

Alternative Cartographies

The troublesome legacy of traditional cultural memory of emigration for Irish poetic migrants to the United States brings about various responses to the inherited narrative, as demonstrated by the ways myths and memorials are disseminated in the poetry of Greg Delanty, debated in the poetry of Eamonn Wall and defused by Paul Muldoon. Contemporary female migrant poetry must also respond to that legacy but as women, are these poets similarly inhibited by the weight of diasporic history, or does the silence around women's experience as emigrants act as a kind of liberation? As Anne Fogarty remarks in her insightful article, 'The Influence of Absences: Eavan Boland and the Silenced History of Irish Women's Poetry', 'the entire absence of a female line of influence ... acts both as a bogey and as a powerful impetus to question, refurbish, and invent poetic strategies of self-definition. This trope of a voided female tradition ... both petrifies and curiously enables the contemporary woman poet'.¹ As outlined in the introduction, within the sweep of historical immigration to the United States (and elsewhere), female voices from any country are rarely heard and superficially represented.² The poetry of Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley explores the complex ways in which, as female Irish migrant poets, they are simultaneously limited and liberated by the occlusion of women from the narratives of migration. As female poets, their poetry does not appear subject to the same expectations of ethical reinvention seen as pressures for male poets, particularly Wall and Delanty.

Vona Groarke's experience characterises the essentially temporary condition of the contemporary global citizen and her poetry conducts a dialogue of complex reconfigurations of identity, affiliation and history in a post-national world. Her volumes *Juniper Street* (2006) and *Spindrift* (2009) engage key concerns borne out of personal migrancy while only occasionally averting to a larger frame of migrant remembering. The instability underpinning her writing derives from a 'destabilisation of temporality and territory' inherent in the post-national condition, and the psychic impact of migration retains its potency precisely because of that destabilisation.³ Sara Berkeley's permanent repositioning to the United States ostensibly represents a more traditional mode of emigration but straightforward dichotomies of geography prove unsustainable in her poetry. Berkeley's reliance on a poetics of water underscores a profound distrust of land-based modes of representation, leading Berkeley to a post-pastoral aesthetic in her writing that is, itself, an act of reinvention. Both Berkeley and Groarke's careful stylistic strategies are the product and the practice of contemporary migration.

In these poetics of migration, memory becomes associative rather than instructive, and is seconded to formal purpose. Catriona Clutterbuck notes in her essay 'New Irish Women Poets', how the generation emerging since the late nineties (including amongst others, Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey and Colette Bryce) 'through their recharging of Irish poetry's signature focus on the theme of fractured inheritance and belonging, attend in a revitalised way to the ghostliness-cum-materiality of history and the self'.⁴ Female migrant poetry shows the residue of historical emigration at the same time as it reinvigorates that experience, and the poetry of Groarke and Berkeley situates that 'recharging' as a revitalisation of the migration paradigm. Ailbhe Smyth's comment that 'Irish poetry criticism is (still) hyper-concerned with questions of myth and history, with national and cultural identity ... poems which do not nourish these critical concerns are considered as either not really Irish, or not really poems' can be read as part of the contemporaneous movement away from restrictive codes of poetic belonging in which both Berkeley and Groarke participate.⁵ For contemporary female migrant poets, the jaded criteria identified by Smyth are not a priority, but instead themes such as history, myth, and individual (if not national or cultural) identity are reinvented. This reinvention is undertaken not in the interrogatory manner of the generation of women poets of Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and Ní Dhomhnaill, but rather with subjectivity enabled

by the previous generation's active reconfiguration of alternate modes of myth, history and identity in Irish poetry. Groarke and Berkeley's inheritance of their predecessors' negotiations with imposed criteria is realised in the way their poetry is released from a representative responsibility.

Balancing the complex, intensive experience of migration with subjective creative values, Groarke and Berkeley demonstrate the extent to which inherited themes have been superseded by individual aesthetics. By engaging, and personalising, metaphors of water, both poets transmute the physicality of migration into profound reflection on what it means to reside as a poet, as a woman, as a mother, as a citizen and as an alien in present-day society. The refraction cast onto older land-based tropes by these water metaphors allows a certain empowerment through the implied rejection of the established mode of Irish poetry. Sara Berkeley's post-pastoral and ecopoetic perspective is particularly subversive in its engagement with the land, while Vona Groarke's shifting central metaphor from settlement to the sea undertakes a similar act of personal and poetic emancipation. By reconfiguring terms, such as post-national, migrant, Irish and home, the poetry of Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley pursues alternative routes for contemporary Irish women's poetry, and for the poetry of migration.⁶

'I MEAN IT AS NO ORDINARY RETURN':

VONA GROARKE IN AMERICA

In interview in 2008, in response to a query about the transatlantic nature of her life and writing, Vona Groarke describes how her forthcoming collection *Spindrift* has 'an introductory section of poems [written] in Winston-Salem, mostly about the idea of being at home'.⁷ *Spindrift*, published in 2009, and its predecessor *Juniper Street* (2006), emerge from a period of living and working in the United States. Since then, Groarke has relocated to Manchester where she is currently based, her collection *X* published to critical acclaim in 2014.⁸ Shifting centres of gravity characterise her poetry from an early stage, however, suggesting an original imprint of dislocation that is more subtle and pervasive than immediately obvious. Groarke's poetry illustrates how her increasingly migratory personal circumstances precipitate the condition of a destabilised self in *Spindrift* and *Juniper Street*, a self that is continually in the process of reinvention. Erll's critical distinction between the dual roles of memory *in* literature and *as* literature is evident in Groarke's

poetry, which is possessed by the quality of residue that speaks of a recessive memory not always fully retrieved but nevertheless present.⁹

The opening poem of *Juniper Street* is entitled ‘Ghosts’ (one of two poems sharing this title in the volume). Groarke’s poetry is haunted by an abstraction and loss that elude description. ‘Ghosts’ captures the imprecision of something amiss that can’t be pinpointed.

Not exactly. Something like the breath on your cheek
or an aftertaste of summer, years ago[.]

Juniper Street, 11.

The hesitancy of the diction signals the poet’s impulse to reinvent and the concomitant uncertainty of a language that shirks from committing fully to an alternate diction. The qualifiers—‘not exactly’, ‘something like’, ‘I don’t think so’—reject inheritance but fall short of complete reinvention. Coupled with Groarke’s mediated and interrupted imagery, these semantic qualifications suggest a fractured memory that, in using reinvention to forget, also struggles to remember. The uneasy tone that continues throughout the volume is borne out by the fact that nothing is what it seems; moments are shadows of older experiences that have been lost or left behind, involuntary memories that surface in sensory snapshots.

one,
two metallic notes with the cadence of a name;
silverfish throwing your reflection off a beat.
Or a peony petal blown off your path.

Juniper Street, 11.

‘Ghosts’ also establishes an ongoing theme of (un)familiarity that dominates the poet’s migrant collections—of things recognisable but not quite known.

Related to the odd sensation of being part of, but still outside, a community, the disjunction between reality and recollection induces gothic resonances to these poems of layered memory. The stunning final image of the ‘ghosts’ delivered through the children’s breath in winter air aptly evokes an ephemerality of memory:

They breathe ghosts into January
 that stand for the split second it takes
 to take us in, and then they're off
 as though released, like figments of the air.

Juniper Street, 11.

The narration of suburban family life forms the backbone of *Juniper Street*, wherein spaces of familiar domesticity are reinvented by the strangeness of elsewhere. The eponymous poem of the volume implies the undesirability of the modification from its opening lines, where even nature appears unnatural: 'We go to sleep by artificial moonlight.' There is no consolation of a shared sky or of looking at the same moon in this place where light and dark are forged by technology. The whirling intensity of this strange place is borne out by the 'wind's plump elevated arch' and the 'dawn's blindsided glaze'. Nature plays arboreal tricks by night, performing for the family in the morning: 'just last week, the icicle tree at our door / was in full bloom. The breeze made a show of it.'

Changing seasons bring new rhythms to the inner life of the poem. Out of the prolonged slowness of winter, with its aurally leisurely lexicon of 'room', 'glaze', 'bloom', 'drooped', March comes with action and speed, 'opening and closing, like a valve'. Single-syllable words accelerate the stanza as spring deliberately marches to a fresh beat:

Snow-melt in the gutters keeps new time,
 ice slurs on the lean-to, the Swiss Alps
 of the swimming pool drape over our own roof line[.]

Juniper Street, 52.

The residential landscape depicted through the poem's invocation of its paraphernalia—'the floodlight stadium', 'the swimming pool', 'the ticking flagpole', 'the trash', 'the laburnum school bus'—creates a image of white picket-fence America, picture-perfect in its suburban somnolence.

The layered nature of Groarke's experience suggested here by 'new time' is made explicit in 'Northeast of Nowhere', where a similar suburban landscape is inflected with pioneers' discomfort. Like Eamonn Wall's *Iron Mountain Road* and, in different ways, Muldoon's *Madoc: A Mystery*, Groarke's poem remembers the indigenous heritage embedded

in the land in which the family, as ‘new adventurers, wary’, settles. The space is simultaneously modern (its ‘gardens abloom with / styrofoam and ply’) and primitive (for ‘the road’s not tarred / and the dust gets everywhere’), again alluding to the dualities that coexist in Groarke’s aesthetic. By drawing on the American settler tradition and calling up its defining feature, the prairie, the poet nods to the historical heritage of her migrations and also calls up the narrative of dispossession in which the reinvented self participates. Outside is vaguely unsettling, and so the family ‘keep to the house, / have time on [their] hands.’ The isolation of elsewhere is suggested in this innocuous phrase, and again, more directly, later, as the poet confesses:

We don’t know where we are,
though twice lately, we used the phrase
‘a life thought better of’

like flat-packed shelves
that had to be returned
on account of too many bolts,
too much daylight.

Juniper Street, 45–46.

Groarke’s careful form offers heightened detail observed with the intensity of an outsider’s eye. The short lines and brief verses are arbitrated by assiduous punctuation: in the above stanzas, minimal punctuation opens out the statement into a musing that enacts a structural echo of the ‘time’ the poet has on her hands. In contrast, the opening stanza is terse and conjunctive, the caution of initial impressions captured by the conditional atmosphere engendered by the comma, the colon, and the semi-colon.

We’re all the same here:
new adventurers, wary,
mortgaged to the hilt;
gardens abloom with
styrofoam and ply.

Juniper Street, 45.

The silence of suburbia in the absence of children is an image that arises in Irish poetry in the United States. Eamonn Wall portrays the

‘bright yellow buses of the future’ that spirit the life away for the duration of the school day.¹⁰ Eamon Grennan meditates on that time in his poem ‘Pause’, describing it as:

the weird containing stillness of the neighborhood
just before the school bus brings the neighborhood kids
home in the middle of a cold afternoon: a moment
of pure waiting, anticipation, before the outbreak of anything.¹¹

For Groarke, once her ‘children’s on the run / goodbyes settle on the porch with [her] unplanted kiss’, she is alone, ‘queen of the morning: nothing to do but to fiddle / words’. This belittling of the poetic act and her dissatisfaction with ‘tired metaphors’ of rain recall the limitations of language of ‘Ghosts’. The responsibility of reinvention here is more than a thematic device; rather it is mapped across the creative process, speaking to an anxiety surrounding the impact, value and legacy of poetry throughout Groarke’s work. She describes her craft in similarly disparaging terms: ‘I tinker with knives and hours / / and one strand of your hair’, the flippancy of the verb ‘to tinker’ belying the transformative potential of poetry to turn words into art. Underpinning much of her work is a distrust of the ability of poetic form, even while retaining its lexical and formal integrity, to render lived experience into language. ‘What do I ask?’ she ponders in ‘Beyond Me’, voicing an ethical anxiety around the poet’s role. Her answer, ‘[t]o make something of these lines / extend to you’, exposes the act of creation as primarily an undertaking of reinvention and secondarily a gesture of community. The line-break carries the ideological weighting, conveying how the poet is immediately occupied with the craft, and only latterly with the audience.

The poet seeks a balance between delineation and delivery, and this preoccupation with meaning and authenticity leaves the poet exasperated with the allusive nature of poetry. In ‘The Sunroom’ Groarke declares ‘I’m through, I think, with metaphor. The sunroom / floats nowhere, there is no other version of this.’ Her desire to reinvent is complicated by the jaded quality of language that serves only to restrict rather than renew. With characteristic circumspection, the interpolation of ‘I think’ qualifies the poet’s intention to abandon allegory. Her expressed despair at the dualities of meaning implies weariness not merely of the poetic act but of a lifestyle predicated on a divided existence. Lamenting the loss of a lingua franca in *An Teach Tuí*, she longs for cultural as well as poetic fluency:

If I knew how to fix in even one language
the noise of his wings in flight

I wouldn't need another word.

Spindrift, 50.

The contradictions here are revelatory: the interconnections of memory, creativity and reinvention meet in the seam of these lines. In its essence, poetry is an act of re-creation that relies on memory. That the mode of expression eluding the poet seeks to recount the sound of the bird's migration hints at a deeper insecurity surrounding the poet's own ability to address the peregrinations of her life.

'Away' (1) is one such attempt to make sense of her bilocation, in which she confesses there are '[h]ours I'm not sure where I am'.¹² In tightly regulated unrhymed tercets, the poet reaches for structural control by prioritising the personal pronoun. In placing the self at the helm of each statement, Groarke maintains a syntactical rigour that belies the emotional turmoil of the narrative. The initial image moulds memory as a form of solace, conducting a synchronicity across space and time that dissolves the distance between past and present:

I paint woodwork the exact azure
of a wave's flipside
out the back of Spiddal pier.

Spindrift, 14.

The specificity of the matched colour binds the speaker's present setting to the place of treasured memory, and the particularity of the remembered detail. Like Wall's 'Election Day' and Bernard O'Donoghue's 'Any Last Requests', the act of suburban DIY in 'Away'(1) is a self-soothing gesture that consoles while it asserts exclusion. Difference is lodged in the most fundamental of daily actions:

My faithless heart ratchets
in time to slower vowels,
higher daylight hours.

I grow quiet. Yesterday
I answered in a class of Irish
at the checkout of Walgreen's.

I walk through the day-to-day
 as if ferrying a pint glass
 filled to the brim with water

that spills into my own accent:
 pewtered, dim, far-reaching,
 lost for words.

Spindrift, 14.

‘Away’(1) progresses from a gentle assertion of presence in a new country—‘We have our own smallholding’ the opening line declares—to a recognition of the irreconcilable sense of the dislocation and marginalisation of migration. The specificities of language, or more precisely of accent, are flagged here as a definitive marker of exclusion, as what Colette Bryce refers to as ‘the shibboleth / *haitch*’ in her poem ‘A Simple Modern Hand’.¹³ The ineluctable differentiation lodged in accent cannot be easily dissolved or painted over—‘slower vowels’ are as inextricable as the sun in the sky, and there is no opportunity for reinvention here. Where Greg Delanty defiantly reaches for a local communal diction, Groarke’s speaker is steadily silenced, and the poem’s final image presents the speaker carrying her dislocation as an overflowing glass that deadens language. Later, in ‘The Small Hours’, the speaker chastises herself for verbosity—‘I talk too much; give far too much away’—as if language by its very volume, not to mention its content, can betray.

Form, however, can offer refuge to the poet, and formal strategies are also acts of literary memory. Groarke’s generation of poets are often ‘loosely (if not always accurately) associated with formal conservatism, even with a new formalism’ in Fran Brearton’s phrase.¹⁴ Including with Justin Quinn, David Wheatley, Cairíona O’Reilly and others, this ‘post-national generation’, as Quinn describes them, are ‘formalist or experimental as the mood takes them’.¹⁵ Groarke’s poetry is always tight and precise and, while she is not as committed to tricks of form as perhaps Wheatley or O’Reilly, the structural choices of her poems consciously sustain her themes as her themes reinforce the form. The caution embodied by the speaker carrying an overflowing glass is reiterated by the three-line stanzas that burst forth and then halt, each one a thrust of overspill before the self-check of the stanza break.

In ‘An American Jay’, the exquisite 64-line *terza rima* is humorous and harrowing by turns, its metrical momentum enforcing the onward emotional march. Groarke remembers the Dantean structure and then

reinvents it in a global capitalist setting, where ‘the pre-Thanksgiving clear-out at K-Mart’ hooks on the satellite broadcast of ‘an Anglophile mid-morning with the Kumars’. Rhymes such as ‘e-coli’/‘ukulele’, and ‘Drink and Dial’/‘tikka and dhal’ are amusingly lighthearted, as is the narrative of the tribulations of teaching metrics to creative writing students who think their tutor either ‘quaint or just plain odd’. Beneath the comedy, however, lurks a dark disillusionment with the vacuity of living, and of being, always, on the periphery, looking in.

I am too old for this. I feel like some hoary, washed-up hoojah
on the edge of that funfair, waiting for the carousel
to jolt into life like a wound-up hummingbird or jay[.]

Spindrift, 16.

The transience of migrant life that contributes to this peripherality heightens Groarke’s awareness of universal impermanence and, throughout her poetry, houses, histories, memories, relationships and identities share a common instability. *Other People’s Houses* (1999) uses the house as a cohesive trope, constructed as repositories of human history and relationships.¹⁶ Shane Alcobia-Murphy perceives a ‘nostalgic longing for communal identification’ in Groarke’s investment in the house, an identification which transmits and incubates memory by its very materiality.¹⁷

The symbol of the house is carried forward into later collections, but its stability is undermined; fragile and crumbling, houses become subject to ravages of time that even bricks and mortar cannot withstand. From *Juniper Street*, ‘Windmill Hymns’ documents the slow decay of living, using an analogy of corrosion to denote the personal damage sustained through life.

How long before the wood
lets itself down on willowherb that finds itself at bay in shuttered
light;
before the doors give up the ghost; the floors shrug the way
windows
cannot bring themselves to do[?]

Juniper Street, 12.

The evolution of the imagining of the house in Groarke’s work concurs with a changing cultural conception of houses in post-Celtic Tiger

Ireland. If in 1999, the year of *Other People's Houses*, houses equated to community, by 2006 and *Juniper Street*, the voided character of ghost estates is increasingly present. This altered perception of the house as a symbol suggests the evolution of memory, and corresponds with an emerging body of literature that reconfigures suburban domestic landscapes as deserted, discordant and disturbed.¹⁸

The house in 'The Return' is a similarly voided space, haunted not by its incompleteness but by absence, a house once inhabited and now abandoned. Like Mahon's 'A Deserted Garage in Co. Cork', the vague traces of life are perceptible, but in Groarke's poem her speaker personally possesses the loss. The structural change to the physical house 'still comes as a surprise', but the 'bricked-up door' signifies more than mere home improvements; rather it suggests the irretrievability of the past. 'I know this house', the poet claims, 'I wrote our summer here', but like the door and the past, her 'words [...] closed over years ago'. The poet is herself 'a half-hearted ruin' in a wreckage of yesterdays.

The losses accrued through the passages of time and migration are also losses of memory. The erosion of physical monuments intimate the lapses of memory—the speaker's assertion 'I know this house' is as much a command to receding memory as an interjection of recognition. On one level, the poet tries to construct the remembered past as offering a sanctuary in unfamiliar places and times, that can be accessed as in 'The Undercurrent':

[a]nywhere. So long as there's a flicker of sea,
a far-fetched train, a lighthouse nodding off
between tea-time and that moment when
your father brightly takes you by the hand[.]

Juniper Street, 17.

The opening assertion of 'anywhere' is immediately contradicted by the highly specific elements necessary to retrieve the childhood experience. Memory is flawed and unreliable, and the way back treacherous. 'You'll need a tiller's hand to steer this through', Groarke admits in 'To Smithereens', a reverie that delivers her back to the same place, 'as always / one fine day. August 1979. A sunlit Spiddal beach.' Yet the frailty of memory as a bank of history, knowledge and experience is clear and even 'the sea loses memory / in midland shallows'. Key historical events are obscured by the vagaries of personal recollection—the IRA killing of

Mountbatten reduced to ‘words like *rowboat, fishing, smithereens*’—while ways of life are lost like ‘a foxtrot or an old-time waltz / that nobody, but nobody, / recalls’.

One of the key post-national features of Groarke’s poetry is her lack of interest in collective national narratives. That history is not an abiding concern for her refutes the perception of Irish poetry, written both on and off the island, as obsessed with the past. In fact her work, empty as it is of community and, by extension, history, correlates with the concerted disassociation of writers and poets from both the idea and the island of Ireland since the 1980s. For this generation and this poet, it is evident that questions of national and ideological unity have been superseded by universal issues of globalization and isolation. Groarke’s rare historical poems take an ethical stand and reject the possibility of objective truth by emphasising the bias involved in any reportage. In ‘Parnell’, the poet equates the manipulation of history with the public’s mispronunciation of the politician’s name, implying that any ‘truth’, even the truth of one’s name, is mutable. By complicating ‘fact’ with multiple narratives, Groarke splinters the myth of a national history. ‘The Game of Tennis in Irish History’ is a suitably disingenuous title for a poem that probes the methods and flaws of historical memorialisation. History itself is ‘a holding game, put down to delivery, / service skills, to foot faults or to where advantage lies’. Donald E. Pease suggests that, in the post-national consciousness, ‘the hegemonic narrative of the nation-state has been dismantled’, and it’s clear that, in Groarke’s work, all versions of national history are palimpsestic and subject to the vagaries of memory and perspective.¹⁹

Remembering, and forgetting, has its price but also its rewards, and the collusion of memory and language as cultural currency is not unnoticed by Groarke. ‘It is a matter of inflection, of knowing what / to emphasise, and what to let drift away’, a truism as pertinent to poetry as to history. This idea is perhaps also Groarke’s reflection on the necessities (and difficulties) of assimilation. However, as Stuart Hall recognises, ‘migration is a one-way trip. There is no home to go back to. There never was.’²⁰ The traditional migrant dream of *nostos* is unrealisable, for myriad reasons, not least because the home-society cannot accommodate the migrant’s peregrinations. The poet perceives how in ‘The Local Accent’:

all the words for elsewhere
or for being there have had their edges worn off
and their meanings powdered to a consonantal darkness[.]

Juniper Street, 18.

These lines imply an intrinsic native hostility to ‘elsewhere’; a refusal to accept or acknowledge that ‘being there’ has any role in the story of this town. This tunes into a primal distrust of the unknown, but it also speaks of the animosity experienced by returned migrants towards their experiences abroad. While Groarke’s allusions are philosophical, they resonate with existing research on accent and exclusion in Irish society: ‘the close association between belonging and voice means that return migrants can disappear into an imagined white Irish majority, through processes of silencing and invisibility’.²¹ The potency of pronunciation as a signifier of belonging and exclusion resurfaces in ‘Athlones’:

at the point where more than accent
slips between *at one* and *alone*,

washing up against the urge to be,
at last, *at home*, pacing over paths
that cast off as I do, in a bed of words[.]

Juniper Street, 23.

The river Shannon running through the heart of the midlands dictates the cadence of the poem and the town. Athlone, ‘wracked on a river’, is defined by its relationship to the water that must be ‘taken in hand’ and ‘kept in check’. Yet the river’s influence seeps into the light that’s ‘lured away’, becoming liquid as it ‘tinkles down through Northgate Street’.

If Groarke’s early writing is preoccupied with places, houses and histories, then it can be argued that her migrant collections engage with the subject and vocabulary of water. This trend amongst female migrant poets of engaging water as a deliberate alternate aesthetic is teased out in more detail in relation to Sara Berkeley’s work, but Groarke’s work similarly moves towards a poetics of water, demonstrating a reinvention of her early delineated, grounded metaphors towards increasingly ephemeral reflections. In her careful observations of transitions—cultural,

geographical, personal, familial and poetical—her aesthetic comes to be located in border-spaces, on the fringes and peripheries of land and lake, sea and sky. Poems walk on the shoreline or along the riverbed in *Juniper Street*, while the very title of *Spindrift* places the collection in the fine spray rising off the waves. Such is the nature of post-national experience that all borders are fluid, all territories tenuous, and Groarke's poetry comes to rest in these sites of temporal and spatial mutability.

Liminal physical spaces in Groarke's poems point to the experiential hybridity of migration, a reality heightened by technological cross-cultural communication. Letters to and from America are at the centre of the Irish narrative of emigration, and while the epistolary form might be almost extinct in the 21st century, precious words from home are no less valued. Theorising the dominance of digital media in interpersonal migration communication, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller propose the term *polymedia* to encompass email, Skype, instant messaging and text messaging.²² The polymedic modes of technological contact in Groarke's poetry are also seen to feature prominently in the poetry of Justin Quinn and Conor O'Callaghan.²³ The opening lines of 'Love Songs' speak to the anticipation of an unopened email, and the promise of its contents:

Your email shimmers
in my inbox.

Here are your words,
inestimable, smooth
to my fingertip,
as though, by touch,
they could be made
to open a chink more.

Spindrift, 48.

There is an erotic tone to the language, a tactile physicality that struggles to defeat the insubstantiality of technology. As Madianou and Miller point out, 'Email is not simply email: it is defined relationally as also not a letter, not a text message and not a conversation via webcam; which, in turn, is not a phone call'.²⁴ Groarke's poetic parallels draw on sensory memory of older, more visceral modes of engagement in order to substantiate

the experience of new media. In her repeated use of possessive pronouns to create an intimacy between sender and receiver, Groarke engages the typed words on the screen as so intensely related to the writer that they might be aroused to response by the poet's touch. The possibility of response is minimal, however, aspiring only to 'a chink more'. Likewise, the electronic glow of the mobile phone receiving a call is transformed into a moment of natural joy; but again the locution undermines the aspiration, the word 'flare' evoking danger or emergency rather than delight:

The flare of the mobile phone
in my hand
is an outcrop of sunlight[.]

Spindrift, 48.

The theme of communication runs throughout Groarke's work, as does a preoccupation with distance and with the limitations and possibilities of polymedia. These recurrent concerns are key themes of contemporary migration, for it is not the *absence* of communication but the mutual *limitations* of that communication across time zones, countries and cultures that troubles. Relations are mediated by 'the transatlantic time lag, five hours on pause, / silting so much of what there is to say'. Groarke's elemental awareness, especially her fixation with water, is borne out of (and balanced by) a necessary reliance on, and despair with, material culture. A poetics of water and rain, via sea, river and lake, is repeatedly invoked, despite the poet's awareness of its limitations and deceptions. 'Trapdoor' challenges the 'serenity' of the lake's surface, declaring '[i]t fools no one'. In 'Rain Songs' the poet dismisses the 'ancient rain, all grimace and sequins', its 'monologue of petty grievance' and 'its tired metaphors', while in 'Spindrift' the ocean refuses to participate in her simile: 'the colour of the sea today / is nothing like the name / of any colour / I can think of.' Nevertheless, the physicality and immediacy of the elements is comforting, especially in contrast with the abstraction of 'Away' (2), which sums up the incubated separateness of a migrant life.

I babysit by Skype
breakfast to their lunch,
lunch to their dinner.

Spindrift, 26.

The disjunctions between home and ‘home’ compound the emotional severance of the poet’s separation from her family, the slippages of time speaking to the fundamental disruption of familial custom. In the failure of linear time, the poet is trapped within widening circles of imitation and inauthenticity. The cold reproduction of her children’s image, yet another counterfeit in a world of falsities, is transformed by a tactile expression of love—‘I touch their silky faces on my screen’—an imaginative leap that is the more poignant for its impossibility.

This crushing image of isolation reinforces the high price exacted by technological communication. Unlike earlier emigrants, who reimagined and reinvented their homeplaces, here the migrant is continually exposed to representations of what she is missing. The consolations of memory are unavailable as ‘reality’ is constantly refreshed. The horror of being left out, of relying on online cameras to depict her children’s lives, is summed up in the final stanzas of the poem:

where I Skype and Skype
and no one answers,

where I Google Earth to see
if the world namechecks
this morning

my son’s bike in the garden,
my daughter’s skirt
on the line[.]

Spindrift, 26–27.

While the substance of the migrant experience has changed utterly, its core of isolation remains intact. Groarke’s poetry recognises the differences, embodied in the tools at the modern migrant’s disposal—‘a borrowed cellphone ... like a spray of fireflies’, ‘the streetlamp of [her] laptop’, ‘the flare of the mobile phone’ as it ‘baubles now and then’—that can reach across distance. These devices have predefined limits, however: the pool of light cast by the ‘streetlamp and the brevity of a ‘flare’ are circumscribed rather than expansive, and certainly are unsustainable. The fundamental isolation of migration, and its associated loss, loneliness and estrangement, persists through the consolations of technology. Even the grunt of the fridge motor is transformed into ‘the engine of a great ship’,

calling up the vessels that transported her emigrant ancestors across the vast Atlantic for weeks and months at a time.

Finding herself strung between two places, Groarke's American poetry depicts a self stranded at 'the spot in the ocean / that's just as far from one home as the other'. In self-consciously describing herself as a 'remnant envoy / to a province of depleted relevance, outlying home', the poet acknowledges the obsolescence of such representations. The limited use of these traditional tropes flags the poet's reluctance to actively participate in reworking emigration narratives, her ethical responsibility discharging itself in the poetic act. Yet by admitting the shared truths at the heart of all migration, Groarke's poetry, and the poetry of her contemporaries, is important for the ways it contributes to narrating the evolution of emigration. Poetic journeys take place across many levels, and geographical peregrinations form part of the profoundly layered story of poetry and migration. Through her journeys of 'no ordinary return', Vona Groarke's poetry forms its own seam in the complex stratigraphy of contemporary Irish poetry.

'LAYING HOLY MILES BETWEEN MYSELF AND HOME':

SARA BERKELEY'S ECOPOETICS

Given the distance in both miles and years from Ireland, Sara Berkeley's collections *Strawberry Thief* (2005), *The View From Here* (2010) and *What Just Happened* (2015) are understandably neutral when it comes to expressions of national or cultural affiliation.²⁵ This ambivalence can be seen, however, to stretch back to her earliest work, *Penn* (1986) and *Home Movie Nights* (1989).²⁶ As Kathleen McCracken observes in her 1989 review, 'Berkeley's work charts conscious and unconscious territories, but what is surprising is that these landscapes rarely correspond to her native Ireland [...] The intention is neither to probe nor define a cultural identity.'²⁷ Berkeley's poetry is concerned with the characteristics of the landscape rather than with the inhabitants, and ecological and environmental concerns particularly underpin her later volumes. In veering away from identifiably Irish poetic concerns, Berkeley distances herself from the national literary tradition. When familiar motifs such as place, heritage, memory and loss do appear, her poems push away from collective expression, using instead a determinedly individual voice. Her engagement with the landscape is less influenced by *dinnseanchas* than by ecopoetics, and her interest is in bodies of water rather than the history

of the land. In this manner, Berkeley re-envision the landscape of poetry through her retrieval of alternate and ecocentric poetics.

The possibilities of water offer a means of circumnavigating the masculine topographical tradition of poetry rooted in Ireland. By diverging from the established norm in various ways (gender, location, subject)—and engaging a metaphor of water rather than earth—poetic and thematic spaces are opened out in which diverse experiences may be positioned. The element of water is manifestly appropriate for female migrant poets in America, not least for its resistance to the grounding affect of traditional Irish poetry.²⁸ Its inherently feminine principles of fertility and fluidity propose alternative modes of engagement, while the significance of water to the migrant consciousness retains its historical relevance. The transatlantic journey has defined the flow of emigrant traffic to the United States for generations and even in the era of easy air travel, the symbolic significance of crossing the ocean retains its power.

While the Atlantic separates, it also connects the two shores and water is the binding element that links the land-masses. The mutability of water means its shape is defined by its boundaries: shorelines form outlines and coasts offer contours to an otherwise amorphous element. Similar to the ways migrants are bound to drift between home- and host-lands, the fluctuations of water are measured by its interactions with local terrain. The cultural, social, historical and communal characteristics of the land define and dictate the migrant's relationship to the new society as well marking his/her negotiations with the place left behind. Oceans and seas have a particular significance in the divided migrant consciousness, but other bodies of water are also meaningful, especially in a contemporary suburban American context. The image of the lake as a pleasure-place, a site of retreat and recuperation, reaches back to Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), offering immersion in an all-American existence. Its symbolic function as a repository of time and history is problematised by the lake's stagnant passivity, however. Rivers, on the other hand, are linear progressions through time, space and place, and propose another series of symbolic significances for female poets moving beyond existing paradigms. Berkeley's ethic of reinvention rejects limiting topographical memory frames and instead recovers alternative sites of memory in which she situates her poetry.

Through the mediated prism of photographic memory, Berkeley intimates the appropriated nature of her central imagery. Black and white

photographs frame Berkeley's volume *The View from Here*, acting as imagistic prompts that participate in the collection's remembering of the social significance of water-scapes while also inveigling themselves into the reader's cognitive memory of reading the volume. The opening image captures a small jetty on a still lake, with distant houses reflected in the water's surface while the final image shows a rusty boathouse on the shoreline, with its jetty stretching into water that fades, borderless, into the white of the page. In bookending the volume with visual reminders of its central element, Berkeley nods to the structural and thematic importance of water in *The View from Here*. Whether in man-made or natural bodies, water figures throughout; indeed she goes so far as to confess her infatuation in 'Swimming Pool':

I have fallen for water,
a silky bolt of it
rolling and unrolling under the heavy sky.

The View from Here, 20.

The banality of the suburban pool-side setting is transformed into a scene of mythic import, charged with power and profundity. The poet sees her 'kneeling by the water / a makeshift altar', in an offering of the self. The elemental purity of water heals as, in harmony with the sun and the trees, it 'breaks life down to its simplest concerns'. The setting invokes a Mediterranean location with the 'sun slanting through the olive tree'. The final verse transforms the girl into Persephone.

If I did not have her
there would be no more summer
and the darkness would not go
with the night.

The View from Here, 20.

If Persephone is the daughter-figure, then the poet is Demeter, and this is surely a conscious allusion, considering the poet's environmental and ecological concerns. Elsewhere, in 'Carrying', Persephone reappears 'among the wild iris and the blue-eyes grass; she filled her basket, she was overflowing', while Demeter engages her archetypal emotions, coming to understand her 'own mother's sleepless nights / and the fury of her love'. The retrieval of the Persephone myth here surely owes a debt to

Eavan Boland's 'The Pomegranate' as well as to inherited versions of the Greek and Roman stories.

As an allusion, Berkeley's remembering and reinvention of Boland's poem operates on multiple levels of memory. 'The Pomegranate' is a poem of motherhood, of loss and of inevitability.²⁹ It is also itself an act of repudiation—the poem refuses to remember Cathleen Ní Houlihan as the female archetype in poems of mythology within the Irish tradition. Boland's retrieval of memory that lies outside the parameters of Irish myth is central to her ethic of reinvention, as asserted in both her prose writing and within her poetry itself.³⁰ The enabling influence of Boland's poetics for subsequent generations of Irish women poets is harnessed in Berkeley's poetry, which retains Boland's memory practices, not only in its mythic principles but also in the way the younger poet engages inter-generational anxieties along expressly female lines.

The complex, evolving dynamics between mother and daughter pre-occupies a number of poems, as reflected in this deceptively harmonious couplet from 'Carrying', a title that services the weighty reciprocity of the relationship:

we carry our daughters until they are too light to bear
then we carry our mothers; they are heavy as air.

The View from Here, 15.

Berkeley's personal journey of motherhood occupies her poetic thought, with poems marvelling at the wonder of her growing child. The balance of independence and need, of individuality and inheritance embodied in the young girl enchants the poet.

I never thought
eight would be so fragile,
so delicate, so robust, such a synthesis,
a symphony, a gallery full
of astonishing art. For my part,
now and then,
I see where I held the brush.

The View from Here, 23.

The daughter is a precious creation but possesses a force of her own, a force that is almost otherworldly at times, 'one whom 'the fairies number

[...] among their own'. Here in 'The Business of Rain', the daughter becomes elemental in her own way, embracing the rainstorm as 'she opens the windows, / she opens all the doors, / [...] / and she bursts upon the great outdoors'. As for Eamonn Wall and his daughter, the synchronicity between the child and nature reconfigures the poetic relationship with physical and emotional landscapes. In Berkeley's poetry, it engenders reflections on the substance of nature in terms of universal human experience. The element of water dictates the lexicon of poems such as 'Dark Summer Days' and 'Approaching Eight' that transfigure the difficulties of growing up into metaphors of voyage and expedition. The daughter's books and toys become 'the bowed and weathered instruments of her navigation', her strength 'driving up like a mast through the sea foam'. The precariousness of life's journeys, even at this early stage, is pronounced.

In fragile possession of her course
and her short set of ship's orders
she steps bravely out with me onto the burning waters.

The View from Here, 19.

The lure of the water, despite its dangers, is perceptible to both poet and daughter, who knows 'how scary, / that moment when the oar / rode up, what a relief / to make it back to shore, / how tomorrow you want more'. The solo journey on the water is a kind of rite of passage, an Odyssean trip across the ocean with dangers lurking beneath the surface. The ocean's charm seduces the poet in 'Heart's Desire', tempting her to relinquish her worldly worries through immersion.

She rocked me back and forth
with the small swell of occasional boats
and I sank my head into her muffled reedy world[.]

The View from Here, 22.

For Berkeley, water tantalises with offers of escape—declaring 'all roads lead to the sea'—while remaining elusively untameable and unattainable: 'they don't belong to me, the snatches / of blue sea between the winded trees'. Steering a way through unfamiliar spaces defines Berkeley's journeys in poetry, and 'the bowed and weathered tools of ... navigation' chart a course that is unfailingly precarious. 'Azimuth' considers the urge

for exploration, its title a technical term principally used in navigation or astronomy. An azimuth is the measure of the angle of the horizon's arc and, as well as establishing a motif of charting routes, the title also continues the undercurrent of nautical references, emphasising the poem's central theme that draws on, and ultimately dismisses, man-made land maps. Like the titular parallax of Sinéad Morrissey's 2014 collection, the angle of the azimuth is dependent on the position and perspective of the observer. By centring subjectivity through mathematical and astronomical concepts, Berkeley imposes a deliberate stamp of individuality that rejects any implication of articulations along collective or national lines.

The distrust in hegemony is extended by again invoking the senior female poet Eavan Boland; her poem 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited' is referenced through Berkeley's depiction of the unreliability of plotted demarcations on the page.³¹ The stasis of sketched lines is anathema to the changing scapes of the migrant's journey: 'I am going on alone / through towns redrawn since we were young.' In this *unheimlich* place, maps prove no guide. But where Boland seeks the stories hidden between contours, Berkeley refuses the atlas entirely. 'We are much farther north than we ever meant to be' the poem confesses, a statement that reveals the folly of following the map as well as a deeper conviction of not belonging. The poem resorts instead to the body, to nature and to the vocabulary of water as trustworthy alternative coordinates. The mutability of maps in 'Azimuth' reinforces Berkeley's belief in the fundamental flux at the heart of human experience that is best expressed through fluid metaphors of water.

On my hands river veins, maps of the years,
hands that anointed you with oils,
sandalwood, jojoba, lavender for rest.

The View from Here, 34.

The narrator's confidence in the lines of her hands, and the easy synchronicity between water and body, contrasts sharply with the ensuing stanza's difficulty in articulating the inner life.

But how to express—I need my mother tongue
for this—*l'étrangeté*—strangeness of the ghost
who walks alone inside my shoes.

The View from Here, 34.

The formal stutter brought about by the caesurae echoes the emotional content of the difficult lines, lines that reach for an other language to express themselves. The 'strangeness of the ghost' draws on ideas of the *unheimlich* and the foreigner, which refract Berkeley's personal experience as an emigrant. The multiple selves of the exilic subject can't help but engender psychic crises of identity, suggested here in linguistic inadequacy and expressive limitations. Personal and cultural alienations are tightly woven, and the paradoxical urge for familiarity as well as distance is expressed towards the end of the poem: 'I ride the same train every afternoon / laying holy miles between myself and home.'

The sense of the uncanny infusing the poet's observations defines her relationship to these foreign places. Peculiarities in nature are eerie and foreboding, at times threatening to disrupt the natural order as she understands it. 'There are bees at the flowers in December. It is not right / to live like this down here in the half-light.' These disturbances are distressing to her instincts, an affront to her understanding of how the world works. Berkeley's expectations are challenged by this foreign climate, and she perceives a catastrophic aspect to these natural digressions, anticipating the deluge. '[I]t's never rained like this before / at Easter. Where the colours should be pale yellow, pale blue, they are an unremitting slate'. This tarnished land is an alien place, full of suffering and distress. The strangeness she perceives is, on one level, borne out of her outsider status but the poet is equally concerned with the profound damage to 'the robbed earth' that translates across cultures and countries. Berkeley's ecopoetic approach equates the environmental and seasonal disruption with insidious ecological and social devastation. 'Absolution' develops those connections between personal and public crises, indicting both herself and society.

I'm at the low-water mark
and I want the journey back.
I sold it, or someone stole it,
and now those same little birds
with the bleeding throats
can hardly sing their way past
the dark stain of hunger, the loneliness.

The View from Here, 63.

The limitations of birdsong are also the limitations of poetry, for 'there aren't even adequate words for it / down here in the wreckage'.

Post-apocalyptic images invade Berkeley's poetic view of 'the parched earth'. Reflections on endings and deaths, on how 'the flowers starved, / the streams ran dry', and the sound of the wind which 'rolled through the cottonwoods / like labour pains' are scattered throughout her work, even in poems espousing hope.

In its title, 'Absolution' points to the possibility of pardon and its final lines are an act of faith in 'the world turning constantly from depletion / towards forgiveness, absolution'. Berkeley offers a prayer for release that is Beckettian in its recognition of the cyclical stasis of existence: 'I want to come to the end / of coming to the end, / begin again / as through there had never been / that sparse, underfed exhaustion.' These lines, and the poem's earlier invocation of birdsong, water and spring, also call forth Brendan Kennelly's poem 'Begin' with its opening encouragement to '[b]egin again to the summoning birds / to the sight of light at the window'.³²

Aspirations of fresh starts are linked to prospects of escape in Berkeley's aesthetic. The suggestion of incarceration brought about by the poet's prayers for release is accentuated by multiple mentions of exits and escape routes. The possibilities of water resurface in 'A Thousand Letters' where 'all roads lead to the sea', whereas '59th Street Bridge' proposes alternate methods while stressing that 'the time for flight has come'. With 'escape routes inked on our palms', Berkeley is urgent in her need to break away from this uncanny place which is both utterly strange yet troublingly familiar.

It isn't mine, the grey road,
that wanders on down to the point
[...]
They don't belong to me, the snatches
of blue sea between the winded trees,
the painful greens, so like home,
the milk trucks lumbering by with their payload.

The View from Here, 28.

Wes Davis proposes that Berkeley's 'poems of memory and loss link her to a longer poetic tradition than first glance might suggest', and this can also be perceived in the bereft quality to her writing.³³ An awareness of the past and its extinct possibilities enthralls Berkeley, as she ventures back to junctions to lament what might have been lost. 'I wish I

had built more fences / taken down more fences' she keens in 'Meals for Friends', a poem that laments and rejoices life in equal measure. Like the *Cailleach Beara*, the speaker rues the onset of old age while acknowledging the joys of her life. 'Everything I needed to remember / has been remembered; everything I yearned to forget / is lost.' Trust in the natural order trumps human expectation, hopes revealed as foolish when 'the ocean gives its undivided attention'. Yet for all the nonchalance, the final line suggests the vulnerability of the human condition and offers little consolation as the last reflections of an aged narrator in asking 'what matter now / when the heart has proved such a porous vessel for love?'

The presentation of fragmented and devastated individual lives highlights the ecopoetic impetus behind Berkeley's poetry. Along with a heightened sense of the uncanny, this disorder permeates Berkeley's perception of the natural world, an awareness intensified by her migrant status as well as by her eco-consciousness. At the core of Berkeley's poetry is a post-pastoral aesthetic that sees human culpability in the devastation of the earth's natural resources. Through this lens, the significance of water in her writing is more than a poetic device of self-liberation from migration and national narratives; the post-pastoral speaks out of an ethic of responsibility to larger environmental and ecological concerns. While the traditional pastoral mode, especially in the Irish tradition, uses nature as a means of redeeming history or violence, or as a unifying tribal motif, Berkeley's poetry refuses distinctions between nature and culture, treating both as a single integrated system. Historically the pastoral is concerned with landscape, countryside (in opposition to city) and idealisation; the specifics of post-pastoral ethics differ in kind. Arguments have been made for (and against) the consideration of prominent Irish poets, including Heaney, Longley and Murphy, as writing in an ecopoetic or/and post-pastoral mode.³⁴ It is worth noting also the emergence of ecofeminist criticism that considers post-pastoral traits in a gendered context, especially in Adrienne Rich's poetry; this approach is particularly illuminating with regard to the work of Moya Cannon, Medbh McGuckian and Mary O'Malley, as analysed by Donna L. Potts and James McElroy.³⁵ Ecofeminism provides another interpretative dimension to Berkeley's work although this analysis is less concerned with gender than with post-pastoral elements in her writing. A post-pastoral approach allows contemporary migratory poetry to move beyond 'a preoccupation with place as an unseverable aspect of self' to address universal environmental issues which Berkeley views with ethical and poetical urgency.³⁶

The post-pastoral mode makes place discrete from identity and nationality by creating a universal language of environment rather than landscape, of quality rather than criteria. Berkeley's post-pastoral perspective complements her water aesthetic, by allowing the poet space to probe her environment without being ideologically bound by or to it; the post-pastoral mode effectively enables the poet to reinvent the terms of poetic engagement with nature. In *Pastoral* (1999), Terry Gifford examines the six defining characteristics of the post-pastoral mode, and demonstrates how the range and scope of a post-pastoral approach. It is particularly for a poet who has purposely removed herself from familiar surrounds, thereby allowing herself to absorb the world anew. Gifford's elements include: awe of the natural world; acknowledgement of a 'creative-destructive universe'; seeing 'inner nature as outer nature'; accepting 'culture as nature' and vice versa; a sense that 'with consciousness comes conscience'; and an understanding of exploitation of nature as on par with the exploitation of human beings.³⁷ Each element features in Berkeley's work, some more prominently than others, but all to such a degree as to warrant considering Berkeley's poetry as post-pastoral. This appreciation of nature as divine is evident in the tellingly-titled 'You Don't Have to be Mary Oliver to Write a Poem about Geese':

This is my church. I come here to worship
at the feet of redwoods and squirrels and monarch butterflies,
at the hem of the soft blue cloak of the sky.

The View from Here, 27.

Berkeley's disavowal of Mary Oliver, pre-eminent American poet of the natural world and her earnest poetry of 'droll metaphor', betrays insecurity around Berkeley's own attraction to the natural environment and how that might be received. In trying to un-remember Oliver's poetry, Berkeley's anxiety about the possibility of reinventing nature in poetry is clear, in both Irish and American contexts. It is significant that Berkeley expressly addresses American cultural memory, implying the poet's self-positioning within the literary narrative of her adopted country. The imagery of her poetic journeys focuses, with heightened clarity, on the destination rather than on the origin of the journeys, origins which remain blurred and out-of-focus, like memory receding beyond retrieval. Aesthetically, and ideologically, Berkeley is more interested in

the landscape of her new surrounds than the imprint of a past place; her ethic of reinvention obliges her to persist with and rework the inherited trope of nature imagery. Her sense of awe at the 'radiant storm of light and sound' finds its language in religious wonder, realising 'every day is holy, full of miracles'. In conceiving of life as 'a ceremony, simple among the redwoods, / each of us in our own shaft of celestial light', Berkeley is inspired and humbled by the magnitude of nature and, by extension, human experience within the natural world. 'I bow down before her, I give her all praise and blame' she announces in 'This I Take With Me'.

Awe-inspiring as nature is, Berkeley is also acutely aware of its creative/destructive qualities: the balance of power between affirmation and devastation forms the central imagery in numerous poems. In documenting the cyclical thrust of nature, Berkeley recognises her own minor role within that system: 'I am part of the pattern / that time makes lovely and destroys.' In her writing, the potential for growth leads inevitably to the prospect of demise and the poetry accepts the symbiosis between life and death. In every act of nature, both possibilities exist, as when 'the heavy drops beat the tulips down / into their final embrace with life'. Rain is simultaneously life-giving and damaging, the flowers both dependent on and subject to the vagaries of rain. The uncontrollable, double-edged aspect of nature and its 'moons and moods' features throughout Berkeley's poetry, creating an atmosphere of apprehension and unease at times in her work. The sense of a looming power hangs over the poems, like 'trees in the river's mirror, / ... almost there', casting shadows across even the positive narratives.

Reflections of other kinds also feature, as internal personal experience is externalised in nature. The dialogic exchange between human and natural expression positions itself with ease, as the poet flits between physical and emotional modes of articulation. Seasonal shifts are given individual characteristics: 'Fall, obediently grey with rain, hugs the car' in 'Smoke from Oregon Fires', while in Feet First 'the days ached to be longer / and the dawns fired up blue in our veins'. The poet conceives of herself as constituent of the earth, longing to be rejuvenated and thereby redeemed by natural cycles. She declares, 'Come spring, after the long months / of slumbering I want my life / to unfurl again, transcendent green'. Furthermore she longs to be released into the environment at death, acknowledging the cyclical structure of life that sees the body return to the earth and the spirit survive in nature.

and when it is done
 they can scatter me among the Mexican Gold,
 the fire poppies and columbines,

and who knows:
 tomorrow I may still be alive,
 still dancing.

The View from Here, 62.

The idea of nature as performative and as a work of art is central to the post-pastoral mode; for Berkeley, it is tied in with a sense of awe. She refers to the 'endless concert hall / of the ocean floor' and 'the flurries of winter birds / drawn in crayon against a wayward sky'. In 'Golden Temple' she constructs a delicate image that is as visual as it is verbal, nature functioning both as subject and backdrop.

We may walk, arm in golden arm,
 across the fractured canvas of this place
 toward the perfect dome
 while light from a primitive source
 begins to write the surface of the Khan[.]

The View from Here, 32.

The simple synchronicity between landscape and human figures creates a harmony that tempers the at-times menacing tone brought about by the creative/destructive nature within Berkeley's poetry.

The destructive capacity of humanity is also alluded to in Berkeley's work, although she shies away from an explicitly didactic approach. Her poetry shies away from responsibility for the world's degraded condition as presented in her work, and this is perhaps the least relevant post-pastoral element in her writing. That said, the damage wreaked on the earth is made clear, and she draws implicit parallels between human and ecological suffering.

It was a time of deprivation,
 hunger, the trees doing without their leaves.
 I went down on my knees; it seemed
 to be the place to be.

The View from Here, 48.

Arboreal deficiencies are aligned with individual afflictions, and the earth's hurt is equated with an intensely personal pain. This anthropomorphism lends an eerily human aspect to the world, blurring the boundaries between the sentient and the scenic.

The world had never bled so much
 [...]

 The wind rolled through the cottonwoods
 like labour pains; I had to wail aloud.

The View from Here, 48.

The cyclical pattern of the pastoral mode centres around retreat and return. This depends on a separation of urban and rural, and on a distinction between home and away. It requires the concept of arcadia that is missing in post-pastoral literature, since post-pastoral dismisses those necessary divisions. Nevertheless, the discourse of retreat figures in Berkeley's poetry at an ideological level; *The View From Here* uses retreat as a post-pastoral poetic device, in that the volume itself is presented as a perspective from elsewhere. The poet is careful to establish her outsider-status, and this position is used to explore alternative realities and possibilities.

On a personal level, Berkeley's relocation to rural southern California signals a retreat from her urban Dublin roots, while thematically, the way her poetry moves away from material and cultural early concerns towards the ecocentricism laid out above is, in itself, an act of withdrawal. Her act of retreat also chimes with her urge to disassociate from Irish canonical poetic concerns, and with the way she prioritises water over land as an integral motif. Berkeley's poetry can be read as escapist and renunciatory, without the pejorative implications of these terms. As Gifford suggests, '[a]gainst necessary notions of roots, neighbourhood and community, there is another necessary impulse towards retreat, renewal and return. This is the circle of post-modern mobility.'³⁸ This ongoing dialectic is consciously espoused by Berkeley, particularly in the way she counterpoints roots with renewal, as in 'Park Bench, Queens: 'some distance from the fork in the road / I turn and look the way I have come, / step by step away from my last home.' Even 'home' is temporary and renewable, the insinuation of 'last' as 'most recent' rather than 'final' suggesting that there will, in time, be a *next* home. Memory reinvents and rejuvenates itself as it anticipates the future as well as preserving (or

forgetting) the past. Expectations of America as an urban, industrialised alternative to an idealised Ireland are reinvented entirely. By avoiding migrant dichotomies, Berkeley creates a poetry that slips between categories, especially within an Irish poetic paradigm. As McCracken notes in an early review, Berkeley's landscapes 'rarely corresponds to her native Ireland', even in her first volumes written in her home country. This urge to disassociate from Ireland continues throughout her poetry, coming to full expression in her latest volumes.³⁹ The post-pastoral aesthetic perceptible in her work enables Berkeley to intentionally distance herself, both physically and poetically, from the idea and the actuality of Ireland.

NOTES

1. Anne Fogarty, "The Influence of Absences": Eavan Boland and the Silenced History of Irish Women's Poetry,' *Colby Quarterly* 35, no. 4, December (1999).
2. Patrick O'Sullivan, ed. *Irish Women and Irish Migration* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995); Dorothea Schneider, 'The Literature on Women Immigrants to the United States,' *Actes de l'histoire de l'immigration* 3 (2003). The phenomenon of the silenced female is a common issue in classic histories of American immigration, which Schneider (2003) argues are 'incomplete accounts because throughout women are almost entirely absent from the story'.
3. Erica Mena, 'The Geography of Poetry: Mahmoud Darwish and Postnational Identity,' *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self Knowledge* VII (2009): p. 112.
4. Catríona Clutterbuck, 'New Irish Women Poets: The Evolution of (In) Determinacy in Vona Groarke,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): p. 654.
5. Ailbhe Smyth, 'Dodging Around the Grand Piano: Sex, Politics and Contemporary Women's Poetry,' in *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-century Women Poets*, ed. Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997): p. 76.
6. A version of this chapter was published as an article entitled "I mean it as no ordinary return": Poetic Migrancy in the poetry of Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley,' *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies* 13 (2013): pp. 45–63.
7. Vona Groarke (in interview with Jillian King), 'A Brief Interview with Vona Groarke,' <http://wfupress.wfu.edu/An%20interview%20with%20Vona%20Groarke.html>.

8. Vona Groarke, *X* (Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 2014). Other recent publications include *Selected Poems* (Co Meath: The Gallery Press, 2016) and a personal essay entitled *Four Sides Full* (Co Meath: The Gallery Press, 2016).
9. Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. Sara B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
10. 'The Debt-Collectors' in Eamonn Wall, *The Crosses* (Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2000).
11. 'Pause' in Eamon Grennan, *Relations: New and Selected Poems* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1998).
12. *Spindrift* contains two poems entitled 'Away'. For the purposes of clarity, I have appended (1) to the poem appearing on p. 14 of *Spindrift* and (2) to the poem appearing on pp. 26–27.
13. Colette Bryce, *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* (London: Picador, 2014).
14. Fran Brearton, "The Nothing-Could-Be-Simpler Line": Form in Contemporary Irish Poetry,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, eds. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): p. 360.
15. Justin Quinn, 'The Irish Efflorescence,' *Poetry Review* 91, no. 3 (2001): p. 46; David Wheatley, 'Irish poetry into the twenty-first century,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): pp. 250–251.
16. Vona Groarke, *Other People's Houses* (Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 1999).
17. Shane Alcobia-Murphy, 'Safe House: Authenticity, Nostalgia and the Irish House,' in *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture*, eds. Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006): pp. 107–108.
18. As early as 2006, David McWilliams coined the term 'ghost estates' for the proliferation of unfinished housing developments in under-serviced and peripheral regions in Ireland with little to no demand for increased residential units. With remarkable prescience, in a blog posted on September 30th 2006 he warns that 'these ghost villages, like our famine villages, may stand testament to a great tragedy which, although predicted by concerned observers, was never fully appreciated until the morning the crops failed.' See <http://www.davidmcwilliams.ie/2006/10/01/a-warning-from-deserted-ghost-estates>. For literary reflections on the post-Celtic Tiger landscape see Colm Barrett, *Young Skins* (Dublin: Stinging Fly Press, 2013); Tana French, *Broken Harbour* (London: Hodder & Staughton, 2012); Donal Ryan, *The Spinning Heart* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012); William Wall, *Ghost Estates* (Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2011).

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