

Coming Home: Lesbian Poetics and Homelessness*

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Abstract:

As a poet of the Irish diaspora, Cherry Smyth queers the environment of her construction (Northern Ireland) by examining the experiences and perceptions of her non-heteronormative orientation when she returns home from London. Smyth delves into memory, nostalgia, forgetting and remembering to articulate her search for a home. This can be read most vividly in her poem “Coming Home”. The visibility of lesbian poets has been historically displaced, silenced and eradicated by the patriarchal domination of lyric poetry, often leaving lesbian poets homeless in the tradition. Rather than ever arriving at home, Smyth is continually coming home and this coming is painful, shameful and erotic all at once and thereby makes a home out of being queer. These, and other issues, are discussed using an auto-theoretical queer approach.

Keywords: Diaspora, Home, Lesbian, Cherry Smyth, Visibility

1. (Re)Orientation

It must be wonderful to wake up in the morning and know just which door you're going to walk through.
(Lauren Bacall as Amy North in *Young Man with a Horn*, 1950)

In January 2017 I visited the Ulster museum's exhibition on the Troubles in Northern Ireland. On the wall large letters spelled out a sentence that resonates with me still: “While we have a shared past we do not have a shared memory”. Over the course of the few weeks I was at home in Ireland, I repeated the phrase to many, including my aunt as we discussed familial memory.

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This was a fervent topic at the time as my paternal family began the search for their grandmother's death certificate and grave. The, to this day, inconclusive search means that my father and his siblings do not have a claim to their mother's family home. As older relations die, so too does the memory of their grandmother. The shared familial past of siblings becomes nothing but a lost memory disorientated by time. As a queer Irish woman living in New Zealand I often feel the boundaries of belonging and home becoming more a memory or an impossible reality. Minnie Bruce Pratt's 1983 article "Identity: Skin Blood Heart" captures this feeling of ambiguity as she moves between three different locations, remapping and transgressing boundaries to question the ambivalence of "being home" and "not being home". In Pratt's article her coming out as a lesbian is "what makes 'home' impossible, which makes her self nonidentical, which makes her vulnerable" (Martin, Mohanty 1986, 229). The Irish poet Cherry Smyth faced similar vulnerabilities:

My coming out as a lesbian paralleled and informed my emergence as a post-prod Nationalist. Common sexuality allowed me to identify with Republican lesbians and gay men in a new way, just as feminism had given me the opportunity to forge new links with women across different backgrounds of class, nationality and race. (1995, 224)

Smyth's experience is similar to Pratt's, and to my own: we all changed direction in our lives by detaching from the heterosexual world; we became in Sara Ahmed's words "reoriented". This reorientation "involves the disorientation of encountering the world differently", which leads Ahmed to also wonder about the impossibility of home, "and how much 'feeling at home', or knowing which way we are facing, is about the making of worlds" (Ahmed 2006, 20). I return to questions of home constantly as for me, and for many queer people, home can invoke isolating feelings of shame, of "[re]entering a closet of furtive whispers and private pain" (Aguilar-San Juan 1998, 267).

The language of reorientation has also been used negatively. In 2008 Iris Robinson, a former Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) MLA and MP in Northern Ireland, made a series of, by now infamous, statements about homosexuality suggesting that homosexuals could be "cured" with psychiatric treatment and promoted the services of a "very nice" psychiatrist she knew who could help to "re-orientate" homosexuals back to heterosexuality (Young 2008, referenced in Duggan 2012). Robinson's statements direct me back to the epigraph of this section, and how it must be wonderful for Iris Robinson to know which door she is going to walk through every morning, to be so sure of the way she is orientated. While she also promotes the belief that she is facing the right way, and that in turn, there is a right way to be orientated towards. This paper is a reading of Cherry Smyth's poem "Coming Home" and concerned with the process of reorientation, and the shame involved in being disorientated, or in other words, homeless. In "Coming

Home” Smyth displays the complicated internalisation of what it means to really *be* Irish, and how speaking about one’s heritage with pride is complicated by a fraught diasporic and queer existence.

2. *Visibility and “Lesbian chic”*

If you’re gay, first they try to tell you that it’s really not true, then they spend years trying to change you. You just have to hate yourself more than straight folks do. Everything that comes at you tells you it’s sick, wrong, perverted, demented. You never get reinforced. (Hollibaugh 2000, 111)

Cherry Smyth’s poem “Coming Home” was originally published in 1993 and appeared as part of her first collection *When The Lights Go Up* in 2001. 1993 was the height of “lesbian chic”, a phenomenon in the 1990s which was believed to have increased the visibility of lesbians in the media and popular culture. The term was coined after k.d. lang appeared in May of 1993 on the cover of *New York Magazine* with the heading “Lesbian chic: The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women”. The following month, *Newsweek* ran a “lesbian issue” which, “presented lesbianism to its presumptively straight readership as an interesting but deeply problematic phenomenon” (Halperin 1995, 49). In the U.S., Dorothy Allison was one of the most prominent lesbian writers to gain increased visibility as she moved from small lesbian publishing networks to major presses and gained the ability to earn a living from her writing (see Cvetkovich 2003). In Ireland Mary Dorcey won the Rooney Prize in 1990 for her short story collection *A Noise from the Woodshed*, and like Allison, moved from a small lesbian publishing press, Onlywomen Press (based in the UK) which published both her short story collection and her first poetry collection *Kindling* (1982), to one of Ireland’s major presses, Salmon Poetry. In December 1992 the President of Ireland at the time, Mary Robinson, invited 34 delegates from the gay and lesbian community to Áras an Uachtaráin. Mary Holland reported for *The Irish Times* (December 17), that

[...] about half of the 34 people said that they did not want, could not afford, to be identified. What a reproach to the rest of us. That the guests of the President should feel that they had to conceal a meeting which, for the overwhelming majority of people in Ireland, would be something to talk about with pride. (1992, 12)

Holland insinuates that the LGBTQI community should feel pride at this invitation to be seen at last by heterosexual society, and that queer people are not like the “majority”. Similar meetings occurred in the US, and some wondered at the expense of this visibility, “The good news is, We finally exist to people other than ourselves. The bad news is. On what terms?” (Hollibaugh 2000, 178). Others, like the actor Harvey Fierstein, saw the increased

visibility of the lesbian and gay community as an achievement after existing for so long without it: “Visibility at any cost. I’d rather have negative than nothing” (quoted in *The Celluloid Closet*, 1995). The nineties also saw the emergence of Queer Theory. In 1992 Cherry Smyth published her pamphlet *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*. Within, she queries what queer means and what it has to offer the lesbian community, “Despite reservations I and other lesbians, gay men and queers have expressed, queer politics offers a radical reclamation of the past and urgent questioning of the present” (1992, 59-60).

In order to negotiate this complex field of visibility, Smyth turns to writing, “I wrote at first to be seen. Be heard. I was very conscious of giving the state of being an Irish lesbian a presence. It was a way of writing myself into language, into love, into being” (Smyth in Brown 2002, 268). In her poem “Coming Home” she uses what I read as a queer language. I mean this in the sense of how the language reads in its questioning of identity and the performativity of self that occurs when Smyth is at home. A performativity that is both generated by others and by the self. This brings to mind the theorising of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose writing has become synonymous with the affect shame.

Shame interests me politically, then, because it generates and legitimates the place of identity – the *question* of identity – at the origin of the impulse of the performative but does so without giving that identity-space the standing of an essence. It constitutes it as to-be-constituted, which is also to say, as already there for the (necessary, productive) misconstrual and misrecognition. (1993, 14)

Smyth’s coming home requires her to perform differently as she begins to misrecognise herself, her identity and to question her sense of belonging.

These questions of identity and visibility are given prominence in the very first stanza, as the language disorients and shifts in time and space.

Coming home is like dying
and coming back from the dead all at once.
Time stops and time begins again where it left off –
leaving at eighteen. Here, time isn’t pressing to go somewhere,
the last call, the last tube. Instead it can sit
and watch the waves rolling, behind the raindrops running,
being blown or flung or just clinging to the windowpane.

Smyth’s poem associates home with a different time zone where time stops and starts “where it left off”, and she becomes her past self again, at “eighteen”. Her present self becomes disorientated and disappears into this past self of a rural country girl in contrast to the urban dwelling queer woman she feels was left, or had to be left, behind in London. She uses the verb *coming* in the title, and also in the first and second line of the poem. This continu-

ous sense of time and shifts in the spatial are intertwined and weaved into the stanza with the use of words like “leaving”, “pressing”, “rolling”, “running”, and “clinging”. The reader gets a sense of the reclamation of the past and how this recovery of time allows Smyth to question her relationship to time when she is in London rushing for “the last call”, or running for “the last tube”. This repetition of “the last” shows the reader that there is something to be missed, and that perhaps, what is to be missed is the “pressing” urgency of time. The poet seems uneasy with the view from where she sits, in her direction away from London, and towards the “waves rolling”. The waves and rain are beyond her control unlike her ability to be on time or to miss, something dictated by a schedule like “the last tube”.

I find myself often in this position when I return home. I am outside of myself, directed away from the life, the home away from home, that I have created in New Zealand, and that can be confronting. It can be confronting in the sense of what you see in front of you (for Smyth the rolling waves), but also, in what you are forced to see of yourself through the eyes of those around you. I have often felt myself disappearing into the way things were, into the person I was. I cover myself up, as it is usually less confronting and more socially acceptable to be ashamed than proud. When people ask, and they do so frequently, whether or not I have a boyfriend, they don’t want to hear that I’m a lesbian and have a girlfriend not a boyfriend. So I just say no. I *just* say and don’t say a lot of things when I’m at home. But living so far from Ireland I feel myself, to paraphrase the words of Martin Luther King, to be sleeping through a revolution. Ireland is changing and part of the difficulty with that change is that I still associate Ireland and Irish people with past attitudes. It’s not true that people don’t want to know that I have a girlfriend, I *just* don’t tell them.

3. *Troubling the self*

I see the sea from the house.
The dark blue rim at the edge of the sky
is the circle round your iris,
flecked with yellow like marram grass.
I unpack clothes smelling of London.
Lulled by the tease of familiar voices
I still yearn for the anonymity of the city,

peace to read, think, eat, not eat, to swear,
clutter, clatter, stay in bed all day with the one I love
and talk about her openly.

From here I begin to consider, using the work of Elspeth Probyn, belonging rather than identity. In belonging we can begin to capture “more ac-

curately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than positing of identity as a stable state” (Probyn 1996, 19). Belonging also suggests permission to belong and the exclusion from belonging, both of which create a sense of yearning. This yearning can be felt in the continuous sense of time in Smyth’s use of verbs and the continuous present tense discussed in the second section. This yearning can also be felt in the ambivalent sense of self expressed in the second stanza and the beginning of the third stanza (quoted above) where Smyth fluctuates between a desire for attachment and intimacy, and a desire for distance and anonymity. The resulting alienation of this ambivalence is what keeps Smyth coming home. She is “not quite here” (Muñoz 2010, 21) in either Northern Ireland or London, she never arrives in either place.

Directed towards the sea, she makes reference to the presence of you, “the circle round your iris”. The reader could think that here she is referring to a lover, but then why does she continue in the next stanza to refer to “the one I love / and talk about her openly”. This movement from your to her, eliminates the lover as “your”, and we see the poet herself, written of in the second person, reflected back to us against the windowpane. Smyth splits herself into multiple persons, the person speaking, the person reflected in the window, the person she was at eighteen, and also, in the next stanza, her mother as a reflection of a potential future self that she seeks to escape. I take this idea of persons rather than subjects or selves from Michel Snediker’s *Queer Optimism*, where in his reading of contemporary poetry Snediker demonstrates a theoretical preference “for persons over subjects extends from questions of how personhood ... might be characterized, removed from the columbarium of subjectivity” (2009, 3). In doing so I align myself with Smyth, who writes of her battle with subjectivity, and the concept of a fixed notion of self:

I do wrestle with the question of subjectivity. I am less interested in creating a coherent self across time than in showing a shifting, contextual, contingent self. I like the idea of drawing the reader into a critical intimacy between our respective subject-selves. I interrogate the self through the work. (Cherry Smyth in Brown 2002, 268)

Smyth expresses this shifting sense of self in how she chooses to structure the poem, moving from “I unpack clothes smelling of London”, to “Lulled by the tease of familiar voices”. She then refers to the “anonymity of the city”, using verbs in their infinite forms, “to read, think, eat, not eat, to swear / clutter, clatter, stay in bed”, rather than the present continuous tense of the first stanza. It is as if the poet is saying that in London she is present, whereas at home she is in a continuous state, she is coming rather than here. At home, she is just beginning. While it seems she is also saying that Lon-

don is both a city of anonymity and intimacy. To lie in bed with one's lover is not to be anonymous but to be known, "stay in bed all day with the one I love", whereas in Ireland things are both "familiar" and the cause of feelings of "anonymity".

My decision to couple shame with belonging and personhood in this reading of "Coming Home" allows me to expand on Smyth's own troubled notions of fixity in the self. Negative affects, such as shame, unsettle the self and allow for the possibility of change, and here I mean change as an ongoing process. For Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, negativity "refers to the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity" (Berlant, Edelman 2014, vii-viii). Shame allows Smyth and me to explore the disorientation of perception that is part of the politics of queerness as a lived state of being. In queerness, we are always shifting, always becoming, always questioning what it means to *really* belong. Belonging is a concept that is unsettled beyond queerness for those of us that are queer, and also members of the Irish diaspora. Smyth quotes Fintan O'Toole in her 1995 article "Keeping it Close: Experiencing Emigration in England":

Ireland is a diaspora, and as such is both a real place and a remembered place, both the far west of Europe and the home back east of the Irish-American. Ireland is something that often happens elsewhere. (222)

If belonging as a queer person is intimately attached to personhood, and that personhood is attached to the erotic, then the process of coming home is a constant, active movement contained in shame. In the words of Audre Lorde, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling". If the erotic, like shame, remains unexpressed or oppressed then it lessens the subject's power to enact change, in any form but specifically in the area of queer activism.

An important part of queer activism has always focused on the removal of stigma and shame associated with sexuality. Speaking openly, and proudly, as a queer person is supposed to rid queer people of their feelings of shame¹. Many queer people historically have faced extreme social and personal repercussions as a result of their openness. This is not just a historical phenomenon, "the survival of feelings such as shame, isolation, and self-hatred into the post-Stonewall era is often the occasion for further feelings of shame. The embarrassment of owning such feelings, out of place as they are in a move-

¹ Mary Hollands's *Irish Times* article "Afraid to be identified" which I quoted from in second section, displays the complications of showing face.

ment that takes pride as its watchword, is acute” (Love 2007, 4). The battle between feelings of pride and shame is expressed throughout “Coming Home”. I feel it is most blatant in the beginning lines of the fourth stanza,

Family engulfs me.
I search their eyes for myself,
see only the nice wee girl they want, not the proud woman I am.

Is this “nice wee girl” the same one we saw reflected in the window? In this instance Smyth’s desire is to see herself reflected in the eyes of her family, shows us her need, and “What is perhaps crucial to shame is the very exposure of our fleshly wanting, of the immensity of human need” (Burrus 2008, 48). The expression “proud woman” directly contrasts with the memory of the “nice wee girl”, giving the sense that the memory of this girl, the infrequent you in the poem, is one that involves shame. Pride in this poem is a diasporic feeling, a feeling that happens elsewhere, away from home. Home is where “time begins again”, where the poet is the “nice wee girl”, eighteen and ashamed. The engulfing feeling of family becomes a powerful tool of regression. I often feel myself, like Smyth, a child again when I return home. I feel the structures of my mind weaken. I am never wholly present, but coming. My mother’s voice follows me every time I leave the house asking when I will be coming home.

4. *Imagination*

When you soak a child in shame, they cannot develop the neurological pathways that carry thought...you know, carry thoughts of self-worth. They can’t do that. Self-hatred is only ever a seed planted from outside in. But when you do that to a child, it becomes a weed so thick, and it grows so fast, the child doesn’t know any different. (Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*, 2018)

From the first line, “Coming home is like dying”, Smyth starts the poem from a state beyond feeling, a deathly state we can only imagine. Throughout she drifts through time and space but there is only one distinct section that offers a full regression into childhood memory and imagination.

My childhood was full of light.
Daz-white fluorescent gleaming on formica,

Frenchtoast for tea on Saturday night,
when the whirl of Doctor Who sent us flying behind chairs,
greetin’ and gurnin’. And then we’d queue up to slide down
the smooth, dark wood of the banisters,
hands and thighs warmed and squeaking like mice.

In Amber L. Hollibaugh's essay collection *Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* she writes of imagination as a necessity to her survival as a queer, working-class, femme, sex-worker and the crucial role it played as an escape from her difficult childhood, "I knew early on that imagination and day dreams were the most expressive reality I had" (2000, 25). Margaret Atwood says that the origins of the writing personality lie in childhood, in a disposition to prefer living in the world of dreams and daydream to living in the real world². In Smyth's depiction of childhood she incorporates tangible facts with the use of specific names for products, food, and television programme; "Daz-white", "formica", "Frenchtoast", and "Doctor Who". The memory comes alive with imagination physically when the body moves, in "the whirl" of movement that sends the children "flying". Smyth's use of the words "greetin'" and "gurnin'" are unusual in the sense that they both express a form of communication. People come into contact with each other or make themselves known through greeting. Gurning is a distorted facial expression, meaning to literally *make* a face. When the children are flying in their imagination, they are not themselves, they are making themselves known in an alternative expressive reality. Smyth does not enter into this world alone, she is part of an "us" that creates an imaginative realm, a realm created by the contagiousness and playfulness of childhood. This highlights the contagious quality of shame, "Shame – living, as it does, on and in the capillaries and muscles of the face – seems to be uniquely contagious from one person to another" (Sedgwick 1993, 14). By omitting the g ending, or g dropping, of "greetin'" and "gurnin'", the reader hears the colloquial quality of speech used within the memory. Smyth is showing a different self, a younger self with an accent, a self that sounded like they were from somewhere and therefore belonged somewhere. The phrase "greetin' and gurnin'" is itself a colloquialism in Northern Ireland which means to excessively complain³. This past self in the memory that dropped their g's had a voice "familiar" with colloquialisms, a voice not so adaptable to "anonymity". The change of texture in Smyth's voice after emigrating from Ireland to England has caused her to feel silenced and ashamed, "At times, when I've gone back to Ireland, I've felt an uncomfortable embarrassment when people think I'm English, which undermines my right to speak as an Irish lesbian" (1995, 232). This embarrassment may have darkened the present for Smyth as she says in the poem, "My childhood was full of light", making the continuous process of coming home impossible.

² Quoted by Dave Lordan: <<https://www.writing.ie/resources/out-of-all-cirriculumms-dave-lordan-on-his-teen-summer-schools/>> (05/2019).

³ I owe thanks here to Dr. Neil Vallely.

We become aware here of the infiltration of English life into the Northern Irish childhood through programmes like *Doctor Who*. My own childhood in Cork was awash with the genteel ways of the English. As children we would often speak with English accents when we were playing at being “posh”. The media saturated both Smyth’s childhood and my own with the English sensibility, so much so that we internalised that Irish people were not presentable in the same way. It was as if Irish people and programming were not as prevalent in the media because there was something about us that wasn’t as watchable. We were somehow not performing to an acceptable standard that would be deemed worthy of space in a television schedule⁴. But also, as evidenced in *The Irish Times* article in section 2, otherness was reinforced by the national media. The more queer people and people who don’t fit the rigid categories of Irishness (in Smyth’s case the fact that she was raised Protestant and perceived as sounding English) were made to feel outside of belonging, the more these “others” end up leaving Ireland. By leaving Ireland, we are respecting the boundaries set up by the dominant group. “Sociologists tell us that if the stigmatized respect the boundaries set up by the dominant group, stability is assured; if shamed and stigmatized, they are tolerated” (Stein 2006, 105). If we begin to challenge this stability, we are made to feel even more outside, as often conservatives (more often than not, in the form of Catholic Church) feel compelled to rally against us.

There is some solace to be found in the body and the erotic, in the warm “hands and thighs” that slide and squeak, along with the “gurnin’ ” facial expressions, giving this sequence a sexualised quality that veers against “an ontology of origins” and queers “the nostalgic line” (Probyn 1996, 117). This is not to say that Smyth pathologises memories in the poem to justify her present queerness, as the following stanza unearths her femme origins in the form of “teenage jewellery with broken fasteners”, and “rusty hairclips in drawers reeking of cheap perfume”. She refuses to represent the popularised narrative of childhood progression from tomboy to lesbian – “I became a lesbian feminist, a queer dyke, a femme top. I refused the fixity of the identity I had been expected to conform to with a vengeance” (Smyth 1995, 222). Smyth refuses the expectation to conform to either a queer notion of self (homonormativity), or a heteronormative identity, while expressing how the playfulness of childhood offers a strangeness that refuses the fixity of adult identity⁵.

⁴ TG4, an Irish-language public service broadcaster, was launched in 1996.

⁵ There has recently been a spate of interesting articles on the fluidity of femme identity. Here are two I found intriguing: <<https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2019/2/13/how-our-generation-changing-definition-femme>>; <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/my-femme-identity-does-not-invalidate-my-queerness> (05/2019).

5. *Nostalgia*

Emigration teaches you of reinvention and loss as you move between nostalgia and disdain. (Smyth 1995, 232)

In this section I move from, or more accurately between, considerations of imagination to nostalgia. Svetlana Boym parodied Roman Jakobson's theory of the two types of aphasia in her article "Estrangement as a Lifestyle", to develop a theory of two types of nostalgia, both of which feature in Smyth's writing:

The first one stresses *nostos*, emphasizing the return to that mythical place somewhere on the island of Utopia, with classical porticos, where the 'greater patria' has to be rebuilt. This nostalgia is reconstructive and collective. The second type puts the emphasis on *algia*, and does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home [...]. This nostalgia is ironic, fragmentary, and singular. (1996, 512)

Smyth carefully manipulates the line breaks in the first sentence of "Coming Home" to stress *nostos* in the first line and *algia* in the second.

Coming home is like dying
and coming back from the dead all at once.

Smyth expresses nostalgia in the present tense, "I still yearn". In the final sentence of the third stanza, she begins with the unusual phrasing, "The spinster is come home", to speak about herself objectively. In doing so she not only transgresses between differing nostalgic states, but also between differing states of shame:

There are two different types of shame: overt shame, in which an individual says "I am ashamed," where one's emotions are relatively accessible, and therefore less potent and destructive; and "bypassed shame," which begins with a perception of the negative evaluation of self where the individual is overly conscious of his/her self-image from the other's viewpoint. (Stein 2006, 114-115)

These two different types of shame, proffered above by Arlene Stein, can relate to different phases of the self. Smyth's fluctuation between the use of *I* and *me* when referring to herself, connects to the work of the sociologist G.A. Mead (1934). The *I* phase, that predominates the consciousness, means that one becomes overly subjective in the style of overt shame, while the *me* phase is overly objective in the style of bypassed shame (Scheff 1990, 289). In the last stanza Smyth uses the objective, *me*, for expressing a want, or a desire, "Saying goodbye made me want to weep. I did". This "me" phase, as Mead refers to it, expresses a bypassed shame at the desire to display emotion.

The poem flips from the objective to the subjective *I*, to allow the reader to experience the overt shame of the emotional display she allowed to happen, “I did”. Within a line of two short sentences, the speaker battles with her shame and from this we can read more about her sense of self. The speaker wants to objectively be seen as composed, as a self-named, “proud woman”. But the subjective *I* dominates the poem, with the dizzying traversal of emotional plateaus that leaves the reader with a sense of the unbelonging, and disorientation within the poet.

Smyth describes how this disorientation is linked to her religious upbringing, “Having grown up in the Protestant tradition, yet seeing myself as Irish, I already experienced a sense of unbelonging, an internal emigration, because I was not Catholic and therefore could not really be Irish” (1995, 222). Yet Smyth does not cast an overt religious veil over this poem. There are glimpses in her interactions and wonderings about her mother, about her “martyrdom”, and hoping her mother “can’t hear in the next room, / the sin of my self-pleasure”. In his book on Foucault, David Halperin states, “Unlike desire, which expresses the subject’s individuality, history, and identity as a subject, pleasure is desubjectivating, impersonal: it shatters identity, subjectivity, and dissolves the subject, however fleetingly, into the sensorial continuum of the body, into the unconscious dreaming of the mind” (1995, 95). This sense of a desubjectified continuum is evident from Smyth’s choice to use the continuous present in the title of the poem, as if she is eternally “coming home”, and with the sexual connotations of the word “coming” hanging over the poem from the beginning. But is it only in the rare glances of the objective *me* offered in the poem that we glimpse the conscious mind of the poet? Smyth only uses *me* when referring to her family, and in particular, her mother; “Family engulfs me”, “The tragic banality of my mother’s days consume me”, “She commands me to affirm her martyrdom”, “My mother desperate to know me”, and finally as stated above, “Saying goodbye made me want to weep”. The use of words like engulfs, consume, command and desperate, communicates how the subjective *I* has been overwhelmed leaving room for glimpses of the objective to slip through and expose the poet’s conscious mind. These moments seem far from pleasurable, but they do succeed in connecting us to a bodily consciousness, they feel almost, to use a word that Smyth herself uses, authentic:

It becomes more difficult to retain an ‘authentic’ identity the longer we stay away and the more idiomatic language and cultural gestures we shed. Many of us perceive Ireland as home when we’re in England and yet when we return, England becomes the place we want to be. (Smyth 1995, 228)

The moments of bodily consciousness appear more obvious as so often the poem and poet seem in exile from home, the body, and a sense of self.

6. *Shame*

The jumble of I and me with the varying degrees of nostalgia and shame create an almost competing (queer) narrative of the past, or what Michel Foucault called counter memory:

A competing narrative of the past composed of memories that exceed official public history. Noting that resistant memories show disempowered people “not who they were, but what they must remember having been,” Foucault contends that “if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles”. (From Castiglia 2000, 168)

Smyth uses a TVAM announcement overheard on the morning of her “leave-taking”, to display such a competing narrative. In this instance the competing narrative between Northern Ireland and England.

TVAM announced that ‘a man was shot dead last night
In Mag-here-a, on the shores of Lough Nee.’
Ahoghill, Aghadowey, Magherafelt—
The sticky place names of the North
get caught in an English throat.
Old meaningless conjectures woven out of lost tongues,
evolving Irish-Anglo non-senses.
They call us British, stamp out our language,
undermine our culture, swallow our pride.

This section of “Coming Home” captures the turbulence between a shared history and a shared memory, and it is one of the two references in the poem to pride. I am reminded of David Halperin here when he writes, “Gay pride does not even make sense without some reference to the shame of being gay” (2009, 3). In much the same way, it could be said that pride in being Irish does not make sense without reference to the shame of being Irish, a shame that Smyth argues here is a result of colonisation. In reference to Puerto Ricans’ situation as a colonised people, the filmmaker, scholar and writer Frances Negrón-Muntaner suggests that colonisation “creates a state of inferiority internalized as shame, particularly manifested in the diaspora” and that individuals constantly try to displace this shame by articulating a discourse of pride (in La Fountain-Stokes 2011, 62). Shame in the Irish diaspora could be a result of an internal judgement, a judgement against the self that sees the self as bad, defective, or weak, as a result of having left Ireland. Smyth plays out this weakness in the face and body, “Pale with separation we drag slowly / with our suitcases and memories to other lands”. Shame arises in Smyth’s negative view of the diasporic self, as a weak “pale” being that can merely “drag” a suitcase, and therefore a negative view of her-

self. But she expresses it through the point of view of others with the use of “they”, showing the narrative as beyond the control of the self, and displaying herself (and other members of the Irish diaspora) as disempowered. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has made the concept of shame central to her understanding of performativity, in the inner workings of shame’s contagiousness and volatility (see Love 2007). The inner workings of the performativity in “Coming Home” operates in both a contagious and volatile way, as Smyth moves from childhood memory and memorabilia “goodies, / photos, pencil-written stories” to death “TVAM announced that ‘a man was shot dead last night [...]’”. Through her display of a disempowered, disorientated sense of self that performs at differing levels of subjective and objective states, Smyth acknowledges the volatile reality of a life lived in Northern Ireland.

One instance of the contagiousness of shame can be read in the last stanza, in the dialogue performed by Smyth and her parents as she prepares to leave.

‘See you soon,’ I lied, guilty and relieved to part.
 ‘If there’s anything you need, wee pet,’ he said.
 ‘Be sure and let us know you arrived safely now,’ she said.

As the poem is written by Smyth, then as readers we are orientated through her perspective. In this exchange, she reminds us of this by elaborating after her spoken dialogue to give the reader feeling cues. We know she was being disingenuous, “I lied”, and that as a result she felt both “guilty and relieved”. However, after her father and mother speak, she writes just “he said” and “she said”. We are not made unaware of how they feel, but the structure makes me think that Smyth is insinuating that her parents felt the opposite of her, or at least that in that moment she felt that they did. One antonym for guilt is happiness, and for relief, unhappiness. If we are to take these antonyms as accurate descriptors of her parent’s feelings, then her parents would have felt as conflicted in that moment as Smyth did. It is difficult to acknowledge that your parents may be, in some part, glad to see you leave.

In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner considers shame as the basis for a “special kind of sociability” and a relation to others that “begins in an acknowledgement of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself” (1999, 35–36). Warner is writing with the queer community in mind, but I can see evidence of this special sociability in this conversation. If her parents could feel the guilt and relief in Smyth, then that could have enabled them to acknowledge those feelings within themselves. Therefore shame spreads between them like a contagion as shame is itself a form of communication that lives in the face and body – “Blazons of shame, the ‘fallen face’ with eyes down and head averted – and to a lesser extent, the blush – are semaphores of trouble and at the same time desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge” (Sedgwick 1993, 5). We can’t see the body language of this conversation but in Smyth’s choice

of sparse reply from her parents' "he said" "she said", we can begin to imagine it. Smyth focuses throughout the poem on the gaze, particularly between her and her mother, in the first part of the poem: "your iris"; "I search their eyes"; "I look at my mother's face". Only in reference to herself in the second person, does she use simile to make a comparison, "your iris / flecked with yellow like marram grass". She queers the poetic blazon with shame, by cataloguing her own physical attributes. Drawing on work by Sedgwick and Warner, Douglas Crimp considers the potential of shame to articulate "collectivities of the shamed" (Love 2007, 13-14). Smyth, both with herself and with her parents, deconstructs and constructs the interpersonal bridge to become a collective in shame.

In 2017 I was at home for nearly three months, longer than has become customary for both myself and my parents. I was constantly "greetin and gurnin'", whether it was about the dog, or cat hair on my clothes, or the excessive amount of cutlery in the kitchen drawers. I was openly upsetting my parents' routine as I found it impossible to climatise to the time zone of their lives. I was agitated, and this made me volatile, to which my parents were provoked to react in an equally volatile manner. I usually felt terrible after, and made many consolatory cups of tea, before the whole cycle would begin again. But through these shame cycles, I expressed things to my parents about myself that perhaps otherwise I wouldn't have. I showed them something of myself. I'm not claiming that was an entirely positive thing.

Shame is a bad feeling attaching to what one is: one therefore *is something*, in experiencing shame. The place of identity, the structure "identity," marked by shame's threshold between sociability and introversion, may be established and naturalized in the first instance *through shame*. (Sedgwick 1993, 12)

Similarly, through the interactions between Smyth and her parents in "Coming Home" we see *something* more of Smyth's personhood. As readers, we are momentarily orientated away from Smyth's perspective. It could be said that for a moment we are, "living in the minds of others without knowing it" (Cooley 1922, 208).

7. *Exile*

Julia Kristeva's *Nations Without Nationalism* describes the "cult of origins" as a "hate reaction" which creates "a sullen, warm private world, unnameable and biological, the impregnable 'aloofness' of a weird primal paradise — family, ethnicity, nation, race." It's the loss of this "weird primal paradise" that fires my work and the sharp relief of "exile" gives it both context and constancy. The expression of loss is unifying. It creates an intimation of homeland wherever I am. It's warm. I'm sullen. It becomes cold. I recover the private world by making it nameable. It may try to shut me out,

but I come back to expose its secrets, mess its symmetry and their fantasy images of what constitutes family, Irishness and Ireland. I insist on belonging where I have not always been wanted. “It’s all very well,” my mother once said, “doing those things in England, so long as you don’t do them here. The ill feelings run too deep”. (Smyth in Brown 2002, 263-264)

When Smyth is referring to the English as a people she uses they, “They call us British”. When she is referring to her parents she uses them, “My fear was not of losing them”. The way in which she uses the third person plural in reference to both England and her parents could be read as a conflation of two modes of colonisation, state and familial. This conflation correlates with the two mentions of pride in the poem. The first mention, “proud woman”, is a reaction to the engulfing, or colonising, feeling of family, “Family engulfs me”. The second, “swallow our pride”, is a reaction to the undermining attitude of English towards Northern Irish culture, “They call us British, stamp out our language”. Both instances create moments of volatility, and a distinct feeling of anger. These feelings of anger, however, are short-lived and what follows on are feelings of alienation, or exile. In the first instance from her mother, “the tragic banality of my mother’s days consumes me”, and in the second from her parents, “emptiness deepened in the night. / Gossip ran out by Ballymena”.

When anger is repressed and when centers of power have sufficient resources to control collective mobilization, the shame that is often the root source of this anger may transmute into alienation. (Turner 2007, 19)

Smyth’s feelings of exile and alienation transmute throughout the poem. For instance, when she feels she should be feeling sad, she feels instead fear, “My fear was not of losing them rather how to stop their tears / if they should let them fall”. In Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feeling* she uses Lisa Kron’s performance piece *2.5 Minute Ride* to challenge expectations of the emotional impact of Kron’s visit to Auschwitz with her father, whose parents were imprisoned there. Kron is terrified of, like Smyth, the guilt of feeling nothing but also she is terrified “by the responsibility of being a witness to her father’s reactions, wondering what will happen if he breaks down and she must comfort him” (2003, 22). Both Smyth and Kron fear witnessing emotional states they have repressed or bypassed, they fear overt emotional displays. The Irish writer Brian Dillon expresses a similar fear of witnessing in his memoir *In the Dark Room: A Journey in Memory*. He remains with his back to his mother as he listens to her crying: “And I cannot tear myself from this spot and turn towards her to acknowledge her suffering – a movement which would be so alien, so unthinkably intimate that it would surely thrust us both into an atmosphere even more confusing than that which already

hovers like a black fog between us” (2005, 23). Dillon’s use of the phrase “unthinkably intimate” is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil, as Smyth uses “tragic banality” to describe her mother’s day⁶. This nod to Arendt can be read as Smyth claiming that her mother’s tragic day is undertaken thoughtlessly, that her mother is unaware of what she is doing. In Smyth’s observance of her mother and acknowledgement of the “unthinkably intimate”, she acknowledges her own unawareness of feeling. Perhaps what Smyth is feeling is shame, not guilt. She does not feel guilty about lying to her parents, but ashamed of herself for not feeling guilt. Acknowledging this shame would mean engaging with the exile she feels at home as a queer woman, the entanglement and ambivalence of wanting a place to call home when she has created an alternative home in London that is not so much a physical place as a community, and the shame of feeling shame at all:

And there’s part of me despite all of my little signs, you know, like, ‘Happy!’ ‘Proud!’ ‘Well-adjusted!’ ‘Bi-sexual!’ ‘Queer!’ ‘Kinky!’—you know, no matter how many posters I hold up saying, ‘I’m a big pervert and I’m so happy about it’—there’s this part of me that’s like, ‘How could I be this way?’ (Susie Bright quoted in Love 2007, 16)

Disabled and genderqueer writer Eli Clare examines exile and alternatives to the concept of home, influenced by their physical (in)ability, “I will never find home on the mountains. This I know. Rather home starts here in my body, in all that lies imbedded beneath my skin” (2015, 10). They see the body as home, and offer this idea to other queer people as an alternative to the exile, displacement and estrangement often experienced by queer people at home and also *within* the queer community. Clare investigates whether queer identity is worth the loss of home as a physical place. Smyth writes of the longing for the physical place of home, “There is also a restlessness in my work, the longing for home, and the love of the beauty of the coastal landscape which made me feel rooted in the North” (Cherry Smyth in Brown 2002, 272). Yet, at the beginning of “Coming Home” I feel that Smyth is expressing a distance from the coastal landscape, “Here, time isn’t pressing to go somewhere, / [. . .] Instead it can sit / and watch the waves rolling”. I do sense a longing for home in the poem, but more often than not, that home seems to be London, “I still yearn for the anonymity of the city”. Smyth uses the act of clearing out her material belongings from the house to express the lack of belonging that she feels, “Once I’ve emptied all the cupboards, / taken the last box from the attic, / will there be anything more to come back for?”. In this clearing she seems to be displacing herself from her home in Northern Ireland, making herself anonymous there, as anonymous as she feels in

⁶ This observation is a result of conversation with Bridie Lonie.

London. This active untethering of possessions seems to overcome her inability to “sit still” when she returns home. If her childhood home becomes as strange to her as her created home in London, she will be able at last to “relax” as both places will then resemble each other in some small way. She will be able to settle into the home that lies imbedded in her skin, and be released from the perpetual state of *coming*.

Every time I go home, my mother makes a reference to things I have left somewhere in the house. At her insistence, I spend hours and days of my time at home clearing out clothes, papers, books, and going through photographs. One night, my mother tells my brother and me that she believes the ceiling is caving in with the weight our belongings. So, we clear away more traces of ourselves from the house. When I go home now, I can sleep in what was once my brother’s bedroom or what was once mine, without much difference between them except the distance from my parent’s bedroom:

Tossing, turning and touching,
I hope she can’t hear in the next room,
the sin of my self-pleasure.

8. *Forgetting to Remember*

I look at my mother’s face for the first time
since I arrived, as she futters away in the kitchen.
A tired sighing mouth, once full-lipped,
her cheeks have sunk into mid-life hollows
as her children grew up and away.
I steal pieces of her past when she’s off-guard
and hoard them for when she’s no longer there to ask.

The word “futters” is used in a colloquial sense to mean to busy oneself but the archaic meaning of the word is to perform intercourse, it comes from the French word *foutre* (Williams 1994, 538). Again, Smyth manages to queer the nostalgic order of things with her chosen line structure by placing, “I look at my mother’s face for the first time”, directly preceding the line “as she futters away”, she embodies the stanza with the sexual, the erotic. The stanza continues to reference Smyth’s own “sin of self-pleasure” which leads me to read the verb “futters” with the sexualised intention I believe it was written with. In doing so, Smyth reminds the reader of female sexual desire. An oft forgotten thing, especially in terms of lesbian sexuality as lesbianism, unlike male homosexuality, was never criminalised, and therefore never seen. Lesbian sexuality was never considered authentic enough to warrant being a threat. I’m not saying that I wish lesbianism was a criminal act, but I am saying that the value of a queer approach to writing lies in recognising and maximising the abject, and in taking risks:

I take risks in my writing and teaching around sexual representation and believe that women could have less repressed attitudes to their bodies and their desires if there were more spaces to present diverse images and texts. (Smyth, 1992)

This erotic risk taking can also be read in the relations to time in the poem. For Elizabeth Freeman, queer relations to time are accessed through new arrangements of bodies, pleasure, history, and time, arrangements that she names as “erotohistoriography” or “counterhistory of history itself” (2010, 95). Through Smyth’s disorientating traversal of time in “Coming Home”, the concepts of past, present and future are often hard to distinguish. Even though the poem seems to follow a (mostly) clear narrative arch, the colliding and separating persons add to a sense of disorientation. However, in the fifth stanza Smyth begins to think about the future in a distinguishable way. She considers a time when her mother may “no longer be there”. For the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, queer futurity is a “realm of potential that must be called upon” and that is “not quite here” (2010, 21)⁷. Smyth enters the realm of “not quite here” in order to access her mother’s past, a past her mother only shares when she is “off-guard”. She calls on futurity’s potential to get to know something hidden about her, which in turn Smyth hides, “hoard them”. Smyth creates a poetics of forgetting and remembering, as she stores her mother’s past inside her for the future, as there are no details given about the “pieces” in this poem. She represses it down inside herself, becoming the parts of her mother that will one day “no longer be there”. In this surveying of her mother, Smyth enters a commentary about how women appear rather than act. In the words of John Berger, “A woman must continually watch herself [...] And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman” (Hertel, Malcolm 2015, 212). This forgotten narrative weaves an intergenerational thread between mother and daughter. The reader is made aware that Smyth did not seek this information from her father. It is her mother’s lineage that she fears will be forgotten. Forgotten history is an area that women and queer people are sensitive to as so much of our history has been written out, or over, or misrecognised, or destroyed. In *The Queer Art of Failure* J. Jack Halberstam makes a claim that forgetting for women and queer people can be useful as it disrupts the smooth operation of the normal and the ordinary, while he also questions why women and queer people should have to learn to forget. He sees the de-linking of the process of generation from the historical process as a queer project:

⁷ I see the concept of “not quite here” used to the fullness of its queer capacity in the TV show *Stranger Things* and alternative realm of “The Upside Down”.

We may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and unusable pasts. (Halberstam 2011, 70)

Smyth does not advocate an unfettered approach but a poetics that is in line with her queer politics. She desires to reclaim the past, “I steal pieces”, as it allows her to continuously question the present which she does in “Coming Home” through her predominant use of the present tense. She uses the Nietzschean notion of an “active forgetfulness, a doorkeeper as it were, an upholder of psychic order, of rest, of etiquette: from which one can immediately anticipate the degree to which there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no *present* without forgetfulness” (Nietzsche 1998, 35). The use of the continuous present from the title and throughout the poem expresses this active forgetting, as well as an active remembering.

The future is also broached in the question that breaks over the ninth and tenth stanza:

Once I've emptied all the cupboards,
taken the last box from the attic,
will there be anything more to come back for?

Nietzsche combines happiness and forgetting, as he believes that only in the repression or suppression of certain memories that we have space in our consciousness for new experiences (1998, 35). So perhaps when my mother is eagerly persuading me to cleanse the house of my belongings when I return home, she is not trying to rid the space of traces of my presence, but in fact trying to allow the house to experience new things and in turn, allow us as a family the space to experience new things⁸.

9. *Afterwardness*⁹ – *Conclusion*

you can't make homes out of human beings
someone should have already told you that.
(Warsan Shire, “for women who are ‘difficult’ to love”, 2012)

⁸ The 2019 TV show *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* advocates keeping items in your house only the items that “spark joy”.

⁹ A concept that Derrida deemed to “govern the whole of Freud’s thought”: *Nachträglichkeit*, loosely translated by a range of critics as “deferred effect”, “belated understanding”, “retro-causality”, and “afterwardness”: a “deferred action”, whereby events from the past acquire meaning only when read through their future consequences (Stockton 2009, 14).

I began this paper with thoughts of disorientation and homelessness, and here I would like to end on a similar note. I initially wanted to convey the feeling that lesbian poets are homeless in the queer poetic tradition. But Smyth is not alone among Irish lesbian poets in “Coming Home”. Mary Dorcey was the first out lesbian to be published in Ireland with her collection *Kindling* in 1982. The second poem in this collection is titled “Coming Home”, and it begins, “Coming home / the streets seem more narrow than ever”. When Dorcey republished a number of poems from *Kindling* at the end of her first collection with Salmon Poetry, *Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* in 1991, “Coming Home” was not one of them. In Sarah Clancy’s 2014 collection *The Truth & Other Stories*, her poem “Homecoming Queen” gives a slightly different take. Clancy accompanies her lover as she returns home, the poem beginning with an ellipsis, “. . . in your humpy pine-lined hometown, / I am damaged goods”. And I’m sure there are a great many more examples to be found.

I was hoping to find in Smyth a justification for the homelessness I so often feel, and hoping that my lesbian reorientation could be pinpointed as the cause. I aligned forgetting with repression and imagination, to create a nostalgia that disorientated me. In this disorientation I found, to use Victor Turner’s phrase, *communitas*. Unlike Warsan Shire, I believe a great capacity of queerness is in the potential to make homes out of human beings. As Turner asks,

Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people—friends, congeners—obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as “essentially us” could sustain its intersubjective illumination? (1982, 47-48)

Through this close reading of Cherry Smyth’s “Coming Home”, I have attempted to convey this sense of homecoming, otherness and shame as a remembering, a coming, and a constant process of reorientation aptly captured by Smyth in the final lines of the poem:

Memories of Ireland
are ice and sunlight which falls down an escalator.
Always in the same place, yet never still.

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