece of cloth”. (Garrigan 2010, xii). It is remarkable, then, that, even as recently as the last decade, religion and spirituality have been marked as “troublesome knowledge” (Carlisle 2016) among mental health social workers in Northern Ireland, with the exploration of “religion within the service user/social worker relationship has been viewed as being ‘off limits’ within anti-sectarianism”, (Carlisle 2016). The article
argues that religion and (religious or secular) spirituality may be present in service users' and social workers' lives in very different forms, in patterns where fewer social workers may identify as religious than service workers, or where the religious identification between social workers and service users may be with different denominations. Simultaneously, since religion is considered "off-limits", there is no way to access this (nonetheless active) elephant in the room, which is particularly troubling given that, according to a 2020 report on suicide in Northern Ireland:

Mental ill health is one of the leading causes of disability in Northern Ireland. Moreover, research suggests that Northern Ireland, being a post-conflict society, experiences 20-25% higher levels of mental health illness compared to the rest of the UK, and around 1 in 5 adults have a diagnosable mental health condition at any given time. There are also significantly higher levels of depression in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK, higher antidepressant prescription rates, higher incidences, and presentations for self-harm (albeit that in many cases, people who self-harm do not present for medical attention and are not visible to healthcare professionals) and high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. (Black 2022, 5)

Recalling the argument that I made in the Introduction that an incapacity for nuanced discourse on religion in the context of Ireland is not just lamentable but harmful, one can discern the need within academic theology in Ireland to reflect on its social responsibilities--continually drawing on, updating and contributing to the resources of other disciplines (poetry being one), particularly those that are concerned with truth and justice--as well as reflecting on tradition and the nature of the divine in more theoretical terms. Even as Claire Mitchell (a sociologist with a publication record that demonstrates a deep commitment to justice) calls theology "the least socially significant dimension of religion", she acknowledges that it "can compel believers towards peace and reconciliation as well as political opposition", (117) and presumably towards a recognition, maybe even embrace, of the other; this recognition and embrace would include the notion of otherness in oneself, the alienation of which has been shown in so many ways to be the condition that creates the perception (or projection) of an oppositional and antagonistic other (Walton and Hass 2000; Zizioulas 2006). Again, it is not that divisions in Northern Ireland "revolve around doctrinal disputes... people rarely cite theology as a reason for their political fears" (Mitchell 2006, 2), and yet, the links
between theology, religion, and politics exist and are dynamic. The failure of theology on both sides of the border to explore and assess its own conditions contextually (and the failure of theological discourse outside of Ireland to recognise the particularity of the Irish context) has a powerful bearing on social life in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Furthermore, writers examining these concerns, from journalists such as Fintan O'Toole to social workers such as Patricia Carlisle above, nearly universally arrive at the intractable, "troublesome" problems of language. In what follows, I move the discourse from here to re-establish relationships between religion, theology, language, and what poetry may have to offer, a little differently in the context of Northern Ireland and through the poetry of Colette Bryce than in the previous two chapters.

6.3 We have choices concerning troublesome terminology

I make a choice in this chapter not to refer to the period of acute conflict between the late 1960s and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 as "the Troubles", unless necessary (within a quotation), for several reasons. The most obvious is simply, that the minimalising language of this term is incommensurate with the suffering that is its referent, with respect not just to lives lost directly during the conflict (3,532), or those injured (over 47,500), but also to the numberless ways in which such violence tears at the fabric of trust and intimacy that makes individual and social life beyond survival possible. High levels of domestic violence (Carr and Cuddington 2020) and higher levels of mental ill-health in Northern Ireland, as compared to the rest of the UK and the Republic, are a few examples of the more visible aftermath of this period of conflict. Before statistical data went under review in 2021, The Guardian had reported in 2018 that, in the thirty years since the Good Friday Agreement, the number of deaths by suicide in Northern Ireland had surpassed the deaths from the thirty years of active conflict (McDonald 2018). The earlier reports underwent review, as some of the data sets did not conform to the current categorisation of what constitutes suicide, but it's not that there were fewer deaths than initially counted, just that more of them were technically "accidental" due to drug overdose than intentionally self-inflicted, a tragic hair-splitting that, viewer through a more trauma-informed lens (Maté 2018), makes
clear that there is no hierarchy of suffering. While it is, of course, important to have accurate data on rates of suicide, the bigger picture is the landscape of suffering profound enough to lead both to self-inflicted suicide and "accidental" death by drug overdose.

Apart from these historical considerations, I also refer to methods concerning language outlined in Chapter 2. Recalling both Saidiya Hartman's and Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí's work, I challenge the re-presentation and re-enactment of particular violence, in this case, in language, through the inevitable reduction of a traumatic, historical, political, theological sequence (Haider) to something that is, in a literal sense, unthinkable. The language of troubles connotes primarily affect, i.e., "troubled waters", a person is "troubled", or has "trouble in mind", as in many blues lyrics, or the typical Irish response of one or two generations ago, and in media, as consolation for a death in the family, "sorry for your troubles", a phrase that the poet Pádraig Ó Tuama explores in his second collection, for example. Be that as it may be, applying the language of individual affect to politics of violence, the effects of which radiate from individuals out into greater society and back again, has the peculiar effect of both dulling feeling and stymying the cognitive mechanisms by which people collectively process grief (which, of course, goes beyond cognition, but needs cognition to consider notions such as justice, mercy, reconciliation). While the words conflict, and war, carry gravitas (if at a formal distance) and accountability, meaning that one can account for belligerents, for the kinds of arms and strategies used; both accounting and analysis become possible in this way. By contrast, the "Troubles", first used in a Belfast nationalist daily paper to refer to Northern Ireland on 15 August 1969, is, according to Éamon Phoenix in The Irish Times, "a euphemism which had the advantage that it avoided ascribing blame to any of the participants" (Phoenix 2019). The other advantage was to minimise the conflict, allowing those responsible to minimize the grievances that underlay it, and to blame “a few savages” for “disturbing the peace” rather than owning the inevitable consequences of British-governed partition on the island of Ireland.

To clarify references to Hartman and Oyèwùmí: In Scenes of Subjection, Saidiya Hartman theorises her refusal to describe--to re-present--an instance of physical
violence that the abolitionist Frederick Douglass had documented in his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, posing the questions (my rephrasing): what would be the function of such a representation, and to what effect? I am not claiming that the violence she describes is the same as the violence of the language used to depict this particular conflict, only that the awareness of the mechanisms of repetition is not innocent or benign. In *The Invention of Women*, Oyêwùmí reminds us that by analysing particular accepted constructs (in her case, the Western construct of gender; in this study, the language used to describe the conflict), scholars create that particular construct, by accepting to validate its terms.

Finally, resisting this shorthand terminology for the conflict is also a way to dispel the notion of discrete violence that began and ended on a specific date and is represented by statistics of people killed or injured within that timeframe. Many forms of violence are thusly erased: for example, the heightened incidence of violence in the domestic arena that often accompanies periods of public, militarised conflict, violence, particularly against women, to which (anthology of Northern Irish women’s voices) bears witness; arguably, the legalised violence of legislation restricting women's bodily autonomy and the right of queer people to marry (same-sex marriage and abortion were legalised last, both between 2019-2020, in Northern Ireland, compared to Ireland or the rest of the UK, although other LGBT rights, for example, the right to change one's gender designation in the eyes of the law, were legislated along with the rest of the UK).

6.4 The help and the limitations of existing trauma theology

In an earlier discussion of theopoetics, I referred to the work of Shelly Rambo in *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (2015). In light of conversations about trauma during the cross-border conflict of “The Troubles”, it is worthwhile to return, momentarily, to her work here. Rambo's project begins in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina--twenty-nine months after the hurricane, to be exact—in New Orleans, where Rambo has gone with a group of students “to do some rebuilding” (1). Rambo, in a sense, instrumentalises the event and the particular words of a local deacon, "The storm is
gone, but the 'after the storm' is always here" (2), to explore her project. Helpfully, she acknowledges the hurricane's wider dimensions in reference to the work of Robert Jay Lifton and Vietnam veterans. She writes:

According to Lifton, what is unresolved about one war becomes the seeds of the next war... Studies of slavery and racism in America point to the cycle of traumatic repetition enacted in respect to historical truths that are continually covered over and buried. Analysis of Hurricane Katrina tells us that the trauma of Katrina cannot simply be limited to the violence of a natural disaster, but must be located within the broader and long-standing structures of oppression that existed long before the storm hit. (27)

However, she does not linger long on the ground of the particular trauma that instances her study, nor here, on this acknowledgement of the "broader and long-standing structures of oppression". They are neither named nor footnoted, and the text moves directly from this consideration to an accounting of "[theories] and interpretive frameworks for trauma" (27) in the next paragraph. There is nothing wrong with this per default. Rambo is working in a mode of academic theology, following its conventions. However, it is worth considering different audiences to whom this text may or may not speak; for example, does it speak to those for whom the "broader and long-standing structures of oppression" are the warp and weft of daily life, and if not, what are the implications of that? Is this to do with the thorny business of white feminist theology? Is it inappropriate for Rambo's theology to speak to communities to which she doesn't belong, not least of which because she herself is a visitor? Should she have tried? While I do not speculate answers to these questions, they have been perennially relevant to me throughout this project that speaks "to" Ireland and also holds close Howard Thurman's challenge to Christian theology, worth repeating here:

Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustices on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself? (Thurman 1996, xixx)

Rambo's meditation on trauma and theology has limited application for my study, not because it is not sound academic theology, but because, as mentioned before, more foundational work is needed in the context of Ireland to ensure that being in the wake
of colonial trauma is properly situated. This, too, is theological work, but it is work that, like poetry, tells truth slantwise, drawing as much from other disciplines as from theology. Notably, I have on multiple occasions above deliberately used the language of "the wake" to invoke the work of the American thinker Christina Sharpe, specifically, her 2016 text *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. The poetics of "the wake" in Sharpe's book are profound in that the form of this word "wake" comes to hold a great deal of meaning in relation to the collective trauma to which she applies it, transatlantic slavery. Wake, as in waves that follow a ship, the gathering that often precedes a funeral, the verb meaning to rouse--Sharpe explores all of these meanings in the project of making visible the ripples of suffering in the aftermath of the catastrophic mass violence of the institution of slavery.

Sharpe doesn't start with grand narratives, however. She begins with the most intimate of institutions, that of the family. She writes:

> The overriding engine of US racism cut through my family's ambitions and desires. It coursed through our social and public encounters and our living room. Racism, the engine that drives the ship of state's national and imperial projects ('the American ship of state . . . the ark of the covenant that authorised both liberty and slavery': DeLoughrey 2010, 53) cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow. (Sharpe, 2016, 3)

Sharpe's framework addresses anti-Black racism in the US, specifically. Its central metaphor for collective trauma, the wake, invites deep reflection. The wake is a deep cultural referent in Irish life. The wake comes between death and burial, as a site of both grief and, if possible, connection. And there must be a way to speak about ships and suffering, in relation to the Irish who perished after the Great Famine, about the wake of this trauma and what it meant for those who left and those who remained. In an interview, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill talks to Jody Allen Randolph about what happened to the Irish language after the famine. She explains that, after its suppression by the British during the Penal Laws of the 17th and 18th centuries, it was briefly reclaimed, and, in a sense, disowned by the Irish after the famine. Ní Dhomhnaill writes:

> It was a reminder of hunger. The economic historian Cormac Ó Gráda told me that 80 per cent of the people who died in the Famine were Irish speakers only—monolingual in Irish. Because you hadn’t a hope at all without at least some
English. Seventy to eighty per cent of the people who fled to America in the first sort of Hijra were Irish speakers only and their average life expectancy in the New World was four years. When he said this I thought, ‘My God, you go through the coffin ships and after all that you die within four years. It would have been better to have stayed at home.’ And they disappear into history, the Irish-speaking monoglots. (Randolph 2010, 93-94)

This is no mere historical study from a distance. Indeed, something that can be said of many contemporary Irish public figures is that they have links to the historical traumas of the last two centuries still within familial memory. Ni Dhomhnaill continues:

My father’s mother’s family, for instance, the Cotters, came to Cork City from West Cork because they were going to America after the Famine. They had paid their passage. But one of them developed typhoid and they stayed on to nurse this person. They gave their passage away and they were going to get the money back. But they never heard from them again, because they probably didn’t live. (94)

Rather than displace the original subject of Sharpe’s metaphor, I want it to unearth the deep correspondences at the roots of racism across different contexts in the North Atlantic to open new possibilities for humility and solidarity. Christina Sharpe’s poetics in In the Wake: On Blackness and Being provide avenues into the difficult temporality of colonisation and post-colonisation, a temporality that has correspondences in trauma theory and is explored very little within most contemporary theological exploration.

This discussion is relevant to Ireland because there is no aspect of Irish life that colonisation does not touch, yet it can be difficult to make this visible. Thinking back to Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill’s mermaid quotation, and previous reference to M. NourbeSe Philip’s poetics, the very fact that the best-known Irish poetry (that of Yeats, Heaney, just to name two Irish poets raised to the world stage by being recipients of Nobel prizes) exists in English, rather than Irish, is a challenge to the notion of post-coloniality in Ireland, and at the same time, being able to argue for a postcolonial lens in Ireland would make colonisation visible.

In offering interpretations of numerous meanings of the word wake, Sharpe’s text invites a way of thinking multiply and plurally, from which I do not want to detract, but rather to add, with the image of the Irish wake, a deeply resonant image for Irish identity. The temporality of the wake is that the past continues in the present (what is
the theology of thinking about time in this way? Is it apocalypse? or a kairos/chronos
dialectic). The inability of most North Americans or British people to see Ireland and
Northern Ireland is a dangerous lack of nuance in thinking about race and empire.

The only texts I have read that directly address Ireland in the complex framework
of colonisation are Akala’s, Dabiri’s, Dunbar-Ortiz, Painter, Garrigan and a few older texts
such as Noel Igantiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (2008), which is the groundwork for
thinking about what happened to Irish people once they left Ireland and went to places
where they could assimilate into whiteness and white supremacist frameworks. The
famines as both collateral and primary colonial damage. The stress that colonisation
places on relationships, including relationships to God and the church.

The way of reading history as discrete events is wrong. One can read colonial
traumas in Ireland as direct links to each other, beginning with the last twenty years and
revelations of institutional abuses, and looking backwards. The trauma of the first
hundred years of the Irish State and partition. The incredible complexity and nuance of
the Easter Rising, Independence and Civil War era. One looks back further, considering
the evidence that those who participated in the rebellions for independence hailed from
the areas hardest hit by the famine. Also, looking at the history of the institutionalisation
of the mentally ill in Ireland, many institutions directly resulted from the aftermath of
the famine. I know it is worth mentioning explicitly that the famine was not due to a
shortage of food but to the management of the British government, which was
deliberately genocidal in its governmental policies.

It would be tempting at the end of this study to conclude that formal theological
avenues haven’t worked and, therefore, there is no point in doing theology in Ireland.
One form of theology is to advance Christianity, as apologetic, to find the cracks of hope
within the walls of doubt, dismissal, and unbelief (it used to be the other way around,
that doubt was seen as the crack in the walls of belief). Another would be from a position
of academic humility, as described in Vanessa Machado de Oliveira’s *Hospicing
Modernity*:

1. We can have conversations that do not reproduce to the same extent the
   harmful hierarchies of modernity.
2. We do not idealise or romanticise any discipline or knowledge system.
3. We can be deeply respectful while also highly sceptical of our own and different worldviews.
4. We combine relational and rational forms of rigour for better research, teaching, and service. (de Oliveira 2021)

In thinking about how different theological lenses develop, I'd like to illustrate the dynamics through a few different metaphors, all found in nature (and challenging us human beings to remember ourselves as nature): mycorrhizal networks (also sometimes called mycelial networks) microbiomes within human organisms and fractal geometry. What these three metaphors share is an iterative (in that one thing builds on a previous other thing, vertically, and is also susceptible to other influences, laterally), interrelated nature and a property of moving between complexity and chaos. Catherine Keller, leaning on the fractal metaphor, writes:

The "iterations" exhibited in fractal geometry comprise interrelations: it is a relational sensitivity, i.e., a responsiveness to an incalculable multiplicity of influences, that imports the "chaos" into a system. Through interrelation, the iterations "amplify" the initial conditions. All theological interpretation (at least that which recognises itself as interpretation rather than revelation) today exposes itself to an incalculable multiplicity of influences—movements, powers, protests, doubts, cultures, desperations, expectations. One pursues hermeneutical complexity. But one always risks chaos. (5)

Considering the metaphor of the microbiome, the body of Christ (as described in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians), Christian theology, and the human body share the property of an identity, and a selfhood, that is accurate only insofar as it doesn't obscure the otherness within itself, i.e., the incredible diversity among Christians (those for whom the Eucharist is central, those for whom the Trinity is irrelevant, etc.); the different approaches to theology; and the diversity of living organisms within the human body that shape, through incalculable biochemical reactions, our propensities to illness, our digestive preferences, our moods, and to some extent our perceptions of ourselves and the world. In terms of the more literal body of Christ, there is even, in the work of Hannah Malcolm, a fascinating experiment with contemporary thinking about biological mutualism, reading "Irenaeus' defence of Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension as a promise for all flesh" (Malcolm 2023).
Colette Bryce was born in Derry, into a Catholic household, at the start of 1970, the material implications of which are that conflict in Northern Ireland had erupted while she was in utero. This is no mere sentimental detail, but one that, given contemporary understandings of epigenetics and intergenerational trauma, has significant implications. She moved to the UK at 18, as she and others of her social background were encouraged to do and has lived most of her life outside of Derry, and yet there’s no mistaking the Irish identity that comes through her poems. Across five thin collections of poetry, approximately thirty have to do with Derry, Northern Ireland, or the conflict, most of them found in her fourth collection, *The Whole & Rain-domed Universe* (a description of how she thought of Derry as a child). Her poetry, when studied by literary methods, reveals frequent references to the Northern Irish poetic tradition of Luis MacNeice and Derek Mahon.

6.5 The poems

Poets’ lives are, in some ways, like Christians’ lives (and some poets are Christian) in that they express something out of and through themselves, in faith (whether in God or something else, but in any case something unseen, as the yet unwritten poem is something unseen), that reveals their individuality, and yet they are associated with those with whom they share a particular habitus, to borrow a term popularised by Pierre Bourdieu (1977). At least, I can say this generally about poets and Christians in the context familiar to me, but this is not to universalise the statement -- poetry and Christianity are diversely expressed and have different functions and dimensions in different contexts. One difference between poets and Christians is whether the sense of belonging is primarily top-down or the reverse. In other words, the sense of belonging for a poet, to a particular group or movement (whether desired by or imposed upon the poet), if it comes, comes as a result of producing and publishing poems; meanwhile, Christian baptism and other sacramental rituals, across diverse denominational expressions, can be said to constitute the structure of belonging within which the Christian expresses oneself as an individual Christian. Colette Bryce's first book, *The Heel of Bernadette*, was published in 2000, and, as such, Bryce, who was born in Derry in 1970
(into a Catholic family), is considered a member of the generation of Northern Irish writers who followed an intense period of poetic activity in the work of Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and to a lesser degree James Simmons, and Seamus Deane.

In Chapter Two I posed the question: What does contemporary poetry by Irish women offer that is helpful to theology in the context of Ireland? Along with other properties I listed--possibilities for deeper attention by looking askance, the practice of repetition and ritual, consideration of the ordinary, a formal commitment to truth and resistance to generalisation--I counted poetry's capacity to help the reader embody her own physical presence, as well as to embody accessible and safe forms of humility, ambivalence, and ambiguity. Nowhere is training this last capacity into reflex more important than in the context of Northern Ireland, where perceived oppositional identities are so difficult to destabilise, even if one has acknowledged the "system of relationships", as Claire Mitchell (2006), drawing on Ruane and Todd (1996) does. The system of relationships, argues Mitchell, "has three interlocking levels: a set of differences, a structure of dominance, dependence and inequality and a tendency towards communal division", (3) expressed in binaries such as Protestant or Catholic, Irish, or British, settler or indigenous. Moreover, Mitchell's analysis demonstrates, these oppositions have a basis in a lived experience of difference playing out in social relationships (4):

So if somebody is a member of the Catholic community, even though they may not practice or believe in their religion anymore, their associations with Catholicism remain. Because of the way Northern Ireland is organised, people's contact with the churches and religious ideas usually continues long after they cease to be active members. Contact is maintained, for example, through education, the role of the churches in family formation and the religious ideas and symbols in everyday life. (4)

While her terrific sociological analysis in the book's sixth and seventh chapters, "Religious Ideology and Politics" (91-116) and "Theology and Politics" (117-132), illuminates the Catholic and Protestant habitus of Northern Ireland, it can be very difficult to approach these subjects as a Catholic or Protestant theologian. It is presumed that one is overtly or covertly attempting to justify one position or another (Ó Tuama
and Jordan's book on Brexit and the Book of Ruth is a notable exception of an evangelical
Protestant and Catholic collaboration, and it is no accident that before his untimely
death in 2020, Glenn was a devoted reader of poetry, and Ó Tuama’s reputation as poet-
thologist is well-established). Poetry, as a kind of third space between all binaries, can
do a great deal, as Colette Bryce's poem "And They Call It Lovely Derry", from her 2005
collection The Full Indian Rope Trick, demonstrates. As with previous poems, I share
longer poems in their entirety sparingly, only when it is necessary to read straight
through the poem.

And They Call It Lovely Derry

And so, strangely enough, to Florida.
Twenty from our side of the River
Foyle and twenty more from the other,
lifted out of a ‘war-torn community’
to mix three weeks in a normal society.
That was the general idea.

When we arrived we were paired
and placed with a host couple, good
church people, settled and stable.
She was the first Prod I had ever met;
a small girl, pale and introvert, who wept
for home, then sniffed, and smiled.

The husband sat at the head of the table
holding forth, hot and bothered.
He couldn’t decide on the right word,
hmmed and hawed between Blacks and Coloured,
whatever, his point? They were bone idle,
wouldn’t accept the jobs they were offered.

The woman dreamed of having a child.
I took to the role of living doll
and would tolerate each morning’s session
under the tug of curling tongs.
I had never heard of Racism.
We gave a concert on the last night,

forty of us, rigid with stage fright.
My whistle shrieked on a high note.
We harmonised on all the songs
but fell apart with the grand finale,
the well-rehearsed ‘O I know a wee spot...’
as the group split between London and Lovely.

(2017, 22)

In the first stanza, the oppositions are established. In a brief explanation of this poem before a reading, Bryce mentions the question of proximity and contact, how “the less contact you had with the other side, the more likely that you would get selected for one of these trips to America, and hence, “strangely, enough to Florida”, strangely in many senses because, to have this encounter with “the stranger”, one has to leave the place where one has the greatest proximity to the stranger, to cross the Atlantic. The juxtaposition of the ‘warn-torn community’ in quotes vs. normal society, sets up another binary.

In the second stanza, with “Good church people”, immediately we get a definition, settled and stable, so to be good is to be materially adjusted. This is a first encounter. The short, taut lines convey the sense of uneasiness, the forced nature of the encounter, and the alienation. The tacit patriarchal dynamic is boiling beneath the surface in the third stanza. The inextricability of racial, religious, gender and class politics even in this single stanza. Recalling the history of the transformations Irish people underwent having once crossed the Atlantic. The way he talks about Black people in the US reflects what the child would certainly have heard said about her identity group in Northern Ireland during the tumultuous struggles of the Troubles, the civil rights marches, and the activism that she would have grown up around.

The particular force in the fourth stanza of the delayed “I had never heard of Racism”, the poem enacts a kind of consideration of the previous stanza, an implicit and embodied knowledge (which often slips or is actively discounted within more conventional theological discourse) of the interrelatedness of the gender dynamics between the woman and her husband, their strangeness to the speaker, the notion of Racism, which the poet capitalizes. And in the final stanza, one has the full force of the failure to see the other as anything but stranger. What Bryce can say about class, race, and sexuality with poetry is so difficult to bring to the fore non-violently. In language that is both revealing and troubling, this poem manages, in 30 lines, to say things that it
would take our theological discourses a great deal of time and text to say: that in the failure to recognize the other as fellow, the violent gestures of patriarchy and colonial whiteness are always intricately fused within theologically constructed identities. The poem brings renewed, urgent relevance to the political context from which this poet comes, and I am thinking about recent riots in Northern Ireland. Thus, poetry offers a kind of third presence to sit alongside, to sit with the disasters it names and doesn’t resolve. In this way, poetry exercises a right, even a luxury, that political and theological discourse don’t have. I turn to this problem now.

6.6 The helpful failures of language are taken up in poems

Poetry and prayer often begin where ordinary language fails. It is, however, useful at times to put poems into context, to understand some of the energy they are transmitting. I rely momentarily for this context on the journalism of Fintan O’Toole, a regular contributor to The Irish Times. O’Toole leans frequently into Irish poetry as he explores violence and language in, We Don’t Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Ireland Since 1958 (2021). The period and events described in this book offer significant insight into the Ireland out of which Colette Bryce’s poems emerge and why poetry can speak to collective suffering sometimes more effectively than religious language. In the chapter “The Body Politic” (318-335), O’Toole considers a policy change in 1976, at the height of the conflict, that re-criminalised political prisoners in Northern Ireland (in the previous four years, political prisoners had been given “Special Category Status”, in part, according to O’Toole, to dissuade hunger striking by IRA prisoners). But as O’Toole shows, this new political condition affected not just politics and society, but the very nature of language, creating a crisis of sign and signifier that, as he describes, the Church tried, but did not succeed in addressing. According to O’Toole, this logic of giving things their proper names was not just British scientific rationalism. It was also what John Paul II tried to do in his sermon in Drogheda in 1979. Pope John Paul II gave the sermon in Drogheda (in lieu of Armagh, the seat of the Irish Church, a Papal visit to which could not be risked then at the height of the Troubles), in which he denounced violence, in no
uncertain terms, and essentially begged the IRA to cease its campaign. O’Toole continues:

At its heart was his decree, delivered with the full authority of Christ’s representative of Earth, ‘that nobody may ever call murder by any other name than murder’. Essentially, the pope tried in that sermon to do exactly what the British were attempting in the H-Blocks: to fix once and for all the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The name for shooting someone in the head is murder and, once the act is so named, it is heinous. The British defined that heinousness as crime, the pope as mortal sin. The effect was the same: the meaning of the act is objective. This was, however, precisely why the IRA could not respond to the pope’s plea. Its system of classification was not objective but subjective. (322)

Words matter and words create matter, Édouard Glissant reminds us, as the medium in which “thinking thought... spaces itself out into the world” and into people, in whom “its risk” – the risk of thinking thought – “becomes realised” (Glissant 1997; Rivera 2015). In other words, the imaginary’s risk becomes realised in people, through words, something made grotesquely evident in the way language for prisoners in the H-Blocks became embodied in the dirty protest, the blanket protest and the hunger strikes of the early 1980s in Northern Ireland. Where O’Toole’s semiotic analysis reveals the value of the “body politic” as an irrefutable intervention within a violent formula that severs signifier from signified, this study appreciates the intervention of a poetics of body and embodiment as a recombinant formula that restores the communicative (transformative, liberative, healing) power of language – if not of theological or religious language per se, then at least language with theological and religious capability and content.

Poetry, on the other hand, offers helpful ways to enter this process non-violently, “In its layered construction of subjectivity”, writes the literary scholar Lucy Collins, “poetry has the potential to extend how the dynamics of self and other can be understood, offering new ways of reading the relationship between the emotional life of the individual and the larger social and political contexts that have shaped these perceptions” (Collins 78). Once given permission, through poetry, to undergo the expansion Collins describes, one still relies on one’s familiar structures and values, however, this is how religious sensibilities are so often present in poets who, in
adulthood, do not claim to practice a religious faith. Returning to this chapter’s poetic focus, Bryce has credited the rhythm and power of hymns and prayers as her first sensitisation to poetry, a common experience for poets who grow up in the practice of Catholicism. It is often the texture rather than the content of the songs and prayers that drive the poetic sensibility. The same may be true with the “content” of one’s place or home; a poet comes out of a particular place, but it isn’t until she writes herself back into it that a real sense of either origin or belonging (even if in the past tense) can emerge. In the poem “Derry”, Bryce offers some ways of reading herself and her own formation:

I was born between the Creggan and the Bogside
to the sounds of crowds and smashing glass,

by the River Foyle with its suicides and riptides.
I thought the city was nothing less

than the whole and rain-domed universe.
(2017, 78)

The sensory and political context, and the accompanying traumas and sense of present danger contributed to the formation of a fragmented wholeness. When what you know is all that exists. But unstated, the poet was also shaped by what she read, and here one sees the echoes of Louis MacNeice, whom Bryce often cites as one of the strongest influences on her work, along with Seamus Heaney, and Shakespeare. This sphere, too, forms a fragmented wholeness, as one often reads whatever is most available, culturally, in a white male-dominated literary economy.

Political activism was a big part of the poet’s life in Derry; as she remembers in an interview with John Brown, “a lot of it was about remembering and grieving, some of it about seeking change” (Bryce 2002, 313). Revealingly, she continues, “I wouldn’t say I attempt to engage with Irish politics through my work... if I wish to engage with politics there are far more direct and effective avenues”. But poetry is made of whatever made the poet, and, as such, has inherent potential for non-violent self-constitution, in ways that are more difficult in academic discourse, where form and intellectual tradition, as well as the material structures and constraints around intellectual production, seem to
necessitate endless replication of dualisms and fragmentation of categories. Poetry is most representative of what can’t be represented, and most revealing to theology, when multiplicities of meanings are allowed to exist alongside each other.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the challenge of theologically addressing the suffering and division stemming from sectarian conflict, a continuation of colonial trauma, while engaging with the poetry of Colette Bryce, looking primarily at complications of language, and the inextricability of theology and politics, despite the difficulty of acknowledging religion within civic space. I have also stepped, somewhat cautiously, in the direction of trauma theology, which I would find a promising area of future study. I now turn to bringing together all the threads of the different themes and poetry with which I have spent the last years.
7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

I lived and learned the strange mix of the religious, the historical and the political, and the day to day. Easter is a good example of this mix, preceded by the dark penitence of Lent, then a celebration of the risen Christ, the pagan ritual of Easter eggs, and a march to commemorate the Easter Rising. (Bryce 2001, 312)

I began this study by establishing the need for mutual engagement between poetry and theology, two disciplines that, I’ve argued, have been overtly central to Irish identity, beyond simplistic claims to “the land of saints and scholars”. It’s true that Ireland’s cultural identity draws on an ancient Celtic bardic tradition, and that the evangelism of first-millennium Irish monks (including Duns Scotus Eriugena) and the preservation of aesthetically, and historically significant texts (such as the Book of Kells) are well known. However, there has been a paucity of serious, mutual engagement between contemporary theology and contemporary Irish poetry, with a few notable exceptions, as, for example, the collaborative public theology of the Pádraig Ó Tuama (previously mentioned, a Catholic from Cork) and Glenn Jordan (a Presbyterian from Bangor), the promise of which has been curtailed by Jordan’s untimely death in 2020. I have claimed, therefore, that the corrective and healing potential of mutual engagement between poetry and theology, specifically, within the Irish context, remains underexplored.

For this reason, I have proposed, as a non-exhaustive sample, the transformative contributions of Irish poetry written by women whose formations as poets and people have been shaped by a diversely Catholic upbringing: Paula Meehan, Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin, and Colette Bryce. I have selected these poets not just because of a personal affinity to their aesthetics, although that affinity exists; I selected them because the diversity of their Catholic experiences and their responses to those experiences within their poetics have allowed me to demonstrate and explore the element of intra-Catholic alterity, in an effort (throughout this entire study) to destabilise assumptions of a monolithic Irish Catholicism, a simplistic opposition to a Protestant alterity. The primary period of poetic production that has concerned this study spans the last 40 years, from the 1980s to recent publications. Through close, prolonged engagement
with their poems, I gained a deeper understanding of the presence and impact of the Catholic Church on Irish life (the matter of the matter, so to speak) during these four decades in a way that would not have been as open to me had I been consulting only religious, academic texts, or other non-fiction texts. Simply put, prose cannot carry the unsaid in the way poetry does. The significance of what is embodied – in the process of writing, in the bodies of the poets, in their bodies of work – to developing a critical, contextual Irish theology is manifold and enriched by the diversity of each poet’s position vis-à-vis her inherited Catholic tradition.

I have also given an overview of the methods underpinning this research. Reading widely within the bodies of these poets' work, including their poetry collections, their critical prose, their interviews, and secondary analysis of their literary outputs, I have also read them alongside the theologies of relevant thinkers and theological movements and practices, in particular M. Shawn Copeland, Willie James Jennings, Louis-Marie Chauvet, as well as Catherine Keller and Heather Walton, and Irish theologians who have laid the foundations for a renewed contextual Irish theology. While doing so, I identified and responded to two core research questions: what does it mean to read poetry theologically? And how can theological readings of poetry contribute to a critical, contextual Irish theology? At the outset of this thesis, to attempt to draw the contours of "critical, contextual Irish theology," I also underscored the importance of interpreting cultural, social, and religious narratives in Ireland within critically reflective frameworks grounded in real, ordinary, embodied experience, including my own. I cited the importance, to my methods, of acknowledging my own situated social location as a dynamic mixture of social advantages and marginalisations: white-identified, cis female, neurodivergent, poor, educated, immigrant (but holding dual American and European citizenship) and queer. My research methodologies and frameworks have been multi-disciplinary, incorporating literary analysis, theological reflection, cultural critique, and creative practice. Theological frameworks such as liberation theology, feminist and Womanist perspectives, sacramental theology, theopoetics, and the theological anthropologies of select Black scholars of religion have been foundational.
7.2 Contributions to the field: praxis

Apart from contributions that I hope my theological appraisal of Meehan’s, Ní Chuilleáin’s, and Bryce’s work will make, this study contributes to the diverse praxis of theopoetics as a situated Irish study. Whereas Irish sources have sometimes been treated for their aesthetic value and sometimes to establish an Irish theological tradition, poetry by Irish women has not received the complex, multi-disciplinary forms of attention that it deserves, that sees the full matrix of its social, aesthetic, and theological dimensions, and that a theopoetical lens can offer. Part of this entails acknowledging the absence of exact theological work similar to this project and then exercising tools from the various disciplines from which I borrow, modifying them to meet my purpose of exposing and forging constructive affinities between poetry and theology. For example, I have borrowed the methods of close reading from literary analysis while privileging the experience that the poems mediate in conversation with Chauvet’s thinking about language rather than the hermeneutics of intellectual interpretation. Where I have engaged in spiritual and theological reflection, I have been grounded in the specific historical and social context of the place and conditions out of which the poets and poems in question have emerged. Finally, when I exercised autoethnography, it was again about Irish poetry, theology, and social conditions in Ireland. The intention is not to essentialise Irishness, however—quite the opposite. The hope is that such a study can illuminate the forms of alterity within Irishness, even Catholic-formed Irishness. As a case in point, my analysis has shown three poets formed within very differently classed and socialised Catholic backgrounds. It has shown that it is impossible to generalise Irish Catholicism. This is the kind of destabilisation that Irish theology requires to become contextual, accountable, and possibly useful to aid in the healing of collective trauma.

As my reading was multidisciplinary, my review of the relevant literature in multiple areas further destabilises any normative approach to Irish theology. In resistance to presumptions of apologetic goals, I have engaged with prominent Catholic (and some other) theologians to give a theological basis for considering aesthetics and
decolonial frameworks. I have delved more deeply into the work of Willie James Jennings, especially his project in *The Christian Imagination* (2010), which treats pre-Reformation theological movements while challenging conventional approaches to theory-based doctoral research, where research questions guide one's methods and reading course. I have argued that while this process is contrary to the poetic process, both in reading and writing poetry, one need not necessarily select to do practice-based research to contribute creatively to the field. I have been informed by many examples of creatively conceived and executed theology. I have argued that, even within scholarly practice, the poetic process, characterised by its contingency and reflective nature, offers nourishing possibilities for Christian theology. Another premise this work has affirmed is that theological imperatives in Ireland, as elsewhere, must address embodiment, creation, and social ethics as much as they address questions of transcendence and piety. However, as the unique conditions and forces shaping theology in Ireland have thus far remained underexplored within theopoetics, this study aims to create new pathways for such work.

7.3 Contributions to the field: poetry

I have aimed to make two concentric contributions with this research. Firstly, to contribute a particular body of work to the field of theopoetics with a theological study of three Irish poets, and in doing so, simultaneously, to affirm theopoetics as a valuable deepening commitment to a critical, contextual Irish theology that recognises and incorporates feminist and decolonial considerations, as well as contemporary trauma discourse, to grow ever more sensitive to unfreedoms due to gender, class, and (though this is not always obvious in Ireland) race, citizenship, and settled or unsettled status.

Readings of Paula Meehan can offer this renewed contextual Irish theology a critical stance towards the legacies of the many institutional aspects of the Catholic Church and how these institutions have often exploited pre-existing class injustices that were themselves legacies of colonisation (and the complex ways in which the Catholic Church participated in these dynamics not just during the early colonial era and in places far-flung from Ireland, but on the island that was, in fact, the first testing ground for
strategies of colonisation). Meehan’s trajectory from her upbringing in the working-class neighbourhoods of Dublin to the status of ecofeminist prophet poet of the underclass preserves the memory of her traumas and that of Ireland, from Catholic oppression to neoliberalism. The victims of the Church’s historical oppressions, particularly women, children, the poor and the mentally ill – those the Church is meant to protect and care for – find at least a voice and a witness, if not material liberation, in her poems and challenge the Church to reckon with its past, the legacies of which live on in the present. In other words, the poems themselves bear witness and advocate for a theology that is inclusive, justice-oriented, and attendant to the needs of the marginalised in Ireland.

To the ends mentioned above, the chapter on the work of Paula Meehan considered some of the conditions into which she was born, excavating Irish history not to make “objective” observations but to illuminate the lived experiences of Irish people and the conditions that shaped those experiences, as evidenced in her poems. I argued that while poets often engage with theology, Catholic theology rarely considers poetry in its material form and that the lack of reciprocal regard is meaningful in that theology in Ireland, to a great extent, lacks the appropriate resources to contend with embodiment (for which reason poetry can help). I used as an example the impact of the Irish theocratic state’s interpretation of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical Humanae Vitae, especially the ways it licensed with Ireland a profound disregard for women’s bodily sovereignty. The integration of Catholic teaching into Irish civil legislation further entrenched this disregard. However, Meehan’s critiques of the church gained power from her embodied knowledge of Catholicism as much as her desire to escape it. Born in the 1950s in North inner-city Dublin, Meehan’s upbringing was marked by migration and poverty, and poetry was the way out in many senses. And yet, even as she established herself as an important literary voice in Ireland and abroad, her attention remains on the suffering of the poor and socially disenfranchised, as is clear in her last collection, For the Hungry Ghosts (2022), a text whose Buddhist references I would have liked to explore more deeply, as well as potentially a link to trauma theory (the renowned trauma and addiction specialist Gabor Maté has also used this reference in the title of one of his books (2008). That work remains to be done by other researchers.
While her position in relationship to the church might in some ways be rather antagonistic—or because of this, since intelligent critique is corrective—her poetics are well worth theological consideration.

On the other hand, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry engages overtly with Catholicism, intertwining Ireland’s mystical and historical aspects with a particular focus on the lives of religious women, making her perhaps a more obvious resource for contextual Irish theology. Her focus on women's lives directly challenges the dismissal of the religious woman as antithetical to feminism and the need for a critical, contextual Irish theology to incorporate a complexly feminist lens. The function of Ní Chuilleanáin’s work, therefore, echoes the late Black feminist bell hooks’ challenge to the individualist interpretation of womanhood, advocating for a relational approach in our struggles for justice; in other words, it is theology’s responsibility to consider the full humanity and dignity of women, in how they participate in the church, including harmful ways. Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry also destabilises the feminist/secular and Catholic/republican-leaning-nationalist binaries. It does this by attending to their experiences, as seen in her collection "The Mother House" (2019), which addresses the neglect and disdain for religious women within Irish feminism while also acknowledging the trauma experienced by women in institutions like Magdalene Laundries and mother and baby homes. Her poems, such as “Bessboro” and “Translation,” reflect on the extreme trauma of these women. In contrast, “The Married Women” explores why women might flee domesticity in theocratic Ireland.

As the only poet among those considered who identifies as religious and is aesthetically concerned with religious themes, Ní Chuilleanáin offers a rare example of contemporary feminism that attends to the complex interplay of influences in her work: Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Romance languages, Republican politics, Renaissance aesthetics, Catholic hagiography of ordinary lives, and feminist embodiment. Her poetry serves as an area of inquiry and self-knowledge, essential for healing and liberation, by dissolving the harsh binaries created by institutional abuses. This approach opens curiosity about the intersections of faith, history, and memory rather than triggering the unhealed wounds of the past. Thus, Ní Chuilleanáin contributes to a contextual Irish theology with
her ability to weave the sacred with the secular, the religious with the mundane, and the traditioned with the observed. This contribution underscores the necessity for Irish Catholic theology to incorporate feminism and for Irish feminism to avoid essentialising femininity, offering renewed ways to explore the dimensions of life that belong neither to the institutional church nor to the state.

Finally, in the chapter discussing Colette Bryce's poetry, I have explored the socio-theological implications of her work in the context of sectarian conflict and post-colonial trauma. Drawing on Claire Mitchell and Siobhán Garrigan, Bryce's poetry is read in light of the complex interplay between religion and politics in Ireland, highlighting the intertwined nature of these forces as Bryce's own words at the beginning of this chapter illustrate. Although her poetics do not stem from a confessional faith, they nonetheless indicate that religion continues to exert a significant social and political influence, often overlooked. This influence is identified as "troublesome knowledge" in Northern Ireland's mental health social work, significantly impacting those suffering from mental health issues, which are more prevalent in post-conflict regions. I have also reflected on the language used to describe the period of intense conflict in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to 1998, known as "the Troubles," and how poetic engagement—typically eschewing direct statements—can aid in the healing of trauma embedded within language by offering alternative linguistic structures to address contentious terms. I anticipate that future research will delve into trauma theology's valuable insights and consider how scholars like Shelly Rambo, Serene Jones, and Karen O'Donnell might be relevant to Bryce's context.

Colette Bryce's poetry and prose offer a critical contextual Irish theology, a sensibility that eschews revealing oneself too openly, a characteristic of the more reserved Northern Irish poetics that Bryce deftly manoeuvres with her lyricism. Her work, when viewed through the lens of trauma theory, suggests a connection between the reticence found in her and other Northern poets' writings and a history of violence in close-knit communities, where to "say a word" could mean betrayal and the endangerment of oneself or others. Poetry becomes the vehicle for expressing the inexpressible and the unsaid. A critical contextual Irish theology must acknowledge that
mountain of the unspeakable in the wake of violence. It must contend with the reality that all of Ireland, especially Northern Ireland, is still grappling with the legacy of the Troubles and that theological approaches must embrace reckoning and truth but also gentleness, compassion, and the gradual softening of boundaries with full yet patient mutual consent—qualities essential for trauma healing. Bryce's contribution to contextual Irish theology is also represented by the profound ambivalences of a Catholic upbringing, the cultural divides between denominations, and the generational rifts within families in Northern Ireland.

7.4 Definitions, uses, framing, sources, answers, and new questions that have emerged

I have qualified the need for ethical language and thinking of language matters as constituting matter, as bodies that matter. Thus, while I have used terminology such as The West/ Western/ modern, I have used these terms within the context of Stuart Hall’s *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power* (1992) and the more recent work of Victoria de Oliveira in *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity’s Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (2021). “Western” generally means a developed, industrialised, urbanised, capitalist, secular, and modern society. Ireland’s desire to be considered as such in the world arena, I have concluded through this research, contributes to the resistance, within recent Irish history, to postcolonial, decolonial and liberation lenses, associated as these generally are with the “poor” countries of Black and Brown people to which Ireland had sent its missionaries. The complexities of race and class within religious movements still lack adequate articulation. Still, discussions through the poetry of Paula Meehan, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Colette Bryce have provided some trailheads to which one hopes other scholars can continue to contribute. By making class visible, one can destabilise polarising religious/ patriarchal and feminist/ secular binaries. To come to these conclusions, I have drawn from sociological disciplines where theological resources were lacking. Otherwise, this study has been resourced by feminist, ecofeminist, Liberation, Black or Womanist, Catholic thinking. I have also challenged the idea of theology as strictly academic or institutional.
My research questions acknowledge that Western Christian theology is often removed from the body, land, and socio-political/communal dynamics. Yet, it has wielded varying degrees of power and influence over these. I have claimed that Irish poetry offers rich opportunities for theologians when engaged seriously and theologically—and as if matter truly matters to both theology and poetry. This includes a mode of conscious unknowing that unsettles the colonial tendencies of the discursive language that theology necessarily relies on. This brings to findings about language, land, and belonging.

7.5 Limitations and further study

Invoking the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, Jeremy Rifkin remarks that "periods of happiness are blank pages in [history]" (Rifkin 2009, 18) because there is no need in these periods to document either conflict or resistance to conflict. In Hegel's terms, there is no need for the intense "particularisation" of being, which, in his formulation of history, is the polar opposite (limitation, individual self-consciousness, antithesis) of the "universal Idea" of "self-contained existence" in the form of Spirit (freedom, collective unity, thesis) (Hegel 2001, 32). Another way to put this is that, in the moments of peace, one does not need to will oneself into a proof or petition for existence as one does during periods of unrest and resistance. One is, and it's this being that Hegel and Rifkin argue needs to be more often documented. Written history, says Rifkin, "is about the pathology of power... [and perhaps] that is why, when we come to think about human nature, we have such a bleak analysis. Our collective memory is measured in terms of crises and calamities" (2009, 19).

First, I want to take up what is useful for considering the limitations of my project. Applying this formulation to contemporary theology and poetry, one can think about the push and pull of particularisation and universalism. Jennings points out "the persistent preoccupations of the modern theological academy with various enlightenment problems... or the obsessive labelling and positioning of theological trends (for example, Barthian, ressourcement, liberationist, postliberal, radical orthodoxy, feminist, womanist, postcolonial)" (2010, 8). This oppositional relation
between particularisation and universalism functions in different ways, as well, for example, in the ways that so much literature, both religious and secular, considers cis heterosexual and white male experience as universal human experience, folding all other experiences therein, while matters of motherhood, menstruation, non-white racialisation, multi-trans- or un-gendered experiences, to name just a few, become particularised, and the Palestinian Jewish racialisation of the mother of Jesus is erased. While there is no Catholic doctrine of mothering (in which all genders can participate, regardless of the capacity to give birth, which some cis women cannot do for various reasons), the title of the 2020 papal encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis 2020) was poorly justified by the Vatican with the reason that the words of Pope Francis' namesake could not be altered; in response to criticism over the word choice, the Vatican's editorial director even doubled down, by saying:

> On the contrary, Francis chose the words of the Saint of Assisi to initiate a reflection on something he cares about very deeply: namely, fraternity and social friendship...He therefore addresses all his sisters and brothers, all men and women who populate the earth: Everyone, inclusively, and in no way exclusively. (Winfield 2020)

As though that settled the matter. However, here is a moment to pause and slow down enough to notice movements inside the mind and body. I don’t mean strictly in the sense of a guided "mindfulness practice" (that can function as spiritual bypassing as often as it can be grounding), but something more immediate and practical. For my part, I notice how readily, in the article I have just cited, I welcomed the quotation gleaned from Tina Beattie's Twitter feed. Beattie writes, "I'm not willing to become a brother when it suits them to call me one. I’ll engage with what I know will be a brilliant vision, but I’ll name this misnomer every time I do" (Beattie (in Winfield) 2020). Yes, I think. That's exactly right, even moderate, not dismissing the whole document on account of the bad piece in the title. A few seconds later, I catch myself mid-fall into my particularisation as a woman and find the reflex I've been training to ask: if Francis had called it *Tutti Fratelli e Sorelle*, who would still be missing from the frame? In our infinite creativity, can we not both be faithful to tradition and embrace each other fully in our language? Irish feminists and Catholic feminists have a deep responsibility to examine how, in efforts to
write women into history and the Catholic church, the qualifications for womanhood have become more important than the condition of the human, wholly sacred in divine diversity. I have raised all this to indicate that with more focused attention to ontological femininity in so much feminist theology, I might have usefully forwarded this project as both diagnosis and corrective. The subject is so amply shame- and rage-triggering to many women that anything but a deeply compassionate approach (driven by an active love of justice and Copeland’s embodied solidarity for all bodies) risks entrenching the binary further. To open theological discussions about shame and rage, one would necessarily need to talk about grief, and the lack of attention to this prevalent condition in Ireland can be counted both as a limitation in this study as well as an invitation to future research. I also wish I had found more ways to build links between Copeland’s Black Catholic theology, Jennings’ theological aesthetics in *The Christian Imagination*, and postcolonial and decolonial projects currently active in Ireland. These, as they are mostly in experiential contexts, festivals, art exhibitions, retreats, and workshops rather than academic papers, would require an entirely different approach to the research, including a more qualitative praxis in the field. Had I another decade to complete a similar project, I would also learn Irish, as I imagine the field opens considerably.

It is still possible, however, to reflect, in the context of Ireland, on “the deep pedagogical sensory deprivation” (Jennings 2010, 8) of Western Christianity while also challenging some of Jennings’ constructions, meanwhile echoing Eric Daryl Meyer’s insightful challenge to Jennings’ argument about supersessionism (Meyer 2015), that I don’t think this challenge weakens the tremendous richness of Jennings’ project. Love-driven critique is a useful praxis that requires practice, however. Critique is not only about rejecting but also about growing in the needed direction. It can be helpful to remember, for example, that Womanist theology emerged from Black, (initially) Christian women in the United States found themselves simultaneously excluded from or actively oppressed by (white) feminist theology and Black theology; Black theology and feminist theologies themselves responded to distortions and erasures in what was called “theology”. These interventions have been necessary to draw attention to how “theology” was already from a particularised perspective, just one that wasn’t making
its particularisation explicit. After offering the grounding convictions of her theological
anthropology ("that the body is a site and mediation of divine revelation; that the body
shapes human existence as relational and social". as I've previously shared fully in
Chapter Two), M. Shawn Copeland makes clear that:

Privileging the black woman's body makes these claims specific and particular. Rather
than exclude or overturn, or punish other bodies or persons, specificity
and particularity insist that we all are subjects... all human bodies have been
caught up in a near totalising web of body commerce, body exchange, body
value. Taking the black woman's body as a starting point for theological
anthropology allows us to interrogate the impact of that demonisation in history,
religion, culture, and society (2).

In Copeland's work, as in the work of other Womanist and feminist theologians actively
publishing during the time that Jennings and J. Kameron Carter (to whom I will return in
just a minute) were writing their books, there is no aspiration to universality, except to
show how specificity and particularity are always in relation to it. All human (and even
other) bodies are universally “caught up” in the fate of an earth in grave existential
danger due to the activities of humans “caught up” by modernity; being specific and
particular allows us to “interrogate the impact”, as Copeland says above. Consequently,
the particularisation is important and needed. And while I am not suggesting that
Jennings is doing this, it's the particularisation, without naming it as such, that is, in fact,
dangerous and has been one of the greatest obstacles to engaging with certain
theologians' work, even when their treatments of particular subjects are highly relevant
to my questions.

As a more personal reflection, in reading most theological texts (and particularly
those of older generations which have to do with the doctrine of the human), my social
location requires me to push against particular assumptions and proposals that are
harmful to me, for instance, theology that uses gendered language for the divine, that
cites the maleness of Jesus' and the canonical disciples' bodies as validation for why
women should not be allowed to preach or be ordained, or that does not regard the love
of queer relationships, and the bodies of queer and trans people, with the same respect
and care as those of cis heteronormative ones. In some cases, some of these things are
true, but one gets the sense that had the author been alive and writing today, he would likely use more inclusive language; such is the case with Howard Thurman, whose text *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949, 1996) I return to whenever my reading and writing becomes too "thinky", to quote a former classmate from Yale Divinity School. In other cases, there are theologians alive and writing today who resist or flatly refuse the invitation to open their theological embrace. While longer discussions about why this happens lie outside this study’s scope, I suspect this resistance has something to do with unprocessed grief. It is a trend I have observed in Ireland among women who resist feminism, feminists who resist gender-non-conformity and the perspective of ethnic minorities, and Catholic feminists more broadly. One ever-present danger is that, at any point, I may not yet be aware of how some assumptions and proposals are harmful to others or myself, as has sometimes been the case in my engagements with theology, as well as other disciplines and social spaces, such as literature, feminism, and environmental activism.

In short, the process of conscientisation is lifelong and humbling; it also requires humility, vulnerability, and a mature understanding of accountability, including the reality that there’s no "getting it right". One must learn how to resist and refuse (and here I return specifically to the context of academic theology) what George Yancy has called the "sutured, oracular voice" (2015, xvi). I prefer the language "sutured" to "fragile" or other words to refer to whiteness, as the former implies some of the efforts (however unconscious) involved in the construction of such a voice. In other words, it is not the "natural" state of things. Quoting Judith Butler in the first line (Butler 2004, 23), Yancy writes (in recognisably theological language, replacing *ex nihilo* with the English translation):

The sutured white self is not "called into question by its relation" to heteronomous, *socially constructed* white norms and structures of power...Heteronomy is too threatening as it renders visible the historically contingent struts of white normative and institutional power, which would call into question such a grand gesture of white self-creation “out of nothing”. Such a grand gesture is a species of the epistemological “god-trick” critiqued by feminist epistemologists regarding another fable: that how we “know” the world is generally non-perspectival, a view from nowhere. (xvi)
Is the constructed self inherently violent? J. Kameron Carter (who, similarly to Jennings, traces the creation of race to theological and philosophical roots) seems to think it is. After tracing the constructions of race through or alongside Immanuel Kant, Michel Foucault, James Cone, and Jarena Lee, Carter concludes that “the gesture to constitute identity for ourselves rather than to receive it as constituted in the God-Man Jesus will in some sense bear the traces of violence” (Carter 2009, 79). Carter’s insistence that “we must receive ourselves”, while modernity “is the effort to constitute ourselves” (80) recalls once more Hegel’s thought from the beginning of this chapter, except Carter and Hegel use the word “self” differently. For Carter, the self-constructed self is for Hegel self-conscious self, and Carter’s received self is, for Hegel, the self-contained self. Essentially, they refer to a similar notion of a self that is not particularised by the need for antithesis to the thesis of God.

I would now like to complicate the formulation with which I began this chapter, the idea, from above, that “periods of happiness are blank pages in history”. On the one hand, Ireland seems to be a case in point, preoccupied as Irish writers and historians are with “setting records straight”. On the other hand, taking “happiness” to mean peace and calm, one has to ask: whose happiness? Who is recording the history? And whose blank pages are obscured from collective memory by the writing of others’ pages? Furthermore, it’s not only happiness that results in lives and experiences being undocumented; hunger, poverty, and living, as Thurman would say, “with one’s back against the wall” also makes it hard to leave traces of one’s existence behind.

One could easily see Ireland as proof of this formulation in that so much has been written and continues to be written to constitute a definitive idea of Ireland. In Ireland, colonisation and resistance to colonisation are written on the land, the architecture, and--so obvious as to escape notice--on the language of the people who live here. The land was restructured to make space for animal grazing, while the mythology of the Emerald Isle has persisted, where once there were primarily woodlands; the shifting of land ownership, too, was systematic, through laws about the legitimacy of one religion over another, and so, the rights to the land passed from the indigenous Irish to settlers and then to the ascendancy classes (A. Jackson 2014). Architecture, public monuments,
and streets now frequently bear the names of Republican heroes, memory markers of resistance to colonisation. The Irish that appears on dual-language signage everywhere is also a reminder that this modern Irish is not the Irish that was once spoken.

Colonisation is written into religion, too, in the presence of the Religious Society of Friends, from early Quakers who came as settlers, and the Church of Ireland, a disowned or self-emancipated child of the Anglican Church. But colonisation is written into religion in other, more complex ways. For example, on the walls of a Catholic church in Dublin. High on the wall adjacent to the East chapel (dedicated to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux) of the Oblates Church of Mary Immaculate in the Inchicore neighbourhood of Dublin, an LCD screen offers the Mass schedule and seasonal pieces of spiritual writing. Due to Harvest Season at my visit, the text quoted was drawn from the famous speech by the Suquamish leader, Chief Si'ahl (known as Chief Seattle) from 1854: “Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people” (Si’ahl n.d.) Incredibly, the image on the screen occupied the same wall space as a more permanent feature, a mosaic depiction of Saint Thérèse, patron saint of missionaries, holding a cross while preaching to—one can guess—the unbaptised (non-white) peoples of the world, among which is a figure with a generic feather headdress. Less overtly colonial on the same wall are many beautiful inlaid mosaic garlands of Ora-Pro-Nobis, which is both a phrase that means “pray for us” (and indeed the words are also written in gold tiles) and a flower (for “The Little Flower”) native to the tropical climate of Brazil (and not Ireland’s temperate one). Apart from the obvious uncritical usage of the text next to an uncritical display of Christian colonial “white saviour” lore (assuming that the idea was for poor, sickly Thérèse to intercede on behalf of African, Asian, and North American non-Christians), why not quote something from the Irish? The tragic irony of the pairing of Chief Si’ahl’s text and the image on the wall and the flowers that come from colonised places is that the Oblate order has been at the centre of some of the most heinous abuses of Indigenous children in North America, instances so voluminous that the first volume to document them is
over 800 pages long (2015). What pathways can be to healing when we don’t recognise that what happened “over there” is not separate from the things that happened “here”?

7.6 Conclusion

I have summarised initial research questions and how my exploration of poetry by Irish women contributes to contextual and accountable Irish theology. At the root of what poetry brings is embodiment, as we explored in Paula Meehan’s work; then a communal ethic that can be both feminist and religious, as in Eiléan Ní Chuileanáin’s poems; and finally, through Colette Bryce’s work, a means through which to honour the alterity of the “other” – to recognise the “other” as kin rather than stranger – by simultaneously exploring the indwelling alterity of God within the self. Poetry and the poets I discussed may use different language, but what is important is beyond the language.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Douglass, Nettie and Kinealy, Christine. 2021. "When emancipated slave Frederick Douglass met Daniel O'Connell in Dublin". *The Irish Times*, September 29:


Mantegna, Andrea. c. 1480. *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.


Moore, Brenna. 2023. “Sinead O’Connor was once seen as a sacrilegious rebel, but her music and life were deeply infused with spiritual seeking”. The Conversation. July 28.


Ní Chuilleáin, Eiléan. 2017. “Poetry is a form in which you never have to say more than what you mean’: An Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin.” Interview by Pilar Villar-Argáiz. Irish University Review 47, no. 2. 222-233.


Ní Churreain, Annemarie @annemarienichurreain. 2023. "Sinéad O'Connor was, in essence, a high priestess..." July 27.


O’Connor, Sinéad. 2007. Theology. Compiled by Sinéad O’Connor.


Sallman, Warner. 1940. *Head of Christ*.


—. 2014. "From the Tears of Things to the Play of Grace: Discerning Textures of Faith through a Practice of Reading Contemporary Literary Texts". PhD diss., Trinity College Dublin/ Irish School of Ecumenics.


Walsh, Suzanne @suz.walsh. 2023. "Feeling like I really have no words.." July 27.

—. 1986. *White Researchers and Racism*. Manchester: Faculty of Economic and Social Studies, University of Manchester.

—. 1987. *An Ethnographic Study of a Moss Side Pub*. Manchester: Faculty of Economic and Social Studies, University of Manchester.

—. 1990. *My Mother Is Ill*. Manchester: Faculty of Economic and Social Studies, University of Manchester.


ADDENDUM RE: FORMAT OF SOURCES

I have explored what to do when the texts one is "reading" are digital, as many of mine are, since:

1) I have not been near the Trinity Library and
2) I work from digitised texts, listening to them on Natural Reader, an accessibility accommodation, as I am registered with the Trinity Disabilities Service.

Some e-books have the original page numbers, which I use; some have "locations", and some don't have either, as they are formatted to scroll as needed, depending on the device.

In this case, the guidance I have found in several library guides is that one uses the chapter or section. Essentially, some version of this is as follows: "If no fixed page numbers are available, cite a section title or a chapter or other number in the footnotes, if any (or simply omit)," which is from this site: https://columbiacollege-ca.libguides.com/chicago/books. It is also what other library guide sites suggest.

I primarily use PDFs rather than e-books, as I would have no way of "reading" e-books, and I cannot use the app that makes them audible. For example, I own a print copy of Derek Scally's book The Best Catholics in the World. I have listened to it on Scribd or Audible, but I can also listen to certain sections and highlight the PDF, but that last version has no page numbers.