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Katharina Andrea Kalthoff und Leonie Windt-Wetzel (Münster)

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textpraxis@uni-muenster.de

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Authors

Katharina Andrea Kalthoff and Leonie Windt-Wetzel (Münster)

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Endangered Shorelines and Absent Solastalgia in Recent English, Irish, and Northern Irish Short Fiction

1. Introduction

In 2019, Tom Wall writes in *The Guardian*: »The British coast is crumbling into the sea at an accelerating rate, with huge chunks of cliffs and beaches being swept away in storms each winter«.[1] In England and Ireland, the effects of climate change are mainly being felt on the countries' edges: heavier rainfall and stronger storms due to global warming lead to weaker coastal soil, which fosters abrasion and erosion and has turned shorelines into precarious environments. Especially in island states, littoral spaces are not only sites for dramatic geological events but carry various layers of symbolic, cultural, socio-economic, and historic meaning.[2] Shorelines have long inspired folklore vernaculars and feature prominently in cultural imaginaries. As historical sites they are associated with (colonial) invasion, surveillance and battles; they are crucial for a country's economy in terms of international trade and are widely appreciated by tourists for their famous recreative powers. Considering both the historic and modern significance of shorelines, their increasing vulnerability reaches far beyond being merely a geological reality. Endangered littoral landscapes and the related loss of home environment cause a distorted sense of place and challenge narratives of national and cultural identity. The rapidly changing and eroding shorelines evoke nostalgia, but with a difference. The philosopher and professor of sustainability, Glenn Albrecht, refers to Albert Camus' *The Rebel* to help define this difference: »When the limits of one's world, its laws and order, are destroyed by forces beyond one's control, then home becomes not only toxic, it becomes ›nostalgia without aim‹«.[3] Albrecht concludes that severe changes to the environment foreground a ›homesickness while still at home‹, an emotion for which he coined the neologism ›solastalgia‹.[4]

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1 | Tom Wall: »Inches from disaster: crisis faces Britain's crumbling coastline«. In: *The Guardian*, December 1, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/dec/01/climate-crisis-leaves-british-coastlines-inches-from-disaster (accessed October 25, 2020).

2 | The term ›littoral spaces‹ refers to geographic locations bordering the sea, such as the coast or shore, the beach or cliffs. For the significance of littoral spaces in Anglophone cultures, cf. Ursula Kluwick a. Virginia Richter: »Introduction: 'Twixt Land and Sea: Approaches to Littoral Studies«. In Ursula Kluwick a. Virginia Richter: *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures*. London 2015, pp. 1–36.

3 | Glenn Albrecht: *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*. Ithaca / London 2019, p. 34. The phrase »nostalgia without aim« is quoted from Albert Camus: *The Rebel*. Translated by Anthony Bower. Harmondsworth 1973, p. 62.

4 | Cf. Albrecht: *Earth Emotions* (ref. 3), p. 30. ›Nostalgia‹ is a Greek and New Latin translation from the German word ›Heimweh‹. »The Homesickness You Have at Home« is the subtitle of Glenn Albrecht's chapter on Solastalgia.

The tensions between natural hazards and historical trauma, between identity and locality as well as between place-homes and nostalgia, have developed into prominent literary motifs and are currently present in literary trends occupied with regionality, including folk horror, bog gothic, and local nature writing. Recently, the literary form of the short story has been particularly successful in offering small-scale abstractions of these large-scale tensions. Notable collections by English writers include Julia Armfield's *Salt Slow* (2019) or China Miéville's *Three Moments of an Explosion* (2015), both full of deeply apocalyptic vision; Gary Budden's *Hollow Shores* (2017), or the folk horror compilation *This Dreaming Isle* (2018) edited by Dan Coxon. Critically acclaimed (Northern) Irish collections include Claire Keegan's *Antarctica* (2000), Kevin Barry's *Dark Lies the Island* (2012), or Jan Carson's *Children's Children* (2016). Some of these examples already imply in their titles that littoral spaces lie at their core. In this article, we will analyse the ways in which recent English, Irish, and Northern Irish short stories narrate the present state of their shorelines as home and how they intertwine environmental change with the (post)colonial history of the countries. As will be shown, the meanings attached to coastal environments may vary nationally and culturally, and depend on perspective formed by historical experience and power relations. Therefore, it is our contention that the aspect of agency and related affects are central to the narration of solastalgia and offer a way of engaging with the countries' relationship to environmental change.

1.1 ›Solastalgia‹ and Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene

In *Ecological Exile: Spatial Injustice and Environmental Humanities* (2017), Derek Gladwin illuminates the sense of dislocation that people experience when their home environment is altered by external forces. As an example, Gladwin employs the severe after-effects of Storm Desmond, a tropical cyclone that hit the coasts of Ireland and the UK in 2015, leaving landscapes flooded and people devastated: Gladwin quotes a resident who stated: »›this is what it must have been like in the war‹«.[5] Allegories between the destruction of home environments through natural catastrophes and war are common in trying to explain the effect on and emotions of people, thereby assigning a destructive and even revengeful agency to ›nature‹.[6] More importantly, comparisons to the atrocities of war also acknowledge the human cause behind such extreme weather phenomena. While connecting globally increasing temperatures to local flooding may pose a complex intellectual challenge, the consequences of unsustainable local practices became immediately comprehensible with Storm Desmond. As Gladwin elaborates:

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5 | Pidd quoted in Derek Gladwin: *Ecological Exile: Spatial Injustice and Environmental Humanities*. London 2017, p. 41.

6 | When we refer to the agency of nature, we imply that natural forces have already been culturally reflected and ascribed to the human concept of wilful action. Our understanding of nature or the material world is based on Edward Soja's dynamic or inter-reactive concept of socio-spatial relations. Building on Henri Lefebvre's socio-spatial dialectic, Soja points out that space is simultaneously real and imagined as it always represents a link between physical, geographical spaces and mental, cultural, and artistic productions of space. In this context, he devises the concept of »Thirdspace«, which he describes to be the result of a »creative recombination and extension« that »builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the ›real‹ material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through ›imagined‹ representations of spatiality«, namely cultural practices. Thirdspace is an understanding of place as simultaneously real and imagined or as Soja spells it »real-and-imagined«. Thus, the concept of Thirdspace pre-empts the nature/culture divide and instead enables a shifting understanding of place, one that allows for constant re-definition. Cf. Edward Soja: *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford 2017 [1996], p. 6.

> The burst of flooding between 2014 and 2016 is partly caused because of the systematic removal of nearby wetlands for urban development. […] Researchers at the University of Salford concluded that the severity of the flooding results from a breakdown of rivers and floodplains. Floodplains should adequately provide catchments for excess water from heavy rainfall. Unfortunately, rivers in this area no longer have this capacity.[7]

In recent years, the awareness for the anthropogenic causes behind currently collapsing ecosystems has increased significantly and has revealed the environmental crisis as a deeply political, social, and cultural issue that reflects on the identity of nation states, their history and socio-economic condition. While environmental consequences of unsustainable practices rapidly increase, their effects, Gladwin further writes, »create new forms of place-based distresses for those people affected and illuminate the issue of solastalgia«.[8] Solastalgia denotes a human emotion that the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht observed as a combination of a loss of solace, desolation, and a sense of nostalgia while conducting a field study in The Upper Hunter area (New South Wales, Australia), a region that had been changing severely due to massive coal mining. Albrecht defines solastalgia as »the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change« which »manifest[s] as an attack on one's sense of place«.[9] Solastalgia »is characteristically a chronic condition, tied to the gradual erosion of identity created by the sense of belonging to a particular loved place and a feeling of distress, or psychological desolation, about its unwanted transformation«.[10] What distinguishes the term solastalgia from other ›psychoterratic dis-eases‹ such as ›eco-anxiety‹ is thus its entanglement with belonging and identity.[11]

In an updated version of his conceptual terms, *Earth Emotions: New Terms for a New World* (2019), Albrecht concludes: »I hope I am wrong, but solastalgia looks like it is here to stay for a while«.[12] One of the reasons why Albrecht's term has found so much attention, especially in the arts, is that in face of the climate crisis in the 21st century, solastalgia grows into a globally felt phenomenon and from a nostalgic longing for the past towards a future emotion. In the article »A Different Kind of Grief«, the Irish artist Shane Finan picks up on Albrecht's latter vision and relocates solastalgia into the future: »Loss of place, loss of community, loss of network, loss of connection: each of these losses is not only a grief for something that *has been* lost, but it is also a *would-be* mourning for all those things that *will be* lost«.[13] Finan points out that grieving for a future loss bears a »leap in logic«. He made this abstract emotion of would-be mourning more tangible in a performance art project that he initiated in Charlestown, County Mayo, called »Beyond the Black Stump« (2017) as part of which local people painted landmarks of their hometown on a large canvas which was afterwards painted over in white, slowly disappearing in front of the audience. As this example shows, art has the power to visualise the (emotional) effects of environmental loss. Finan simulates the idea of future grief in his live performance and thereby temporally overcomes the logical dissonance it poses to the human mind.

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7 | Gladwin: *Ecological Exile* (ref. 5), p. 41.

8 | Ibid.

9 | Albrecht: *Earth Emotions* (ref. 3), pp. 38–39.

10 | Ibid.

11 | Ibid., p. 40.

12 | Ibid., p. 180.

13 | Shane Finan. »A Different Kind of Grief: Learning to Love Our Networks in a Time of Disconnnection«, June 12, 2020. https://networkcultures.org/longform/2020/06/12/a-different-kind-of-grief-learning-to-love-our-networks-in-a-time-of-disconnection/ (accessed October 31, 2020), n.p., orig. emphasis.

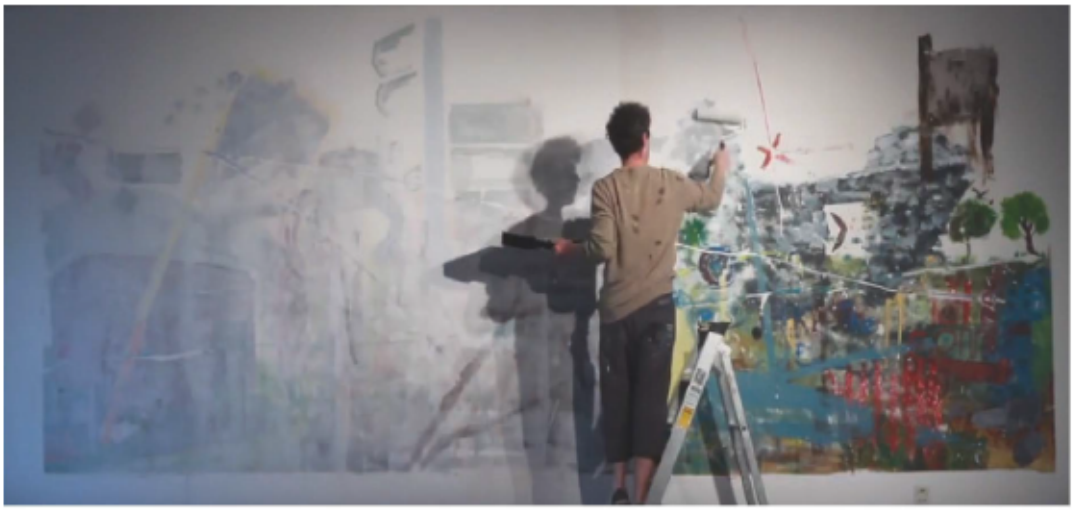

Fig. 1: The agency of art to create effect and affect by visualising erasure: Shane Finan's performance art project in Charlestown, County Mayo, »Beyond the Black Stump« (2017). Local people painted landmarks of their hometown on a large canvas which the artist overcoated during a live event, making ›home‹ disappear in front of the audience: »By immediately destroying the artwork after creating it, loss was inflicted immediately as well«.[14] Courtesy of the artist.[15]

The climate crisis constitutes an ontological and epistemological challenge to humanity indeed: It calls for a widening of the imagination when it comes to the bridging of timespans, especially regarding potential futures, or the comprehensibility of local cause and global effect. In her study of the interplay between local and global in cultural forms and their contribution to ecological awareness, Ursula Heise formulates the need for a ›sense of planet‹ in order to arrive at an understanding of global interconnectedness with local actions. She foregrounds that »[t]he challenge for environmentalist thinking […] is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet«.[16] Heise's elaborations thus emphasise the powerful role of individual and cultural imaginations in the global discourse. The inherent complexities of this discourse require abstraction, be it through visualisation or narration and have also called for a re-definition of the role of literary practice in the age of the Anthropocene.[17] In this context, the meaning of literature particularly evolves around narrating future scenarios that function as thought experiments.

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14 | Finan, »A Different Kind of Grief« (ref. 13), n.p.

15 | Shane Finan: »Beyond the Black Stump«, 2017, collaborative painting and performance, 920x300cm. https://shanefinan.org/visual_art_pages/solastalgia.html (accessed October 30, 2020).

16 | Ursula Heise: *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford / New York 2008, p. 56.

17 | The term ›Anthropocene‹ first gained attention with Crutzen's and Stoermer's eponymous essay (2000) in which they diagnose that the age in which human impact dominates and changes the planetary system has replaced the geologically stable epoch of the Holocene. In: *Global Change Newsletter* 41, pp. 17-18. Since the millennium, the term rapidly increased in popularity in the media, the sciences, the humanities in general, and in ecocriticism in particular. On the interfaces of the Anthropocene and narrative, cf. Ursula Heise: »Comparative Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene«. In: *Komparatistik: Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* 2013, pp. 19-30. For a timely exploration of the Anthropocene as a new research field in the humanities, cf. Gabriele Dürbeck a. Philip Hüpkes (eds.): *The Anthropocenic Turn: The Interplay Between Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Responses to a New Age*. London / New York 2020.

As Sonja Frenzel and Birgit Neumann point out: »literature […] provides a particularly effective and affective arena in which planetary ›scale effects‹ of locally grounded actions can be explored and in which the abstract, often intangible complexities of the Anthropocene can be translated into concrete experiences«.[18] The interplay between local and global inherent in the complex emotion of solastalgia in the 21st century, is thus central to the literary imagination of environments.

1.2 Econarratology and Selected Short Stories

In *The Storyworld Accord* (2015), Erin James points out that reading is an imaginative transportation to virtual environments and can thus enable us to »experienc[e] the world according to alternative environmental imaginations«.[19] »Imaginative gaps« caused by »cultural dissonances« can be overcome by the world-creating power of narratives. Since, as James states further, »there is no standard way of conceiving of and interacting with the material world«,[20] the aesthetics with which specific environments are represented, differ, and manifest in varying tensions between fact and fiction as well as agency and affect. Speaking with Erin James, this article contributes to a direction in ecocriticism that seeks »to explore the ways in which creative representations of the physical world can encode local particularities and nuances«.[21] Erin James' approach of ›econarratology‹ emphasises the potential behind the simultaneous employment of ecocriticism and narratology. By maintaining a »sensitivity to the literary structures and devices that we use to communicate representations of the physical environment to each other via narratives«,[22] we cannot only gain a deeper understanding of these represented environments but simultaneously enhance narrative theory.[23] Reading literature through the lens of econarratology thus foregrounds the affective qualities of fiction in raising awareness to environmental change. Assuming with Ursula Heise »that the aesthetic transformation of the real has a particular potential for reshaping the individual and collective ecosocial imaginary«, the following analyses will pay specific attention to »the way in which aesthetic forms relate to cultural as well as biological structures«,[24] by analysing narrative strategies of creating affect.

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18 | Sonja Frenzel a. Birgit Neumann: »Introduction: Environments in Anglophone Literatures«. In: Sonja Frenzel a. Birgit Neumann: *Ecocriticism: Environments in Anglophone Literatures*. Heidelberg 2017, pp. 9–32, here p. 10.

19 | Erin James: *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*. Lincoln 2015, p. 2.

20 | Ibid., p. 27.

21 | Ibid.

22 | Ibid., p. 23.

23 | As Erin James and Eric Morel point out in the introduction to *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology*. Ohio 2020, p. 1, »[U]nderstandings of narrative change as the environment changes […] the modern environmental crisis, in addition to being partly a crisis of narrative, also promises to have a strong effect on narrative and narrative theory«.

24 | Ursula Heise: »Afterword: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Question of Literature«. In: Bonnie Roos a. Alex Hunt (eds.): *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*. Virginia 2010, pp. 251–258, here p. 258.

As a literary form that is characterised by its »cultural specificity« and »communal significance«,[25] the short story is particularly well equipped to negotiate issues that connect environmental change and cultural identity. The short story is a quickly consumable narrative entity and an immersive form that may provide an *in medias res* experience. In her article »A Poetics of Immediacy«, Sarah Hardy points out that the short story form relies on this heightened degree of including the reader and usefully understands this as a structural quality:

> To the extent that it asks our complicity at the beginning and our involvement throughout the act of reading, the short story turns on a poetics of immediacy. Any text naturally depends on its readers to become a living discourse. The short story differs, however, from longer narratives in the way that the space of the reader, the reader's immediacy, is structurally characteristic of the genre.[26]

Hardy emphasises the frequent reliance on metaphor and irony in short stories as formal elements that lead to their immediacy. In addition, we contend that short stories are particularly affective in regulating ›transportations to virtual environments‹ by playing with established genre conventions and via the use of different narrative modes, such as comic, pastoral, or the Gothic. Another affective strategy is the narrative creation of emotive dissonances between characters and the reader. Characters are presented to react to the emerging threat of ecological change with unexpected and incomprehensible manners which may provoke a discomforting affect in the reader. In an econarratological understanding, affect aesthetics thus connect the level of the text with the level of reception.

The employment of metaphors and narrative modes, the evocation of perspectives and focalisation, and the interplay between agency and affect are central to our analyses of four selected short stories.[27] The first part of the analyses will focus on two stories that are set in specific locales in England. China Miéville's »Covehithe« is set in the eponymous village that lies on the North Sea coast in East Suffolk. »The Headland of Black Rock« by Alison Littlewood is set near Land's End in Cornwall, the westernmost tip of England. In the first example, the rapid erosion of England's east coast is imagined as a scenario in which sunken oilrigs come to life to drill and breed at the English coast while the characters in the story react to the phenomenon by absorbing it in stereotypical touristic practices. In Littlewood's short story, the mythology of the Irish Lady rock acts both as a metaphor for England's colonial past with Ireland and as an allegory for the ways in which English nationalism as nostalgic ideology prevents a global perspective and connected emotions towards the environment. The second part of the analysis focuses on two Irish short stories, namely »Fjord of Killary« by Kevin Barry (Republic of Ireland) and »Children's Children« by Jan Carson (Northern Ireland). Both stories are set in microcosmic settings, which are based on the material world but are abstracted

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25 | Susan Lohafer: »Short Story«. In: David Herman, Manfred Jahn, a. Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.): *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London 2005, pp. 528–530, here p. 529.

26 | Sarah Hardy: »A Poetics of Immediacy: Oral Narrative and the Short Story«. In: *Style* 27.3, Fall 1993, Special Issue: *The Short Story: Theory and Practice*, pp. 352–368, here p. 360.

27 | Employing the here formulated joint terminology and theoretical tools, we distributed the following two analytical parts of the article according to our respective fields of expertise: Katharina Kalthoff, currently writing her dissertation with the working title »Mapping Postmillennial Anxiety: Locating the Monstrous in Contemporary Gothic Fiction«, focuses on the analysis of English short fiction while Leonie Windt-Wetzel focuses on the analysis of (Northern) Irish short fiction. Her dissertation *Modelling Rural and Urban Place in Post-Ceasefire and Post-Agreement Northern Irish Narrative Fiction* has been published by WVT in March 2020.

for effect. Barry's story highlights the rural/urban divide of the Irish population and explores the possibility of communality in the face of mutually experienced ecological disaster by choosing a remote hotel in which his antagonistic characters are entrapped during a flood, while Carson's story muses on the chances and challenges of a reunited Ireland by presenting a small, divided fictional island, which is in danger of collapsing into the sea and can only be saved by the mutual effort of its inhabitants.

2. Eroding Coasts and Identities in Recent English Short Fiction

The landscapes in China Miéville's short story »Covehithe«[28] and Alison Littlewood's »The Headland of Black Rock«[29] are inspired by real littoral places, threatened by actual environmental changes and provide a strong factual basis for the short stories. Thereby, they use the literary stock motif of the British landscape that has transcended its function as mere setting by far in literary history.[30] Landscapes have rather provided a literary space of projection that may negotiate a whole variety of issues, including those connected to the imagination of the nation and, especially when it comes to specific rural places, cultural identities.[31] Instead of asking for its evident historical dimension, a rather dynamic question begs itself, namely which circumstances re-popularise landscape in literature. For 21st century English short fiction, the answer is twofold: on the one hand, a drastically changing landscape, accelerating in the face of climate change poses an urgent geological reality. On the other hand, the political turmoil surrounding the Brexit debates, before and after the Brexit referendum, has

28 | China Miéville: »Covehithe«. In: China Miéville: *Three Moments of an Explosion – Stories*. New York 2015, pp. 337–351. The story was first published in *The Guardian* on April 22, 2011. Quotes in this article will be taken from the short story collection.

29 | Alison Littlewood: »The Headland of Black Rock«. In: Dan Coxon (ed.): *This Dreaming Isle*. London 2018, pp. 257–275.

30 | Cultural dimensions and ideas about the nation and belonging are evident in narrations of the British landscape, particularly the countryside and shores are often imagined as being threatened or haunted, be it by war, excessive tourism, or climate change. Cf. e. g. William Hughes a. Ruth Heholt (eds.): *Gothic Britain: Dark Places in the Provinces and Margins of the British Isles*. Cardiff 2018; Anneke Lubkowitz: *Haunted Spaces in Twenty-First Century British Nature Writing*. Berlin / Boston 2020.

31 | The theoretical trends in literary criticism after the spatial turn are crucial for ecocritical analysis in general and for econarratology in particular. As Erin James and Eric Morel point out: »The spatial turn in narrative theory […] provides ecocritics with an invaluable vocabulary by which to better analyze human perceptions of spaces and places. Likewise, ecocritical considerations of the values of inhabited places introduces a useful cultural dimension to discussions of narrative spaces« (»Introduction: Notes Towards New Econarratologies«. In: Erin James a. Eric Morel [eds.]: *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology*. Ohio 2020, pp. 1–24, here p. 11; orig. emphasis.)

divided the country and has questioned notions of belonging and identity.[32] These two realities oppose each other and create a paradox: While the geological threat demands an appreciation for international networks and joint ideas for sustainable economics, politically, the country experiences an inward turn. The analyses of the following two short stories will show how an eroding sense of identity brought about by the contested Brexit debates and the eroding landscape fostered by climate change are metaphorically aligned.

2.1 »The sea is taking it all back« – Loss of Agency and Irony of Inaction in China Miéville's »Covehithe« (2015)

As it is England's most vulnerable place when it comes to coastal erosion, Covehithe in county Suffolk invites emotions of solastalgia and illustrates the idea of future loss: Due to its soft soil paired with increasing tidal activity and rising sea levels catalysed by climate change, it currently loses about 4.5 metres of coast every year.[33] In 2011, the UK government approved the Shoreline Management Plan suggested by the Environment Agency,[34] an advisory council, in which all coastal protection measures for Covehithe are deemed unsustainable, it recommends: »NAI: No Active Intervention«.[35] An online tourist guide even advertises the town with the line: »Visit Covehithe soon before the rest disappears into the sea!«[36] The coast's dramatic recession is very well documented since Covehithe became a popular destination for day tripping tourists who fill their online photo blogs with pictures of the collapsing coast. They show a road that has broken off and now leads straight down the cliff, or the skeletons of dead trees that have fallen off the coast and now lie on the beach. In the media, coastal erosion is repeatedly fashioned with a stock set of images: it is said to be eaten or to be lost to the sea, while the sea is metaphorically implied as a coloniser that reclaims landmass. Covehithe is often

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32 | We regard Brexit not as a single event marked by the day of the referendum, but as a process that had its lead time. In literary criticism, Brexit is accepted as a discourse, a political, cultural, and social context in which texts before and after the referendum may be read and discussed in, even if not specifically directed at Brexit. Cf. Caroline Kögler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, a. Marlena Tronicke: »The colonial remains of Brexit: Empire nostalgia and narcissistic nationalism«. In: *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 56 (2020), Special Issue: *Writing Brexit: Colonial Remains,* pp. 585–592. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1818440 (accessed January 8, 2021).

33 | The connection between coastal erosion, rising sea levels, and higher flood risks are well documented, e. g. in the recent article G. Masselink et al.: »Impacts of climate change on coastal geomorphology and coastal erosion relevant to the coastal and marine environment around the UK«. In: *MCCIP Science Review*, January 15, 2020, pp. 158–189, here p. 178. http://www.mccip.org.uk/media/2011/08_coastal_geomorphology_2020.pdf (accessed October 30, 2020). The figure 4.5 m/y is an estimate, since this particular strip could lose up to 12 m in a single coastal weather event (p. 170). England's East coast, agreed upon as most vulnerable to future erosion, is on the whole estimated to lose between 82-175 m within the next 100 years (p. 175–176). In their coastal erosion map, the Environment Agency estimated an erosion of 86.8 m with a 95 % probability within 20 years (2010–2030) for Covehithe, cf. »National Coastal Erosion Risk Mapping«. https://environment.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=9cef4a084bbb4954b970cd35b099d94c (accessed October 30, 2020).

34 | On November 1, 2011, the BBC newspage titles: »Plans for the future of Suffolk's coastline approved«: »The proposals say it is too expensive to protect all 45 miles of the coast so areas including Covehithe and Benacre Broad will not be defended«. The Eastern outcrop of the UK is said to be so vulnerable because its soil is particularly soft. In: *BBC*, November 1, 2011. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-suffolk-15543541 (accessed October 30, 2020).

35 | Cf. »National Coastal Erosion Risk Mapping« (ref. 33).

36 | Cf. *Thetouristtrail.org*, https://www.thetouristtrail.org/guides/suffolk-guides/covehithe/ (accessed October 30, 2020).

talked about as a ›sacrifice‹, the martyr of coastal erosion, that is given up on in order to secure the touristic sandy beaches of the nearby towns of Southwold and Walberswick.[37] The language employed does not only insinuate a loss of human dominion. It connects coastal erosion to England's colonial past by using the rhetoric of empire loss and often suggests the ›unruly‹ waves and storms as a form of revenge.[38]

The metaphorical language and the visibility of the shorelines' drastic changes inspire literary imagination. In China Miéville's eponymous short story, a girl lies on the aforementioned collapsed road and looks down from the top of the cliff »at its sheer crumble on the beach«. Her father, Dughan, explains: »›The sea's taking it all back,‹ he said. ›There used to be a lot more coast here‹«,[39] thereby assigning agency to the nonhuman realm, indicating that humans are rather irrelevant in this process. She asks her father: »›Is it still going?‹« […] »›Being eaten?‹« (C ibid.). But Dughan just shrugs: he did not take his daughter to Covehithe to see the progress of the eroding cliff. In the reality of the short story, erosion is not the spectacle. The beginning of the story first suggests a very stereotypical trip to the English coast: Dughan and his daughter arrive at a Bed & Breakfast in Dunwich (a historical city a few kilometres from Covehithe) where »they were lucky to have found a room«; they watch wintering geese and eat fish and chips at a pub (C 337). The reader is thus introduced to a very familiar world that by its basic parameters indicates the present. As night-time comes, Dughan wakes up his daughter to take her on an adventure to the Covehithe coast. In order to get there, they have to cross the graveyard of St Andrew's church. But the nocturnal medieval graveyard that evokes expectations about genre-specific places in the reader, has lost its affective potential: »they continued through the graveyard. There was nothing at all frightening about the graves« (C 339). Thus, the possibility of a generic Gothic story is casually negated. The fact that the Gothic trope is deprived of its potential affect so explicitly with an individual sentence amplifies the reader's expectations about the spectacle beyond the graveyard.[40] A larger-than-life experience awaits at the edge of the cliffs. When the girl leans over the cliff, the narrative suggests a truly weird scenario: »revenant oil rigs« (C 344), oil platforms that went down at different places around the globe, visit the Covehithe coast to inject »slippy black rig eggs into England« (C 351). From her elevated position at the cliff's top, Dughan's daughter looks down into the abyss and observes how an immense industrial ruin approaches the beach:

> Each concrete cylinder leg a building or a smokestack wide. The two on one side came forward together, then those on the other. Pipes dangled from its roof-high underside, clots of it fell back into the sea. It wore steel containers, ruins of housing like a bad neighbourhood, old hoists, lift-shafts emptying of black water. A few waves-width from the beach, it hesitated. It licked the air with a house-sized flame. »P-36,« Dughan said. »Petrobras.« (C 341)

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37 | Cf. *BBC*: »Plans for the future of Suffolk's coastline approved« (ref. 34).

38 | In her article »›Gripping to a wet rock‹: Coastal Erosion and the Land-Sea Divide as Existentialist/ Ecocritical Tropes in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction«. In: Kluwick a. Richter (eds.): *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures* (ref. 2), pp. 53–69. Anne-Julia Zwierlein analyses that the language media employs for coastal erosion is often militaristic. She quotes Nicolson who paints Britain as »a fortress defended against the sea«, p. 54.

39 | China Miéville: »Covehithe«, p. 339. All further quotes will be referenced within the text and the title abbreviated to 'C'.

40 | However, the endangered church and its graveyard have also inspired explicitly Gothic treatment, such as in Blake Morrison's poem »Covehithe« in which he exploits the Gothic potential of this pending happening: »the cliffs are stuck in reverse: Back across the fields they creep, to the graves of Covehithe church«, first published in *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/31/saturday-poem-covehithe-by-blake-morrison (accessed October 25, 2020).

When the narrative transcends its recognisable factual topography, it simultaneously exchanges its carefully created sense of local place for a global perspective. This global perspective is already present in the extradiegetic history of the Petrobras P-36: The Petrobras was the world's largest offshore oil drilling platform and sank in front of the Brazilian coast in 2001. The oil rig was an international cooperation; it was built in Italy and originally named ›The Spirit of Columbus‹, cynically aligning the oil industry to colonial quest, and was installed offshore northeast of Rio de Janeiro. In the presence of the short story, Dughan assures his daughter that no one died when it sank.[41] His confident remark implies that Dughan has a deeper knowledge of the happening at the Covehithe coast. As is then revealed, this is not the first time that he witnesses an oil rig operation.

The arrival of the oil rig at Covehithe also changes the narrative tone. The next paragraph in the story reads like a reportage from a global battlefield, where all the oil rigs that have drowned in the sea resurface to come at the shores of the world from Canada to Australia, among them the Rowan Gorilla I and the Sea Quest. The reader further learns that Dughan served as a soldier in the UNPERU, »the UN Platform Event Repulsion Unit«, a governmental organisation composed of an array of human expertise: »scientists, engineers, theologians and exorcists, soldiers, veterans…« (C 344). Dughan does not share these stories with his daughter, and she has only minor insight into her father's history with the returning oil rigs. When the narrative switches back into the present, the oil rig has already come close:

> The rig. It closed on her and she stopped breathing. It came near enough that she felt the envelope of cold air it brought, smelt abyssal rot and chemical cracking. Spray hit her. The weary factory's spray. It giant-walked by her hiding place sending all those Suffolk birds away, hauled into the fens to squat like a monument that had always been there. (C 348)

Despite the immensity of the industrial ruin, it does not seem to be fear but rather suspense that makes the girl hold her breath. She tries to get even closer to the platform to watch the oil rig drill into the coast to inject its eggs while her father watches her: »She was pressed against one of the dead trees. Beyond her was Petrobras, like a failed city block. He went to her, of course. Exhilarating to exit the cover. He was quickly there, looking with her through barkless branches« (C 347). The presence of the oil rig, for the father too and despite his better knowledge, sparks curiosity rather than outright horror, the latter of which would have led to emotions of panic and an urge for action. While the language renders the oil rigs monstrous and indicates their threatening potential, the response by the protagonists breaks with evoked expectations. If watching the oil rig's animalistic behaviour is an »exhilarating« experience, this rather speaks to a Romantic sense of the sublime. Watching oil rigs may be more exciting, yet not too different from when they were still watching geese in nearby Dunwich. Again, the affect of established genre aesthetics is explicitly negated or, at least, mitigated on the plot level. The implied comparison between bird watching and oil rig watching fashions the two protagonists as nature enthusiasts. Yet, what they are observing implies the beginning of a new evolutionary process: The revenant oil rigs that have been »wandering at the bottom of the world« (C 350) have taken a next step in their ›biological‹ evolution, a new life form

41 | In reality, the two explosions that led to the sinking of the P-36 killed eleven people and injured hundreds more. Cf. the official report of the Agência Nacional do Petróleo: »Analysis of the Accident with the Platform P-36«, July 2001. http://www.anp.gov.br/images/EXPLORACAO_E_PRODUCAO_DE_OLEO_E_GAS/Seguranca_Operacional/Relat_incidentes/Analysis_of_the_Accident_with_the_Platform_P-36.pdf (accessed October 31, 2020).

arising from industrial ruin. This reconnects the shoreline to its integral role in the history of life on earth itself that originated in the sea before populating land. In the 19th century, it was the observations of »littoral space – beaches, cliffs, eroded rocks, submarine forests« that ultimately formed the basis for Darwin's evolutionary theory.[42] Miéville's short story suggests that a new form of evolution may set out to replace the ›pride of creation‹. The drilling oil rig at the Covehithe coast symbolises the human cause behind its drastic erosion, an aspect that seems irrelevant to the protagonists.

The endeavour of oil rig watching is abruptly interrupted when Dughan and his daughter are caught by a guard who first appears more intimidating than the oil rigs: »You move and I'll fucking kill you« (C 349). After searching the two and finding only the minimal equipment of the regular night wandering nature enthusiast, »binoculars, torch and cameras« (C 350), the guide changes his tone. Instead of sending them away or arresting them, he invites the girl to the local kids' club: »›They have activities and that‹« where »›you can see the eggs on a live feed. They'll be digging down to them and they'll put cameras and thermometers and whatever. Sometimes you can even see movement through the shells. And there's colouring books and games and that‹« (C 349-350). The guard's reaction and invitation imply that they have stepped into a wildlife sanctuary where it is not his task to protect other humans from the oil rigs but the other way around. The carefully constructed dystopic scenario is taken *ad absurdum*: In the face of monstrous oil rigs that have come to life and breed at the coast, humans will still stick to a capitalist culture that turns even their self-made doom into a tourist spectacle. This critique again resonates with the way in which Covehithe is being advertised, as a place that tourists should visit regularly, just to see it disappearing. As Gladwin concludes on the employment of irony in Miéville's story: »Part of the absurdity of catastrophe is that people want to watch their own annihilation as a skewed form of entertainment. Oil dispersed in space and through the nonhuman continues to be a spectacle as much as a cause of planetary ruin«.[43] Only at the end of the short story, it gradually dawns on the girl that the oil rigs may not share human priorities. The cause of her concern is a story about a dog that was kicked by a breeding oil rig. While the story as a whole suggests that the rigs could ultimately extinguish humanity, ironically, it is the story of the injured dog that evokes unease about the invasion of Petrobras.

What is menacing about Miéville's story is not the loss of agency but the loss of affect. Despite its humour, Miéville's »Covehithe« is far from being a ›funny‹ story. When irony occurs, it radically breaks with the reader's expectations that the threat of revenant oil rigs will be acknowledged and reacted to by the protagonists. Instead, it leaves the reader over-aware of his*her observing status, in a state of paralysis. It is a bitter satire on how humanity has been taken over by its own fatal capitalist creations that have become too strong to act on despite better knowledge and judgement. Miéville draws up the scenario of a world in which neither emotions of nostalgia nor solastalgia have led to environmental action. It is, quite literally, a trip to the edge of environmental catastrophe, excessively fashioned through the drastic example of oil drilling platforms, their monstrous aesthetics and the suggestion of Gothic horror, all deprived off affect by framing it as a touristic adventure.

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42 | Ursula Kluwick a. Virginia Richter: »Introduction: 'Twixt Land and Sea«. In: Kluwick / Richter: *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures* (ref. 2), pp. 1–36, here p. 5.

43 | Gladwin: *Ecological Exile* (ref. 5), p. 192.

At the end of the story, its irony is again emphasised when Dughan turns around to look up to St Andrew's Church, thereby exchanging the virtual scenario for the sight of the »remains of a grander church fallen apart to time and the civil war and to economics, fallen ultimately with permission« (C 351). The early seventeenth century Anglican church, built into the ruins of a medieval church, enjoys all the national prestige: it is listed as national heritage and protected by the Churches Conservation Trust.[44] However, the receding shoreline that threatens it has an official ›NAI‹ (No Active Intervention) status, and is estimated to be ›lost to the sea‹ by 2100 at the latest. In conclusion it may be said that the characters' lack of affect in the face of catastrophe illustrates an eroding sense of cultural identity, present in an inability to understand the subject as part of the whole. Cultural imagination does not exceed the cliff's edge and does not allow for a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Anthropocene even while looking out through binoculars, watching birds, or revenant oil rigs.

2.2 »Was she wrecked by the storm or did she raise it?« – The Revenge of the Irish Lady in Alison Littlewood's »The Headland of Black Rock« (2018)

In Alison Littlewood's »The Headland of Black Rock«, the protagonist is a hubristic aging actor whose pronounced nostalgia revolves only around his former fame. He visits the Cornish coast, more specifically Land's End, the westernmost tip of England, in search of recovery and isolation.[45] When he arrives at his holiday retreat, he reacts to the hospitable landlady with hostility: »She was grey and worn out and I wanted only to dismiss her«.[46] Yet, despite his apparent superiority, his ego quickly reveals as fragile: »Had she not realised who I was? I felt a sudden urge to flip through the magazine and show her, to point out that I'd been in a movie, for fuck's sake. How could she think I'd be interested in her?« (HoBR 261). As becomes obvious from the quotes above, the protagonist is also the narrator in this short story. While the fact that he is so unlikeable complicates identification, this narrative situation turns the protagonist's development over the course of the story into an immediate experience. His hubris affects various levels: he considers himself superior to the surroundings that should only serve his recreation, he is superior to the touristic turmoil that he encounters on the Cornish coast but that he is simultaneously a part of. He is so self-absorbed that he feels a disconnection to everyone and everything around him, ultimately including himself.

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44 | Cf. *Visitchurches.org*, https://www.visitchurches.org.uk/visit/church-listing/st-andrew-covehithe.html (accessed October 31, 2020).

45 | The irony is perfect since the coast of Cornwall is one of the most popular touristic places in England and stereotypically celebrated for its recreative powers.

46 | Alison Littlewood: »The Headland of Black Rock«, p. 260. All quotes from the short story will henceforth be referenced in the main text and abbreviated to ›HoBR‹.

The relentless narcissism through which he defines himself against everyone else and his desperate longing for a glorious past is reminiscent of an equally narrow and defensive ideology: nationalism. As Krishan Kumar writes in *The Making of English National Identity*, »such self-absorption, such narcissism, is natural to nations. It is indeed one of the main constituents of nationalism. Nationalism proclaims the unique character and destiny of each and every nation«, they all lay »claim to exceptionalism and exclusivity«.[47] Littlewood's short story, published in the midst of the contested negotiations after the Brexit decision, engages with the destructive force behind such misplaced selfishness.[48] Reading the short story with this allegory in mind makes apparent how ›Brexit vanities‹ bear a disconnection to the environment and impede a global perspective.[49]

Again, an accurate topography, this time of a famous strip of the Cornish coast, poses the factual basis that is transgressed by the shore, that is by its very nature a transitional space. Only there, temporality and sense of place may resolve to negotiate the hubristic character of the protagonist. In the beginning of the short story, the narrator witnesses the power of the Irish sea: »The sea shattered against the rocks, sending up spume that dampened my skin and booming echoes that resounded around the cliffs« (HoBR 259). The latter sentence creates the impression of a resonance chamber and metaphorically establishes the bay as an arena or theatre. Indeed, the bay has a dramatic story to tell. A dead seagull had its throat ripped open by another animal. The narrator is disgusted by the sheer brutality of the scene: the seagull has not been eaten and was apparently killed only for the sake of killing. His values are tested when he spots a dying chick on the cliff: »It was large but ungainly, its feathers nothing more than fluff. I searched its bright black eyes for some expression I could recognise, but they were alien to me. As it shuffled along the rocks it revealed a malformed left foot, like a half-melted candle, and I knew then that it would die« (HoBR 259). The narrator denies the possibility of sentience in birds, it becomes obvious that in his opinion, sentience is only possible in humans. This stands in contrast to his decision not to help the bird, thereby making himself accomplice to his reproach: »I imagined them to be cold, ravening creatures, no affection in them« (HoBR 259).

In the first two paragraphs of Littlewood's story, the reader experiences the vulnerability and hostility of nature at the same time through the estrangement of the narrator. The moral responsibilities behind his inaction are negotiated when the fate of the chick is repeated in the Cornish mythology of the Irish lady, a folklore vernacular that is spun around a rock between Sennen Cove and Land's End that looks as if a mermaid is kneeling on its top. At first, the narrator dismisses it as »only a rock, only a story« (HoBR 263) but becomes interested in it after an encounter with a mysterious woman that leaves a lingering impression on him. Having spent the night with her, his initial ignorance towards the mythology of the place begins to change. When he reads about it in his holiday retreat, he learns that once there was an Irish lady who survived a shipwreck and clung to a rock; but bystanders watched her die instead of helping her. Engaging with the story of

47 | Krishan Kumar: *The Making of English National Identity*. Cambridge 2003, p. 21.

48 | For a deeper discussion of the interplay between narcissism, colonial mindset and empire nostalgia present in the Brexit debate, cf. Kögler, Malreddy a. Tronicke: »The colonial remains of Brexit: Empire nostalgia and narcissistic nationalism« (ref. 32).

49 | After the Brexit referendum, critical responses in politics and the media have framed Brexit as a ›vanity‹. Thereby suggesting a tendency in politics to subordinate all other interests to the nationalism present in the decision and negotiations. Cf. Philip Stephens: »Britain is being held hostage to Theresa May's Brexit vanity«. In: *Financial Times*, February 14, 2019. https://www.ft.com/content/7a7782c8-2f8f-11e9-ba00-0251022932c8 (accessed October 31, 2020), or the interview with the Brexit-critical leader of the socialist Irish party Sinn Fein: »Sinn Féin leader: ›Brexit is a Tory-conceived vanity‹«. In: *BBC*, June 15, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-44500778 (accessed October 31, 2020).

the Irish Lady rock starts a process of self-reflection in the narrator. On returning to the cottage after his nightly adventure, his contemptuous attitude develops into a keen interest: »I wondered again about the Irish Lady. If a woman could turn into a stone, why not a mermaid or something else?« (HoBR 270). The short story strongly emphasises folklore as a way of looking back into the past and a way of looking in. On the plot level, it enables thus an engagement with identity present in the challenged self-image of the narrator. Simultaneously, on the narrative level, the local folklore vernacular lends an authentic appeal to the place: it integrates the reader's experience with folklore which is mediated through the, at first, sceptical protagonist who gradually becomes more susceptible for the mythology of the Irish Lady rock.

Increasingly, the mythology of the place permeates the aesthetics and structure of the narrative and assumes agency over the protagonist. His change becomes observable through the way he perceives the horizon throughout the story. In the beginning and while inside his holiday retreat, he flips through a magazine and finds an unflattering paparazzi shot of himself among other ›older‹ actors. Angry at this sight, he throws the magazine away and only calms when looking outside the window: »I looked beyond the cliff edge to the grey sea, the grey sky, all the miles and miles of nothing, and took deep breaths until I calmed« (HoBR 262). The insistence on the repeated grey colour implies that the narrator cannot read what he is looking at. Sky and sea mirror each other but without vision for a horizontal line that is explicitly negated by the endless ›nothingness‹ that he sees before him. The intractability constructed by this featureless aesthetic calms the narrator. He projects himself onto the grey surface but sees only a part of it, metaphorically as well as literally since he observes the seascape only through the limited frame of the window. After his impressive encounter with the mysterious woman, he stands outside at the bay and his perception changes completely:

> I waited and I watched. The Irish Lady bathed in the cold waves. The chick wasted away on the cliff. Nothing changed except the sea. I saw now that it held countless colours within it; ever-changing moods; innumerable faces. I couldn't take my eyes from it. I barely drank or ate and I'm not sure I thought of anything else, didn't care as time began to skip. (HoBR 269)

Again, there is an emphasis on ›nothing‹. But this time, this negation is directed towards everything apart from the sea and makes something else emerge. Now, the intractability present in the moods and ›innumerable‹ faces does not calm him but excites a longing for the sea. The narrator suddenly feels guilty for his inaction: »I had been watching it *die*. It seemed suddenly important, this thing I could have saved, some little good that I could have done with my life, and I started towards the door« (HoBR 272, orig. emphasis). Outside, the protagonist sees a clear way ahead of him, which is expressed aesthetically by an interplay of the absence and presence of light: »foam marked the meeting of wave and rock; moonlight formed a path into the sea, but all else was dark« (HoBR 272). He follows the path which marks the ultimate fulfilment of his transformation as he is literally consumed by the place's mythology when ›she‹ drags him into the sea without showing compassion: »She wasn't even looking at me any longer. There was no fascination in watching me die« (HoBR 274). Instead of developing into a human being of heightened environmental awareness, his suggested process of self-reflection reveals as a process of gradual disappearance. He does not give up his static yet self-assured identity in favour of a more dynamic one, instead, identity quite literally dissolves, or, erodes here.

Littlewood's short story offers a strong commentary on the way in which self-absorption prevents the acquisition of a global perspective and numbs sensitivities for history and identity from which responsibilities arise. It symbolises the alienation from nature; a lack of grief for its changes, a lack of solastalgia, held back by a preventing kind of narcissistic nostalgia. When a sense of solastalgia is ultimately suggested by his late regret, the protagonist has already been consumed by the place. Likewise, the Irish Lady folklore and the memory of not helping her while there was still a chance also contains a moral connection to the climate crisis. It presents as an allegory to the endangered shoreline, that is, together with the narrator, slowly being ›reclaimed‹. Furthermore, the short story criticises the jingoism present in the Brexit debates and the implied hegemony of England over the rest of the British Isles as a nostalgic, outmoded, and ultimately destructive self-image. With the historic frame of England's colonial past with Ireland, the story suggests nationalism as a preventive ideology that provokes the motif of revenge on the plot level; but revenge also features prominently in the mythology of the place. If one reads the Irish Lady rock as a national symbol for Ireland, as Mother Ireland, she represents the guilt resulting from the colonial past; she mediates between coloniser and colonised. The historic dominance of England is ultimately questioned in the story when the narrator reflects on the agency of the Irish lady and her fate: »Was she wrecked by the storm or did she raise it?« (HoBR 271).

3. Haunted by the Past and Threatened by the Future – Irish and Northern Irish Place between Nostalgia and Solastalgia

The agentive force of landscape has a long tradition in Irish literature. Due to the country's history of invasion and resulting territorial conflicts, the resistance of the landscape to foreign attacks developed into a prevalent motif in Irish writing from early founding myths onwards and was employed to invigorate Gaelic cultural heritage and strengthen Irish national identity.[50] In Ireland, as elsewhere, territorial hegemony always also involved a contention over imagined place and is thus reflected in cultural artefacts such as literary texts. Thus, Irish literature has always been closely concerned with the environment and with related place attachment or sense of place in regard to personal as well as cultural identity.

Ireland and Northern Ireland continue to be affected by territorial conflict in many ways. The island is still divided by a physical national border as well as several ideological borders. Estrangement does not only persist between Northerners and Southerners, but also between Catholics and Protestants on either side of the border as well as between the

50 | A prominent example of a compilation of place lore or so-called dinnseanchas, is the *Leabhar Gabhála* (also called *The Book of Invasions*), a collection of poems and prose from different times and sources, first compiled in the 11th century. Ethnic constellations of the people of Ireland and the question of when a distinct Irish nation has been formed are thoroughly discussed in the *Leabhar Gabhála*. Thus, the book serves as an early example of the close connection between writing, place, and national identity in Ireland. This connection was perpetuated by the Irish Bards throughout the Early Modern Period and has also repeatedly been taken up by poets in modern times, for example by William Butler Yeats during the Celtic Revival movement in the late 19th and early 20th century and, arguably, by Seamus Heaney in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. Cf. Leonie Windt-Wetzel: *Modelling Rural and Urban Place in Post-Ceasefire and Post-Agreement Northern Irish Narrative Fiction*. Trier 2020, p. 6.

rural and the urban population, and between older generations, who grew up in the early years of partition and lived through the Northern Ireland conflict, and young people, who were born into the difficult legacies of a post-conflict society, which inflicts a shadow on their identity as young Europeans. Economic anxieties, especially since the financial crisis of 2008, as well as a rebound of identity politics in recent years, also in connection to Brexit, further complicate matters.

Spatial concerns currently negotiated in Irish literature are, for example, the housing crisis since the end of the Celtic Tiger[51] and the related emergence of so-called ghost estates (Republic) as well as the continuing demarcation of place and other socio-spatial legacies of the Troubles (Northern Ireland). With the exception of poetry, Irish literature, despite its keen awareness to spatial change, has not dealt extensively with ecological concerns yet; nor has it comprehensively been read from the perspective of ecocriticism or the environmental humanities.[52] Global warming and the severe effects it has on Irish shorelines[53] at first glance remain largely unaddressed in Irish writing, both North and South. At the same time, feelings of nostalgia as well as solastalgia[54] do play a central role and can be considered as one of the most prevalent themes in recent Irish and Northern Irish narrative fiction.[55]

Taking a closer look at Irish and Northern Irish short stories, the following analysis argues that in the Irish context, nostalgia and solastalgia as dis-eases have a long prehistory, which has an impact on perceiving and handling the effects of climate change as well as addressing these effects in cultural discourse. Present and future ecological threats such as coastal erosion and rising sea levels have to be viewed in relation to past traumas and their legacies inflicted by territorial change including British settlement, the famine

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51 | Period of economic growth in the Republic of Ireland from the mid-1990s to the late-2000s.

52 | Malcolm Sen in »Irish Studies at a Time of Climate Change and Sovereignty Loss«. In: Malcolm Sen: *UCDscholarcast*, Series 11 Irish Studies and the Environmental Humanities (Winter 2014 / Spring 2016), n.p., identifies several reasons for the relative absence of ecocriticism in Irish studies, such as ecocriticism's alleged apolitical nature, its focus on the future rather than the past and its global perspective. He points to the prevalence of postcolonial, revisionist historical, and feminist readings that, in the eyes of many Irish studies scholars, do better justice to an analysis of Irish socio-spatial relations which are in many ways determined by its colonial past and preoccupied with questions of national and local identity. Given the imminent threat of climate change, he criticises these retrospective readings and argues the case for a more intensive engagement with environmental concerns and their economic and political dimensions in Irish studies.

53 | For an overview of prognoses on sea level rise and erosion on Irish coasts, cf. e. g. Climatechangepost.com, https://www.climatechangepost.com/ireland/coastal-erosion/ (accessed July 28, 2020).

54 | While the term ›solastalgia‹ has only recently been coined and is mainly associated with the effects of global warming, the emotion it describes, namely distress caused by negatively experienced environmental change, precedes it by far. As Glenn Albrecht notes in *Earth Emotions*, the experience of solastalgia is »ancient and ubiquitous« (p. 40) and can be caused by any chronic transformation that presents »an attack on one's sense of place« (p. 38), e. g. colonisation, war, coal mining, land clearing, deforestation, or gentrification (cf. p. 39). In Ireland, the grief caused by the unwanted transformation of home environment, for example, through extensive deforestation during British plantation in the 17th century, has so far been subsumed under the term nostalgia. In future discourse on place in the Irish cultural imagination it might prove beneficial to embrace the nuancing offered by Albrecht's neologism to differentiate between nostalgia in the context of displacement, emigration, or retrospective idealisation, and solastalgia in the context of place-based distress experienced at home.

55 | This is true for a great number of Irish and Northern Irish texts. Some examples are Deirdre Madden: *One by One in the Darkness*. London 1996; John Banville: *The Sea*. London 2005; Kevin Barry: *City of Bohane*. London 2011; Glenn Patterson: *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young*. London 2012; as well as numerous short stories such as Joseph O'Connor: »The Breakers«. In: *The Stinging Fly* 37.2 (2017), n.p.; Méabh de Brún: »Liminal Bus Café«. In: *The Stinging Fly* 37.2 (2017), n.p; and, of course, the short stories analysed in this article.

of the 1840s and connected mass emigration, independence and the introduction of the Irish border, loss of agricultural identity, the Northern Ireland conflict, the economic and housing crisis as well as recent insecurities about the Irish border caused by the Brexit negotiations. Because nostalgia and solastalgia have been constant, culture defining emotions in Ireland for centuries, the newly arising ecological threats to the environment are perceived and narrated differently than in England.

In the following, a closer look will be taken at two short stories which make the complexities of (Northern) Irish solastalgia particularly visible by interweaving long existing socio-spatial conflicts with ecological threats. Kevin Barry's »Fjord of Killary« (2010) and Jan Carson's »Children's Children« (2016) have been chosen as two poignant examples which illustrate that Ireland is not just haunted by the past but also by the future and that these overlapping threats may lead to paralysis and fatalism but also enable national reconciliation and a new sense of community and solidarity.

3.1 »Fjord of Killary« (2010) – The Politics and Poetics of Climate Change in Ireland's Rural West

> 1648 was a year shy of Cromwell's landing in Ireland, and already the inn at Killary fjord was in business – it would see out this disaster, too. (FoK n.p.)

Kevin Barry's story »Fjord of Killary«[56] is set in the West of Ireland on the eponymous fjord in north Galway. The setting is significant for several reasons, not least because in the Irish cultural imagination, the West is associated with remoteness, origins, a pre-colonial idyll and anti-colonial resistance.[57] In the story, a provincial mind-set, scepticism towards strangers, especially from the city, and connected self-centredness as well as a strong belief in the imperishability of Killary in fact defines the local characters who make »a geography of the country by the naming of pubs« (FoK) and completely lack a global spatial imagination.

The story is narrated by Caoimhin,[58] a mildly famous poet with a writer's block, who has recently bought the fictional Water's Edge Hotel, a traditional Irish inn, located in the harbour of Killary to escape his exhausting city life and to find new inspiration for his poetry in the picturesque landscape of the fjord, which he longingly envisions: »the murmurous ocean… the rocky hills hard-founded in a greenish light… the cleansing air… the stouts peeping shyly from little gaps in the drystone walls« (FoK). The hotel appealed to him because of its traditional interior with original beams as well as the fact

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56 | Kevin Barry: »Fjord of Killary«, first published in *The New Yorker*, January 25, 2010. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/02/01/fjord-of-killary (accessed October 30, 2020). Quotes in this article are taken from this version and will be referenced to in the text as »FoK«. Unfortunately, no page numbers are given. A shortened version of the story is also part of Barry's short story collection *Dark Lies the Island*. London 2012.

57 | Moreover, as Luke Gibbons has noted in Oona Frawley: *Irish Pastoral Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*. Dublin 2005, a move or recourse to the West »is impelled by a search for community, a desire to escape the isolation of the self and to immerse oneself in the company of others«, p. 83. This motif becomes significant in the story's context of social reconciliation, as will be shown.

58 | The name Caomhín is the original Irish form of the anglicised name Kevin. The meaning of the name is »noble birth«. In the context of the story, the name might allude to the protagonist's felt superiority, status as an outsider, and his colonial mindset despite being Irish.

that it was once visited by Thackeray[59] and he admits that »I had leapt at it. I was the last of the hopeless romantics« (FoK). However, as Caomhin increasingly realises, Killary is not the pastoral idyll he imagined but a precarious place, a »dismal little world« (FoK). The landscape turns out to be menacing rather than comforting and the hotel is described as forsaken, »listed westward […] in the direction of the gibbering Atlantic« (FoK) and set at the foot of the »depressing« Mweelrea mountain, whose »looming shape fill[s] almost every view from the Water's Edge Hotel« (FoK). The landscape of Killary eludes the Romantic processing of the narrator-poet. He develops an intense ecophobia[60] and his Romantic image of Killary turns into an anti-pastoral, Gothic, and apocalyptical one in which the colonial hauntings of the past meet with the dystopian environmental threats of the future as a flood ravages the fjord.

Caomhin feels excluded as the people of Killary regard him as »superior«, »a fretful blow-in […] simply not cut out for tough, gnarly, west of Ireland living« (FoK). The locals in turn are described by the narrator as »nutjobs« and »habitual country drinkers« (FoK), who do not pay attention to the rising waters as they sit at the hotel bar talking about the shortest routes to surrounding towns and their pubs. They are preoccupied with local concerns such as the state of the roads, the negative effects of tourism and immigration on Killary as well as diesel washing,[61] cross-border trade, and connected injustices. Their narrow, small-scale conception of the world is mirrored in the setting of the story, which is entirely set in the microcosm of the inn where Caomhin serves them Bushmills whiskey and Guinness stout. Derek Gladwin points out that the characters' »literal entrapment in the inn is caused by their inability to acknowledge the catastrophe looming around them [which] mirrors the larger issue of climate action – despite the obvious signs, action remains slow or non-existent, signalling the ultimate cost of a lack of imagination and foresight«.[62] The insularity of the local inhabitants is clearly exaggerated by

59 | William Makepeace Thackeray, the Victorian journalist and novelist, who travelled through pre-famine Ireland for four months in 1842 and wrote about his experiences and especially about the bad quality of food and of his lodgings in *The Irish Sketchbook* of 1842 in a humorous but at times also derogatory way.

60 | In ecocriticism, ecophobia is defined as an irrational fear of or contempt for the natural world that is rooted in the loss of human control over nature in western culture. Cf. Simon Curtis Estok: »Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia«. In: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16.2 (2009), pp. 203–225. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isp010 (accessed December 19, 2020).

61 | Diesel laundering by criminal gangs has been a widespread national phenomenon in post-crash Ireland. The trade with inferior and cheaper (agricultural or industrial) diesel wrecks engines and puts legitimate garages out of business. Moreover, toxic waste sludge is produced and often dumped at the side of roads, the removal of which costs millions. For more information cf. Richard Curran: »The dirty business of washed diesel«. In: *Independent*, September 4, 2013. https://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/richard-curran-the-dirty-business-of-washed-diesel-29549815.html (accessed October 31, 2020).

62 | Gladwin: *Ecological Exile* (ref. 5.), p. 203.

Barry through the use of satirical techniques such as reinvigorating the stereotype of the stock Irishman who is sternly set against any form of modernisation, thus evoking 19th-century English travel writing and the topos of the Irish inn.[63] In this fashion, the locals are depicted as blind to the threatening global crisis of climate change with which they are now personally confronted as the waters of the fjord are rising in an incident of torrential rain and their remote hometown is directly threatened by a flood.

In contrast to the narrator, who becomes increasingly worried about the rising waters and the indifference of the others, the locals remain calm, cheerful, and immersed in their game of estimating pub-distances. Barry employs a parodistic voice[64] and the characters as well as the setting are consciously overdrawn for effect. Caomhin describes himself as the only sane person. The locals, according to him are alcoholic, »oversexed« bordering »on the paganistic«, and suffer from »delusions, paranoia, warped fantasies«; his Belarussian summer staff, whom he houses »in the dreary, viewless rooms at the back of the hotel« (FoK) are derogatorily portrayed as lecherous vampires. Central motifs constructed in the story are the colonial mindset of the narrator, who fashions himself as a »charming-innkeeper figure« (FoK) as well as the rural/urban divide, still a prevalent socio-cultural phenomenon in Ireland, which is emphasised, for example, through metafictional commentary and intertextuality. Caomhin, being a ›cultured‹ artist from the city, becomes worried about his own degeneration as instead of writing poetry, he involuntarily becomes »versed […] in the strange, illicit practices of the hill country« (FoK). The story here draws upon the sub-genre of folk horror, one of its main characteristics being the urban elitist's fear of regression. At a later point in the story, the narrator quotes from Thackeray's pejorative accounts of visiting »the backwoods of Ireland« with its diet of »›raw ducks, raw pease‹« and a particular inn: »›No pen can describe that establishment, as no English imagination could have conceived it‹«, (FoK) thus implying Irish illiteracy as well as the uncivilised state of rural Ireland more generally. As K.J. James points out, in 19th-century travel writing, the Irish inn was stylised as a central setting to negotiate the cultural estrangement after the Union of Britain and Ireland in 1801. While at that time the stereotype of the English Gentleman, ›Saxon‹ or ›Cockney‹ was set against the ›Celt‹ or ›uncivilised‹ rural Irishman,[65] in Barry's story the microcosm of the inn emphasises the inner Irish rural/urban divide. Thus, the inn represents a place of social divisions.

Only with the external threat of torrential rain, which befalls Killary, the internal (power) dynamics begin to change. On the night of the flood, the sky turns into »an intense purplish tone that was ominous, close-in, Biblical« (FoK). The superiority of the narrator is inverted as even he is powerless against the higher forces of nature. Caomhin experiences a moment of epiphany and finally adapts the wisdom of the locals, who seem to have

63 | In 19th century English travel writing, the Irish inn developed as a topos for negotiating the cultural estrangement of England and Ireland after the Union in 1801. English travellers visited Irish inns for cultural interaction with local Irish people and, based on their travel experiences, often wrote derogatory accounts describing their alienation with the simple rural lifestyle of the Irish, recommending the modernisation of travel accommodation in Ireland. A characteristic of writing about the Irish inn at that time was the extensive use of cultural stereotypes, for example, the depiction of the stock Irishman as primitive and firmly set against English attempts at modernisation. Cf. K.J. James: »The Irishness of the Irish Inn: Narratives of Travel Accommodation in Ireland from Union to Home Rule«. In: *Studies in Travel Writing* 17/1 (2013), pp. 22–42.

64 | As mentioned above, the story makes parodic reference to the topos of the Irish inn. In our reading, Barry employs parody to raise awareness to the ongoing division of Irish society.

65 | Cf. K.J. James: »The Irishness of the Irish Inn« (ref. 63), p. 24.

resigned to their fate a long time ago. ›Nature‹ increasingly takes over as an otter enters the hotel's kitchen to eat soup, sheep try to save themselves on a boat, a swarm of cormorants flies in formation across the hotel, which is compared to the attack on Dresden, a black-backed gull is starting to feast on its companion, the lights on the far side of the harbour are cut out and the water sweeps over the porch.

As ›nature‹ turns against them and the waters rise, Caomhin accepts his personal loss of agency and the loss of human agency more generally, which the age of the Anthropocene paradoxically has brought about.[66] In this context, genre elements of the Bildungsroman[67] are employed to describe the moment of coming of age, which is necessary to enable such a transformation: »And the view was suddenly clear to me. The world opened out to its grim beyond and I realized that, at forty, one must learn the rigors of acceptance. […] I would accept all that was put in my way, from here on through until I breathed my last« (FoK). The forces of nature have confronted him with his own powerlessness and he is relieved about this realisation: »[t]he gloom of youth had at last lifted« (FoK). The freedom that is achieved by the acceptance of fate is foregrounded here. Caomhin stops worrying about measures to hold back the water and instead leads his guests to the function room on the upper floor and starts a disco.

On the one hand, this ending of the story suggests that solastalgia and the lack of solace it implies, may not only cause grief but, as the example of Caomhin shows, eventually also lead to a state of indifference and maybe even exhilaration triggered by the alleged certainty that global warming is irreversible and the human race no longer has agency anyway. Or, to put it in the words of Camus which opened this article: nostalgia loses its aim once we realise that it is beyond our control to shape the environment we inhabit.[68] However, precisely this surrender of agency invigorates the plot and Caomhin suddenly feels »[e]lectrified« (FoK.). He becomes devoted to fatalism, reconnects with his faith and discovers the power of communality: »There was a conviviality in the bar, the type that is said to come always with threatened disaster« (FoK). Thus, he gives up his urban, colonial, elitist mindset, reaches out to the locals, and embraces his new identity as one of them. In this context, faith, fatalism and communality are foregrounded as Irish national characteristics which are well-tried in the face of disaster. With the waters rising, the symbolism of the inn changes and it transforms into an arch. Caomhin, the locals and the hotel guests from Limerick and Londonderry become companions in fate and overcome their cultural dissonances as well as the paralysis and anachronism associated with the inn. Instead they discover their commonalities and start to dance to »old favorites« that they share: »Abba, the Pretenders, Bryan Adams« (FoK).

Ultimately, the narrator is optimistic about the survival of the hotel and its guests, who have drawn closer together in the cause of the disastrous night: »1648 was a year shy of Cromwell's landing in Ireland, and already the inn at Killary fjord was in business – it would see out this disaster, too« (FoK). This belief in the resistance to external threats of the Irish landscape, Irish inns and Irish people in turn revives his

66 | Paradoxically, due to the effects of man-made climate change, it becomes ever more challenging for humankind to control nature. Cf. e. g. Nicholas C. Kawa: »The irony of the Anthropocene: People dominate a planet beyond our control«, In: *The Conversation*, October 4, 2016. https://theconversation.com/the-irony-of-the-anthropocene-people-dominate-a-planet-beyond-our-control-64948 (accessed January 25, 2021).

67 | In the context of Irish literature, the Bildungsroman or rather the thwarted Bildungsroman/Counter-Bildungsroman has a tradition. Genre elements of the (failed) Bildungsroman are frequently employed in Irish and Northern Irish fiction to draw attention to the often complicated search for identity in Ireland. Cf. e. g. Anne Goudsmit: *The Counter-Bildungsroman in Northern Irish Fiction 1965-1996* [Dissertation]. University of Surrey 2013.

68 | Cf. Camus qtd. in Albrecht: *Earth Emotions* (ref. 3), p. 34.

poetic inspiration: »Now random phrases and images came at me – the sudden quick-fire assaults that signal a new idea – and I knew that they would come in sequence soon enough, their predestined rhythms would assert« (FoK). This meta-poetic statement of »predestined rhythms« underlines the folkloristic mode of the story. Caomhin, the townie, who started out to capture the picturesque landscape of Killary with his pen for selfish reasons, fails. The landscape of Killary strongly defies his attempts of Romantic idealisation. Only after undergoing a transformation, a coming of age, which is allegorically connected to a reconciliation of the rural and the urban population, his writer's block resolves and he feels inspired, not by the beauty of Killary but by its alleged imperishability. This folkloristic and self-reflexive ending has the effect of foregrounding the affective capacities or the agency of literature in the Irish cultural imagination and its role in the preservation of Irish place. While the story thus emphasises a strong and shared sense of local place and a reconciled society as a prerequisite for confronting the global challenge of climate change, its satirical emphasis of Irish stoicism in the face of climate change also has an unsettling effect.

3.2 »Children's Children« (2016): Gaining and Losing Territory – The Reunion of Ireland in Times of Global Warming

> »If we both move north, we'll upset the balance and tip the island into the sea,« he explained, holding her little hand coldly across the border. (CC 190)

Like »Fjord of Killary«, »Children's Children«[69] is set in a microcosmic story world which emphasises the characters' local-scale thinking and psychological entrapment. The story takes place on a small fictional island which is geographically and ideologically divided: »The rock marked the exact midpoint of the island, seven foresty miles from the northern shore and a similar, open-fielded seven from the opposite coastline. […] On the island you were north or you were south, or you left for the mainland« (CC 186). Although the islanders are all »formed from the same sandy soil« (CC 186) and cannot go »so much as a single day without encountering the ocean« (CC 184), speak the same language and are »consistent as common spades, on either side of the border« (CC 186), they have strong reservations against the inhabitants of the respective other side. They grow up with an ideological mindset, which prejudices them against the looks and habits of the other.

Every year the island loses »twenty stones of weight« as »one by one, and occasionally in couples« (CC 185) young people leave the island for the mainland. The story here takes up on the real-life situation of mass emigration of young people from Ireland. In the story, only two young people remain on the island, a young woman from the south and a young man from the north. The young protagonists are destined to save the divided island from extinction: »They were leftover children, set aside for such a time as this. Tomorrow they would be married for the good of the island, both northern and southern sides. […] The arrangement was a simple mathematical equation; if more people were not soonly made, there would be no one left to keep the island afloat« (CC 184-185).

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69 | Jan Carson: »Children's Children« [2015]. In: Jan Carson: *Children's Children*. Dublin 2016, pp. 184–190. All quotes from the story will be referenced within the text and the title abbreviated to 'CC'.

The imagery and tone used in the story, similar to »Fjord of Killary«, is strongly folkloristic, magical and ironic, as for example when the lifestyle of the islanders is described: »They knew nothing more than the placid seasons of their parents and grandparents: up with the sun, down with the cows, and television for all those needs which could not be grown, or hauled – sleek gilled and flappering – from the sea« (CC 184). The language, however, is precise and matter-of-factly, for example, when the narrator describes the island's curious gain of land mass: »the island's tideline had receded by three centimetres in the last decade. This extra pinch of pebbly sand was widely attributed to global warming« (CC 185) or names historical events like »the Battle of Hastings« or »Holocaust« (CC 188). The magical tone of the fable-like narrative is thus interrupted, and the effect is that reality settles in. Formal elements, especially the interplay of the folkloristic and the factual, regulate the meaning of the story. Through the precise language, the reader's attention is drawn to the factual matters that present the matrix and occasion for the story. The narrative mode, which combines elements of magical realism and fable, consciously addresses the reader's genre knowledge. In this way, the story presents itself as a narrative dealing with the fate of the nation (magical realism) as well as a moral lesson (fable).

The ideology of north and south dominates the spatial imagination of the people on the island to such an extent that they are more concerned with the preservation of this binarism than with their mutual territory as such: »Once, in the 1970s, a half mile of the east coast had unhooked itself and floated off to Lanzarote or some such sunny place. No one had noticed or particularly cared, for the peripheral directions had remained unimportant so long as north had stayed north and south had continued to dominate the southern extremities« (CC 186). As this tragic-ironic passage makes clear, the inhabitants of the island remain indifferent towards geological processes like erosion as long as ideological divisions are not resolved.

As the number of inhabitants diminishes, due to emigration, the geological state of the island and its ideological divide become interrelated. Carson interweaves the problems connected to the division and demographic change on the island with the terminology of geological extinction. The island is described in terms of a fragile ecosystem whose balance can easily be disturbed: »They could not settle upon a side, for the land changed shape the moment you crossed the border. […] ›If we both move north, we'll upset the balance and tip the island into the sea‹, he explained, holding her little hand coldly across the border. […] ›The weight of us combined could ruin everything‹« (CC 190). The protagonists' concern about the balance of the island implies that the current real-life political state of Ireland is in fact dependent on its division as the socio-economic consequences of a reunion are complex. The Anthropocene, as Carson points out in her story, is not only characterised by man-made geological threats, but also by the man-made disintegration of countries due to ideologies. The collapse of the island as a liveable territory might be brought about by social imbalances and the forces of hatred and prejudices long before its geological extinction. In this context, irony is used. A reversed erosion is taking place in the story, which emphasises the self-centredness and shortsightedness of the remaining islanders on both sides, who are joined in their territorial pride without realising the destructive potential of their mutual hatred: »The islanders rested easy, convinced that they, and they alone, were riding high while the rest of the world sunk on the whim of a polar icecap« (CC 185). What they do not realise, however, is that as the tideline recedes and the island grows, there are no people left to inhabit it.

Like »Fjord of Killary«, Carson's story also engages with the theme of coming of age. »Children's Children« is about the island's state of liminality which is characterised by an ideological and nostalgic worldview and the simultaneous realisation that there is no future in clinging to the past. The young protagonists, who represent a new generation of Irish and Northern Irish people, come to understand that they have to grow up, overcome the past, take over responsibility and find a common telos for their country's future. They realise that present threats like mass emigration, demographic change, Brexit, and, of course, the effects of climate change which threatens their shared territory, afford island-wide solidarity.

The story revolves around the opportunity of overcoming binaries, for example through the use of irony, and, at the very end, sets up a scenario for a third option in the form of shared space, a united island on which it is possible to be neither north nor south but live a balanced existence in the geographic and political middle. This thought experiment is left open however as the protagonists still have to make up their mind about whether they love the island enough »to be neither north nor south« (CC 190) and whether the island is ready for the »brave new direction« (CC 190) of union with all its unforeseeable consequences.

The question that lies at the heart of both, Barry's and Carson's stories is whether a global ecological crisis can be dealt with when people are already prostrated by local and national crises. In order to face global challenges, inner conflict on the island needs to be resolved. Both stories quite dramatically point out that an arrestment in the past paralyses the characters and to a certain extent prevents them from becoming aware of the pressing concern of global warming. In this context, the stories foreground an irony of the Anthropocene: Centuries-old territorial conflicts may become futile once the embattled landmass is seriously threatened by ecological collapse.[70] The characters are preoccupied with historical trauma and resolving continuing socio-spatial divisions. However, the priority of these concerns is challenged in the light of the newly emerging existential threats of erosion, floods, and climate collapse. The threat of global warming is described with a (post)colonial vocabulary and thus embedded in the historical experience of losing territory and of the brutal alteration of home place. There is the strong suggestion in both Barry and Carson that it can only be faced in an island-wide collective effort that leaves the past behind. The fable-like narratives can thus be interpreted as moral lessons, or, as Malcolm Sen has pointed out, »the effect and affect of narrative […] help[s] us envision liveable futures«.[71] He argues the case for a more intense engagement with environmental concerns in Irish literature by asking »How do we historicize

70 | The futility of existing or historical conflicts in the face of imminent ecological collapse, of course, presents only a limited perspective. As human geographers estimate, the Anthropocene will bring about new territorial conflicts due to decreasing resources and climate-induced migration. Cf. e. g. Eva Lövbrand et al.: »The Anthropocene and the geo-political imagination: Re-writing Earth as political space«. In: *Earth System Governance* 4 (2020), pp. 1–8, here p. 2.

71 | Malcolm Sen in »Introduction: Irish Studies and the Environmental Humanities«. In: Malcolm Sen: *UCDscholarcast*, Series 11 Irish Studies and the Environmental Humanities (Winter 2014 / Spring 2016), n.p.

lost futures?«, thereby pointing to the futility of purely retrospective readings of Irish place in a time in which humanity depends on »conceptions of narrative […] inflected […] with transnational, long term, futurisms«.[72] While the hauntings of the past will remain central in Irish conceptions of place, the ecological threats of the future and the global perspective it affords to confront them, start to feature more prominently in Irish literature and Irish studies as well. Although Barry and Carson both ground their stories on the nostalgic and localised attachment to place prevalent in Irish culture, in the course of the stories it transpires that in order to preserve their sense of place, characters need to broaden their spatial imagination and confront present and future threats to their home environment.

4. Conclusion: The Affect of Absent Solastalgia

The aim of this article was to gain a more profound understanding for the ways in which solastalgia is narrated in recent English, Irish, and Northern Irish short fiction. In the selected short stories, endangered shorelines, as the countries' joint geological reality, are semanticised differently. While in the English stories, the accelerating hazards to the coast are translated into the language of empire loss and metaphors of revenge, Irish and Northern Irish stories resonate a familiarity with territorial threat. However, the fascination with the attack by oil rigs, the Irish Lady, and the sea itself as symbols of territorial exploitation as well as the foregrounded Irish and Northern Irish characteristic of serenity in the face of disaster also display a lacking sense of urgency; a commonality in all of the short stories. A limiting sense of nationalism or cultural hubris (»The Headland of Black Rock« and »Fjord of Killary«), a preoccupation with internal division and national trauma (»Children's Children«), or an inability to question and adjust the status quo (»Covehithe«) establish a culture of inaction that is obstructive to the development of a national, let alone, a global perspective.

In the context of the analyses, solastalgia has served as an illuminating parameter revealing the dynamics between agency and affect. However, the short stories do not create affect by emphasising the presence of solastalgia, but by narrating its *absence*. This lack of emotional involvement leads to paralysis on the part of the characters: feelings of nostalgia do not lead to environmental awareness and solastalgia does not develop into a shared and unifying emotion. The short stories' critique of inaction becomes particularly strong through a negative play with established genre conventions and aesthetics, for example by questioning the cathartic effect typically associated with folklore and the *Bildungsroman* or through the explicit negation of Gothic affect. Anxiety is thereby relocated into the realm of the reader who is confronted with the characters' unsettling indifference to catastrophe and acceptance of the loss of human agency. All of the analysed short stories employ the anthropocentric paradox and take it even further by displaying environmental inaction as yet another ›leap in logic‹.

72 | Sen: »Irish Studies at a time« (ref. 52), n.p.

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