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## "Or am I seeking home?": Arrivals, Departures, and/or Returns as Identity-Shaping Experiences in Contemporary (Non-)Irish Women's Literature\*

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### Abstract:

A land historically marked by the sorrows of astonishingly numerous (in-voluntary) "emigrants" and/or "exiles", in recent decades Ireland has also undergone remarkably significant waves of immigration and return migration, which have inevitably questioned the nature of "true Irishness" today. Drawing on fictional and non-fictional narratives of metaphorical and/or literal (e)migration produced by the contemporary generation of (non-)Irish *women* writers, this paper aims to shed light on the personal and national implications related to a woman's "decision"/"necessity" to seek, leave, and/or return to a "new" *home* away from *home*, and therefore to her attempt to "reconcile" with or forge her identity/ies and ambivalent longing and sense of (not) belonging elsewhere or within an ever-changing Ireland.

**Keywords:** Escape, Otherness, Reconciliation, (Un)Familiarity, Vantage Point

### *I. Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: a Short History of (E)Migration to/from Ireland*

"About 10 million Irish men, women, and children have emigrated from Ireland since 1700": this is how Kevin Kenny, among the most distinguished scholars of the Irish diaspora, begins his recent "Two Diasporic Moments in Irish Emigration History: The Famine Generation and the Contemporary Era" (2019, 43). In order to emphasise the Irish migratory pheno-

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menon's devastating impact and persistent importance since its earliest phases – attested well before the Great Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century –, Kenny further adds as follows:

Remarkably, this figure is more than twice the population of the Republic of Ireland today (4.8 million), it exceeds the population of the island of Ireland (6.7 million), and it is higher than the population of Ireland at its historical peak (8.5 million) on the eve of the Great Famine in 1845. (*Ibidem*)

Destined predominantly for North America and Great Britain, Irishmen and women left their *homeland* in staggeringly high numbers in search of better opportunities elsewhere. Whether should their emigration be considered (voluntary) “opportunity” or (involuntary) “exile”, however, it is extremely difficult to claim, today, without easy generalisation about an experience which typically involved/s diverse implications related to each emigrant's gender, age, economic background, destination, etc. Emigrants' (un)willingness to leave – nowadays, as in the past – has indubitably figured among the most debated topics related to the Irish diaspora: a life-, identity-altering experience deeply marked by “the culture of exile” which intensified and spread widely within and outside Ireland's national borders, in particular, throughout the nineteenth century (Miller 1985, 102-130), the migratory phenomenon underwent remarkably significant changes over the three main waves of emigration from twentieth-century Ireland – the 1920s/30s, 1950s, and 1980s – related, in particular, to emigrants' overall “easier”, albeit inevitably ambivalent, relationship(s) with *home*, wherever it might be<sup>2</sup>.

In his aforementioned article, Kenny further states that:

The history of Irish emigration consisted of five distinct waves – the eighteenth century, the pre-Famine era, the Famine era, the post-Famine era, and the twentieth century and beyond – that varied considerably in their causes, regional origins, and destinations as well as by class, gender, and religious composition. To collapse these separate phases into a single type is to rob history of its diversity and diminish its protagonists. (2019, 51)

While, nowadays, the extraordinarily high numbers of men and women who left their *homeland's* shores over the nineteenth century – in particular, during and in the aftermath of the most catastrophic episode in Ireland's history – continue to be the foremost reference point in the study of the Irish diaspora, the late-nineteenth- and, even more so, twentieth-century waves of emigration doubtlessly acquire paramount importance in the Irish context: “[v]irtually alone among the European emigrants to America”, claims Kevin Kenny, “Irish women emigrated in the same numbers as men, even slightly outnumbering them in several of the post-famine decades” (2000, 138) and onwards. Women emigrants' significant numerical preponderance over their male

<sup>2</sup> An emigrant's difficult relationship with *home* following/due to her/his (in-voluntary) “decision”/“necessity” to leave emerges prominently, for instance, in Phyllis Izzard's words collected in Dunne 2021 [2003]. The last of seven surviving children, Izzard left for London at seventeen because her brothers and sisters, emigrated because there were no jobs at *home* (2021, 31), were already there. Despite the displacement which she vividly experienced on the other side of the Irish Sea, Izzard managed to start a “new life” in England, where she also gave birth to two sons aware of their Irish origins, who nonetheless did not ever feel “the need to look for their roots – they were always quite content to be English” (49). Still, her sense of not belonging anywhere emerges distinctively in Izzard's testimony, in particular when asked by Dunne, “[w]here is home for you?” (*ibidem*, italics in original): “I find it a strange phenomenon that when I'm here I talk about going ‘home’ to Ireland, and when I'm ‘at home’ in Ireland, I talk about coming back here as ‘going home’. I must admit there is a sense for me of not belonging totally in either place. Even though we have made a home here, ‘home’ is where we were born and where our heart is. Our hearts have never left there. I very often have the feeling of being neither one thing nor the other” (*ibidem*).

counterparts in the astonishing outflow of people from the island most certainly sheds light on the controversies and contradictions of a markedly patriarchal country such as Ireland, historically represented as an idealised woman – often, significantly, as a mother: Mother Ireland –, whose “real” women were nonetheless confined, in Ireland’s 1937 Constitution, to a “life within the home”<sup>3</sup> where to perform the idealised roles of wife and mother (Lennon, McAdam, O’Brien 1988, 24), as well as, until remarkably recently, to the role of “the great unknown” of the Irish diaspora, as famously stated by Donald H. Akenson (1993, 157-187). While Hasia R. Diner (1983) – author of the first study entirely dedicated to Irish women’s inherent importance in Irish emigration since its most significant phases – highlights the importance *not* to interpret young Irish women’s early departures as quest for greater personal “autonomy and independence” (x-iv)<sup>4</sup>, over the twentieth century that “necessity” – once related, in particular, to their own and/or their families’ economic conditions – was associated increasingly more often with a markedly ideological “decision” irrevocably influenced by Ireland’s specific context. “Three generations of daughters left Ireland in the twentieth century”, claims Íde B. O’Carroll (2015 [1990], 184). “The reasons given for this self-imposed separation from the home place cannot fall under the simple statement that ‘there were no jobs’. Their leaving was much more complex than that” (*ibidem*).

If emigration, regardless of its more “optimistic” interpretation, has indubitably continued to be a reality of remarkable importance within contemporary Ireland, in the late twentieth century, in particular, the island concomitantly became a land of *return* migration and *immigration*: attracted by *her* unprecedented prosperity, Irish men and women who had left in the preceding decades as well as “foreigners”, literally, from all over the world chose to (re)make Ireland their (adopted) “new home”. The inward influx of unprecedentedly high numbers of newcomers, however, inevitably posed questions related to “true Irishness” – questions which, today, are still being asked within an ever-changing Ireland. “There are many ways of being Irish”, claims Marie-Claire Logue in her introduction to *Being Irish: 101 Views on Irish Identity Today* (2021, xii). “We can be Irish by birth, Irish by ancestry, Irish by geography, Irish and British, Irish by accident, Northern Irish, Irish by necessity, Irish and European, Irish by association, Irish by culture, Irish and American and Irish by choice” (*ibidem*). As further suggested by Logue, era-defining events with major impact on one’s personal and national identity and (not) belonging such as “the 2015 referendum legalising same-sex marriage and the 2018 repeal of the Eighth Amendment” (xi) as well as, on an international level, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (xii) and, not secondarily, the effects of (e)migration to/from Ireland (xi-xii) are often mentioned in discourses about Irish identity within a country with such a significant past as *homeland* and present and most probably future as *both homeland and hostland*. While London-based Annie MacManus claims that “[w]hen you are an Irish emigrant, you have the privilege of being selectively Irish [...]” (2021, 203)<sup>5</sup>, Teresa Buczkowska, Polish by birth and

<sup>3</sup> “The pressures on women to emigrate were further increased by the proposed new Constitution, and by the way women’s role was defined in it. [...] Article 41 states that ‘by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved’” (Lennon, McAdam, O’Brien 1988, 24). “Within the home” (*ibidem*), women were therefore supposed and expected to perform the roles of wife and mother, and consequently support their families as well as, by extension, Ireland – a country which, contradictorily, women had left and would continue to leave in extraordinarily high numbers.

<sup>4</sup> Young Irish women’s early “move to America”, Diner precisely claims, “did not represent a search for a new identity, nor did it constitute a break with the past” (1983, xiv).

<sup>5</sup> MacManus’s contribution, however, significantly ends with her following words: “[i]n our new chosen homes, we are Irish ambassadors whether we like it or not. Maybe it’s time to stop being selective about our Irishness and embrace every part. [...] Let’s tell the world that for all of its trauma and baggage, Ireland is a country moving forwards, and regardless of how far we’ve travelled, and for how long, we are moving with it” (2021, 205).

Irish by choice, states that, for her, “[h]ome is where our future is, not only where our past was” (2021, 21). Hers, evidently, is in Ireland: “[c]alling myself Irish”, she significantly adds, “*does not mean the need to renounce my Polish roots. Being a migrant means I am bridging both identities, and I do not have to choose only one*” (*ibidem*, italics in original). Conversely, the Dublin-born, long London-based writer Joseph O’Connor observes that, sometimes, “you almost have to get out of Ireland to be Irish at all, [...] that those who stay turn out to be the real exiles, and those who go are the natives” (1993, 18). Inevitably, the diverse issues related to Irishness most certainly involve different implications for Irish sons and daughters born and raised away from their parents’ country of birth: being/becoming Irish for the second-generation Irish, indeed, means being able to locate her/his identity/ies somewhere in particular, and therefore provide the word “home” with a meaning which most often differs markedly from the one attributed to it by previous and/or succeeding generations of their diasporic families. Furthermore, the word *home* itself generates personal and (inter)national hurdle to overcome when used by the non-Irish within their *hostland*: unfortunately, Ireland is not all magical landscapes and *craic* for “the other”. Evidently, the challenges presented by (not) feeling Irish, whether by birth or choice, are currently haunting the contemporary generation of (non-)Irish men and women in ways that vary significantly according to both personal and national expectations. All of them, however, are perfectly aware of the lifelong influence of one’s native land on their past, present, and future selves – at *home* and anywhere else.

## 2. Travelling to, from, and/or back to Ireland as a Woman’s Quest for “Somewhere” to Belong

Although the personal and national expectations related to the experience of (in-voluntary) (e)migration have significantly changed in the course of time, one’s “decision”/“necessity” to literally and/or metaphorically leave *home*, whether (self-)perceived as “opportunity” or “exile”, has historically been a topic of paramount importance in Irish literature. Until remarkably recent times, however, “the story of the Irish woman emigrant [...] was underrepresented in both historical accounts and literary representations of emigration”, which, not surprisingly, mainly focused on male migratory experiences (McWilliams 2013, 2). It was the second half of the twentieth century which finally witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of women’s narratives of emigration from Ireland: from silent, silenced testimonies to three centuries of departures from the island, since then women have become speaking and writing testimonies to their own and/or their predecessors’ diasporic existences and experiences (St. Peter 2000, 40-65; McWilliams 2013, 2018; Moynihan 2022). In “Diasporic and Transnational Writing, 1950-Present”, Ellen McWilliams particularly highlights the renewed importance provided to the recollection of female Irish migratory experiences: “[u]p until the 1990s”, the distinguished scholar claims, “the Irish woman migrant remained what one historian called ‘the great unknown’ of Irish emigrant history, but since then historians and social scientists have been assiduous in addressing that missing history”<sup>6</sup> (2018, 410).

<sup>6</sup>The last decades of the twentieth century coincide with the publication of two of the most comprehensive studies into women’s inherently important role in Ireland’s migratory phenomenon: Diner’s *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1983) and Lennon, McAdam, and O’Brien’s *Across the Water: Irish Women’s Lives in Britain* (1988). Since then, remarkably numerous monographs about the innumerable Irish women who (in-voluntarily) started a “new life” in a “new *home*” were published: see, in particular, O’Carroll 2015 [1990]; Walter 2003. Ultimately, see also Dunne’s aforementioned *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* (2021 [2003]): although not exclusively aimed at recollecting female migratory experiences from Ireland, it doubtlessly sheds light on the main causes and consequences of Irishwomen’s “decision”/“necessity” to relocate on the other side of the Irish Sea in astonishing numbers.

Concomitantly, the experiences of female *return* migration and *immigration* increasingly acquired greater importance in Irish literature. While "from the 1950s to the 1990s, we see very few female Returned Yanks in Irish fiction and drama", claims Sinéad Moynihan (2022 [2019], 91), in the final decades of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first – with few notable exceptions dating back to previous periods<sup>7</sup> – Irish female returnees became almost ubiquitous in narratives of Irish (e)migration, enriching at once a markedly male experience with gender-specific details (McWilliams 2018, 421–423; Moynihan 2022 [2019]). The controversies over gender, moreover, most certainly figure prominently in the literature produced by non-Irish women writers within Ireland's borders: a still largely unexplored topic which indubitably should/needs to be provided with greater attention, non-Irish women face the added burden of being doubly "other" within a land which is still learning to be/act as *hosland*.

The women described in contemporary (non-)Irish narratives of female (e)migration from/to Ireland need/want to "escape" the burdens of life when they feel like "visitors" anywhere, and there seems to be nowhere they really belong. These are women who (unsuccessfully) try to leave behind something and/or someone – even, maybe, themselves – they cannot cope with, who struggle to be themselves in the place they have been used to calling *home* for all their lives, the setting of their pervasive otherness. While walking still unexplored streets and/or Ireland's "wildest" areas or inhabiting (un)familiar (real or imagined) houses they would need – but often cannot – call *home*, they attempt to break with the past only to realise it inevitably follows them everywhere. Sometimes, instead, they feel they must/need to look back at past generations of Irish women in order to come to terms with their own past, present, and future, and thenceforth understand where *home* really is, wherever it might be. Only some of them, in the end, manage to provide that word with their own highly personal meaning(s).

In the prologue to her recent *Wild Atlantic Women: Walking Ireland's West Coast*, Gráinne Lyons describes herself as follows: "[a]lthough both of my parents are Irish, I have always prided myself on being a die-hard Londoner – a reaction, to some extent, to having two Irish parents and such an Irish name" (2024 [2023], 2–3). Her name itself has been a "landmark" for her "inherited Irishness" on the other side of the Irish Sea for all her life, while once in Ireland, not surprisingly, it immediately acquires a different meaning: "[a]lmost everyone I meet seems pleased with my parents' decision to give me this name that requires so much explanation in the UK that I use pseudonyms for coffee orders and restaurant bookings" (46), remarks Lyons soon after the beginning of her solo journey along Ireland's western coast. "Here, it helps me fit in, makes me feel like family [...]" (*ibidem*).

A highly personal narrative closely concerned with her own quest for clues about her identity as a second-generation Irishwoman who, for half her life, had been used to living exclusively in the urban environment of London – a city which historically provided her parents' and/or previous and succeeding generations of Irish immigrants with better opportunities than *home*, and herself and other second- and third-generation Irish with "a distinct identity" (3) –, Lyons's travelogue recounts her "emotional journey" across time and space, begun "at a crossroads in [her] [...] life" (2)<sup>8</sup>, aimed at (re)constructing her own past, present, and future through the

<sup>7</sup> See, in particular, Maeve Brennan's *The Visitor*; posthumously published in 2001, it was most probably written in the 1940s (McWilliams 2018, 410), and indubitably figures among the most powerful "parable[s] about the impossibility of return" produced by a Dublin-born woman in America (422).

<sup>8</sup> "I had just turned forty", Lyons further adds while recalling the genesis of her project in 2019, "but was still single and without children, seemingly at odds with the general flow of things around me. [...] I felt, in some ways, that I was on a new path – diverging from what I had supposed to be the template of a woman's life. And this all



major achievements, outstanding in their “extra-ordinariness”, of previous generations of her family, as well as of well- and lesser-known women of Ireland’s ancient and/or more recent past and present. “Rooted in and connected to this landscape” (4), Lyons has therefore chosen eleven women<sup>9</sup>, whom she “consider[s] to be outliers or subversives, [...] people who confounded, or are still confounding, expectations of what a woman can do” (*ibidem*), as “guiding stars” able to trace a temporal and spatial route which would allow her to understand what it meant for a woman to be Irish yesterday and, consequently, what it means today. Private and public stories which belong to the woman’s own as well as to the whole Irish people’s personal and national background are therefore juxtaposed by Lyons to the end of giving voice to the voiceless, as well as, not secondarily, of forging her own second-generation Irish identity and sense of belonging to Ireland as *home* away from *home*. Soon after the beginning of her “emotional journey”, indeed, the London-born woman of Irish descent questions her real reasons for embarking on such a potentially unsettling, life-altering experience: “[a]m I seeking escape from the expectation of what my own life should or could be? *Or am I seeking home?* I’m unsure” (46, my emphasis).

While walking, metaphorically as well as literally, from Western Ireland’s southernmost to its northernmost points (4) in search of “stories that for [her], as a member of the Irish diaspora, were as yet unknown” (3), Lyons almost feels part of the natural landscape which surrounds her, at times unfamiliar for a woman born and raised in the urban environment of London. Simultaneously, she establishes a close emotional and physical connection with the places inhabited by Irish women of her own and Ireland’s past and present – among them, first and foremost, Lyons’s great-grandmother, whose silenced experiences she instructively uses in order to fill in gaps about the history of her family, and, therefore, about herself. Her journey along Ireland’s western seaboard makes it possible for Lyons to assemble the puzzle of her own and the Irish people’s past in order to come to terms with her present and imagine a still unknown future while concomitantly raising questions about Irish female identity – remarkably often a limit in the pursuit of a woman’s goals<sup>10</sup>, today as in the past. Moreover and, perhaps, most importantly, it enables her to forge her second-generation Irish identity:

coincided with a shift in my identity too, as I applied for and was newly bestowed, along with 400,000 other British people, with an Irish passport” (2024, 3).

<sup>9</sup> Part historical and part legendary figures, the Irish women chosen by Lyons are: Ellen Cotter, her great-grandmother; Ellen Hutchins, “Ireland’s first and most prolific female botanist” (2024, 21); “pioneering marine biologist” Maude Delap (48), a woman who, in childhood, could not pursue formal education because of her gender (49), whose adult “career might have been seen as unseemly” had she conformed to the role of the Irish wife (59); oral storyteller Peig Sayers, born in the late nineteenth century, whose stories shed light on “how everyday life was lived for [her] generation of women” (81); Country Limerick-born Charlotte Grace O’Brien, who witnessed the horrors initiated by the Great Famine and the consequent departures of innumerable Irish for overseas destinations; Edna O’Brien, “perhaps Ireland’s greatest [...] writer” (111-112); traditional knitter Úna McDonagh, “born and raised [...] on the smallest of the Aran Islands, where she still lives”: Inisheer (133); Kate O’Brien, “[o]ne of the most famous Irish female writers of her time”, whose “novels – often set in her fictional version of Limerick [...] – were once incredibly popular” (159) as well as “banned in newly independent Ireland” (162); “pirate queen” Granuaile (176), “often mentioned in [Lyons’s] house as [her] parents tried to help [her] to enjoy, to be proud of a name which in London, with every new school year and new round of pronunciation explanations, was fast becoming tiresome” (*ibidem*); Queen Maeve of Connacht, the woman “whom [Lyons] feel[s] closest” (195) for reasons of geography as well as because passing close to her tomb provides her with “a feeling of being connected, by landscape, to the people of the very ancient past” (196); and, ultimately, Dr. Easkey Britton, “Ireland’s most famous big wave surfer” and marine social scientist (207).

<sup>10</sup> “While I feel identity is completely individual”, Lyons claims, “I also have to contemplate the fact that life was different, is different, if you are a woman moving through this landscape” (2024, 213).

My mum and dad always called Ireland ‘home’ when we were growing up, and as a child it annoyed me. After all, Ireland wasn’t my home, East London was! After thirty-five years, they finally moved back in 2001 [...], and because they are here now, over the past two decades I’ve spent much more time in Sligo. (108)

Although, in the course of time, her prolonged visits have positively influenced her in the construction of a closer relationship with her parents’ *home* and *homeland* – which she now likes more than she used to –, Lyons admits missing London and *her* “multicultural life” there when she is on the other side of the Irish Sea. Once in *her home* and *homeland*, instead, she misses Ireland (*ibidem*)<sup>11</sup>.

Lyons’s quest for her second-generation Irishness, uniquely infused with episodes retrieved from her emotional solo journey along Ireland’s western coast, differs markedly from the great majority of the writings produced by the increasingly more numerous writers who are finally shedding light on the distinctively diasporic existences of the second generation of Irish men and women, in particular, across the Atlantic Ocean and/or Irish Sea. In their introduction to *I Wouldn’t Start From Here: The Second-Generation Irish in Britain* (2019), for instance, French, McCrory, and McKay focus extensively on the multimodal forms of art employed by the second-generation Irish in Great Britain in order to “capture [...] the diverse experience of a group largely rendered invisible” (2019, 1) until remarkably recently, which, significantly, looks back to and draws inspiration from “a shared heritage and past, in a continuously changing present” (*ibidem*). As the three editors particularly remark, the contributors whose testimonies are gathered in their anthology “consider themselves as part of a diaspora” (*ibidem*) whose (in-direct) consequences have impressed incurable wounds on their identity/ies, and, most distinctively, have irreversibly condemned them to experience a perennial “sense of never fully belonging” anywhere (*ibidem*), as well as to the impossibility of finding “somewhere” to call *home*<sup>12</sup>. In her comprehensive *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction* (2013), moreover, Ellen McWilliams particularly focuses on women’s quest for their second-generation Irishness as a topic of remarkable importance in contemporary Irish literature, which, according to the distinguished scholar, distinctively “explores the tensions and fractures between generations and the pain of growing up remote from a culture that belongs to the land of the parents”<sup>13</sup> (197).

In Lyons’s *Wild Atlantic Women: Walking Ireland’s West Coast*, the “sense of never fully belonging” which has marked the experience of being second-generation Irish across the Irish Sea is uniquely replaced by the woman’s eventual firm awareness of where *home* is for her as a result of her recent journey across time and space. Although, while wandering around

<sup>11</sup> Although (still) unsure about it, Lyons significantly meditates on the possibility of calling “homesickness” the feeling she experiences while thinking about Ireland once in London (*ibidem*).

<sup>12</sup> For further information about second-generation Irish sons and daughters’ perennial quest for *home*, see, in particular, the excerpt from Maude Casey’s *Over the Water* (1987) collected in French, McCrory, and McKay’s, which sheds light on three English-born siblings’ efforts not to “stand out as aliens in this foreign land. Except, for us, it’s not a foreign land. We were born here [...]” (2019, 179). “I watch Mammy, preparing to go home”, Casey particularly recalls (180). “Here, in her own house, the wild excitement is building to a frenzy. I wonder, for the hundredth time of wondering, why it is that she never thinks of *this* house as being her home. And why she should feel so foreign here, when she’s been here for years and Ireland is so near. And I wonder, for the hundredth time of wondering, in which of them is *my* true home, and whether I’ll ever find it, one fine day” (*ibidem*, italics in original).

<sup>13</sup> When claiming this, the eminent scholar focuses, in particular, on the writing of Moy McCrory and, more specifically, on her short story entitled “Prize Giving”, whose second-generation protagonist “was so English, a foreigner to her parents. To her, Mayo was just a postmark on a card from cousins she did not know very well...” (qtd. in McWilliams 2013, 197-198).

Western Ireland, Lyons insistently questions her unconscious desire to make Ireland her *home*, by the end of her travelogue she apparently acknowledges the purpose of her journey while wondering about one's – and, therefore, her own – “connection with a physical place that is home in a bigger sense, not just the house you were born or grew up in” (2024, 219). Significantly, she ultimately claims as follows: “[p]erhaps I don't need to move anywhere – perhaps, for now anyway, I have it just the way it works? Two places, London and Sligo, both of which can have equal status as home” (*ibidem*). For now, Lyons has managed to forge a “dual identity” located in two equally important places at the same time. Since the last line of her travelogue sees her continuing her walk (227), however, who knows where her Irish “guiding stars” will bring her in the future?<sup>14</sup>

The positively connoted “familiar” feelings associated by Lyons to Ireland as (temporary) *home* differ drastically from the pervasive sense of perennial otherness which is the heartbeat of Arja Kajermo's “Alienation”, whose protagonist, a Czech-Slovak-Hungarian woman based in Dublin, significantly describes herself, after living for prolonged periods away from her *homeland* and choosing Ireland as *hostland*, as “a mongrel, a piece of many parts [...]” (2020 [2019], 310). Through the recollection of episodes of ordinary life of a non-Irish woman in her unfamiliar adopted *home*, in her ten-page contribution collected in Lucy Caldwell's *Being Various: New Irish Short Stories* (2020) the Finnish cartoonist, grown up in Sweden and herself relocated to Ireland since the 1970s, provides readers with a vivid description of today's Ireland – a country that may attract tourists fascinated by breathtaking landscapes, which nonetheless easily transforms itself into a land of “disenchantment” (306) as soon as someone born outside the national borders, regardless of her/his origins, claims the right to call it *home*. Indeed, “[n]othing works” in Ireland for the non-Irish who (unsuccessfully) attempt to be/become Irish by choice (*ibidem*):

Go home, you big eejits, if you're so homesick for order and efficiency and good workmanship. You won't find it here because you can't just buy it, it has to be bartered for and you have nothing to barter with. You will never be included in the ‘we’ that islanders call themselves. (*Ibidem*)

A handwritten accusatory note delivered only to foreigners living in the same neighbourhood as her – apparently blamed for “illegally” dumping rubbish in an elderly Irish woman's garden (302), but most probably, simply, for choosing Ireland as *hostland* – triggers the unnamed Czech-Slovak-Hungarian woman's thoughts about the alienating experience of being non-Irish within contemporary multicultural “new Ireland”: “[w]e are the *dubhghaill* and the *fionnghall*, the ‘dark foreigners’ and the ‘fair foreigner’”. Those words are two of a handful I know in Irish. Most Irish people don't know many more. They grieve the loss of their language, but most of them won't learn to speak it” (304). While there are immigrants who “occupy their space without apologising” (*ibidem*) and feel “at ease” in their adopted land, where “they will happily integrate but not assimilate” (*ibidem*), because they realise their new lives there are better than the ones they would be destined to at *home*, there are others – like the woman herself – who “fear attention in case [their] foreignness attracts hostility” (*ibidem*), as evidently is the case in the Ireland described by Kajermo, a land relatively recently transformed from *homeland* for astonishingly numerous Irish emigrants into *hostland* for immigrants from all over the world.

<sup>14</sup> Although in the prologue to her travelogue Lyons claims that, in that moment, she is “at the end of a journey” (2024, 1), her final words about where home is for her seem to be permeated by a sense of “temporariness”, as if she had not completed her “emotional journey” aimed at (re)constructing her past, present, and future yet: “perhaps, for now anyway, I have it just the way it works?” she actually claims (219).



Nevertheless, the unnamed woman's outsiderhood does not only depend on her foreignness, but also on her *impossibility* of conforming to the only roles available to "ideal" Irish women, which she shows to have interiorised and be perfectly aware of. After her Irish husband's sudden decision not to return home after a night out, she no longer could be considered a wife. Once a "*Mother*" (301, italics and capital letter in original), moreover, she had been deprived of that title after her grown-up children's relocation "as far away from Dublin as possible" for university (*ibidem*). In short, she had instantly been transformed into a non-Irish woman within a land which she did/does not belong to, unable to perform Irish women's idealised roles within the familiar environment of a house which she nonetheless manages to call *home*: the "*Family Home*", where she still resides in solitude, is now empty and silent (*ibidem*, italics and capital letters in original). "Without a husband", the non-Irish woman recalls, "I was nothing. I had nothing, no Residence Permit, no work permit, and all the utility bills were in his name" (306). "Without a utility bill in my name", she significantly adds, "I had no identity" (*ibidem*). Still married to a voluntarily disappeared man in a country which, at that time, did not recognise divorce (307), her presence in Ireland was no longer required (*ibidem*). In that moment, therefore, Kajeremo's protagonist faced the double hurdle of being (in)visible as a virtually unmarried non-Irish woman within a land unconcerned about foreign women's everyday challenges.

A topic of paramount importance, in particular, since the final decade of the twentieth century, the Irish people's hostility towards the "foreigner" is addressed in close detail by Declan Kiberd in an article originally published in 2001, at the height of the island's most significant wave of *immigration*: "Strangers in Their Own Country: Multiculturalism in Ireland". Although, in Kiberd's own words, "the historical capacity of the Irish to assimilate waves of incomers should never be underestimated" (2005 [2001], 303) as a result of Ireland's history of long-distance *emigration* – which rendered the island "always multicultural, in the sense of eclectic, open, assimilative" (312; also partially qtd. in Villar-Argáiz 2015 [2014], 7) –, the distinguished scholar himself must ultimately admit that "[...] racism of the most ugly kind undeniably exists in Irish society: and the presence of ever-growing numbers of refugees and migrants from overseas has brought it to the surface, making all foreigners (not just people of colour) arguably more vulnerable than once they were" (Kiberd 2005, 307). Furthermore, the Irish people's *incapacity* and/or *unwillingness* to welcome foreigners in the most flourishing period in Ireland's recent past is significantly mentioned also by Maureen O'Connor (2006). Focused predominantly on her father's return *home* after fifty years in America, the US-born, Cork-based scholar also addresses the man's *impossibility* of calling "home" the "new Ireland" he found at his *homecoming*, "a prosperous country unwelcoming of immigrants, such as he was himself fifty years ago when he arrived in another prosperous, industrial land" (2006, 15).

In her introduction to *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland: The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*, moreover, Pilar Villar-Argáiz focuses extensively on "[t]he cultural effects" (Villar-Argáiz 2015, 3) of Ireland's recent transformation from *homeland* into *hostland*: "[i]nward migration", the Spanish scholar claims, "has had inevitable consequences for the literature which has been produced in Ireland from the beginning of the Celtic Tiger period onwards" (2015, 3). Similarly, the Belfast-born woman writer Lucy Caldwell – who, significantly, cannot stop calling her native city "here" (2020, 3) despite her new life in London as a Northern Irish woman married to an Englishman (1) and mother of two "Cockney-born children" (2) – prominently focuses on the nature of "true Irishness" in contemporary Irish literature, and attempts to answer the following question: "*What makes a writer Irish?*" (3, italics in original). In her introduction to the aforementioned collection of short stories by Irish-born as well as non-Irish writers who chose Ireland as adopted *home*, Caldwell further challenges today's Irish identity/ies:

Who is more Irish: a writer born in Ireland who moves and stays away, or a writer born elsewhere who chooses to come – and there's that 'here' again. A writer born in what is technically Ireland, in the 'island of' sense, but who chooses to identify with 'the mainland'? A writer born outside of Ireland to parents who keep it alive through songs, St Patrick's Day and waking up in the wee hours to watch the rugby? A writer born in Ireland to parents from elsewhere, who constantly has to answer the deathly question, 'No, but where are you *really* from?' (*Ibidem*, italics in original)

Evidently, Kajermo's unnamed protagonist does not feel Irish despite her decision to settle in Dublin. In the short story's final scene, the woman cannot even provide a concrete answer when asked what brought her there if not that "grass is greener here" (310). "I love it here, I love Ireland!" she ironically adds (*ibidem*). Although a long time has passed since the Czech-Slovak-Hungarian woman's decision to relocate to Ireland, Kajermo's non-Irish protagonist has not forgotten about that "woman of memory" once deprived of her identity/ies by her Irish husband and *hostland*. "I am a mongrel, a piece of many parts, my homeland is in my head", she significantly remarks (*ibidem*).

From Indonesia to Australia, then New Zealand and Ireland. And then Peru, Ireland, the Netherlands, and back, again, to Ireland. "Would you travel the world to feel at home in your skin?": this is the question, asked on the back cover of E.M. Reapy's *Skin* (2019), which an Irish woman aged about thirty on the threshold of an indefinite future attempts to answer from remote areas of the world which she makes her temporary *home* in order to silence her ambivalent longing for her real *home* and *homeland*. To describe *Skin* – preceded by *Red Dirt* (2016), itself a great success about Irish emigration<sup>15</sup> (O'Hanlon 2019) – as a novel about a young woman who struggles to find her own place in the world when there seems to be nowhere she truly feels at ease with herself and anybody else would most probably be too simplistic. Nevertheless, to say that this young woman has the self-punishing habit of (unsuccessfully) "forgetting" – albeit merely temporarily – about traumatic episodes and memories from her unsatisfactory life through compulsive eating most probably adds particularly important details about Reapy's protagonist's life and, not secondarily, constant necessity to leave *home* for an elsewhere which must be as different as possible from Ireland. To state that the vivid sense of not belonging which triggers her restless move from one side of the world to the other is not generated only in/by her native Ireland, moreover, most certainly acquires major importance in order to acknowledge that, sometimes, the circumstances which lead to one's "(self-)exile" may transcend place, and therefore surface everywhere, anytime (O'Hanlon 2019).

A native of Western Ireland, Natalie Dillon has worked as a teacher in Dublin for six years:

'I thought I was doing the right thing. What I was supposed to do. Got good exam results, went to uni, got qualified, got a job, did the job for six years and then, I dunno, I felt like an alien. Like I was living an out of body experience daily'. (Reapy 2020, 10-11)

Following a good friend's advice, Natalie embarks on a journey which, evidently, is synonymous with "escape": "My old housemate [...] said travelling had cleared her head. Made her see life differently. That's what I decided to do. That's why I'm here", she openheartedly tells an Englishwoman who asks her what brought her to Bali (12). "I don't even want to be here. I'm so uncomfortable all the time", Natalie nonetheless adds (*ibidem*). Immediately before, at the woman's question, "What's your home like?" (10), she had answered as follows: "I don't really have a home" (*ibidem*).

<sup>15</sup> In her review of Reapy's *Skin*, Eilis O'Hanlon claims that for both novels "the Irish woman writer, born and grown up in County Mayo", drew inspiration from her "own experience as an emigrant and traveller, at least in part [...]" (2019, n.p.).

"But leaving is only conditional. The person you are, is anathema to the person you would like to be", Edna O'Brien would most certainly suggest in this moment (1978 [1976], 87). Under completely different circumstances, the County Clare-born author of international successes voluntarily left her native land at approximately the same age as Reapy's protagonist in search of a "somewhere" which could/would allow her to be who she wanted/needed to be: "[...] I had got away. That was my victory", O'Brien herself significantly remarks in *Mother Ireland* (1976) (*ibidem*). From the "vantage point" of being far enough from Ireland, O'Brien was nonetheless forced to come to terms with her *homeland's* indelible marks on her diasporic identity: "The real quarrel with Ireland began to burgeon in me then", she herself adds immediately afterwards (*ibidem*). According to Tony Murray, who focuses on O'Brien's unprecedented literary achievement in *London Irish Fictions: Narrative, Diaspora and Identity*, the London-based Irish woman writer's aforementioned words from *Mother Ireland* – as well as, more in general, her experience of voluntary departure from the island – suggest that "the migrant is escaping not only his or her home country but also himself or herself" (2014 [2012], 7). Evidently, neither did Natalie Dillon nor Edna O'Brien manage to "leave themselves behind" at *home*<sup>16</sup>.

Natalie's pervasive otherness, regardless of where in the world she finds herself, permeates Reapy's *Skin* from its first episodes. From the uneasiness generated by sex tourism in Bali, where "[e]veryone's on the sell" (41) – which, not surprisingly, she temporarily overcomes through disproportionately eating as much as she can, only to wish, immediately afterwards, that she "didn't exist" (45) –, to Darwin, Australia, where she suddenly, unexpectedly feels *homesick*, if just for a remarkably too short time, while "hearing all the familiar accents from home" (63) in the birthday videos for her aunt Dolores, an Irishwoman who has "lived in Australia for over half her life" (50) and, in the course of time, acquired a "wacky Irish-Australian accent" (65). "For a moment", Natalie thinks, "I wish I was home at my parents'. The familiar rooms of where I grew up. But as soon as the longing hits, it vanishes again" (63). Nevertheless, it is in Wellington, Natalie's next temporary *home*, that the young woman truly comes to terms with her sense of not belonging either to her *homeland*, Ireland, or her (temporary) *hostlands*, drastically exacerbated by her long-established habit and its indelible scars on her body and, not secondarily, soul:

Fatfuckingbitch, stupidcunt, outofcontrol, uglymonsterfat, nobodylikesyou, beachedwhale, stupidfuck, nobodyfuckinglikesyou, don'tevenlikeyourself.

'It's as if I'm not even real. I'm not even here' [...].

[...]

'I could be anywhere. New Zealand. Home. Nowhere.'<sup>17</sup>

'Nowhere's good'.

'I think and feel the same way and do the same thing in a different place. I'm the same person in a different place. Same hamster wheel. Rut. Going nowhere'. (99)

Not surprisingly, Natalie's escape has not transformed her into a "new person": she is and feels always the same – everywhere. In this moment, there is no "vantage point" for her.

<sup>16</sup> For wide insight into Edna O'Brien's extraordinary diasporic life and writing, see, in particular, her most autobiographical writings: *Mother Ireland* (1976) and *Country Girl: A Memoir* (2012). See also Murray's aforementioned study – in particular, the section entitled "Escape and its Discontents" (2014, 57-69) –, as well as Donatella Abbate Badin 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Natalie's words brilliantly recall one of Maeve Brennan's most eloquent statements: "no place is home—it is as it should be [...]" (qtd. in McWilliams 2014, 98). For detailed information about Brennan's diasporic writing and, not secondarily, life as an Irishwoman in America, see, in particular, Bourke 2004 and McWilliams 2014.

Nevertheless, the time spent away from her native West of Ireland makes it possible for Natalie to see it differently at her *homecoming*. Unexpectedly “[g]lad to be back” (107), she seeks and finds (temporary) relief in the healing power of Ireland’s natural landscape (108-111), the major attraction for tourists and newcomers – among them, also a friend of hers, a poet in desperate need for inspiration for a new collection, who ultimately claims as follows: “[t]he unpolluted air has cleared my head. My words have come home” (128-129, italics in original). While living at her grandmother’s, Natalie understands that it is not the place itself which renders it *home*, but the people, and therefore herself. Travelling – imaginatively and/or back in time – enables her to spend more time with, and therefore take care of that beloved woman in her blindest moments of confusion, when she loses memory and concomitantly, revealingly, her way *home* (148-150). While remembering the happiest moments of her youth, instead, her grandmother’s “memory [is] crystal clear when she returns to her teens. I sit back in the chair and Gran takes me on one of her trips for the last time” (165).

A brief parenthesis in Dublin anticipates Natalie’s next journey, which nonetheless coincides with “the start of something new” (246): the beginning of a more reconciliatory phase of her life. Finally aware of her (self-)destructive habit of “let[ting] [her]self be at the whim of everything and everyone else” (320), Natalie ultimately seems to find her place in the world. Her quest for herself (un)surprisingly finishes in Dublin: finally more at ease with her body and self, the young woman gives fitness lessons for people willing to travel with their minds while physically at *home*. “Where will we be going next week [...]?” someone asks her (333). “I draw a breath, smile, and wait for the idea to flash in my mind” (*ibidem*).

While, more than thirty years ago, Dermot Bolger claimed that “[e]xile and departure suggest an out-dated degree of permanency. Irish writers no longer go into exile, they simply commute” (1993, 7, italics in original), Colum McCann concomitantly stated that “*when London is a one-hour flight away from Knock it’s hard to say that we’ve actually emigrated*” (qtd. in *ibidem*, italics in original). More recently, the internationally acclaimed Irish writer has further focused on the “outdated” use of the word “exile” in the specifically Irish context (Cullingford 2014, 84):

This whole issue of exile has to be redefined for Irish writers. We’re not in exile anymore. [...] you just commute back and forth. [...] But while I’m not in exile, I am displaced. The people I’m writing about are trying to find a way home, looking for a home. The issue of home is enormous. (McCann qtd. in Cullingford 2014, 85)

In the introduction to *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, moreover, Ellen McWilliams similarly focuses in closer detail on the debated correspondence between the concepts and conditions of “emigration” and “exile” in contemporary Irish (women’s) literature, and claims as follows:

‘Exile’, which is borne of, but is not synonymous with emigration, [...] carries a culturally specific ballast in Irish literature in the imaginative construction of the processes involved in emigration, assimilation and acculturation that take place in the journey from homeland to hostland, and in the making of new kinds of communities, real and imagined. (2013, 3)

While the contemporary generation of Irish emigrants no longer accepts the typically Irish synonymy between “emigration” and “exile”, most probably, as a result of emigrants’ own more conscious decision-making, “easier” relationship(s) with *home*, and greater openness to the world beyond the Atlantic Ocean and/or Irish Sea, the word “exile” still evokes an imagery closely associated with (self-)imposed, *involuntary* separation from one’s *home* and *homeland*, as well as with the pervasive feelings of perennial alienation, displacement, and otherness – everywhere.

The article remarkably entitled “A Writer in Exile – Aimée Walsh on Her Debut Novel”, published in 2024 on RTE.ie, contrasts sharply with today’s dichotomy between the conditions of “emigration” and “exile”, which are distinctively merged by Aimée Walsh in *Exile* (2024). “*Exile*, appropriately, was written while I lived away from my home-city, Belfast”, claims the Northern Irish novelist herself (2024b, n.p.). “There was little of this period of time that brought me much joy [...]”, she further adds. “But I was contented, as my mind was elsewhere [...]” (*ibidem*). From the “vantage point” of being elsewhere – in this case, both literally and metaphorically –, Walsh managed to come to terms with her native country as both *homeland* and *hostland* for her Northern Irish-born protagonist on the threshold of an indefinite future when there seems to be nowhere she really belongs. A narrative which explores in depth the pervasive displacement experienced by an eighteen-year-old girl on both sides of the Irish Sea, Walsh’s debut novel vividly suggests that the experience of “exile” does not merely correspond to one’s (in-voluntary) “decision”/“necessity” to leave to the end of starting a “new life” away from *home*. Indeed, otherness can be pervasively experienced also – and, perhaps, *most* pervasively – within the safety of one’s native place, and consequently lead to “escape”. In some cases, moreover, it precisely is their *homecoming* which irreversibly marks emigrants’ outsidership – everywhere: “[...] if leaving, or worse, having to leave, can be infinitely painful”, suggests Christine St. Peter, “the experience of returning may be no less problematic. Once gone, forever changed, and even a returned emigrant will be an insider/outsider perched uneasily in the place called home” (2000, 43). “LEAVING HOME WAS HARD. RETURNING IS IMPOSSIBLE”: there is no need to add more words than those reported on the back cover of Walsh’s *Exile* in order to summarise her protagonist’s attitude towards *home* (2024, n. p., capital letters in original).

When she receives her final year results, Fiadh Donnelly suddenly realises her life is about to change irreversibly. Three simple consonants – B, C, and D: her results themselves (Walsh 2024a, 41) – condemn her to an uncertain future, on her own and elsewhere; therefore, simply, to “exile”. Nevertheless, Fiadh’s voluntary decision to leave for Liverpool to pursue education and thus not to accept a second choice which would make it possible for her to stay in her native Belfast with her family and friends since childhood, who “will unfurl into their future selves” at *home* (52), apparently testifies to her openness to the positively connoted possibility of starting a “new life across the water” (49), where she would be able to transform herself instantaneously into a “new” person (*ibidem*).

The young woman’s optimistic prospect of beginning a new phase of her life on the other side of the Irish Sea, however, must confront with the challenges she immediately encounters in the urban environment of Liverpool. Unlike in her native Belfast, “a small enough city that everybody knows somebody who knows who you are after” (5), in England nobody seems interested even in exchanging a few words with her. Apart from the two friends she makes in the course of time, the only person with whom Fiadh (involuntarily) spends time in Liverpool – a city of major importance in Ireland’s migratory history as “great Atlantic port” (MacRaild 2011, 49), and once known as the “city of plague” as a result of Irish immigration in the nineteenth century (qtd. in MacRaild 2011, 50) – is her landlady, a woman “carrying the weight of the world, or at least that of the Irish diaspora, on her shoulders” (Walsh 2024a, 61). At university, almost all the people she meets do not even understand her very Irish name or accent (68), and neither do they want to know who she is; conversely, they do notice where she is from. One day, while speaking about “trauma, what that means [...], what being at home means” (77), Fiadh speaks instead of being silent:

I’m hearing sounds come out of my mouth. Tumbled together knotting into words I cannot control. I find myself verbally unravelling. I speak of experiences passed down like worn heirlooms: checkpoints in the city centre; armed patrols in the streets; death, hurt, pain, fear. A vivid memory, not my own,



appears to me, and I voice it: a department store in Belfast city centre exploded, people dazed walking the streets, fire-engines dousing the flames of the building. Then my mother, years after these events, fearing for me going to the city centre alone with friends. I was thirteen-years-old at the time. (*Ibidem*)

The girl's words are met with the harsh response from "[a] lad from Milton Keynes [who] tells the room that it wouldn't have happened that way if it weren't for 'the terrorists'" (*ibidem*). Immediately afterwards, Fiadh's silence fills the room – again.

On both sides of the Irish Sea, Fiadh further (unsuccessfully) attempts to "escape"<sup>18</sup> her pervasive otherness through heavy drinking and/or drug consumption, which make it possible for her to distance herself from the ongoing collapse of her "new life" – at *home* and elsewhere, anywhere else. During her visits *home*, she attempts to recreate "the feeling of how it was before [she] left" (106) only to realise she no longer is – and is seen as<sup>19</sup> – the same person as prior to leaving. Evidently, neither are her dear ones able to provide her with the sensations of familiarity and comfort she would desperately need<sup>20</sup>. A night out in Belfast, of which she has no memory at all, impresses physical and emotional wounds on the young girl – wounds that cannot be healed at *home*: "home isn't going to fix this. Home is the problem", she significantly thinks (179). The sexual assault she is victim of – perpetrated by one of her closest friends, one of the few who once made her feel at *home* in Belfast – eventually annihilates all the positive feelings which she had been able to maintain for her native place. Furthermore, her final vengeance, which she partially obtains physically punishing him, triggers her necessity to "escape" again, and therefore irreversibly condemns her to "(self-)exile": "[e]verywhere in this city reminds me of change. A fresh start will do me good, to be unfettered. Freedom", thinks Fiadh on board a flight with unknown destination, at least for readers (248). "I dream that I am home. Over the clouds, I wake up, not sure where that is or what it means yet" (*ibidem*). Impossible to claim if she would ever be able to understand what it means for her, even from the "vantage point" of being elsewhere.

<sup>18</sup> "Escape" from reality is similarly attempted by the protagonist of Rachel Connolly's *Lazy City* (2023): herself a young Northern Irish woman who must come to terms with the "new life" she has not managed to create, on her own, on the other side of the Irish Sea – in this case, in London –, Erin returns *home*, a place she had initially been glad to leave, to erase the pain of loss. Despite her final "reconciliation" with her *home* and *homeland*, however, it is evident that, for her, physical escape just provides short-term distraction: her traumas, indeed, follow her everywhere.

<sup>19</sup> "Think you're better than us now?", an acquaintance of hers asks Fiadh (Walsh 2024a, 195).

<sup>20</sup> In particular, her closest friends' reaction to her *homecoming* deepens her pervasive otherness: "[f]riendship is like picking up a book, they say, but right now, I cannot speak the language", Fiadh actually thinks (Walsh 2024a, 106). Here used metaphorically, the reference to spoken language conversely acquires major importance in narratives of (e)migration. In Walsh's own novel, for instance, Fiadh's friends address her newly acquired accent just to emphasise her "linguistic otherness": "[t]hey say I'm rolling my *rrrs* now, a guttural rattle to the back of my voice as I pronounce certain words" (188, italics in the original). "Sorry, love. Your accent's fucked", they further add afterwards (203). "Linguistic unfamiliarity" as a return migrant's distinctive feature is extensively explored also by Bernie McGill in "There Is More than One Word" (2022). After numerous years away from *home*, Jaynie experiences bewilderment and displacement at her *homecoming*: her native Belfast no longer corresponds to the setting of her memories. While overhearing foreign accents she does not even recognise, she also realises that new words and structures have replaced those which she herself would use in the same context: "Jaynie'd forgotten that people did that here, added linguistic fillers to the end of their sentences. What was that about? A lack of confidence in being believed, even when speaking the truth? For years Jaynie has lived elsewhere, in places where she has had to make herself understood [...]" (24). Once at *home*, therefore, she must cope with the otherness arose from her *impossibility* of understanding and being understood: "[h]er own language", the woman acknowledges, "is thirty years out of date, fossilised in the 1980s [...]", when she left for elsewhere (*ibidem*).

### 3. *The Role of Ireland as Homeland and/or Hostland in the Process of Personal and National Identity Formation*

Ireland as the one and only place where to look for clues about one's past, present, and future and, therefore, about oneself. As unwelcoming *hostland*, where otherness and displacement, sometimes, overshadow the island's magical landscape and typical *craic*. As a *home* to leave as soon as possible, and look back to from the "vantage point" of being elsewhere, as far as possible. As a place in memory, which irreversibly changes as much as the ones who leave it behind and those who stay.

In contemporary (non-)Irish women's narrative of (e)migration, Ireland may be all of these – and, perhaps, much more than these – as inevitable result of a woman's (in-voluntary) "decision"/"necessity" to start a "new life" elsewhere.

Remarkably often a life-altering experience with lifelong consequences, one's departure from *home* inevitably involves issues related to one's identity/ies and sense of (not) belonging. In *Leaves* (2007), a play deeply rooted in the specifically Northern Irish context of Belfast, Lucy Caldwell vividly focuses on the indelible impact of one's *homeland* on the process of personal and national identity formation, at *home* and elsewhere. " 'We are where we come from?' ", significantly asks one of Caldwell's protagonists (34). As the four (non-)Irish women whose writings are analysed in this article show, all of them definitely may be/are more than that. Caldwell's protagonist herself, however, answers as follows: "[t]hat's not true. That's not true because if that's true there's no hope for any of us" (*ibidem*). "Home is a place in the mind", Maeve Brennan would most certainly add (2019 [2000], 8): it follows you everywhere.

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