

“That name is a wealth to you”:
The Necropolitics of the Great Famine, and the
Politics of Visibility, Naming and (Christian)
Compassion in Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea*

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Abstract:

The paper discusses Joseph O’Connor’s novel as an investigation of a necropolitical event par excellence – the Great Famine. The mass production of dead bodies through poverty, starvation and disease is coupled with O’Connor’s struggle against necropower via the politics of visibility and naming of the victims, which results in the transformation of the necropolitical “acceptable losses” into Butlerian “grievable lives”. Naming the novel after the Virgin Mary, moreover, O’Connor engages in a complex relationship with Christianity: critical of the officials’ role in maintaining poverty, he does not negate the radical potential of the doctrine of inclusive love.

Keywords: Compassion, Joseph O’Connor, Necropolitics, The Great Famine, Visibility

1. Introduction

Joseph O’Connor’s 2002 novel is set in the last month of the “Black ‘47” on a coffin ship bearing the name of *Star of the Sea*, an epithet of the Virgin Mary: bearing, also, in equal parts hopeful and dying Irish passengers to the New World. In numerous narrative flashbacks, the novel visits the “death worlds” (Mbembe 2003, 40) of famine-struck Ireland: cast primarily in terms of the failure of compassion, *an Gorta Mór* and its effects on both the human and social tissue are nonetheless vividly detailed. Unlike “old Ireland” that is left behind already in the subtitle of the novel, moreover, its lethal class divisions remain. Replicated on the ship, they result in the Steerage becoming a “death world” in

its own right, with the starving and diseased “Common Passengers” dying on a daily basis. Their names, after the initial efforts by the Captain to note them down, are repeatedly “duly struck off the Manifest” (O’Connor 2005, 164).

O’Connor depicts the national trauma – which, as all traumas, resists being contained by words – and attempts both its genealogy and correction. It is only as correction that one can interpret O’Connor’s politics of visibility/naming in relation to the sufferers; his narrative re-fleshing of the bodies that were too quickly de-fleshed, reduced to bones, and made invisible and nameless, both in the historical past, and in the much-contested, though few, histories. Moreover, O’Connor’s imaginative raising of the dead – rather than burying them properly, as Aidan O’Malley argues¹ – runs parallel with the examination of the necropolitics that killed them and the promotion of empathy, compassion and solidarity. While necropolitics is never named as such – Mbembe’s influential essay appeared a year after the novel – it is, indeed, necropolitics whose mechanisms and procedures O’Connor examines and reflects in the seemingly postmodern pastiche form of the novel. The mechanisms and procedures range from the anthropological machine, lethal poverty, the death worlds and the blurred social roles they foster to the prison-industrial complex, mirrored in the literal policing of class boundaries on the ship, complete with (prison) bars, and the role of the law in sentencing a million people to death. The form of the novel, therefore, is not merely stylistically postmodern, as expected in generally self-conscious neo-Victorian fiction, nor does it only reflect the difficulty of finding the accurate language for trauma – the difficulty expressed succinctly by Grantley Dixon’s insight that “[th]e best word for death is death” (O’Connor 2005, 129). Rather, the illustrations from popular and scientific magazines; the excerpts and caricatures of the Irish from *Punch*; and the reproduced entries from the 1847 *Anthropology* that one finds scattered throughout the novel exemplify the mecha-

¹ O’Malley insists that it is precisely “the unburied dead” who haunted the contemporary witnesses the most, as well as O’Connor: “For contemporary witnesses, such as the Cork artist James Mahony who was commissioned to provide an illustrated report on the horrors wracking Ireland for *The Illustrated London News* in February 1847, nothing spoke so clearly of the disintegration of the frayed fabric that held this society together than its inability to take care of its dead. Perhaps the most powerful embodiment of the population’s distress in his account was the figure of a harrowed woman he encountered in Clonakilty begging for the means to bury the dead baby she still carried. Indeed, as he later notes, this inability to accommodate the deceased had destroyed the essential *cordon sanitaire* between the living and the dead, so that in hovels one found “the dying, the living, and the dead, lying indiscriminately upon the same floor” (quoted in Kissane 1995, 115). In short, the boundary that gives life its basic definition was crumbling. ... Inscribed throughout Star of the Sea’s history of this period is the suggestion that accommodating, and showing hospitality to, in particular, contemporary immigrants might be a way of working through the trauma of the famine, mourning it, and finding places for its unburied dead” (O’Malley 2015, 132, 152).

nisms where by populations are racialized as sub-human and animal like, and eliminated. The murder mystery frame narrative also calls attention to the seeming paradox of modern necropolitics. While one man's violent death is investigated as a murder with the aim of identifying the killer, the deaths of millions are not even a bureaucratic problem. O'Connor seems to be deliberately contrasting Captain Lockwood's initial meticulous recording of the names of the Steerage dead with the well-known fact that "accurate records were not kept of those who died [during the Famine]" (Kinealy 2001, 10).

Significantly, the dehumanizing constructions of the Irish as "Caucasian nigger[s]" (O'Connor 2005, 294); the nightmarish depiction of the Victorian prison as the place where ethnic conflicts are re-enacted through physical violence and rape; and the piling up of the de-fleshed, diseased and dead human bodies are juxtaposed with the letters of those who were lucky enough to escape to the United States. Against the horror of famine, hope is affirmed as a sign of humanity. With these excerpts depicting America as a land of equality, a nod is given to the more positive outcome of the Famine, the vast extension of Irish diaspora, as Avril Doyle put it in 1995 (quoted in Kinealy 2001, 1), though this is the positivity which the harrowing journey itself does not easily suggest. It seems, therefore, that O'Connor is not only invested in bringing the dead to life – naming them and making their bodies and their suffering visible – but in making sure their humanity, too, is visible, recognized, and acknowledged. Most significantly, an Anglo-Irish landlord, a traditional villain in the Famine narratives, is given such treatment. This corresponds with the general Christian, compassionate ethos of the novel, expressed succinctly by David Dark: "[w]e wrestle not against flesh and blood, the apostle Paul instructs. We struggle instead against the mechanism, the principalities and powers in which people of flesh and blood are caught up and used up, often pitted against each other, and directed to act against their own thriving" (2016). One such mechanism can be termed necropolitics.

2. *Necropolitics/The Politics of Visibility*

Achille Mbembe introduces the term "necropolitics" as a corrective to Foucault's biopower, which he deems insufficient "to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective" (2003, 12). This "subjugation of life to the power of death" (*ibidem*, 39) is both highly specific and universal. While he locates its operations primarily in the "the plantation and the colony" (*ibidem*, 40), Mbembe also sees it at work in contemporary world in general: "the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to

conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (*ibidem*, 40; italics in the original).

Necropolitics, in Mbembe's definition, is thus oriented towards the physical destruction of the enemy via weapons, under conditions of war. Therefore, he focuses on the topography and the devastating socio-psychological effects of occupation:

To live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of 'being in pain': fortified structures, military posts, and roadblocks everywhere; buildings that bring back painful memories of humiliation, interrogations, and beatings; curfews that imprison hundreds of thousands in their cramped homes every night from dusk to day-break; soldiers patrolling the unlit streets, frightened by their own shadows; children blinded by rubber bullets; parents shamed and beaten in front of their families ... bones broken; shootings and fatalities – a certain kind of madness. (*Ibidem*, 39)

As such, necropolitics seems an odd analytic tool with which to discuss O'Connor's rendition of the Great Famine, especially when we bear in mind that O'Connor himself appears to be treating the Famine primarily as a failure of compassion, empathy and love – those traditional Christian virtues emphasized by the title of the novel. Ironically, perhaps, it is Foucault's account of the transformation of power in modernity which, at first sight, seems a much better choice. Namely, the deaths of an approximately million Irish men, women and children during the 1845-1852 period occur precisely in that historical shift from the power of the sovereign to "let live and make die" to the "making live and letting die" of the modern, democratic nation-states. The Irish are not killed; no weapons are deployed; there are no curfews, no "soldiers patrolling the streets", no "shootings and fatalities" (*ibidem*, 39). They are, moreover, clearly allowed to die – by the British government, their (Anglo-)Irish landlords, their neighbours and, in the novel, their own brothers. Yet Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is indeed useful for the discussion of *Star of the Sea* for several reasons, the first one being his account of how necropolitics functions to produce the living dead inhabiting death worlds – a description that applies to certain sections of O'Connor's novel with eerie precision². Another reason is Mbembe's insight into the confusion regard-

² I have in mind paragraphs such as this one: "Nothing has prepared him for it: the fact of famine. The trench-graves and screams. The hillocks of corpses. The stench of death on the tiny roads. The sunlit, frosted morning he had walked alone from the inn at Cashel to the village of Carna – the sun shone, still, in this place of extinguished chances – and found three old women fighting over the remains of a dog" (O'Connor 2005, 130). Nicholas Mulvey's letter/suicide note to his wife also depicts a death world: "The town was a dreadful sight, I could never forget it; with a multitude half dead and weeping as they walked through the streets. Worse again to see those for whom even weeping was too much effort, and they sitting down on the icy ground to bow their hands and die, the best portion of life already gone out from them" (*ibidem*, 39).

ing the fundamental lines in the population subjected to necropower: “under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred” (Mbembe 2003, 40). *Star of the Sea* details the genuine blurring of these, and other fundamental lines – between mercy and punishment, love and murder, for instance, especially in the relation between parents and children. Nicholas Mulvey drowns his own daughter to spare her the pain of dying from starvation; Dixon mentions “[t]he man arrested on the outskirts of Clifden accused of devouring the body of his child” (O’Connor 2005, 130) – the child that, too, was loved. The third reason why Mbembe’s necropolitics is a much better analytic choice than Foucault’s biopolitics is precisely Mbembe’s insight that necropolitics is mass murder disguised as war – we only need to recognize poverty as a too-often unacknowledged weapon of mass destruction, directed at the “surplus population” (*ibidem*). It is a well-known fact that only the poorest Irish died of starvation; another well-known fact is that Ireland never stopped exporting food during the Famine. Finally, the fact that Mbembe discusses slavery as “one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation” (2003, 21), and focuses on the plantation and the colony – i.e. the role *race* plays in the distribution of death in places and “states of exception” – is also valid for our discussion of *Star of the Sea*. From the very start of the novel, O’Connor calls attention to what Giorgio Agamben termed “the anthropological machine” – the mechanism for “the production of man through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman” (Agamben 2004, 37). In its modern incarnation, the machine functions by “animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: Homo alalus, or the ape-man” (*ibidem*). For Agamben, “the Jew ... the néomort and the overcomatose person” (*ibidem*) are the examples of the machine animalizing human beings. Yet, throughout the nineteenth century, necropolitical animalization is inseparable from racialization and criminalization. As such, it is evident in the creation of the African, but also the Irish. It is no accident that O’Connor begins his novel with the illustration from *Harper’s Weekly: A Journal of Civilization*, which depicts three human heads in profile, labelled “The Irish Iberian”, “The Anglo-Teutonic” and “The Negro”. There is an exaggerated similarity between the ape-like first and the third profile. In addition to quoting the historical documents, O’Connor suggests this African-Irish connection by making *Star of the Sea* a former slave ship; one of the narrators, moreover, lets it slip that after the 1847 voyage was over, “she was bound for Dover Docks ... there to finish out her days as a hulk for convicts” (O’Connor 2005, xxv). The racialization of the Irish as “Caucasian nigger[s]”, furthermore, is not limited to scientific treatises and serious magazines such as *A Journal of Civilization*. O’Connor, for instance, quotes the 1862 edition of *Punch* which identifies the Irish poor as “The Missing Link”. The entry states in a mock-scientific manner that

[a] creature manifestly between the gorilla and the Negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland, whence it has contrived to migrate; it belongs in fact to a tribe of Irish savages: the lowest species of Irish Yahoo. When conversing with its kind it talks a sort of gibberish. It is, moreover, a climbing animal ... (xv)

Racialized as a sub-human “Negro-type” (*ibidem*, 287), “a Caucasian nigger” (*ibidem*, 294), the Irish is not only animalized (“she’s as hale as a Connemara pony”, Lord Kingscourt describes his Irish nanny (*ibidem*, 7), but also brutalized, as the anthropological machine does more than merely distinguish between man and animal: it produces the crucial difference between (human) life and (animal) death. Thus the killability of the Irish poor during the Famine is made possible by the twin traditions of animalizing the human enemy (racializing “the African” as “a beast” in particular³) and the everyday killing of the animals – the practice so mundane it is practically invisible. The link between animalization, killability and race in the country that “was in effect a colony existing in close physical proximity to the richer colonial power” (Neal 1998, 5) is even more pronounced if we bear in mind that, as Mbembe puts it, “[i]n the eyes of the conqueror, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension” (2003, 24; italics in the original). Quoting Hannah Arendt, Mbembe continues, “[t]he savages are, as it were, ‘natural’ human beings who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, ‘so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder’ ” (*ibidem*). Nothing betrays the identical attitude towards the Irish better than Disraeli’s famous remark that “the British State was able to provide accurate statistics on the numbers of pigs and poultry consumed, yet it did not attempt to keep a record of the deaths of its people” (Kinealy 2001, 10).

Yet, unlike Mbembe, and in keeping with Christine Kinealy’s influential interpretation of the Famine, O’Connor more directly connects the necropolitical practices with economy. Kinealy, as Frank Neal summarizes, concludes that during the Famine “laissez faire economics triumphed over compassion” (1998, 6). O’Connor’s Grantley Dixon, too, makes an assessment that is easily applicable to the twenty-first century’s neoliberalism: “[t]he name of the economic system within which the catastrophe is occurring is very well known indeed. It is called “The Free Market” and is widely revered” (*ibidem*, 18). Moreover, Dixon identifies it explicitly as a war which distributes life and death. “Its *nom de guerre* is ‘Laissez-Faire’; which preaches that the lust for profit may regulate everything: including who should live and who should die” (*ibidem*; italics in the original).

³ See Scott 2007, for further discussion of the cultural/ scientific racialization of the African as “a beast”.

Another important facet of O'Connor's novel is its depicting how necropolitical, *laissez-faire* animalization and brutalization intersect to produce the disposability of the (dead) Irish bodies – at this point it is perhaps worth noting that Henry Giroux referred to necropolitics as “biopolitics of disposability” (2006). The novel piles up dead bodies: terrifying in their materiality, in their physical histories of dispossession, these bodies are nonetheless quickly disposed of – in the water. Alice-Mary Duane, the daughter of Mary Duane and Nicholas Mulvey, is drowned by her father. Named and unnamed “common passengers” who die of starvation and the starvation-related illnesses – on the ship bearing the name of the Virgin Mary – are dropped in the ocean. The symbolism of the water in the novel, which is deeply imbued with Catholic imagery and references, is too great to be ignored. Whereas holy water is used in many Christian rites of blessing, symbolizing purification, the waters swallowing/obliterating the victims' bodies are ultimately holy in the sense that they receive the abject(ed) people and bodies that are not welcome anywhere else, including the promised land, America. Placing the diseased and dead bodies in (close proximity to) the water, moreover, O'Connor dramatizes “the famished body's radical estrangement from the everyday social world” (McLean 2004, 126). But water and disposability are joined in the great project of modernity as well. As Jenna Brager writes in the midst of the latest “refugee crisis”,

[t]he oceans are full of bodies – the waters speak of the necropolitical creation of disposable classes that are subject to vanishing. The boundaries are made clear, between the privileged class of the human and its other. The ritual of body disposal, which prevents or makes ghosts, is at the foundation of political community. ... The water is full of evidence, and that which is dumped as trash reemerges to haunt us, demanding justice. (2015)

In this context, it is no accident that the Famine is almost universally regarded as constitutive of both Irish and British modernity. Avril Doyle, for instance, claims that the Famine is where “modern Ireland was born” (quoted in Kinealy 2001, 1); Stuart McLean suggests that “[t]he spectacle of Irish destitution both grounds and menaces the contrapuntal fashioning of an emergent British modernity” (2004, 69). On a more general note, Avery Gordon, too, states that “[h]aunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import” (Gordon 2008, 7).

It is in response to such disposability, and the inevitable loss of empathy in the face of such effectively distributed death, that O'Connor engages in the politics of visibility/naming and the promotion of solidarity. The phrase “politics of visibility” is inspired by the work done by Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore in *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility*, where they ask the following:

What can account for the fact that certain bodies are hyperexposed, brightly visible, and magnified, while others are hidden, missing, and vanished? We believe there are dimensions of corporeal visibility and erasure that need to be charted and interpreted, for intellectual and political reasons, and we attempt to do so here. Interested in social processes and conditions of local and global stratification, or the many ways in which the world's people are unequal, we investigate in this book the traffic *between* and *among* visible, invisible, and missing bodies. ... we find ourselves longing for these missing bodies and for stories about them". (2009, 3; italics in the original)

Starting from the definition of visibility as "a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness" (Gordon 2008, 15), Avery Gordon, furthermore, notices that "[i]n a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe that neither repression nor the return of the repressed, in the form of either improperly buried bodies or countervailing systems of value or difference, occurs with any meaningful result" (*ibidem*, 16). It is precisely these missing, disposable, and improperly buried bodies that Joseph O'Connor's novel makes visible. The novel also provides stories about them, and names them carefully in an attempt to fight the namelessness of the necropolitical animalization and mass dying. Thus O'Connor's novel is what Avery Gordon would call a ghost story: "stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities" (*ibidem*, 17). It is quite fitting, therefore, that one of the prominent characters in *Star of the Sea* is at first known simply as "The Ghost".

Yet *Star of the Sea* is not limited to the naming of the de-fleshed bodies ravaged by hunger (syphilis, corporal punishment in prison): it is invested in the act of re-fleshing the bodies, by visiting them in the happier, fuller past. As in almost every other neo-Victorian novel, the re-fleshing of the bodies in *Star of the Sea*, the visibility of suffering, and the naming of the victims are politically motivated. The author's narrative choices seem oriented towards giving the agency (back) to the silenced historical others. As in almost every other neo-Victorian novel, too, the production and destruction of the disposable surplus "others" is recognized as the fact of modern life – "these novels create uncanny affinities between the way we live now and the way they lived then", as Saverio Tomaiuolo writes (2016, 129). O'Connor ends his "Introduction" to the novel reproducing the words and dates from a Connemara tombstone, which was erected on the grave of a young man who died in the Vietnam War. Even though it is the dead, and not the living, who, as Antigone claims, "have the longest demands", O'Connor does not shy away from the explicit conclusion that in their demand to be witnessed, the dead speak for the living as well. "People like my characters all existed at the time. More to the point, they exist now, too" (2005, x). Moreover, the demand is not only that the dead be remembered, named and mourned – O'Connor, following Horkheimer and Adorno, calls for "the conscious horror of destruc-

tion” as well. “Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope” (quoted in Gordon 2008, 19).

3. *Necropolitics and Legible Bodies*

In “Necropolitics”, Mbembe asks: “What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?” (2003, 12). While O’Connor engages in the politics of visibility and naming as a counterforce against the necropolitical animalization/disposability of anonymous lives and bodies, he answers Mbembe’s questions by documenting the wasting of bodies by poverty, disease and starvation. Although not limited to the pauperized tenants – Lord Merridith’s “being eaten through by syphilis” (O’Malley 2015, 144), for example, is rendered in terrifying hints – O’Connor’s examination focuses primarily on the conveniently forgotten and invisible. The human body in the necropolitical order of the Great Famine is represented as wounded, and finally slain, by all the physical and social aspects of systemic poverty. For instance, the steerage poor, who are kept alive almost exclusively by hope and prayer, are depicted as abject – rotting and stinking. Their abjection, moreover, is uncontainable, and it is spilling over into the inanimate world: “[r]otten food, rotten flesh, rotten fruit of rotting bowels, you smelt it on your clothes, your hair, your hands; on the glass you drank from and the bread you ate. Tobacco smoke, vomit, stale perspiration, mildewed clothes, filthy blankets and rotgut whiskey” (2005, xxiii). At the very beginning of the novel, an incident is recounted where an old woman dies while boarding the ship, and her children beg the Captain to “take her to America anyway” as “[n]o means were available to pay for her burial” (xxv). The old woman’s body is already reduced to “little more than an agglomeration of rags” (*ibidem*), but death is not the end of poverty’s grip on the body. Namely, when the pious Captain offers a compromise – wrapping the dead woman’s body in one of his blankets and dumping it in the water once the ship leaves the port – the following happens: “[i]t was later recounted by the Fourth Engineer, who against all advice had been moved to assist them, that they [her sons] had disfigured her face terribly with some kind of blade, fearful that the current would drift her back to Crosshaven where she might be recognized by her former neighbours” (*ibidem*). O’Connor reads this as the enduring stigma of poverty, the symptom of the “shame [that] lasts longer than life” (*ibidem*). It is, however, possible to interpret it as the metaphor for the trauma caused by the Famine, and its unburied, restless, and disfigured ghosts – a point made by O’Malley, Kinealy and Neal. All three call attention to the somewhat surprising fact that “so little professional scholarship has been devoted

to such a catastrophe, occurring as it did, in the heart of the British Empire” (Neal 1998, 2), concluding that the Famine was “ignored, marginalized or sanitized by generations of professional historians” (Kinealy 2001, 22). It is precisely this attitude, moreover, that has resulted in subsequent outbursts of haunting. But before we start turning the unburied woman into a metaphor, we have to bear in mind that what O’Connor is depicting is first and foremost the body that suffers necropolitical poverty and starvation. The disfigurement is an act of protection, invoking Mbembe’s blurred lines as well.

It is perhaps no accident that in the novel where men are murderers and suffer violent deaths, it is women who are associated with the slow death from starvation more closely than men. When Pius Mulvey, the Ghost, boards the ship, he emphatically avoids all women as they seem to embody the dispossession of poverty and death more visibly than men. “He could not be around the women, especially the younger ones. Partly because it pained him to see their emaciated faces: their lightless eyes and skeletal arms. The awfulness of their hope, the way it was burned into them: a brand of absolute dispossession” (O’Connor 2005, 25). The absolute, gendered dispossession of poverty is revisited in a traumatic scene recounted by Nicholas Mulvey in his suicide note, when a “wretched old woman” asks him for food and then, as he has none, begs him to kill her. All her sons are gone, she explains, and there is nobody to do the deed for her. “All I could think of to do was to lift her up and carry her with me along the way”, Mulvey writes. “This I did. Christ be my judge, Mary, she weighed as a pillow, but even so, I could barely carry her” (*ibidem*, 40). Mbembe’s “death-worlds” seem like an accurate description: the muddled lines between murder and kindness are there as well. Nicholas himself is dying; a strong man, he finds it nearly impossible to carry the much-reduced weight of another, though on his return he will manage to drown his daughter and kill himself.

Still, O’Connor does not suggest that a male body is somehow exempt from the pain associated with various forms of dispossession. The terror of starvation, for instance, is recreated vividly by Nicholas: “[b]ut then the cramp came back, harder than before – Christ stand between us and all harm – like a blacksmith’s iron aflame in my guts. I thought my time had come to die but it stopped, then, and I could feel myself weeping for the pain of it” (*ibidem*, 41). Nicholas’s brother, Pius, also weeps from pain in his prison cell, having received two hundred lashes for saying “I didn’t hear you” to the prison guard (*ibidem*, 196). Newgate is at that time enforcing the infamous “silent system” by the “progressive” Governor (*ibidem*, 195), and speaking is a punishable offence.

The (wounded and slain) human body in *Star of the Sea* is thus represented as a gendered material reality which endures necropolitical dispossession in all its manifestations, from social isolation and imprisonment to starvation and death. The treatment of the human body under conditions of

legal necropolitics⁴ detailed by *Star of the Sea* is similar to the one depicted in Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony" (1919). In this story, the law is tattooed into the body of the convicted person until death, for several hours. The body functions as a canvas for the law that ultimately destroys it, but the law is not even understood. Kafka's narrator states explicitly that the convict does not even speak the language in which he is sentenced to death. Yet death is only one outcome of the necropolitics of the Famine/poverty. O'Connor rightly connects poverty with social death as well, with the frustrated desires, denied appetites and the de-fleshing of life itself. Unlike life, however, it is bodies that are legible and it is they that bear most clearly the traces of necropolitics, as individual, material histories of penury:

The hills of Connemara abounded with such men. Bent, dead-eyed, ancient brothers who shuffled through life with the cross of loneliness on their backs. They limped into Clifden, laughed at by girls, to Midnight Mass on a Christmas Eve. Virgin old donkey-men with womanly faces. They reeked of their isolation, of stale piss and lost chances. (2005, 89)

Yet, as already stated, O'Connor does more than detail the de-fleshing of bodies and lives through poverty and the Famine. He also re-fleshes them, and shows them filled with sated desires and appetites. This is particularly noticeable in the depiction of the love affair between David Merridith, the future Lord Kingscourt, and Mary Duane, his future governess. Before the two are revealed to be half-siblings and the incestuous affair is ended, their sexual encounters (dubbed "Winchester College Football" [*ibidem*, 68] by the lovers) are depicted by O'Connor as the source of deep, fleshly joy. The appetite, moreover, only grows with satisfaction: "[a]t night she lay in bed she shared with two of her sisters, waiting for them to stop whispering and finally fall asleep, so her fingertips could begin their delicious imitation of David Merridith's caress" (*ibidem*, 72). The joys of the sated hunger are there as well, especially in David Merridith's memory of what is in effect the quintessential scene of Irish rural poverty. "He

⁴ Kinealy calls attention to the role played by the 1838 Poor Law. "Modelled on the English amended law of 1834, the Irish version was deliberately more draconian with no right to relief existing and relief only being provided within the confines of a workhouse. Nor did the Irish Poor Law include a Law of Removal. The differences between the two Poor Laws made it clear that poverty in Ireland was to be treated more harshly than elsewhere and that the Irish poor were even less deserving than the undeserving English poor. Inevitably this attitude shaped responses during the Famine. The point was made on a number of occasions that if the Famine had occurred in England, the political response would have been more generous, as was the accusation that the poor of Ireland were unjustly and unnecessarily being subsidized by the industrial classes in England" (2001, 95-96). In one of the novel's many scenes dramatizing the insurmountable gap between the Anglo-Irish Lords and their poor, David Merridith offers as his contribution to the relief for the Famine victims the fact that he fought to *relax* admission into poorhouses.

liked the way her [Mary Duane's] mother would empty the great black cauldron of potatoes straight onto the table. He loved to eat potatoes with his small, bare hands, licking the butter from his knuckles like a puppy" (*ibidem*, 53).

The rare scenes of the joys of the sated bodily appetites serve as a foil against which the terror of the Famine plays out: both the slow decay of the individual body and mind, and the necrosis of larger social tissues. The readers are reminded of the complexity of human beings and social networks, and the horror of necropolitics which erases that complexity, sentencing its victims not only to death, but also to invisibility, silence and obscurity.

4. Compassion

In *Star of the Sea*, O'Connor engages in the politics of visibility and naming as a measure against the dehumanizing, abstracting murder operations of (colonial) necropolitics, but also against the self-defeating Irish custom to close the doors on the dying. The "collective memory of the Famine", as Ian Baucom notes, "repeatedly approaches and draws back from images of corpses buried in canvas sacks rather than in coffins, of bodies left to rot in collapsing cabins" (quoted by Melissa Fegan in Kohlke and Gutleben 2011, 324). Naming is particularly invoked – already in the Introduction, where O'Connor discusses the continuity between the past and present necropolitics, and the fact that victims and perpetrators have names, such as, for instance, Lieutenant Corporal Peter Mary, dead at twenty-two in Vietnam (2005, xi). To borrow terminology from Judith Butler, the named and narrated lives of the Famine dead are in the course of the novel revealed to be "grievable lives" (Butler 2004, 15-38). Moreover, while claiming, just like Butler, that "mourning means attesting to a life" (Weil 2012, 103), Kari Weil calls attention to the "link between mourning and naming". "[A] proper or successful mourning", she explains, "depends on the ability of the living to name and so to reconstruct the identity of the dead along with a place and moment of death" (*ibidem*, 104). In addition to proper burials, the uncounted and anonymous Famine dead are denied proper and successful mourning, so the novel grants them this as well.

Yet O'Connor's artistic and political engagement does not stop at raising the dead for them to be mourned – the work of mourning has its own pitfalls, as Saidiya Hartman has demonstrated⁵. His ambition is not only

⁵ "[T]he work of mourning is not without its perils, chief among these are the slippage between responsibility and assimilation and witnessing and incorporation. Can we mourn for those lost without assuming and usurping the place of the dead, and yet recognize that the injuries of racism tether us to this past? Does mourning necessarily entail the obliteration of the other through identification? Can we mourn the dead without becoming them?" (Hartman 2002, 771-772).

to re-member the Famine dead, to recognize and acknowledge their posthumous humanity; it is not merely to expose the politics of invisibility of certain suffering/dying bodies which enables the hypervisibility of some others. O'Connor raises the Famine dead for the sake of promoting solidarity, compassion and empathy in face of effectively (brutally) distributed death, both then and now. Not only that: if possible, O'Connor is Christianizing the Famine, by highlighting the instances of "astonishing suffering" (2005, v) being coupled with astonishing grace; by infusing the dying with divinity. Jurgen Moltmann's famous passage from *The Crucified God* (1993) encapsulates the ideology behind O'Connor's difficult feat. Having quoted Elie Wiesel's account of the execution at Auschwitz –

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment for a long time, I heard the man call again, 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows ...'. (Moltmann 1993, 273-274)

– Moltmann concludes that "[a]ny other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon" (*ibidem*, 273-274). While a very dangerous and superficial reading of this passage might suggest that it offers divine justification for the hanging, it has to be noted that God is decidedly with the dying boy, and not with the SS. The SS officers are clearly Godless.

The novel, needless to say, abounds in Christian allusions and references. At the same time, it is highly critical towards the official religion and its appointed practitioners, who are represented as complicit with the necropolitics of the Great Famine. Though he does not tackle Providentialism⁶ and its role in the Famine, O'Connor writes that in the first days of the voyage, "in the afternoon the Methodist minister would recite a few uncontroversial words on the quarter dock or read aloud from the scriptures" (2005, xxvi). On the ship where the boundaries between the rich and the poor (the living and the dying) are guarded by quasi-police officers and actual bars, the words from the Bible have to be chosen carefully so as not to be controversial – otherwise the First Class passengers might be reminded that they are failing in their duty towards the poor (or worse, the poor might be inspired to rebel, in Christ's name). The unnamed Methodist minister thus

⁶ At the very beginning of the novel, though, O'Connor quotes Charles Trevelyan's proclamation that the Famine is "a punishment from God for an idle, ungrateful and rebellious country; an indolent and un-self-reliant people" (2005, xv).

appears to be trafficking in the kind of Christianity that Carl Gregg terms “one of control ... one to hold people down ... an opiate to pacify people into compliance”. The minister is, therefore, merely “[p]ractic[ing] safe texts” (2015). Against this – and in the context of the imperialist racialization of the Irish as sub-human “Caucasian niggers” – O’Connor sets the explosive pronouncement that “Jesus Christ was probably a Negro, Grace! His skin was the color of tobacco, Grace!” (2005, 328). While Grantley Dixon, who utters these words, is himself plagued by the guilt over the slave-owning ancestors and the slave-created wealth he has inherited, his exclamation does point to “[th]e radicalness of the Gospels, usually missed by those who are privileged by houses within empire”. The radicalness lies in the fact “that the Jesús narratives are anti-colonial literature about a native resident displaced by the invading colonial power” (De La Torre 2015, 27). Needless to say, it is as anti-colonial literature that the Gospels resonate most strongly with the plight of the displaced Irish, who are fleeing the margins of the empire, victimized by its necropolitics.

There is yet another use of the religious imagery and symbolism: to set against the inhuman mechanism of necropolitics the narrative of common humanity, which includes both suffering and the desire not to go through it alone. This aspect is introduced very early in the novel, when David Meridith remembers his son’s teething, and how the child wanted his father to be near, to stay with him in his moment of pain. Lord Kingscourt translates this common childhood experience into the language of religion – “[I]like Christ in the garden. Watch with me one hour. The heart-rending smallness we finally want” (O’Connor 2005, 12). From page 12, therefore, O’Connor is building on a simple argument, which is nonetheless radical in its implications: it is this common humanity – the inevitability of suffering and the desire for companionship – that should be the source of active compassion. It is in support of this argument that O’Connor scatters memorable instances of mercy saving lives, and the denial of it destroying the innocent, throughout *Star of the Sea*. David Merridith’s father, for instance, sentences a man to death in 1826. Decades before the Famine, the poor are hungry, and this man, “an evicted tenant of Commander Blake of Tully”, “had stolen a lamb from the Commander’s meadow and fatally stabbed the gamekeeper who had tried to arrest him” (*ibidem*, 60). Juxtaposing, Dickens-like, the human law and the law of God⁷, O’Connor continues:

The accused had five children; his wife was dead. Even the gamekeeper’s wife pleaded for clemency. What the man had done was a terrible thing but one day his God would have to be faced. One day we would all have to face our God. There had been too much killing in Ireland already. (*Ibidem*)

⁷ Remember, for instance, the death-sentencing scene in *Great Expectations* (1861).

But mercy is not granted by the imperious judge; the man is hanged, “his body dumped in a quicklime grave in the yard” (*ibidem*). One denied act of mercy only results in more innocent deaths. “His children were sent into the almshouse at Galway, as, within the month, were the gamekeeper’s children. And the seven children fathered by killer and victim were buried in the same pit-grave before the year was through” (*ibidem*).

Nicholas Mulvey drowns his daughter and kills himself on Christmas Eve, being denied address with Commander Tully, having walked “for three days and nights” (*ibidem*, 40) for that purpose only. Half-dead with fatigue and starvation, Nicholas observes, from a distance, Tully’s servants covering the Commander’s horse with blankets, as it is a cold night (*ibidem*, 42). Yet the lethal acts of denying mercy are juxtaposed with poignant instances of compassion and solidarity. Sometimes they save lives; sometimes they come too late for that, yet give animalized people a human death. The latter is to be found in the instance of Nicholas Mulvey carrying the old woman, who dies in his arms after “utter[ing] the Rosary that she and I might live this night” (*ibidem*, 40). Unlike the majority of the Famine victims, “the wretched old woman” (*ibidem*, 39) even gets something resembling a proper burial. “I laid her down and covered her as best I could with stones” (*ibidem*, 40), Mulvey continues in his suicide note/Christmas card. A deeply pious man and a former priest, Nicholas, however, reproaches himself for not saying a prayer – “I should like to say that I knelt and said a prayer but Jesus forgive me I did not” (*ibidem*). But he offers compassion and companionship – that heart-rending smallness that we all want in the end – and acts as a true Christian. Wiesel’s and Moltmann’s God hanging on the gallows, sharing in the throes of a dying young man, is to be found in this instance of final compassion, too. Yet Mbembe’s blurred lines in death worlds come to mind, also, once we remember that this man will kill his own daughter a few hours later, as an act of parental protection.

Despite his initial choice of “uncontroversial words”, the Methodist minister, too, behaves as a true Christian by the end of *Star of the Sea*’s dreadful journey. Namely, he and Captain Lockwood decide to stay on the ship, demonstrating solidarity with the poorest passengers who are not allowed to disembark for the next seven weeks, out of fear of infection. By staying with the pauperized Irish, who are further dehumanized by being treated as the source of contagion, the Methodist minister repeats the gesture of St. Francis and the early Franciscans. As Richard Beck highlights, they were “known for their care of lepers, living among and caring for that ostracized, unclean and marginalized community” (2016). Beck then reaches the logical conclusion, which can be equally applied to the instances of compassion in *Star of the Sea*: “[w]hen the Franciscans lived with leper colonies they were doing more than liturgically desiring the kingdom, *they were becoming the kingdom*” (*ibidem*, italics added). This is what is meant by O’Connor’s “Christianizing

the Famine” – the necropolitical event par excellence is not only analysed in terms of its genealogy, mechanisms and outcomes; it is also shot through with the scenes of the astonishing suffering of the innocent, and the rare but emphasized instances of human/divine generosity in the widest sense of the word. In keeping with O’Connor’s politics of naming, moreover, it is at this moment of solidarity that the minister is finally named: “Henry Hudson Deeds of Lyme Regis” (2005, 386).

Of course, one has to tread carefully here; otherwise Christianity might easily slip into what it has been for centuries – an apologia for the status quo of injustice, dispossession and suffering of countless surplus others. Indeed, many have warned against this, including, most recently, Judith Butler. It is precisely Christian attitude to poverty that she finds problematic. Against the neoliberal version of responsibility, she writes,

there is also the Christian version, which underscores the need to care for the poor, a moral maxim that never really questions why there has to be poverty of this kind at all. In other words, in the second instance (and Hegel makes this claim in his “Natural Law” essay), if the maxim to provide for the poor is considered universal and timeless, then it presupposes the eternity of poverty, and even becomes an alibi for its persistence. The solution to this is not to reverse the maxim – “don’t care for the poor”! – but to shift the entire problem of poverty to the socio-economic and political level, where we can ask why and how poverty is being augmented at such alarming rates, and how it can be countered. (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 106-107)

While absolutely correct on poverty being both an economic and a political issue, Butler, however, works with the distorted meaning of charity. She is neither alone, nor to be blamed for this; according to José Miranda, the confusion between “justice”, “charity” and “compassion” began as early as the first Greek translations of the Old Testament (Miranda 1974, 17). This confusion resulted insignificant distortions of the Christian maxims: the original struggle for social justice was replaced with inequality-perpetuating charity, and the radical meaning of Christian inclusive love was dulled.

O’Connor seems to share the notion that “[i]f the Christian hope is reduced to the salvation of the soul in a heaven beyond death, it loses its power to renew life and change the world” (Moltmann 2004, xv). This radical belief is conveyed most forcefully in the scene where Mary Duane saves the life of Pius Mulvey. Pius is Mary’s former lover who left her pregnant and penniless; he is also her brother-in-law, responsible for the eviction of her family and the subsequent deaths of her husband and daughter. Mary, just like Mary Mother of God and David Merridith’s mother⁸, shows love to the particularly unde-

⁸ Lady Verity’s behaviour offers the alternative solution never taken up in 1845-1852: in 1822, when potato murrain hits Connemara, she establishes “Model Farm Soup Kitch-

serving by including him in her family – by naming him as her own blood. Yet she names her dead daughter too, in what is perhaps the clearest expression of the novel's politics of visibility/naming and compassion.

Pius Mulvey on his knees, begging for his life. Mary Duane above him, shaking with tears; for she wept that night on the Star of the Sea, as perhaps only the mother of the murdered child can weep. Nobody ever drew Alice-Mary Duane, whose ruined father snuffed out her agonized life. Her mother wept as she uttered her name. 'Like a prayer', as many of the witnesses said.

And as the name was uttered, some began to pray; and others began to weep in sympathy. And others again who lost children of their own began to utter their children's names. As though the act of saying their names – the act of saying they ever had names – was to speak the only prayer that can ever begin to matter in a world that turns its eyes from the hungry and the dying. They were real. They existed. They were held in these arms. They were born, and they lived, and they died ...? If it was mercy – and I simply cannot say what it was – whatever made Mary Duane show it may only be guessed. Wherever she found it can never be known. But she did show it. She did find it. When the moment of retribution rolled up out of history and presented itself like an executioner's sword, she turned away and did not seize it. (O'Connor 2005, 374-375)

Turning away from the sword, from "the subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 2003, 39), including the sinner/criminal in the family⁹, in the metaphorical and literal meal-sharing – this is the radically loving and

en" (O'Connor 2005, 55) for the starving. Even more importantly, she sends her husband's men to find Commander Blake's evicted tenants – the people living, animal-like, in the woods, "or in 'scalpeens' of turf-sods on the side of the road" (*ibidem*, 56). "They could come and be fed at the manor, she said. Nobody hungry would be refused. It was a time for all Galway to stand together" (*ibidem*). The solidarity founded in love and the recognition of humanity in the people who are dehumanized into "white-faced, lurching phantoms" (*ibidem*), culminates in her death. "Just as the blight was ending", Lady Verity catches famine fever and dies – her final act of solidarity with the impoverished. But just as poverty's grip on the humiliated body does not end with death, Lady Verity's death does not mean she's excluded from the family of her tenants: in a scene whose emotional impact is equal to Mary Duane's final acceptance of Pius Mulvey, the tenants, old and young, men and women, utter the Hail Mary in Irish during her funeral – the prayer is described as "[g]rowing in volume, swelling like a wave, echoing against the granite wall of the church ..." (*ibidem*, 58). The plea, addressing "Holy Mary, Mother of God" to "pray for us sinners" – *Anois agus ar uair ár mbáis* – "Now, and at the hour of our death", spoken from the living throats of people united by love and grief, is, moreover, subtly but powerfully contrasted with the Reverend Pollexfen's "sombre words of the psalms" (*ibidem*).

⁹ See Melissa Fegan's 2011 paper, "That heartbroken island of incestuous hatreds: Famine and Family in Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*" for a detailed discussion of the novel in the context of "the family of nations" and Ireland's place in it, both in the nineteenth and in the twenty-first century.

radically inclusive Christianity which Mary Duane practices. But the question remains, how is this individual choice translated, if at all, into social practice? Moreover, what are the implications of saving bare lives in the severely stratified society? Lady Verity's soup kitchen, after all, keeps the poor alive – and poor. The common objection levelled at the promotion of Christian compassion for the poor is the recognition of the systemic production and maintenance of poverty by, *inter alia*, the higher classes' compassion and charity. As Matthew Snow points out, charity in particular is an expression of “individualized culture of giving” preventing all the parties involved from “challenging capitalism's institutionalized taking” (2015). The promotion of compassion connects O'Connor with Dickens – it is no accident that the great novelist makes a cameo in one of the chapters – and is therefore susceptible to the same objections levelled at his sentimental and humanitarian approach to crisis. Yet, O'Connor's novel achieves more than exclaim “[d]ead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day” (Dickens 1993, 551). O'Connor, of course, does not shy away from that kind of engagement. This is demonstrated explicitly in the Introduction, and most memorably in the final encounter between Mary Duane and Pius Mulvey. On the other hand, it is perhaps worth remembering John Caputo's take on charity. “If we ask someone whose life is dedicated to the feeding the hungry, why they do that, they would be dumbfounded. Because the hungry are hungry – why would you even ask?” (Jones 2015). But an equally important question has to be – *Why* are the hungry hungry?

O'Connor's novel unites Butler's emphasis on the investigation of poverty with Caputo's instinctive charity, showing how amidst the necropolitically engineered tragedies, lives are sometimes sustained by small mercies. Particularly touching are the two brothers on the verge of death, who “were never done offering their rations to the children of the steerage; singing patriotic ballads when their comrades were low” (2005, 26). The good Englishman, Captain Lockwood, torn between his duties to the Employer, the Silver Star Shipping Line Company, and his human and Christian duties, goes a step further. After the ship arrives in New York, here signs from his post, and goes to live in Ireland “in solidarity with the Irish famished” (*ibidem*, 396). Grantley Dixon continues, “[h]e and his sisters and brothers of the English Quakers – he always insisted gently on his preferred word, ‘Friends’ – saved hundreds and possibly thousands of lives” (*ibidem*). The life-saving actions, as usual, are not ostentatious. “They built homes, roads, drains, a school; paid their workers fairly and treated them with respect” (*ibidem*). In addition to the astonishing suffering suffused with divinity, the turning away from the sword and the grand narrative of common humanity, Christianity here offers yet another framework – the practical, community-building one.

Significantly, O'Connor's persistent parallels with the contemporary socio-political situation led both Aidan O'Malley and Melissa Fegan to read the novel primarily as criticism of the modern Irish racist and anti-immigration politics.

Lockwood's belief that the 'frightened stranger' would be welcomed in a wealthy Ireland has been resoundingly disproved. ... The 'incestuous hatreds' which made an Irish Protestant such as David Merridith an 'Englishman born in Ireland' in the nineteenth century, have been transferred to more vulnerable internal and external others in twentieth- and twenty-first-century 'multicultural' Ireland. (Fegan in Kohlke and Gutleben 2011, 340)

O'Malley makes a similar point: "[i]nscribed throughout *Star of the Sea's* history of this period is the suggestion that accommodating, and showing hospitality to, in particular, contemporary immigrants might be a way of working through the trauma of the famine, mourning it, and finding places for its unburied dead" (2015, 152). Fourteen years after the publication of the novel, this suggestion is all the more valid.

5. "Never let people forget what we did to each other": Conclusion

In the "Introduction" to the novel, Joseph O'Connor states that he hopes the novel "celebrates the solidarities which fill life with joy: friendship, loyalty, home, commitment, the bravery of the emigrant, the indomitable boldness of human desire. *Star of the Sea* has been read in different ways, but to its author, at any rate, it is simply a story about love" (2005, ix). This paper has read the novel in one of those different ways – as a genealogy and an attempted correction of a historically specific instance of what Achille Mbembe termed necropolitics. The Great Famine has been interpreted as a necropolitical event par excellence, directed at the (section of the) Irish population that was thoroughly animalized, criminalized and racialized as "Negroes turned inside out" by the imperial centre throughout the nineteenth century. In this novel, moreover, the necropolitical mass production of dead bodies through poverty, starvation and disease is coupled with O'Connor's simultaneous struggle against necropower, against indifference, against forgetting – against death itself. In addition to locating the birth of modern Ireland in the silent empty hills of Connemara and the (holy) waters of the Atlantic Ocean, O'Connor is invested in raising the dead so that they could be seen, named, remembered and mourned. In the context of his insistent parallels with contemporary necropolitics – which, too, traffics in mass death, silence, the invisibility and the anonymity of its victims – seeing, naming, remembering and mourning the victims of the Great Famine are not only highly emotional responses, but political actions as well. It is precisely in response to necropolitics that O'Connor builds his novel on the politics of visibility and

naming, attempting to transform the necropolitical “acceptable losses” into Butlerian “grievable lives”. Moreover, by giving the novel the title *Star of the Sea* – one of the many names for the Virgin Mary – O’Connor engages in a complex relationship with Christianity. Critical of the religious officials’ role in maintaining poverty, he does not negate the radicalness of the doctrine of inclusive love, seeing in it the potential for saving lives, in direct opposition to the production of disposable races, classes and bodies. The genealogical investigation of necropolitics, therefore, is intersected with the instances of memorable compassion and (occasionally) life-saving mercy; disconcertingly, also, with the Moltmannesque scenes of “astonishing suffering” suffused with divinity. The national trauma, which, as Kinealy, Neal and O’Malley agree, was marginalized, sanitized, re-written and silenced, is in this novel simultaneously Christianized, humanized, and depicted in all its physical and social brutality.

Ultimately, with the words of Captain Lockwood, “Never let people forget what we did to each other” (O’Connor 2005, 396), O’Connor returns both death and salvation to the level of interpersonal relationship – the most intimate and arguably the most important one, especially in the context of modern impersonality and mass destruction of anonymous victims. Whether or not compassion is an adequate answer to necropolitics (it is not) is, perhaps, the wrong question: the correct question should be – does it save lives? If the answer is yes, then it is weapon enough against the neoliberal and necropolitical distribution of death along racial, gender and class lines, which continues unabated.

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