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ARTICLE

Ghost Stories, Ghost Estates: Melancholia in Irish Recession Literature

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This article considers representations of melancholia in post-Celtic Tiger Irish literature. By situating their post-recession fictions in “ghost estates,” or largely uninhabited housing developments, Donal Ryan and Tana French present neoliberally-inflected varieties of melancholia for their contemporary readers to contemplate. The settings of the ghost estates – and the accompanying supernatural elements to the texts – call to mind ghosts of Ireland’s past and legacies of recent economically unsound policies, spurring the reader to think about the imagined loss of futurity that accompanied the Irish economic crash. “Ghost stories for ghost estates,” then, represent an important contribution to the growing field of post-recession Irish literature.

Keywords: Irish literature; Celtic Tiger; melancholia; neoliberalism; Tana French; Donal Ryan

Introduction

In March of 2011, *Vanity Fair* journalist Michael Lewis traveled to Ireland to conduct a post-mortem of the fall of the recently buoyant Irish economy. While there, he engaged a driver named Ian to take him around the country. On their way out of Dublin to explore more rural landscapes, they passed by ‘abandoned building sites and neighborhoods without people in them’. Seeing his interest, Ian told Lewis, ‘We can stop at ghost estates on the way . . . but if we stop at every one of them, we’ll never get out of here’ (Lewis 2011). Ghost estates are intriguing images: they are empty of humans but take up vast tracts of space, sprawl over acres of land but remain largely vacant. As symbols of the post-2008 economic bust and, accordingly, of the loss of an imagined prosperous future for Ireland, ghost estates have become powerful signifiers of melancholia in the post-recession Irish landscape. In *Luck &*

The Irish: A Brief History of Change from 1970, which R.F. Foster (unluckily) published just before the onset of the 2008 recession, he felt it possible to write, 'In the end it is hard not to side with the Boosters [of Irish history] rather than the Begrudgers, and to recognize that in several spheres, not just the economic, a certain amount of good luck was maximized by good management' (Foster 2012, 188). Optimism, in the pre-recession days, was fully in the air. Compare this praise of 'good management' to what the authors of the working paper 'A Haunted Landscape: Housing and Ghost Estates in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland' write in July 2010: 'A new spectre is haunting Ireland – the spectre of development run amok. This haunting has left its mark across the entire nation in the form of one-off houses, new housing estates, shopping centres, business parks and hotel developments, many of which now lie idle, deserted, and unfinished' (Kitchin et al 2010, 5). One form this spectre or haunting takes is that of the new but primarily empty housing development known as the ghost estate. These ghost estates, once held up as examples of Ireland's neoliberal economic transformation, now melancholically haunt the landscape, acting as potent reminders of a lost future. Their presence and corresponding emptiness represents a kind of societal depression, their continued emptiness a potent symbol of cultural melancholia.

Though, as Darian Leader points out, melancholia is 'usually considered an outdated category' (Leader 2008, 4), I argue that melancholia is still a relevant subject for Irish literature, particularly in the years after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. Freud's definition of melancholia, which he sets against what he considers to be the healthier state of mourning, consists of a list of symptoms sounding very similar to what we would today call depression (Freud 1917, 244), but he notes that 'melancholia too may be the reaction to the loss of a loved object' (245). Rather than a laundry-like list of depressive symptoms, it is this aspect of melancholia on which I will primarily focus: a reaction to the loss of a loved object (in this case, the Celtic Tiger economy and its promises of a bright economic future for Ireland) that does not quite reach the level of full-scale, cathartic, completed mourning. Following Judith Butler, who calls melancholia 'disavowed mourning' (Butler 2004, xiv) and Julia Kristeva, who refers to it as 'non-communicable grief' (Kristeva 1989, 3), I assert that Irish recession literature can best be interpreted through the lens of melancholia, which is understood as public, shared,

but unnamed, unconscious, and unspecified grief at the loss of what was perceived to be, in the height of the Celtic Tiger, a glorious neoliberal future.¹ This melancholia has found a creative expression in the ghost estates that litter the outskirts of Irish cities and towns because Ireland has not fully worked through the mourning process for its fall from economic glory; as a result, ghost estates and the emptiness and limbo they represent are imbued with significance in this subgenre of recession literature.

As places devoid of human occupants but full of capitalist investment, ghost estates are reminders of the neoliberal speculation that caused the Irish (and global) recession, as well as the loss of dreams for the future. The novels I will examine in this article – Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* and Tana French's *Broken Harbor* – invest their tomes with healthy doses of melancholia because Ireland itself has failed to rectify the crimes of the Celtic Tiger, and as such melancholically looks back at the past in the absence of any clear futurity. Paul Gilroy has written of twenty-first century Britain that, 'the life of the nation has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige' (Gilroy 2005, 90). Though, of course, under Gilroy's reading British melancholia is a consequence of the loss of empire and Ireland has typically been understood as a colony of that empire, I will demonstrate that Ireland is currently undergoing a similar melancholic process with regards to the loss of the Celtic Tiger, and that the subsequent melancholia, produced by Gilroy's 'inability to mourn', has found its expression in contemporary Irish literature set on ghost estates.

'An Unresolved Past': The Celtic Tiger and Resultant Melancholia

The 'Celtic Tiger' refers to a period of time, generally accepted as the early to mid-1990s until around 2008, when, due to foreign investment and various neoliberal economic measures, Ireland's economy suddenly, seemingly miraculously, took off. After years of

¹ Though I am fully aware of the neoliberal realities of the Celtic Tiger and am cognizant of the fact that this form of development is unsustainable and inequitable, my argument holds that this kind of melancholia negotiates the loss of a *perceived* wonderful future, not an actual one.

poverty, the Celtic Tiger must have seemed like an answer to centuries of prayers; Jason Buchanan refers to the period as an 'escape from Irish history' (Buchanan 2009, 303). As Timothy J. White notes, 'the success of the Irish economy in the Celtic Tiger period [. . .] is especially noteworthy when one considers the history of the Irish economy' (White 2010, 28): White later goes on to call the advent of the Celtic Tiger 'nothing short of a miracle' (30). The Tiger was hailed as an economic phenomenon, quantifiable evidence that neoliberal economic policies worked. But the acceleration from zero to sixty was built on shaky foundations. Michael Lewis notes that the rapidity of the move from poverty to wealth 'is without precedent in economic history' and that the country 'had gone from being abnormally poor to being abnormally rich, without pausing to experience normality' (2011). The economic boom was heavily based on a property bubble, and when it crashed it left thousands of people in debt and tied to houses they could no longer afford. Fintan O'Toole writes of the housing crisis and what it meant for the Irish people, 'Irish house prices had fallen more rapidly than any others in Europe [. . .] the average Irish family had lost almost half of its financial assets, whose worth had fallen from €95,000 at the height of the boom to €51,000 in mid-2009 – not counting the steep decline in the worth of its house' (O'Toole 2009, 9). As if having the net worth of its average family practically cut in half was not enough, Ireland had an additional recession element to contend with: the ghost estates.

The 'ghost estate' phenomenon refers to the presence of homes built in American-like subdivisions all over the Republic of Ireland. Because many of these homes were still in the process of being built or were newly finished at the time of the Celtic Tiger collapse, most of the houses in such estates remain empty. Citing the Urban Institute at University College Dublin, O'Toole writes

In March 2010, it [the Urban Institute] worked out that there were 345,116 vacant residential properties in the state (including 64,000 holiday homes). This is 17.5 per cent of all the homes in the Republic of Ireland. Outside of the greater Dublin area, 21 per cent of houses are unoccupied. One home in every five is an empty shell (O'Toole 2009, 226).

Periodically, half-hearted talk will circulate of instituting a scheme whereby homeless citizens may occupy the houses, but so far, not much action has been taken; at least for the time being, most ghost estates stay looming and unoccupied on the outskirts of Irish localities, reminding those who live in them or drive past them of a future that was never to be. This failure to seriously attempt a justice-oriented measure to set right the past is echoed throughout Irish society; a large part of the reason the Irish cannot mourn the loss of the Celtic Tiger is because the Irish government (and to an extent, the European Union) has done very little to redress the economic sins of the crash and move away from the sort of neoliberal economics that led to the recession in the first place. The continuing presence of ghost estates is one of these examples, but others include austerity measures, wage cuts, and other such neoliberal economic tools.

There has been a recent spate of recession literature focused on the setting of these ghost estates. Many of them, *The Spinning Heart* and *Broken Harbor* included, carry a real or imagined supernatural presence: ghost stories for ghost estates. Melancholia, in turn, is often linked to the presence of ghosts and hauntings. Winifred Siemerling has written, 'like melancholia, ghosts can signal the presence of an unresolved past' (Siemerling 2015, 16); in this case, the unresolved past is the lack of attention to addressing the societal ills of raucous neoliberal Celtic Tiger development, the ensuing crash, and subsequent recession. AbdouMaliq Simone defines haunting, a concept closely related to ghosts, as 'a sense that there is much more taking place than meets the eye, and that everyday life is a force field of resurgent traces from some past, something not yet laid to rest' (Simone 2004, 92), while Darian Leader notes that one suffering from melancholia 'is situated between two worlds: the world of the dead and the world of the living' (174), a liminal stage again recalling ghosts. The presence of ghosts, real or imagined, in these ghost estate novels, then, signifies the presence of a large-scale cultural history with which Ireland has not yet come to terms, where it is still operating in a sort of melancholic limbo. Ireland's contemporary melancholia is wrapped up in the demise of the Celtic Tiger, figured through depictions of ghost estates.

'Like an Orphaned Child, Bereft': Melancholia in the West

Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* is set in an unnamed town on the west coast of Ireland, after the financial crash. The novel is narrated by twenty-one separate inhabitants of the town, ranging from a small child to a psychotic kidnapper to a ghost. All the characters are trying to come to terms with the sudden economic downfall; most are despairing and melancholic. The central target for everyone's angst is Pokey Burke, a man who invested in what is now a ghost estate and left the village, owing his employees money and leaving many others in debt. Though Pokey never directly enters the narrative, most of the short vignettes at least mention him, and it is clear that, whether he deserves the entirety of the blame or not, most locals are negotiating their way through the downturn by focusing on him and his ghost estate. Two violent acts, a murder and a child snatching, are also tied up in the novel; as Judith Butler has pointed out, aggression often quickly follows loss (xiv), and the plot suggests that these aggressive, violent actions were instigated by recession-related economic and social pressures.² Many characters reference a belief that the universe needs a sort of balance, and *The Spinning Heart* seems to suggest that without this balance and catharsis, violence will continue to ravage the melancholic village.³

The Spinning Heart is concerned with its particular situation in time and history; Daphne Kalotay notes that *The Spinning Heart* is focused on 'a moment in time' (Kalotay 2014), and James Walton concurs, saying it is 'firmly a novel of the Irish

² For instance, a character named Denis who is deeply in debt and feels as though 'the sky is falling down' (120) murders the father of Bobby Mahon, a man who worked for Pokey Burke, because he 'wanted the father to know his son fraternized with rats' and needed 'to frighten someone, anyone, so I wouldn't be the only one feeling this way' (123–124).

³ As a point of comparison, Donal Ryan's follow-up work, *The Thing About December*, is set in the same village as *The Spinning Heart*, but dated notably earlier; the action in *The Thing About December* takes place during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger, and accordingly presents a jarringly different set of circumstances. As opposed to the devalued land on which Pokey's ghost estate sits, land in *The Thing About December* is immensely valuable; much of the plot revolves around various people in the village trying to get possession of the main character's family farm in order to, it is rumored, build luxury apartment buildings. As such, we see in *The Thing About December* the frenzy that surrounded land speculation and purchasing during the height of the Tiger, and in *The Spinning Heart* we encounter the consequences of this period.

crash' (Walton 2013). For all the precise contemporary feel of the text, elements of the novel seem timeless; Walton writes that the characters 'are speaking in a language that's been familiar in rural Irish literature since at least the days of Synge' (2013), and Justine Jordan remarks upon the way 'Ryan reaches back to the archetypes of Irish literature – the terrible father, the wanton country girl; the peat-black comedy of Flann O'Brien and dramatic rhythms of Yeats and Synge . . .' (Jordan 2013). This combination of old and new emphasizes that the fall of the Celtic Tiger hearkens back to other dark days of Irish history; elements of the novel could be read into earlier periods of Irish history. A policeman, Jim, remarks upon the historical conflation that is easy to make in Ireland, musing

This must be how things were at the time of the war against the British when a crowd outside of Mass would suddenly explode into a flying column, guns appearing from under overcoats, killers appearing from inside of ordinary people. They were good killings, though – the Tans burned churches and creameries, interfered with women and shot little children. That was a time when killing was good, for God and country. That time is long ago. But aren't we still the same people? (Ryan 2014, 138)

Jim's observation that killing is no longer 'good,' that there is no longer a specific target for an outpouring of the peoples' rage, is an apt one. After the Celtic Tiger collapse, there is no firmly defined enemy as there was at the time of the anticolonial war. 'The bankers' are a vaguely defined target, as are 'the government' or 'the financial system,' especially when Ireland's recession is tied to global patterns. Pokey Burke represents one obvious target of the community's anger, but even he is missing; most people think he has left for Spain. It is impossible to mourn before confronting the specifics of what went wrong, as Paul Gilroy suggests post-imperial Brits ought to;⁴ the residents of the town are not given that sort of reprieve. Instead, they

⁴ Gilroy writes, 'before the British people can adjust to the horrors of their own modern history and start to build a new national identity from the debris of their broken narcissism, they will have to learn to appreciate the brutalities of colonial rule enacted in their name and to their benefit, to

must resort to melancholia, or the kind of 'emotional crisis' that is likely to appear 'when one's livelihood and purpose disappear without warning' (Rapp 2014). The villagers have no healthy ways to process their emotions, for their community is out of balance with no foreseeable attempt to set it right. For those who do not resort to violence, they must fixate their melancholia on a tangible thing – the ghost estate on the outskirts of town.

Though the characters in *The Spinning Heart* 'populate a metaphorical ghost town, haunted by the dead, the departed and phantom prospects that have vanished overnight' (Kalotay), it is the sections specifically focused on the ghost estate that best amplify the effects the financial crash have had on this small town. The novel opens with a monologue from Bobby Mahon, the man whose 'moral decency anchors the story' (Kalotay), as well as the man whose father is killed later in the narrative. Bobby had been one of Pokey's laborers and was cheated by him, which he only discovers after Pokey has left town. Bobby reminisces on the boom years, saying

I had a right swagger there for a couple of years, thinking I was a great fella. *Foreman*, I was, clearing a grand a week. Set for life. Houses would never stop going up. I'd see babies like our own being pushed around the village below and think: lovely, work for the future, they'll all need their own houses some day too. We knew Pokey was a prick, but none of us cared. What matter what kind of man he was, once the bank kept giving him money to build more and more? (13)

Of course, we as readers know that the houses will stop going up, and that the banks investing in Pokey's ventures are bound to end poorly. But that hindsight does nothing for Bobby, after he has spent years helping to build an estate that is now empty, with no money to show for it. 'Imagine being so suddenly useless', Bobby implores

understand the damage it did to their political culture at home and abroad, and to consider the extent of their country's complex investments in the ethnic absolutism that has sustained it' (99). Again, the situations are not completely parallel, with the varying colonial and imperial histories of Ireland and Britain taken into account, but Gilroy's theory provides a foundation for thinking about how to formulate melancholia and mourning in the context of a fall from power.

the reader (15). 'Here I am, like an orphaned child, bereft, filling up with fear like a boat filling with water' (20). Bobby is an example of Kalotay's observation about many of the townspeople: 'These people have been left in a rut, spinning their wheels as well as their hearts. Depression has caused them to lose their former sense of themselves' (2014). Without a proper way to mourn and process their losses, the townspeople, and Bobby Mahon in particular, are left only thinking about being 'so suddenly useless', 'bereft'.

Bobby's plight is an excellent example of how the financial crisis has affected the laborers who built the ghost estates, but other people have to actually live in them. Réaltín is a young single mother, one of the two adults who populate the entirety of the 'freaky ghost estate' (Ryan 85). (It is Réaltín's child, Dylan, who is eventually kidnapped, though her narrated section comes before that event.) She opens her monologue by telling the reader, 'There are forty-four houses in this estate. I live in number twenty-three. There's an old lady living in number forty. There's no one living in any of the other houses, just the ghosts of people who never existed. I'm stranded, she's abandoned' (42). Though Réaltín's father often comes out to visit her, the sense of being stranded pervades her section; she does not seem to get any other visitors, and at the end, when Bobby and some of his former co-workers knock on her door to see if anyone has been back to finish building her house, she is so excited for the company that she hires Bobby to do some work for her the next week. The reader is given the distinct impression that this is so that someone will be in the house who is not her father. Her sense of isolation from living in the ghost estate is overwhelming; she describes the image of her father on the streets of the estate, walking

up and down the rutted avenues. River Walk. Arra View. Ashdown Mews. He tuts and shakes his head at the boy racers' tyre tracks. He tries to pick up every fag butt and beer bottle. He looks in the gaping, empty windows; he scowls at the houses' spooky stone faces. He hums and whistles, and curses now and again. He slashes at weeds with his feet. He kicks at the devouring jungle. He's like an old, grumpy, lovely Cúchulainn, trying to fight back the tide (43).

But her father is only one person, and putting his well-intentioned litter cleanup efforts aside, there is not a great deal he can do to alleviate the institutional and large-scale injustices that have swept Ireland and led to the phenomenon of the ghost estate. A more widespread, national consciousness would need to take root, as Gilroy suggests,⁵ for there to be any substantive change to the mood of national melancholia.

To appropriate the words of the working paper 'A Haunted Landscape', the 'spectre' haunting Ireland is not only the presence of the ghost estate, but also the ghost of Bobby's father, Frank, who is condemned to haunt his home after his murder. Though Frank's home is not in the ghost estate, it is regardless a site of melancholia, due to its presence in the economically depressed village. Frank represents unfinished business, in the same way melancholia does; he, like the ghost estate, is a reminder to the villagers of the physical and economic violence their community has recently endured, and the ways in which they must be continually reminded of a catastrophe that has not been resolved.

Frank has been murdered by a character named Dennis, who is so melancholic from financial stress he blacks out and only awakens when he realizes he has killed a man. Frank was not a good man – he abused Bobby, drank excessively, and was cruel to Bobby's mother – but the presence of his ghost is, to echo Siemerling, a reminder of an unresolved past. His section, narrated after his death, is vague in particulars. Frank tells the reader

I'm nearly sure I've been dead about a month. I haven't got out past the front door yet. It'll be a fair old while before I'm left leave this limbo, I'd say. They probably don't know what to do with me. I'm stuck here while they wonder about it, them that does the deciding about who gets sent where. They'd want to get the finger out now, in all fairness. I'd say I'm meant to be contemplating my life and feeling sorry for my wrongdoing. The Vatican

⁵ See footnote 4.

done away with Purgatory, I'd say that's why I'm being left here to haunt my own house. Ha! (140–141)

Frank's observation that 'the Vatican done away with Purgatory' is resonant in more ways than solely being caught in a melancholic limbo. Fintan O'Toole, citing Daniel Corkery's triumvirate of religious consciousness (in particular, Catholicism), Irish nationalism, and the land as being those elements that make up 'authentically Irish literature', notes, 'by the end of the twentieth century, those apparently secure landmarks no longer defined the Irish cultural landscape' (O'Toole 2006, 630). In the world of *The Spinning Heart* absolutely no reference is made to Irish nationalism by any character, which is a fitting response for residents of a country who feel that their leaders have betrayed them. Catholicism no longer holds a central place in the town; the local priest is so little thought of that he is only glancingly mentioned⁶ and is not even given a monologue of his own, and whereas Catholicism may have been the organizing structure of the community 50 years ago, today, it is economics. While both nationalism and Catholicism seem to have been let go of with a relative amount of ease, 'the land' is a bit more troublesome. As Cassie Maddox, the narrator of *The Likeness*, a Tana French book that predates *Broken Harbor*, says, 'This country's passion for property is built into the blood, a current as huge and primal as desire. Centuries of being turned out on the roadside at a landlord's whim, helpless, teach your bones that everything in life hangs on owning your home' (French 2008, 46). The land and the secure economic benefits it can provide is still central to Ireland's conception of itself and its literature; this is why so much of the melancholia in *The Spinning Heart* circulates around land, whether that be Bobby's role in building the ghost estate, Réaltín's depressing living situation, or Frank the ghost's inhabitation of 'the cottage where I lived my whole life and where my father lived before me' (141). The characters in *The Spinning Heart* are aware their community is out of balance, but cannot productively mourn the intangible causative figures that have

⁶ And when he is mentioned, it is because a local resident told him 'to go way and fuck off for himself and 'where to go and where to shove his Scriptures' (72).

made it so; their only recourse is to focus their melancholic feelings on the land and its buildings and how they represent the violence that has been done to them.

'The Village of the Damned': Melancholia On the Outskirts of Dublin

Donal Ryan and crime writer Tana French are often grouped together as part of a new wave of Irish post-recession writers.⁷ Like Ryan, French's work often directly concerns the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath; her first novel, *In the Woods*, concerns the construction of a motorway during boomtime, and *Broken Harbor* studies the effects of the recession (a rough parallel to *The Thing About December* and *The Spinning Heart*). Also similarly to Ryan, French is concerned with the psychological fallout of the recession and what results that psychology and melancholia can have on communities. But unlike Ryan, who seems more interested in painting portraits of his characters than in judging them, French is fascinated by what makes someone 'good' versus 'bad', as well as the subtleties and gray areas in between. 'I write psychological crime', she says, 'so I spend a fair amount of time thinking about morality and amorality and what underlies them' (French 2013). French is the author of a series of five books collectively known as the Dublin Murder Squad series. Each book is told from the point of view of a different detective on the squad, and each focuses on a different murder or series of murders. While in some of her earlier books, most notably *In the Woods*, French is comfortable positioning biological aspects of psychology as the key determinants of what causes morality and amorality, in *Broken Harbor* French is much more interested in making 'urgent points [. . .] about the social and economic underpinnings' (Maslin 2012) of violence and the amorality that violence is borne of and can lead to. The novel, set in post-recession Ireland and in 'possibly the most perfect post-crash setting for a slice of genuinely disturbing horror' (Flood 2012), investigates how outside circumstances, including economics and associated melancholia, drive people to do unspeakable

⁷ See, for example, Justine Jordan's 17 October 2015 article in *The Guardian*, 'The New Irish Literary Boom: The Post-Crash Stars of Fiction'.

things; *Broken Harbor*, says Maureen Corrigan, is 'as much social criticism as [. . .] whodunit' (Corrigan 2012).

Broken Harbor is set primarily on a ghost estate on the far outskirts of Dublin. The narrator, Detective Scorcher Kennedy, went there on holidays with his family when he was a child and the area was rural and called Broken Harbor; now, the land has been tamed and developed and rebranded as Brianstown. One holiday, when Scorcher was a teenager, his mother walked into the ocean and killed herself. It is strongly implied she had been suffering from untreated depression for many years; as such, the physical location of Broken Harbor/Brianstown is replete with melancholic associations for Scorcher, even before he is tasked with investigating the case on which the novel focuses, that of the Spain murders. The Spain family (note the allusion to the country, which also suffered tremendously in the 2008 worldwide recession) consisted of Patrick and Jenny and their two children. Patrick and Jenny were childhood sweethearts in Dublin who married and moved out to a newly developed subdivision in Brianstown. That subdivision is now a ghost estate, almost entirely abandoned but for the Spains and another family across the street (who believe the Spain house to be haunted). All Scorcher and his partner, Richie, know about the case at first is that Patrick and the two children have been found dead in their home; Jenny has been brutally attacked, but remains alive.

Readers know Scorcher from Tana French's previous book, *Faithful Place*, where he is presented to the reader as a blustering, know-it-all, ignorant buffoon. This image would seem to be justified in *Broken Harbor* by one of Scorcher's earliest musings, as he is driving out to Brianstown: 'I'm a big believer in development – blame the property developers and their tame bankers and politicians for this recession if you want, but the fact is, if it wasn't for them thinking big, we'd never have got out of the last one' (French 2012, 11). Scorcher seems unable to comprehend that 'getting out of the last recession' is no good if the developers are just going to develop another one – his lack of interest in drawing a line between good and bad means of development is a troubling attitude for a deeply suffering post-crash Ireland. However, his buoyant attitude deflates a bit as he and Richie approach the Brianstown subdivision

where the Spains lived, known as Ocean View. Though 'at first glance, Ocean View looked pretty tasty: big detached houses that gave you something substantial for your money', at 'second glance, the grass needed weeding and there were gaps in the footpaths', and at 'third glance, something was wrong' (13). Even Scorcher can see that this form of development is not productive:

The houses were too much alike. Even on the ones where a triumphant red-and-blue sign yelled SOLD, no one had painted the front door a crap color, put flowerpots on the windowsills or tossed plastic kiddie toys on the lawn. There was a scattering of parked cars, but most of the driveways were empty, and not in a way that said everyone was out powering the economy. You could look straight through three out of four houses, to bare rear windows and gray patches of sky. A heavysset girl in a red anorak was shoving a buggy along a footpath, wind grabbing at her hair. She and her moon-faced kid could have been the only people within miles.

'Jaysus', Richie said; in the silence his voice was loud enough that both of us jumped. 'The village of the damned'. (13)

It is no surprise that in such a desolate location, the reader would, like the Spains' neighbors, begin to wonder if supernatural elements were in play in the murders. When Richie and Scorcher enter the house, the eeriness is compounded: the walls of the bright, new home have been riddled with holes, and multitudes of security cameras are scattered all over the house. After some time in their house, Scorcher begins to be concerned: 'the place was starting to get to me [. . .] Something about the holes in the walls, all those skeleton houses staring in at us, like famine animals circled around the warmth of a fire'. He ends his thoughts with an ominous, '*This is different*' (29).

Like Jim in *The Spinning Heart*, Scorcher recognizes in contemporary scenes of Irish desolation a hearkening back to previous years. While Jim's point of reference is the early twentieth century fight for independence, Scorcher reaches even further back to the days of the Great Famine, perhaps the worst disaster in the history of an

island that has seen more than its fair share of disasters. Yet, both Jim and Scorcher are aware that though there are threads of continuity between earlier times and their own, their melancholic feelings do not focus on the attitudes of decay and decomposition that references to the famine and the early twentieth century conjure up; instead, their melancholia finds its outlet in the brand-new, 'triumphant' outposts of Ireland's vanished dreams for the future. Jim's community is inhabited by a spectral manifestation of that melancholia, the ghost of the murdered Frank; Scorcher, at first, similarly starts to wonder if there might be more to the story than what meets the physical eye.

But in *Broken Harbor*, French is not interested in supernatural explanations for melancholia. She is interested, rather, in demonstrating what happens to people in a world where 'all the rules [they've] followed start to let [them] down' (Flood). *Broken Harbor* posits that when the 'rules' are gone and individuals are unable to fully process what has happened, the melancholia that creeps in leads to violence. As Marilyn Stasio would have it, the novel is 'about the dangers of suppressing unthinkable thoughts' (Stasio 2012); the fact that these thoughts find their outlet on a ghost estate, 'a stark symbol of Ireland's distress' (Anderson 2012), further signifies that these physical spaces are where melancholia resides in contemporary Ireland. For in the end, of course, there is no supernatural explanation for the mysteries of *Broken Harbor*. Ghosts are referred to throughout the course of the novel as explanations for the murders, the holes in the walls, and the cameras, but the most mundane and most comprehensible explanation is the one that wins out: essentially, Patrick had been under a tremendous amount of stress from losing his job in the recession and yet still needed to make mortgage payments on the house. The violence springs from the melancholia Pat falls into, as Freud and Butler predict; he takes revenge on the physical structure of the house, smashing holes in the walls and positioning cameras everywhere to catch sight of an animal he imagines is tearing the house apart from the inside. Without spoiling the end of the story and the final resolution of the mystery, Pat's slide into self-reproach is made apparent when Jenny, recovered enough to speak and recounting Patrick's melancholia, tells Scorcher and Richie that Patrick started making holes in the wall of

Our lovely house, that we'd worked like crazy to buy and keep nice, that we used to *love*, and now he was smashing it to pieces. I wanted to cry. Pat saw my face and he went, really *grim*, 'What's it matter? A couple more months and it'll all be the bank's anyway'. He'd never said anything like that before. Before, we'd both always been all, 'We'll find a way, it'll be OK . . .' And the look on his face . . . There was nothing I could say. I just turned around and walked out and left him there, hammering the wall. It fell apart like it was nothing. (398)

This last note of Jenny's – that the wall fell apart like it was nothing – sums up the financial structure that led to the presence of ghost estates in the first place. The shaky financial structure that led to the property boom fell away in the face of the recession, leaving nothing but an all-pervasive sense of melancholia to take its place. As one of Patrick and Jenny's friends, Conor, puts it, when he first saw the pamphlets for Ocean View, he knew straightaway that 'There *was* no place' (333), that 'it wasn't somewhere anyone would want to *live* [. . .] the whole place was fucking horrendous' (334). Conor seems to possess a capacity for long-term thought that escaped Patrick and Jenny when they bought the house; he grimly notes to the detectives, 'I don't have a clue about financial stuff. I'm just a web designer. But I knew nobody wanted houses out in the middle of nowhere. . . Like I said, I'm just some idiot, but even I know a pyramid scheme eventually runs out of suckers' (334–335). By 2012, the 'suckers' are no longer buying, but no real plan has been proposed to help those who are already imbricated in the system. The novel's setting on a ghost estate is resonant of the ways in which the Irish government's failure to deal with and correct the failings of the Celtic Tiger and ensuing recession still haunts Irish society; ghost stories in ghost estates not only signal the emptiness and depression of melancholia, but are also a way for writers to signal to readers that some justice-oriented action must be taken to deal with the unresolved past.

Two possible solutions are proposed for the ghost estates as the case comes to a close. Scorcher is talking to Jenny's sister, Fiona, who comments that she has

heard that the government is thinking about bulldozing many of the country's ghost estates. 'Just smash them down to the ground, walk away and pretend it never happened', she says (434). It's not clear what 'pretending it never happened' would accomplish or how this would help any of the remaining inhabitants of the ghost estates, but when she says this, Scorcher allows his mind to wander, thinking:

For one last second, I saw Broken Harbor the way it should have been. The lawn mowers buzzing and the radios blasting sweet fast beats while men washed their cars in the drives, the little kids shrieking and swerving on scooters; the girls out jogging with their ponytails bouncing, the women leaning over the garden fences to swap news, the teenagers shoving and giggling and flirting on every corner; color exploding from geranium pots and new cars and children's toys, smell of fresh paint and barbecue blowing on the sea wind. The image leapt out of the air, so strong that I saw it more clearly than all the rusting pipes and potholed dirt. (434)

This second solution, an overly romanticized vision of exurbia populating the ghost estate, is troubling as well. Recall Scorcher's earlier thoughts on property development: 'blame the property developers and their tame bankers and politicians for this recession if you want, but the fact is, if it wasn't for them thinking big, we'd never have got out of the last one' (11). Scorcher's fantasy of a fully developed Brianstown is nostalgic for a future that never existed, and speaks to a worrisome tendency to work through the presence of melancholia by seemingly hoping that next time, the developers will once again 'get out of the last one' by building bigger, grander, newer. It looks to another, future iteration of neoliberalism to replace the melancholia, rather than utilizing melancholia's presence to propose alternative solutions.

While Scorcher's image of Brianstown wistfully thinks of how a ghost estate should have looked in the past and would ideally appear in the future, the reality of the ghost estates remains in Ireland. Michael Lewis, the *Vanity Fair* correspondent, did eventually persuade Ian to pull over at one of the ghost estates. He writes of the experience:

The wet hedgerows cultivated along the highway to hide the wet road from the wet houses now hide the wet houses from the wet road. Picture the village of the future, reads a dripping billboard with a picture of a village that will never be built . . . You can see the moment the money stopped flowing from the Irish banks, the developer folded his tent, and the Polish workers went home . . . The concrete slab, like the completed houses, is riven by the kind of cracks you see in a house after a major earthquake, but in this case are caused by carelessness. Inside, the floors are littered with trash and debris, the fixtures have been ripped out of the kitchen, and the mold spreads spider-like across the walls. The last time I saw an interior like this was New Orleans after Katrina. (2011)

The invocation of Katrina, another disaster caused and made worse by neoliberal economic policies such as the gutting of the public sector and the withdrawal of regulation from many aspects of public life⁸, reminds one of the way in which New Orleans's future has been rebranded after the hurricane. The American media often breathlessly proclaims New Orleans is 'back', that it has 'recovered' after the natural disaster, but critics point to the way in which neoliberal measures like the replacement of public schools with charter schools, the use of Section 8 housing vouchers instead of traditional public housing, and the privatization of various other formerly public services have increased gentrification, inequality, and widening racial and economic disparity in the use of land and allocation of housing. Though the Irish billboard in the excerpt above asks the viewer to 'Picture the village of the future', the vision of the future remains murky: is it to continue to be abandoned ghost estates, a return to neoliberalism that invokes New Orleans, or a different, more just solution? At the moment, Ryan and French argue, no such solution exists; without a plan that focuses on aggressively addressing the wrongs of the Tiger, melancholia will continue to pervade Ireland.

⁸ See Cedric Johnson (ed.), *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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