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“Girlhood, desire, memory and Northern Ireland in Lucy Caldwell’s short fiction”

Abstract:

This essay discusses two short stories of girlhood written by Lucy Caldwell: “Mayday” and “Here We Are” (2017). This article argues that, while Caldwell’s fiction is mobilised by an engagement with the politics of Northern Ireland, it is not the physical violence of “the Troubles” that animates her work. Rather, her stories are concerned with the broader reverberations of the conflict and its aftermath; the conservative political climate that characterised the latter part of the twentieth century; and the domestic debris that decades of conflict have left in their wake. Caldwell’s focus on young female sexuality – and the ways in which is curtailed, controlled and abused – enables her to critique the anachronistic politics of Northern Ireland while opening up imaginative avenues through which to envision the future. In exploring moments of connection and the enabling power of girlhood desire, Caldwell provides a feminist alternative to the masculinist narratives, so often of (paramilitary) violence, that have characterised engagement with the North of Ireland during the latter part of the twentieth century. The article emphasizes that it is not the “trauma” of the Troubles that galvanises Caldwell’s short fiction but the trauma of being denied bodily autonomy, or the right to love who you choose in a manner equal to your peers.

In her introduction to *The Glass Shore: Short Stories by Women Writers from the North of Ireland* (2016), Sinéad Gleeson asserts that “[g]iven the geographic focus” of the collection, the “expectation” might be that the anthology would be marked by “conflict or religion”. Gleeson highlights that, rather than displaying a preoccupation with the violence of the latter part of the twentieth century, euphemistically referred to as “The Troubles”, the anthology is engaged in a “broader kind of politics”: “the personal, of bodies, of borders” (3). One such story included in Gleeson’s anthology is Lucy Caldwell’s “Mayday”, about a young woman in late adolescence who, denied access to an abortion in Northern Ireland, is forced to terminate a pregnancy by taking pills she has purchased online. Like much of Caldwell’s fiction, “Mayday” is concerned with the impact of Northern Ireland’s social and religious conservatism, which disproportionately affects women and the LGBTQ population. Northern Ireland’s stance towards women’s reproductive rights

is significantly more regressive than the rest of the UK and, as of February 2018, Northern Ireland still does not afford equal marriage rights to same-sex couples, unlike both Ireland and Britain.ⁱ The heterosexual family unit was deemed to be so integral to, and emblematic of, Northern Irish society that it was used as a cover image for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, where the silhouettes of a man, woman, girl and boy embody the hopes of a new peaceful North.ⁱⁱ Caldwell's most recent short fiction is testament to the ongoing exploration, negotiation and shifting of the balance of power in the North of Ireland; an essential element of Caldwell's contribution to this exploration is the investment she makes in women and, especially, adolescent girls. "Mayday", like many of Caldwell's stories, employs a distinctive use of what Susan Cahill has termed the enabling "potential of girlhood" to articulate a sense of "freedom, independence [and] development" (177, 168). Through mobilizing the forward-looking voice of girlhood in her short fiction, Caldwell is able to simultaneously imagine a more tolerant, hopeful future, in conjunction with criticising the current political climate in the Northern Ireland. While Caldwell's work observes the ongoing violence perpetrated against women, children and LGBTQ people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is also full of moments that depict girlhood desire as a force for envisioning connections that transcend and disrupt the politics of heteronormativity, and for more convivial futures.ⁱⁱⁱ

In "Mayday", a telling "memory" from the woman's childhood places religion at the centre of Caldwell's narrative; she recalls being "eleven" and on "a Junior Strings weekend away", where the Catholic and Protestant children are separated for their respective church services on Sunday. Despite not being Catholic, the unnamed girl goes to "receive Holy Communion". After she "chews [and] swallows" the Holy Sacrament, the other children laugh at her and tell her she is going to hell (355, 356).

This anecdote forms the second paragraph of the story, quickly and intimately connecting religion to discipline, shame and fear. The young woman is studying English Literature at university and writing an essay on *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's epic poem, first published in 1667; with no small degree of irony on Caldwell's part, the woman reflects, "You can't get away from religion, in the seventeenth century" (356). Despite holding quite radical views on divorce, Milton was a strict Puritan whose religious views dictated women should be subservient to men and his literature has been criticised for its misogyny.^{iv} Through twinning Milton with contemporary Northern Ireland, Caldwell illustrates the everyday violence inflicted upon women in the state, where politics is driven by conservative, and in some cases, fundamentalist, Christianity.^v In this way, Caldwell implicates the North's religious culture as the impediment hindering a more progressive political climate, where the rights of women – including access to essential reproductive health services – are respected and protected.

"Mayday" is a sensitive, nuanced exploration of the woman's experience; although the young woman is terrified about the abortion going wrong, the story concludes with an "overwhelming, incredible sense of relief: that she is doing the right thing" (363). This young woman may live in a patriarchal culture that attempts to limit her ability to exercise her reproductive rights but she is determined to maintain control over her own bodily autonomy and, crucially, her future. Although "Mayday" never diminishes the trauma of having to undertake a potentially life-threatening procedure without medical or other support, the strength of Caldwell's protagonist rings out in defiance, insisting that her future will be a positive one: she declares "[s]he will be one of the lucky ones. She will. She will" (363). Note the slippage in this story between distant and recent past; past and present; present and

imagined future. The previously discussed “memory” from the narrator’s childhood interrupts the contemporary narrative almost immediately, unsettling the linearity of the story and establishing an anxious preoccupation with time. This first memory highlights the corrosive effect of religion on young lives; “[A]nother memory” comes to the narrator later in the story, of “Junior Debating Club” and a debate over abortion, where “[a]lmost nobody voted For” the rights of women to access abortion. In coupling these memories with the narrator’s university work into seventeenth-century literature, for which she is reading books entitled “*Gender, Family, Faith: Norms and Controversies*” and “*Civil Wars of Ideas: Politics vs. Religion*”, Caldwell makes a searing comment about the anachronistic state of affairs in the North, suggesting that the attitudes towards women which underpin current legislation echo those of the puritanical seventeenth-century. Through this temporal play, Caldwell accentuates and critiques the lack of progress that has been made with regards to women’s rights by Stormont (356). The keystone of the story is the tenacity and optimism of a girl in late adolescence, willing and desiring a future society where she will have the ability to make her own decisions about her body.

Girlhood is a state with striking biopolitical potential:^{vi} girls physically and metaphorically embody the future since it will be their bodies that birth the next generation. Nira Yuval-Davis argues “[i]t is women [...] who reproduce nations, biologically, culturally and symbolically” (Yuval-Davis 2). In this way, girlhood animates discussion – and perhaps, uncertainty – about the future in a more obvious fashion than boyhood. The nature of “girlhood” is profoundly troublesome, as both a slippery semantic concept and a peculiarly anxiety-inducing moment in female development. “Girlhood” is a term that is hard to define and in her landmark study on the subject, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture & Cultural Theory*

(2006), Catherine Driscoll actively avoids defining the term concretely. While Driscoll ties girlhood to “feminine adolescence”, she is keen to assert that “feminine adolescence” is not the same as “female adolescence”. Female adolescence, Driscoll advises, is “predominantly a discourse of puberty” and the physical changes that mark the transition from girl child to adult woman (6). The social, cultural and psychological markers of girlhood are not necessarily attached to the bodily changes of puberty. Rather, girlhood can be understood as the transitional stage of “a girl-becoming-a-woman” and it is precisely the indeterminate nature of this stage that gives the girl her own particular type of agency (Driscoll 1). The “in-between” quality of the girl, on the borders of childhood and adulthood, makes the voice particularly effective for Northern Irish literature. Northern Ireland is a country that is and is not part of both the Republic of Ireland and the UK; Eamonn Hughes has argued that “Northern Ireland is not so much enclosed by its borders as defined by them: it is a border country” (3). Adolescence is the physical embodiment of this borderline identity. If the girl is a liminal figure, no longer a child, not quite an adult, then girlhood both straddles the past and gestures toward the future. This is not lost on Caldwell and her most recent collection of short fiction, *Multitudes*, is explicitly concerned with what is yet to come. Echoing “Mayday”, multiple stories, such as “Through the Wardrobe”, about a transgender boy, end with their characters willfully asserting control over their futures, declaring “no matter what it takes and no matter how long it takes, you will come through” (99); other stories of adolescence, like “Poison” and “Here We Are”, conclude with the first-person narrator as an adult, anxiously drawing attention to youthful hopes for a different future or frustrated desires. In *Multitudes*, girlhood is, as this article elucidates, a particularly affective –

if ultimately ambivalent – status, loaded with hope, potential and convivial desire at odds with the North’s repressive culture.

Given that the vast majority of the stories in *Multitudes* are located in Northern Ireland, it is tempting to read Caldwell’s investment in an imagined future as a particularly “post-conflict” or “post-Troubles” engagement. To do so would not only reductively limit the scope of Caldwell’s political project, but would also disregard Caldwell’s own stance on this. Caldwell has stated numerous times that she “isn’t, and doesn’t want to be, a writer of the Troubles, or of the post-Troubles generation” (Kearney). Instead, with *Multitudes*, Caldwell sought to “keep the Troubles at a remove, without ignoring the insidious, even if indirect, impact they had on the rhythms of daily life and the collective and individual psyche” (Stitch). Many of the stories in *Multitudes* – some of which are located during the decades of the Troubles, some of which are “post-conflict” – are clearly marked by trauma, and make passing reference to incidents of violence. However, most stories are concerned with the broader reverberations of the Troubles and its aftermath, with the conservative political climate that characterised the latter part of the twentieth century and the domestic debris that decades of conflict have left in their wake.

In 1995, in the introduction to his anthology *The Hurt World: Short Stories of the Troubles*, Michael Parker wrote that “contemporary Northern Irish writing [...] is not just concerned with bombs and bullets, but with many other issues of power” (3). Many of the short stories collected in *The Hurt Locker*, Parker argues, “exhibit[ed] their female characters’ increasing impatience with, and resistance to, male readings and patriarchal order” (3). This “patriarchal order” is a by-product of the twin strictures of nationalism – both “Orange” and “Green” – and religion. These parallel forces underpin the “traditional thinking behind some of the major institutions, such

as the education system or the judiciary”, and are “also responsible for the extremely conservative ideology for which the Province has become infamous” (McWilliams 81). In an interview published in *The Honest Ulsterman*, Caldwell discusses how the “Northern Ireland [she] grew up in was very male-dominated” and she vividly recalls the overbearing presence of “[m]ale politicians, male religious leaders, male soldiers on the streets” (Stitch). Drawing attention to the dearth of representation of women and girls, Caldwell lamented what it was like to “grow up without seeing fictional representations of yourself”; she claims “[y]ou grow warped and insecure, you lack confidence, you fail to know who you are or could become” (Stitch). Noting how her own “personal experience was in direct contrast with the civic, political, public life and face of the country”, Caldwell decided that with *Multitudes*, published over twenty years since Parker’s assertion, she wanted to explore the lives and stories from Belfast, and the North, that are often overlooked. Indeed, in this return to Northern Ireland of the 1980s and early to mid-1990s in *Multitudes*, and conscious decision not to focus on moments of violence, Caldwell’s work can be read as offering a subversive feminist critique of the dominant narratives repeated about the North of Ireland. Caldwell has suggested that it can “seem that only certain stories are worthy of being told” about the North – “the ‘big’ stories, the stories that suck up all of the oxygen” about “the bombs you’d seen, the bereavements you’d suffered”. But, Caldwell insists, there are plenty of stories that have not yet been told, and these “are just as important as the ‘big’ stories” (Stitch). In her work, Caldwell elevates the stories of society’s most marginalised group – girls – and their desire for difference: for connection, tolerance and conviviality.

The narratives of girlhood discussed here offer a chance to imagine a different future, but these stories should be read as part of a longer history of women’s writing

that has worked to appraise the role of, and reinsert, women into the narratives of the North of Ireland, pre- and post-partition. With her focus on women from the North, Caldwell's work can be read as part of a literary genealogy that includes Rosa Mulholland, Alice Milligan, Janet McNeill, Mary Beckett, Fiona Barr and Ann Devlin, amongst others.^{vii} The short story is a particularly apposite literary form for both the articulation of women's experience – so long sidelined and marginalised – and of a form of resistance to dominant narratives. Much critical work has positioned the short story as a means of expressing of a minor voice or a (post)colonial writing back.^{viii} In his seminal study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice* (1963), Frank O'Connor suggests that the short story is particularly well suited to writing about what he labels "submerged population groups" (18). O'Connor defines these submerged population groups as "figures wandering about the fringes of society", marginalised from a dominant social tradition (19). Some critics, most notably Clare Hanson, suggests that these marginalised figures include women, amongst others: "the short story has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks – writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling narrative or epistemological/experiential framework of their society" (2). Hanson elucidates further on the enabling properties of the form, noting how the "formal properties of the short story – disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity – connect with its ideological marginality and with the fact that the form may be used to express something suppressed/repressed in mainstream literature" (6). The ability of short fiction to "express something suppressed/repressed in mainstream literature" is particularly pertinent to the discussion below on the gendered and sexual politics of Caldwell's stories.^{ix}

There is an argument that short story is an apposite form for women writers not just because its formal properties give voice to the experience of *being* marginalised but because the women's short story is *itself* a marginalised form. In their introduction to *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now* (2016), Emma Young and James Bailey argue "there is a far richer tradition of women short story writers [...] than is readily recognised by" critical orthodoxy (5). In the introduction to her edited collection, *Narratives of Community: Women's Short Story Sequences* (2007), Roxanne Harde highlights how literary critics have tended to argue that *Dubliners* (1914) was the "first story sequence or collection of linked short stories" but in reality, "sequences by women, including Elizabeth Gaskell and Sarah Orne Jewett" were published as early as the "mid-nineteenth century" (1). In her study of Irish women's short fiction, Elke D'hoker calls attention to how, in the "standard histories and theories of the Irish short story", the "achievements of women writers have often been side-lined: limited to one or two chapters [...] or ignored altogether" (1). D'hoker's *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* pursues an astute and interesting argument suggesting that short fictions by women – especially Irish women – have been overlooked because they do not fit into O'Connor's thesis on the form. Rather than "idealizing the romantic outsider or promoting a sense of universal loneliness", as O'Connor insists good short stories do, "the short fiction of Irish women writers is abundantly concerned with questions of relationality and connection" (7). While resisting both O'Connor's masculinist narrative of the short story, or creating an essentialist one that posits a definitive reading of women's stories, D'hoker maintains short stories written by Irish women are often preoccupied with "dramatizing the difficulty of interpersonal relations or the

need for human connection” (7). This interest in community and human relations is one keenly displayed in Caldwell’s *Multitudes*.

Indeed, Caldwell’s stories track the relationships of individual girls to their larger, and various, Northern Irish communities; *Multitudes* could be understood as an example of the “Narrative of community” that Harde explores in her edited collection. Drawing on an essay by Sandra Zagarell of the same title, Harde maintains that some short story cycles written by women can be understood as “narratives of community” and read as a “coherent response to social and cultural changes, although these coherent responses come out of texts that are often fragmented or episodic. They are collective, continuous, and bear the culture of community through a focus on the details of local or domestic life’ (Harde 2). Rather, then, than focus exclusively on marginalised individuals, the short story often dramatises encounters between such individuals and their communities; Mary Louise Pratt suggests that we consistently “find the short story being used to introduce new regions or groups into an established national literature” (104). Throughout the twentieth century, women from both sides of the Irish border turned to short fiction in order to demarcate and reclaim a space of their own within Irish, British and Northern Irish literary traditions.

In the twenty-first century, and particularly the past few years, an astonishing number of short story collections and anthologies have come out of the North of Ireland, or written by women with connections to Northern Ireland. Significant recent examples include anthologies like Gleeson’s and *The Female Line: New Writing by Women from Northern Ireland*, edited by Linda Anderson and Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado (2017), in addition to Bernie McGill’s *Sleepwalkers* (2013), Jan Carson *Children’s Children* (2016), Rosemary Jenkinson’s *Aphrodite’s Kiss* (2016) and Roisín O’Donnell’s *Wild Quiet* (2016). These collections share similarities and all

three are, as with *Multitudes*, heavily concerned with the lives of women and girls. Explorations of desire and intimacy reverberate through *Sleepwalkers* and *Multitudes*; *Wild Quiet* is profoundly invested in youth although, like McGill's collection, O'Donnell's stories take place in a broader geographic spread than Caldwell's. With its focus on children, young people and Northern Ireland, Carson's *Children's Children* is relatively similar to *Multitudes* in many respects. Carson's collection is, however, notably different from Caldwell's through her experiments with magical realism and her use of male voices. Caldwell's sustained dedication to the voices of girls from Northern Ireland makes *Multitudes* a particularly fascinating collection for our purposes.

"By then we'll be free": girls and queer desire in "Here We Are"

Caldwell is a writer fiercely attuned to the ongoing inequality that affects the lives of women, girls and LGBTQ people. In Northern Ireland, same-sex marriage is illegal: Article 6 of the Marriage (NI) Order 2003 prohibits marriage if both parties are of the same sex. Same-sex marriage has been voted on five times in the Northern Irish Assembly and, despite it passing by a slim majority in 2015, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) vetoed it using the "Petition of Concern", in line with their conservative (Christian) beliefs.^x This "Petition of Concern", a direct legacy of the conflict in the state, requires a motion to achieve cross-community majority; the votes of the DUP and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) blocked this. There are significant and ongoing attempts to have this law redressed but these have not yet met with success.^{xi} In "Here We Are", Caldwell's depiction of a burgeoning and unfolding sexual relationship between two girls galvanises her criticism of the treatment of those who subvert heterosexual expectations. In the story, two teenage girls, another unnamed narrator

and Angela Beattie, whose father is a former “local councillor” and “born-again Christian”, enter into a deeply fulfilling relationship. Through their mutual love of music, the two girls are able to hide their relationship, “passing” for straight and using music classes and practices to disguise their romantic meetings. However, Mr Beattie’s religious beliefs mean is unable to tolerate their feelings for each other; when they are “finally confronted” by him, the pressure of his “disgust”, “revulsion”, “anger” and “panic” force the two to end their relationship (115). Angela’s mother has been killed a few years prior to the start of the story, in a hit and run accident, and so Angela feels a particular responsibility for her father.

The desire, optimism and excitement that propels this romance is asserted in an opening section that sees the lovers on a “Northern evening” in the “Cutters Wharf” pub before they go on a long walk through the streets of east Belfast, “along the Lagan and through the Holylands”, along the “whole sweep of the Ormeau Embankment [...] further and further east until [they reach] Van Morrison territory”. Caldwell’s very first paragraph focuses on a “*dreich*” Belfast summer, where “[e]very day the heavens open, and the rain comes down” (100; italics original). This is immediately followed with a single line, indented as if a new paragraph, ripe with the joy of adolescent attraction and abandon: “We don’t care. It is the best summer of our lives” (100). This statement is in sharp contrast to the opening paragraph’s focus on “heavy, dull, persistent rain”. As the lovers walk, Caldwell recites a litany of Belfast Street names, from “Palestine Street, Jerusalem Street [and] Damascus Street” to “Ravenhill Road [...], the London Road [...], and the North Road” (100-101). The power of the lovers’ desire, or what Lauren Berlant might term “desire’s optimism”, enables them to imaginatively reclaim the geography of Belfast from the height of the Troubles, lifting these street names from their association with violence and suffusing

them with the enabling properties of love and connection (282). Angela declares “[t]hese streets are ours” as they walk, the euphoria of their new relationship ostensibly pacifying the violence (101). Angela’s optimism is shared and then subtly undercut by the narrator, who echoes Angela’s assertion with a “[y]es, they are”, before slipping from the present to past tense by adding “[a]nd they were. The whole city was”. This move between tenses, through the change from “are” to “were”, cements the retrospective nature of the narration and imbues it with a sense of nostalgia, even while Angela’s words reverberate with opportunity. The youth of the narrator and her companion is made apparent by the observation that the “older crowd” who surround them at the “Cutters Wharf” pub include “some students from Queen’s [University Belfast]”, suggesting that the girls are still at school. Caldwell establishes the youth of the lovers early in the text and, as the story progresses, associates their youth with their will to imagine a more tolerant future, free from the bigotry that will ultimately thwart their romance.

Of all the stories in *Multitudes*, “Here We Are” is the most explicitly concerned with desire, pleasure and intimacy, and the transformative affect of desire on the body. Describing an encounter between herself and Angela, before either has acknowledged their feelings, the narrator exclaims, “I felt my whole body fizz [...] through and to unexpected parts of me, the skin tightening under my fingernails and at the backs of my knees” (105). When the two reveal their feelings for one another and initiate a sexual relationship, the moment is relayed with excitement, urgency and delight: the narrator recalls, “we unbuttoned each other’s shirts and unhooked the clasps of each other’s bras. Then our jeans and knickers: unzipping, wriggling, hopping out and off”; the girls are described as “ridiculous bubbles of joy” (104). This unabashed and unashamed focus on the pleasures of female and queer sexuality is

powerful, as is the strength of feeling shared between the two. This commitment to excavating these desires calls attention to the depth of sexual experience and expression that patriarchal society denies women and girls: especially queer girls. In this way, Caldwell works to privilege not just female sexuality, but to elevate silenced stories from the margins of recent Northern Irish history.

For, despite the pleasure that this desire brings, the retrospective quality of the narration makes the reader aware that the narrator used to believe these feelings to be deeply transgressive. Angela causes the narrator to fantasise about “things I didn’t dare think in words and that afterwards left me hot and breathless and almost ashamed” (107). Note here the emphasis on the narrator’s shame at the thought of physical intimacy with Angela, as if the feelings the narrator harbours are illicit or something to cause her embarrassment. In a tense exchange before Angela kisses the narrator for the first time, the narrator remembers “see[ing Angela’s] pulse jumping in the soft part of her neck”, adding, “[a] horrible, treacherous part of me wanted to reach out and touch it” (113). Again, in the earlier parts of the story, the narrator’s girlhood self sees her burgeoning homosexuality as a cause for concern; an aspect of her identity that is “horrible” and “treacherous”, something that she cannot control and that might betray her. The genuine, undiluted enjoyment that the girls find in each other is destroyed when Angela’s father “finally confronted” the lovers when he “walked right in on” them (115). This traumatic interaction evidently involved Mr Beattie making some homophobic comments, for the adult narrator forcefully declares that she does not “want to give any room to the disgust or revulsion” (115). This tactic suits the concise nature of the short story form, which is “geared towards the unsaid and suggested, rather than the elaborately articulated”, but it also negates repeating and giving voice to the hateful rhetoric of homophobia (McDonald 249).

“Here We Are” is a searing critique of the insidious nature of a repressive culture that seeks to control and curtail desire along the lines of heterosexuality. It does, in part, seem as if the adult narrator has recognized the corrosive quality of such ideas, lamenting the “wild apologies” that herself and Angela offered to Mr Beattie when he learned of their relationship, “when we should have been defiant, because what was there, in truth, for us to be apologising for, and to whom did we owe any apology?” (115). However, the adult narrator informs us that she is “happily engaged, and about to buy a flat” with her fiancé, indicating that, perhaps, she was unable to escape the beliefs that shaped her girlhood. After witnessing a “Marriage Equality march in Belfast”, the narrator decides to “look [Angela] up on the Internet”. She is shocked to discover that Angela, who has left the North for Scotland, now “r[uns] a small music school together [with her husband] in Ayrshire” (117). Caldwell’s decision that both women should end up observing the predetermined path of heteronormativity speaks to the pervasive impact of the North’s conservative climate. Ironically, music, which had provided a cloak of heterosexual invisibility for the two girls, enabling them to “pass” while also subversively furthering their romance, now seems to have a permanent role in suppressing Angela’s queer identity. In suggesting that it was a “Marriage Equality march” that led to the narrator thinking of Angela, Caldwell reminds the reader that equal rights have still not been achieved for those in same-sex partnerships. With devastating understatement, it becomes obvious from the narrator’s confession, in the final paragraph, that she “walked the streets of East Belfast” in her “dreams” – a “dream that seemed to linger”. In ending the story with the narrator contemplating emailing Angela, Caldwell concludes with the possibility of connection: a hint of the hopeful futurity that the girls’ teenage relationship was so rich with, but which was ultimately frustrated.

This oscillation between past and present underscores the tragedy of the story: that queer couples still cannot enjoy and celebrate their love in the same manner as their heterosexual peers. Throughout the story, the girls make several references to wanting to publically declare their feelings for one another. In the penultimate section, the narrator ruminates on a “memory [that] came to me”, of a conversation between herself and Angela, where the unnamed narrator exclaims: “I want to tell everyone: my parents, your dad, everyone. I want to stand in front of the City Hall with a megaphone and shout it out to the whole of Belfast” (119). This youthful exuberance is tinged with unhappiness that their contemporary society is unable to accept their status as a same-sex couple but it is also contrasted with the quiet confidence of Angela’s belief that things will change by the time they reach adulthood. Where the narrator dreams up elaborate schemes to disguise their relationship, Angela dismisses these as “[h]iding in plain sight” and states that “[w]e won’t need to [...] by then we’ll be free” (119). In finishing this penultimate section of the story with these words, Caldwell twins Angela’s optimism with the tragic irony of their unrealised promise; this makes the narrator’s subsequent admission that she dreams of Angela even more affective and powerful.

“Here We Are”, unlike numerous other stories in the collection, such as “Thirteen”, “Through the Wardrobe”, “Killing Time” or “Inextinguishable”, moves from a voice explicitly concerned with the future to a narrator turning back to the past: the final word of the story is “remember” (119). This tactic, as with the engagement with seventeenth-century literary politics in “Mayday”, calls attention to the regressive nature of Northern Irish politics. Where “Mayday” used the narrator’s engagement with academic work on *Paradise Lost* to illustrate Northern Ireland’s anachronistic stance with regards to the reproductive rights of women, in “Here We

Are” the narrator reads John Keats’ poem, “The Eve of St Agnes” (1819/20) for her school English class after her and Angela have broken up. The poem is a tale of forbidden love that ends with the lovers escaping, albeit with the deaths of two elderly characters, one of whom – named, curiously enough, Angela – has helped the lovers meet on the fated evening of St Agnes. For those familiar with the poem, Caldwell’s adoption of “Angela” for her short story sets up an intertextual link between her own and Keats’ Angela, both of whom sacrifice themselves for the love of others; Keats’ Angela to facilitate the love between Madeline and Porphyro, Caldwell’s Angela to keep her extremely religious father happy. In her copious notes on the poem, the narrator has written that the “[e]nding” of the poem, which concludes with the death of Angela rather than with the euphoria of the lovers, “rights the focus” of the poem. The narrator believes that with Angela’s death, Keats ensures that readers are not “le[ft ...] in too cosy a glow but remind[ed ...] of age/decay/coldness of religious characters” (116). With this intertextual critique, Caldwell reaffirms that it is religion – and its role in creating repressive state apparatus – that is responsible for curtailing the love of her two protagonists and for failing to give homosexual couples the same rights as heterosexuals.

Despite their hopes for a more tolerant future, in “Here We Are”, Caldwell’s young girls find themselves unable to realise their desires. However, in her work on “willful subjects”, Sara Ahmed argues that willful desires can still have an affective resonance, even if these desires go unfulfilled. Ahmed’s work on “willful subjects” is galvined by the Brothers Grimm story, “The Willful Child” (1884). In this story, a naughty girl-child, who refuses to behave, is allowed to become fatally ill by a “God who had no pleasure in her” and perishes (Grimm 125; quoted Ahmed 1). Upon her burial, however, the girl’s errant arm thrusts its way out of the soil in a final act of

willful unrest and continues to make its presence known, despite repeated efforts at reburying it, until her mother beats the child's arm into submission. This anecdote is significant for this article for two reasons: the insistence on the girlhood as the ultimate embodiment of the willful subject,^{xii} and the suggestion that thwarted desires of the willful subject linger on, haunting the contemporary moment and threatening to disrupt the future with their willful intent. Ahmed's declaration that the willful subject continues to haunt and unsettle, even if its aims are frustrated, is crucial. Caldwell's stories are preoccupied with the particular ability of girlhood desire to imagine different futures but, through dwelling on these preoccupations, Caldwell highlights the violence done to women, and society at large, when such desires are curbed by the North's repressive culture.

"A memory came to me": time, politics and anachronism

In addition to their privileging of willful female desire and canonical intertextual relationships, "Mayday" and "Here We Are" are both haunted and unsettled by memory. In "Here We Are", the narration is interrupted when "[a] memory came to me"; likewise, "Mayday" is punctuated by anecdotes from the past: "[a] memory", "[a]nother memory" and "[a]n evening from her childhood" ("Here We Are" 117; "Mayday" 355, 358, 360). These interruptions of memory derail the narrative of both stories, taking the reader into circuitous diversions into the narrators' pasts. In this way, then, these memory prompts disrupt the linear, chronological development of plot: they unsettle progress. It is significant that all of these diversions into the memories of the narrator involve a return to a moment that either highlights how little progress has been made with regards to the rights of women and the LGBTQ population, or an incident indicative of the religious sentiment that drives

such a conservative culture. In the first section of this essay, I suggested that Caldwell's conscious narrative detours into both the distant and recent past had the effect of fashioning Northern politics as peculiarly anachronistic. Anachronism, Gillian Rose argues, "is customarily taken to mean the retrospective misplacing of time: attributing to one point in the past the character or conceptuality belonging to some subsequent age, or to concerns which are current" (125). In Caldwell's short fiction we can trace what Helen Groth and Paul Sheehan see as a "productive anachronism", which, with its "'untimely' historical collocations" is an acute political commentary (579).

The tendency of memory to disfigure or reroute the conventional linear narrative of literary or cultural texts has often been conceptualised – and not unproblematically – through the discourse and rhetoric of trauma studies.^{xiii} Narrative heavily engaged with, or driven by, memory and/or trauma often share features such as "aporia, repetitions, gaps, silence" (Frawley 5). This intimate relationship between memory and trauma is particularly apparent in critical (and creative) texts that focus on the North of Ireland, which is unsurprising given the heavy burden of "dealing with the past". Historian Ian McBride has noted that the surge in scholarship dealing with such topics, along with a "growing interest in the social and political dimensions of remembrance, prompted partly by the rise of multiculturalism, with its political vocabulary of victimhood, restitution and, in the Irish context, 'parity of esteem'" (7). Caldwell's short stories highlight the shocking lack of "parity of esteem", not between Catholics and Protestants, but between men and women, and homo- and heterosexual couples. Caroline Magennis has drawn attention to how "Northern Ireland's cultural preoccupation with exorcising Troubles trauma" has kept "the spectre of misogyny" and, it could be added here, homophobia, "obscured" until very recently (231).

Caldwell's fiction is undoubtedly mobilised by an engagement with the politics of the North, but it is not the "trauma" of the Troubles that galvanises her work but the trauma of being denied bodily autonomy, or the right to love who you choose in a manner equal to your peers.

Caldwell's short fiction enacts a delicate and complex dance around history, trauma, gender and geography. While the stories are irrevocably set within Northern Ireland, her focus on female sexuality – and the ways in which is curtailed, controlled and abused – means that her stories transcend their geographic location, for these issues have a global resonance. In focusing on girls, Caldwell is able to critique the anachronistic politics of Northern Ireland while opening up imaginative avenues through which to envision the future. Her short fiction is testament to Caldwell's aspiration to find "new ways of approaching and questioning and reconciling the recent and received past of Northern Ireland with what it means to grow up and live here" (Stitch). Telling these stories is important because it lifts society's most marginalised voices out of the gaps and silences of history. In exploring moments of connection and the enabling power of girlhood desire, Caldwell provides a feminist alternative to the masculine-dominated narratives, so often of (paramilitary) violence, that have characterised engagement with the Northern Ireland during the latter part of the twentieth century. Even where the willful desires of some girls cannot come to fruition, they still speak to the chance for a radically different future; as Lauren Berlant articulates, "[e]ven if desire fails to find objects adequate to its aim, its errors can still produce pleasure: desire's fundamental ruthlessness is a source of creativity that produces new optimism, new narratives of possibility" (*Desire/Love* 43). Written from the perspective of girlhood and giving full expression to subversive desires, these stories capitalise on the liminality of youth; the embodied futurity of the girl enables

these Caldwell to imagine how different this future might look and how this girl can renegotiate her role within – and beyond – the limits and constraints of a conservative nation-state.

Notes

ⁱ Statistics collected by the 2016 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey indicates that, although there is strong support in the North “for abortion to be allowed where there is a risk to the life of the woman or a serious risk to her physical or mental health and in cases of fatal or serious foetal abnormality and where a pregnancy is a result of rape or incest”, there is strong opposition to the legalisation of abortion for any other reason. There is, however, “strong opposition to the criminalisation of women who buy abortion pills online and to the imprisonment of women for having abortions”. Ann Marie Gray, “Attitudes to Abortion in Northern Ireland”, *Research Update* Number 115, (June 2017), <http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update115.pdf>, 1-8, 8. Accessed August 2, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Image available at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.jpg> (accessed June 29, 2017). For an excellent analysis of the politics underpinning this aesthetic choice, see Stefanie Lehner, “Post-Conflict Masculinities: Filiative Reconciliation in Five Minutes of Heaven and David Park’s The Truth Commissioner”, in C. Magennis and R. Mullen (eds.) *Irish Masculinities: Reflections on Literature and Culture*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press 2011), 65-76, 65-66.

ⁱⁱⁱ I borrow the term “convivial” from Paul Gilroy, who believes that there is a spontaneous conviviality in post-imperial societies. He argues for a tolerant, “multicultural future prefigured everywhere in the ordinary experiences of contact, cooperation, and conflict across the supposedly impermeable boundaries of race, culture, identity and ethnicity”. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xii, italics mine.

^{iv} For a comprehensive, rigorous and nuanced account of Milton’s gender politics, see Catherine Gimelli Martin ed. *Milton and Gender*, (Cambridge, 2010).

^v Ian Paisley, head of the Democratic Unionist Party, initiated a campaign to prohibit the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Northern Ireland in 1977, which he entitled, ‘Save Ulster from Sodomy’. More recently, Ian Paisley Junior suggested that the DUP should boycott the Belfast bus company, Translink, because they had painted their buses pink: a colour he felt was too closely aligned with homosexuality (see Henry McDonald, “The DUP’s closet policies”, *The Guardian*, July 6 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/feb/06/northernireland.gayrights>, accessed 17 May 2017). Senior members of the DUP are associated with Creationism, see Nelson Jones, “Creationism and political power in Northern Ireland”, *The New Statesman*, July 6 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/07/creationism-and-political-power-northern-ireland>, accessed 17 May 2017.

^{vi} I am indebted to Caroline Magennis for suggesting the “biopolitical” quality of girlhood’s embodied futurity and to all those involved in the discussion of a version of this paper at the Melancholy Empire symposium at the University of Salford, 16th April 2015. Particular thanks must go to Dorothy Butchard and Amy Rushton for their insightful comments.

^{vii} Although primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with womanhood, rather than girlhood, see Mary Beckett, *A Belfast Woman and Other Stories*, (Swords: Poolbeg Press Ltd, 1980); Anne Devlin,

The Way-Paver, (London: Faber, 1986); Fiona Barr, “The Wall Reader” in *The Hurt World: Short Stories of the Troubles*, ed. Michael Parker, (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1995), 261-269 and, for an example of a novella in part concerned with girlhood, see Una Woods, “The Dark Hole Days’, *The Hurt World: Short Stories of the Troubles*, 162-233. Other notable narratives of Northern Irish girlhood, although not in the short story genre, include Frances Molloy, *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985); Mary Costello, *Titanic Town* (1993); Anna Burns, *No Bones* (2001); and Lucy Caldwell, *Where They Were Missed* (2006).

^{viii} There is a wealth of criticism exploring the adoption of the short story form by particular social groups. Many critics have made the claim that the adoption of the short story was a form of “writing back” against colonial subjugation and the epistemic violence of imperialism. It is striking that the short story really came into being – and flourished – on the fringes of the British Empire. For more on this, see *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*, eds. Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and Adrian Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 137-176. For more on the short story and Northern Ireland, see Michael Storey, *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction*, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004); Ronan McDonald, “Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles”, *The Yearbook of English Studies* 35, (2005); and Michael Parker’s “Introduction” to *The Hurt World* (1995).

^{ix} I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for *Contemporary Women’s Writing* for suggesting this work to me.

^x Across the UK, which governed Northern Ireland through direct rule for most of the latter part of the twentieth century, homosexual activity was decriminalised in England and Wales in 1962 and in Scotland since 1980; same-sex marriage was legalised across Britain in 2014. In Northern Ireland, homosexual activities were not decriminalised until 1982 (and even then, the age of consent was higher than for heterosexual couples); “Save Ulster from Sodomy”, led by the then-leader of the DUP, Ian Paisley in conjunction with the Free Presbyterian Church, had been established in 1977 to prevent decriminalisation. In the Republic, same-sex marriage was legalised via referendum in 2015, despite homosexual intercourse (between men) being illegal until 1993.

^{xi} Two same-sex couples challenged the legality of Article 6 of the 2003 Order, maintaining that it unlawfully discriminated against them on the basis of sexual orientation, contrary to the Human Rights Act 1998 and Articles 8 (right to respect for private and family life), 12 (right to marry) and 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the European Convention of Human Rights. In August 2017, this case was dismissed, with Judge O’Hara sympathising with the “frustration” same-sex couples must feel. He noted, this “frustration is increased by the fact that the Assembly has voted by a majority in favour of same-sex marriage, but by reason of special voting arrangements which reflect the troubled past of this State, that majority has not been sufficient to give the vote effect in law”. Justice O’Hara, quoted in ‘Northern Ireland’s ban on same-sex marriage does NOT breach human rights’, *TheJournal.ie*, 17th August 2017, <http://www.thejournal.ie/same-sex-marriage-northern-ireland-3551036-Aug2017/>, accessed 30 May 2018. In May 2018, UK Labour MP Conor McGinn introduced a bill in the UK Parliament to legalise same-sex marriage in the North, which was blocked by a single Conservative MP. This legislation will, however, be given a second reading in October 2018.

^{xii} Ahmed clarifies that, in the original German version of the story, the child has no gender and that English translations alternately use both “she” and “he”. However, she argues “willfulness tends to be registered as a feminine attribute” and places the female subject at the centre of her analysis (*Willful Subjects*, 205).

^{xiii} For insightful analysis of the potential pitfalls of fashioning too simple an overlap between Memory and Trauma Studies, see Oona Frawley “Introduction: Cruxes in Irish Cultural Memory: the Famine and the Troubles” in Oona Frawley ed. *Memory Ireland, Volume 3: The Famine and the Troubles*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 1-14; Emilie Pine, Naomi McAreavey and Fionnula Dillane, “Introduction” in Emilie Pine, Naomi McAreavey

and Fionnula Dillane ed. *The Body In Pain in Irish Literature and Culture*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1-19.

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