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Of Silences and Snow: Forgetting and Remembering the Troubles in New Poetry from Northern Ireland

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Abstract: "The Troubles," an internecine conflict between Catholics and Protestants, raged in the north of Ireland from the late 1960s till 1998, claiming 50,000 casualties in riots, police brutality, paramilitary bombings, and assassinations. In its wake, poets from the region, including Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson, reflected on the conflict in poems such as "Punishment" and "Belfast Confetti." The Blackstaff Press anthology, *Poets from the North of Ireland* (1979), brought many such voices together, serving as a site where poetry confronted trauma, inscribing the Troubles into cultural memory. On the other hand, Blackstaff's more recent anthology, *The Future Always Makes Me So Thirsty: New Poets from the North of Ireland* (2016), seems keen to leave the Troubles as subject matter behind. The anthology's avoidance of Troubles memories—explicitly represented in only two of 116 poems—is the central problematic that this paper will explore. This literary forgetting is particularly curious given the overabundance of mnemonic constructs in the cultural fabric of the North. After historicising the Troubles and discussing the peace process—in particular, economic change and its reflection in the anthology—this paper will read the seeming eschewal of Troubles memories as a tacit and unacknowledged remembering. Drawing on new materialist philosophy, in particular the notion of "affective assemblage" growing out of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I suggest that repressed Troubles memories are encoded and inscribed into material, spatial, and affective dimensions of the poetic texts under consideration. I read the anthology as part of a broader network of memory—an assemblage of heterogenous elements, where memories, matter, and affect interact, and leave their traces in semiotic as well as material elements of the book. I shall focus on four sites of inscription—spaces, bodies, animals, and mood—that encode and bear witness to the trauma of the Troubles even as a new generation of poets explicitly distance themselves from the

incendiary circumstances and divisive political rhetoric of the past. Focusing on key poems by Paula Cunningham, Caoilinn Hughes, Stephen Sexton, and others, the paper shall explore a spectral poetic landscape of snowfall and ruined cathedrals, hospitals and radioactive burns, fallen sparrows and stalking panthers, suggesting that even a strategic and transformative politics of forgetting leaves materially, spatially, and affectively embedded traces.

Keywords: *The Troubles*, *Northern Irish poetry*, *Affective assemblage*, *New materialism*, *Conflict studies*, *Memory studies*.

Introduction

This paper closely reads a recent anthology of Northern Irish poetry, *The Future Always Makes Me So Thirsty: New Poets from the North of Ireland* (henceforth: *New Poets*), published by Blackstaff Press in 2016, attempting to explain the curious absence of the Troubles—an ethno-nationalist conflict that raged across the North of Ireland from the late 1960s to 1998—as explicit subject matter for poetry. By contrast to its previous landmark anthology, *Poets from the North of Ireland* (1979), which foregrounded the conflict, the Troubles seems to have disappeared from the poetic horizon of Blackstaff's recent collection. This seeming act of literary forgetting is even more curious when set against the overwhelmingly mnemonic cultural fabric of Northern Ireland—a place marked by "memory wars" (McBride 221) over the Troubles. Through political murals, parades, bonfire nights, sculptures, museums, storytelling workshops, remembrance projects, to a consociational form of government that is itself a "mnemonic construct" (McBride 212) *lieu de mémoire* proliferate in a region marked by, if anything, *too much* remembering. Given this overdetermining culture of memory, how do we account for the fact that only two of 116 poems in the Blackstaff anthology explicitly depict the Troubles? Beyond the obvious explanation of a deliberate, politically-informed editorial choice to leave a conflictual past behind, I suggest in this paper that the seeming absence masks what is better understood as a tacit presence—a persistent kernel of remembering, albeit hidden in materially instantiated traces. This

presence, I suggest, marks an emergent effect of an affective assemblage—a concept emerging from the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, further developed by Manuel DeLanda and others. Decentring both authorial intent and editorial intent, I suggest that memories of the Troubles circulate as part of an assemblage of heterogenous elements, where memories, matter, and affect interact to produce traces in the symbolic landscape of the poems.

The first half of this paper historicises the Troubles and the post-Troubles peace process, taking a detour into how economic realities in post-conflict Northern Ireland are reflected in *New Poets*. It then describes the "memory wars" in Northern Ireland, theorising them using new materialist philosophy. The third section of the paper traces the spectres of the Troubles—understood as an emergent property of an affective assemblage—through a scrutiny of select poems from the anthology, suggesting that memories and postmemories of the Troubles are inscribed into material, spatial, and affective dimensions of the poetic texts. Closely reading key poems by Paula Cunningham, Caoilinn Hughes, Stephen Sexton and others, the essay will find traces of the Troubles embedded in four sites of inscription—spaces, bodies, animals, and mood.

Since this paper is informed by memory studies, I should clarify from the outset that both direct, first-hand memories of the Troubles and what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemories" (22) are inscribed into the anthology. The median age of the poets in 2016 (the year of publication) is 36.4 years. Even the youngest poets, Padraig Regan and Kiera McGarry (both 23 years old in 2016), lived through five years of the Troubles (albeit much of it after the ceasefire of 1994), while the eldest Irish/Northern Irish poets, Paula Cunningham and Maureen Boyle (53 and 55 respectively, in 2016) lived through the entire thirty years of the conflict. On average, the poets experienced 17 years of the Troubles, most first-hand, some (since immigrant poets are included in the volume) only through international news and media. Thus, while for most of the poets the Troubles was a lived experience they have adult memories of (the median age of the poets in 1998 being 18.4), for

the younger amongst them, the intergenerational trauma of the Troubles is better described in Hirsch's terms as "postmemory", which

> is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation […] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth. (22)

Before historicising the Troubles, it would be useful to briefly review the existing scholarly work on how Northern Irish poetry remembers the conflict.

Literature Review

There is quite extensive scholarship on Troubles poetry produced *before* the ceasefire (Ormsby, "Ulster"; Brearton). Ormsby and Brearton's works are overviews that discuss how different poets reflected on the sectarian violence in different ways. Both of them stress how the poets struggled with the expectation of being representative war poets, often responding in oblique and deeply personal ways to the Troubles, attempting to retain artistic freedom and integrity. There is also some work on the Troubles as reflected in post-conflict poetry (Alexander; Gamble). Interestingly, Neal Alexander's thesis is almost the opposite of my own. While I detect a politics of forgetting at work, at least in the particular anthology I am studying, Alexander, reading recent work by poets such as Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian and Sinéad Morrissey, finds a "preoccupation with memory in poetry published since the Agreement" (2). Where he finds the poets "at odds with … accession to the global capitalist economy" (3), I find a consonance between the rhetoric of economic growth in post-conflict Northern Ireland and the glamorising of commodity and consumption in many of the *New Poets*. It should be noted that,

on average, the poets I discuss in this paper are much younger than the poets Alexander focuses on. Miriam Gamble's findings on post-Troubles poetry are closer to my own. Closely reading poetry by Leontia Flynn, Alan Gillis, and Sinéad Morrissey, Gamble traces a malaise underlying the "surface glitter" (669) of post-conflict society in their poetry. She, too, traces the representation of "the wheels of consumerist capital" (673), though she suggests that these poets are less than at peace with a merely economic reconciliation in the North. Gamble outlines a sense of identity crisis in these poets as they attempt to come to terms with a changing Northern Ireland. The specific anthology I study in this essay has also been looked at, albeit briefly, by Anthony Bradley. He outlines an optimistic orientation towards the future in *New Poets* in line with my own findings, arguing that the anthology frames the North as the "location of a lively internationalism and the centre of a thriving poetic that is just the opposite of the dreary provincialism long associated with the place" (95). While there is extant work in this general area, this essay addresses a research gap by applying theories from the materialist turn in memory studies to examine remembering and forgetting in contemporary Northern Irish poetry.

The Troubles

Rooted in the legacy of British rule, "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland, spanning from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, emerged from political, religious, and social tensions between Protestant and Catholic groups. While Catholic nationalists largely favoured the secession of Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland, the Ulster Protestants—descended from British settlers—demanded the region remain part of the United Kingdom. Discrimination against Catholics fuelled resentment, leading to civil rights protests that escalated into violence. The deployment of British troops in 1969 heightened tensions, leading to the formation of paramilitary groups like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Over the next three decades, "routine patterns of rioting, assassinations and bombings" (McBride 208) were established. Paramilitary groups employed various methods, including bombings of buildings, car bombings, and shootings. Atrocities

were committed by both parties, with Bloody Sunday (1972), where British soldiers opened fire on unarmed civil rights protesters in Derry, and the Omagh bombing (1998), carried out by the Real IRA, remembered as some of the worst. The conflict led to approximately 3,700 deaths and at least 47,541 injuries, putting the Troubles' human costs at par with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Breen-Smyth 244).

Literature, especially poetry, became a culturally prominent medium for thinking through The Troubles. Works by Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, and Michael Longley—labelled "the Belfast Group" (Clarke 43)—Derek Mahon, Ciaran Carson, Tom Paulin, and others, reflected on the conflict's emotional and historical dimensions (Brearton; Ormsby, "Ulster"). Heaney, for instance, reflects on the horrific practice of tarring and feathering carried out by lynch mobs in his poem "Punishment." Meanwhile, Ciaran Carson would vividly depict the war-torn streets of Belfast in his "Belfast Confetti," a poem relating conflict to poetic form:

> Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining
> exclamation marks,
> Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type.
> And the
> explosion
> Itself — an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated
> line, a burst of
> rapid fire… (Ormsby, "Poets" 197)

However circumspect these poets might have been about acting as representative "war poets" (Brearton 222), due in part to their relative privilege and the ethical quandary of accruing poetic capital out of human suffering, it must be conceded that responding to the conflict consolidated the international reputation of an entire generation of poets, (Brearton 227), and that their work contributed to, and to an extent prefigured the peace process (Heaney quoted in O'Driscoll 122-3). Understandably, then, Blackstaff Press's 1979 anthology, *Poets from the North of Ireland*, would squarely foreground the Troubles. In a non-exhaustive list of

Troubles poems in the anthology, one might mention Seamus Heaney's "The Tollund Man," "The Other Side," "A Postcard from Antrim," Padraic Fiacc's "Soldiers," "The British Connection," "Enemy Encounter," "Intimate Letter," Michael Longley's "Wounds" and "Peace," Seamus Deane's "A Burial," "History Lessons," and Derek Mahon's "The Spring Vacation" and "The Last of the Fire Kings," as poems that foreground the Troubles context quite clearly.

The Troubles ended with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, ushering in a power-sharing government and demilitarisation. While sporadic incidents persisted, the agreement marked a significant reduction in violence, offering hope for a more stable Northern Ireland. The next section explores the nature of this peace, and how the Troubles are remembered in peacetime.

The Peace Process

Economic Growth

Since the end of the Troubles in 1998, Northern Ireland has seen some economic growth, driven by factors like increased foreign direct investment (FDI), government initiatives, and the promotion of tourism. Between 1997 and 2007, the economy grew at an average of 5.6% annually while unemployment decreased. After a setback during the 2008-2009 global recession, the economy recovered between 2013 and 2019 (Archick). The peace agreement attracted inward investment, fostering growth in job creation, technology, and R&D (Northern Ireland Department for the Economy). Graham Dawson describes the new Belfast emerging from this economic base, describing

> the regeneration of the old, largely derelict commercial district and the opening-up of riverside walkways, the proliferation of new shops, bars and restaurants, and the promotion of Belfast's unique cultural heritage…visitors have been drawn into the city and the "normality" of free-market capitalism has been restored. (1)

Dawson is, however, keenly aware that these new, upwardly mobile pockets of Belfast co-exist with parts of the city that continue to be marked by sectarianism and underdevelopment.

A number of scholarly sources, albeit with their own vested interests, suggest that economic growth in Northern Ireland has played a role in maintaining peace (Archick; DPI 3), while others are circumspect—suggesting that post-conflict growth in the region has been less than equitable, creating conditions for the exploitation of unemployed youth by paramilitaries (Oloke and Byrn 17). Still others are outright cynical:

> Rather than a new ethical dispensation, Northern Irish society's reconciliation is an economic one, a reconciliation with the dynamics of a world system . . . whose only compass is the flow of capital around the globe…. In contrast to a popular will to end sectarian conflict, the state-sponsored aspects of the Peace Process—extending British "Third Way" capitalism westwards and the Celtic Tiger northwards [...] aim at establishing a wishy-washy and market-driven postmodern pluralism that actually serves to mask the real socioeconomic divides in our city… (Kelly 547-8)

While it is beyond the disciplinary horizons of this paper to evaluate the truth-claims of such socio-economic studies of the region, I am able to note that the economic growth of Northern Ireland is indexed in *New Poets* in a number of poems that are marked by restless energy and an ethic of self-transformation through consumption. At times, we see hedonism carried to an excess, leaving hangovers literal and metaphorical, haunting the reader with a sense of the emptiness of a merely economic solution to conflict. In other places, economic progress is marked by a rhetoric of globalised cosmopolitanism. I will briefly

discuss these tropes before returning to my discussion of the peace process and cultures of commemoration.

Economic Growth as Reflected in New Poets

One response in *New Poets*, then, to the repression of the Troubles context and its displacement by the late capitalist narrative of growth is the injunction to eat, drink, and make merry—to lose oneself in bacchanalia; a hedonism enabled by the resurgent post-conflict economy. In Padraig Regan's poetry, pleasure, and consumption are linked to liberation—of deterritorialised individuals from oppressive historical metanarratives; of queer desire from the shackles of heteronormativity. His vivid, often ekphrastic poetry combines homoerotic images of the male body with a discourse of hunger and thirst, as his world-travelling narrators go "flitting from bar to bar like honeybees" (20). Regan's poems reflect the discourse of sexual liberation emerging in an embattled queer movement in post-conflict Northern Ireland. In "Viande," for instance, an erotic painting of "pale, hard bodies" awakens a hunger in the speaker:

> Some days you can make do with mushrooms. Other
> days
> you eat until your stomach sulks & still your tongue
> wants to taste everything… (25)

The liberation of eros in Regan's poems is linked to patterns of consumption in a liberalised economy. The ubiquitous and flamboyant ampersand (&) in Regan's poetry, marks at the level of form the energy and artifice of a restless, never-fulfilled *and*. The "&" so common in his poetry is to me, a lexical echo of Belfast's many relatively new, postmodernist artworks, sculptures, and installations, particularly those that dot the shopping area (Victoria Square) in Belfast, as exemplified by the "Spirit of Belfast" sculpture, popularly called "The Onion Rings."

In Kierra McGarry's "Whale Fall," the death of a whale feeds and sustains an entire ecosystem, as its body is picked clean at the bottom of the ocean (102).

Two readings suggest themselves for Stephen Sexton's "Daydream of the Jacket"; both suggestive of a kind of commodity fetishism. In the more mundane interpretation, Mr. Carmichael wears a new jacket to the supermarket, and seeing himself in a new light on a reflective surface, experiences with a defamiliarizing jolt, himself as someone else. In another, science-fictional reading, a new, bespoke jacket with supernatural powers transforms the speaker into an altogether different person—Mr. Charmichael. In either case, the jacket is the site of a transformation.

In *New Poets*, brands—for instance, Adidas and Coca-Cola—are often named, and are presented (albeit sometimes with a hint of irony) as transformative. A Padraig Regan poem shaped like a tall glass of Coke ends:

> …all we want is a glass
> of Coke & the froth will
> taste like the beard of God.
>
> ("Poem on the First Warm Day of the Year," 29)

Regan brings out both the temporary thrill, and the absurdity of the capitalist "god" of consumption replacing—unsatisfactorily—the rebarbative Old Testament deity implicated in the Catholic-Protestant conflict.

Progress in *New Poets* is also indicated by broadened geopolitical horizons. In the anthology, a region formerly hamstrung by conflict somewhat anxiously indicates its global aspirations as it seeks to relegate its regionalist conflict to the backwaters of history. This, the poets seem anxious to declare, is a *new* Northern Ireland, of globetrotters and enthusiastic, all-embracing multiculturalists. Thus, poem after poem is set abroad—Spain, Italy, America, Sri Lanka, to name just a few—as young poets root/uproot themselves in a new, deterritorialised, globalised identity, espousing affinities and enacting affiliations with the likes of Japan, Germany, and even the Congo. "What if Elvis had taken to *my* mother," Miriam Gamble asks, in a somewhat fanciful poem ("On Fancying American Film Stars," 86). The anthology thinks through encounters with cultural Others: New Zealanders, Cambodians, and Asian tourists (newly encouraged to travel to a now-

peaceful region). Caoilinn Hughes finds it peculiar that New Zealanders and Americans look for Irish roots while touring the region and "link themselves to a thrice-removed/ history," "making up their own mythology with inverted vowel sounds" (52) while the Irish themselves forget their history. Finally, in an inclusive gesture of diversity, the "Irishness" of the anthology's authors is determined not by place of birth but by intimacy and familiarity: one-third of the poets canonised, the editors point out, were not born in Northern Ireland but have integrated into its poetic community after immigrating from places such as America, Bermuda, and England. The critic Anthony Bradley is hopeful about this cosmopolitanism and suggests it is more than tokenistic— "This is not a mere poetic tourism, but a genuine cosmopolitanism in which the Irish poet absorbs influences from another culture, whether through new ideas or experience living outside Ireland, or both" (92). Discussing *New Poets* specifically, he sees it as describing "a lively internationalism" (95).

These tropes of commodity fetishism and global interconnectedness are brought to their apogee in the final poem in the anthology—Emma Must's "Belfast Pastoral." Its significant positioning as the farewell piece to the reader, as well as government-funded videographed performances of the poem available on YouTube, suggest that it is almost a manifesto. Must paints Belfast in broad strokes of bright yellow and gold— "Our Golden Age is now," the poet writes. This is an ironic tribute to Yeats's use of gold in "Sailing to Byzantium" (to indicate the eternalising power of the cultured, artificed object) that collapses Yeats's distinction between golden age Byzantium and the degraded present. Must brings together the economic resurgence and celebration of consumption I have mentioned with an urban pastoral mode, in an enthusiastic, eulogistic poem:

> The parks are full. The Botanic Gardens over-brims
> with a festival of legs and arms, everybody
> sunning themselves on spread-out coats.
> We lick Twisters and, more of a mouthful,

> Rowntrees Fruit Pastille Lollies. We talk poems.
> And this is no longer the city you've read about. (214)

Having noted that memories of the Troubles are in many ways substituted in the anthology for a celebratory ethos of consumption and global interconnectedness, an ethos arguably imbibed into the poets' imaginary as much through their location amidst an affective assemblage—comprised of the visual and material cultures of a prosperous new urban landscape—as through conscious poetic willing, we may return to our appraisal of the post-Troubles peace process.

The Peace Process: An Uneasy Stalemate

While certain poems in the anthology are optimistic about the new Northern Ireland, critics have suggested that the nature of conflict resolution—if resolution there been at all—in Northern Ireland is less than perfect. Ian McBride has noted that the consociational, power-sharing form of government in post-conflict Northern Ireland is "the political embodiment of an entrenched stalemate rather than a mechanism for conflict resolution" (217). Describing the representation of this stalemate in the poetry of Sinead Morrissey (one of the editors of *New Poets*), Anthony Bradley writes, "Despite the peace, little has been resolved, as though the price of peace is stasis and the persistence of unresolved tensions in a peculiar nullity" (98). Scholarly findings suggest that Northern Ireland remains entrenched in various forms of segregation, with identity formation occurring along communal lines. Muldoon et al., in a 2007 study, suggest that "Despite the changes in the political landscape in Northern Ireland the survey evidence indicates the majority of both Catholics and Protestants continue to categorize themselves into one of the two main religious groups" (91). They conclude that "for the most part, national identities [in Northern Ireland] continue to be constructed as oppositional and negatively interdependent" (101). Furthermore, one study finds that

> for many [in Northern Ireland], the past remains an open wound. In 2011, researchers found that the region has the world's highest recorded rate of post-

> traumatic stress disorder. Nearly half of adults know someone who was injured or died in the Troubles. And more than three thousand murders related to the conflict are still unsolved. (Council on Foreign Relations)

Given this traumatic, recent, and as-yet unresolved history of conflict, it is no surprise that Northern Ireland is a space that remembers and constantly re-negotiates its past, often in mutually antagonistic and deeply divisive ways. Drawing out its conflict in memory cultures, to some scholars, "it sometimes feels as if the Troubles never really ended" (McBride 208). In fact, it seems that remembering in Northern Ireland is itself a form of conflict: "In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, the politics of memory has become war by other means" (McBride 212). Ian McBride has described this as "memory wars" that perpetuate "continuous low-level antagonism" (221).

Memory Wars

There is an extensive literature on the politics of memory in Northern Irish culture (McAuley and Braniff; Richtarik; Coulter et al.; Armstrong et al.; Smyth; Ferguson and Halliday; Leahy; MacAuley; Robinson). Drawing both on my personal memories from four years as a doctoral student in Belfast, as well as scholarly sources, I was able to compile a partial, indicative list that illustrates the profusion of memory practices that keep alive memories of the Troubles. I present this in compressed form here: i) murals ii) "peace walls"/"peace lines" (barriers separating loyalist and republican communities iii) Bonfire Night—an annual commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne that often takes violent forms iv) parades: McBride reports that a staggering 3,500 commemorative parades took place annually in Northern Ireland at the end of the twentieth century (210) v) statues, memorials, graves, gardens, and other sites of memory vi) prisons and prisons-turned-museums vii) museums—including the Ulster Museum in Belfast, with its haunting "Troubles and Beyond" gallery viii) projects, bodies, and storytelling practices—such as the Healing Through Remembrance project and the

Consultative Group on the Past ix) The arts—in poetry, drama, visual arts, plastic arts, music (songs like "Zombie" by the Cranberries and "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" by U2 are popular around the world), memoirs, fiction x) Miscellaneous: other forms of remembrance, including days of remembrance, memorial funds, educational initiatives, and digital archives, such as the "Accounts of the Conflict" archive of Queen's University, Belfast.

Memory Practices as Affective Assemblage

While these memory cultures or practices are comprised of numerous *lieux de memoire* [sites of memory], "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 7), and also exemplify what Maurice Halbwachs calls "collective memory," (38; McAuley and Braniff), I will apply more recent paradigms developed in the intersections of new materialism and memory studies to my analysis. Rather than treat the literary text as a closed system in which personal memory is a determining structure, it is rewarding to treat it as a nodal point in a rhizomatic network comprised of memories, bodies, objects, and environments—in short, what might be called an "affective assemblage." Although they do not use the exact phrase, "Affective assemblage" is a term that develops across Deleuze and Guattari's collaborative works, present in their work on Kafka (81-88) and developed further in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004). The concept is further shaped by Manuel DeLanda and Patricia Clough, the latter theorising assemblages of affect by linking memory, bodily trauma, non-organic entities, and complexity theory (8-13). In Deleuzian terms, *assemblage* connotes an "unstable coalescence of relations" (Fox and Aldred 195) comprising heterogenous elements—objects, practices, bodies, affects, discourses, environments, and memories—that are constantly in flux, interacting to produce effects that are not solely attributable to a single component. When such an assemblage carries *affect*—by which one means visceral emotional intensities with transmittable qualities, that are "relational and transpersonal rather than located solely in the interior individual subject" (Morley, Roberts, and Ota 768)—as an operative force, it might be understood as an *affective assemblage*. An affective assemblage comprises "relationships and processes between many

heterogeneous components—including material and immaterial bodies" (Carline, Gunby, and Murray 29). The ten components of Troubles memories I listed earlier are perfectly described as an affective assemblage—composed of a non-hierarchical set of relations between objects and spaces (such as murals and memorials), practices (parades, bonfires, storytelling, etc.), bodies (bodies of survivors marked by trauma; even bodies of casualties buried in graveyards and ritually remembered), affects (a "mood" of paralysis that characterises the region), discourses (reports, projects, studies, political rhetoric, etc.), environments, and memories. In such an assemblage, memory needs to be understood not as a purely psychological phenomenon, but as a materially inscribed agent with real effects. As Nick Fox and Pam Aldred argue, memory has material agency—it affects real and material decisions. Memories are *active*—they interact with bodies, environments, and objects—and are not confined to the mind of the individual. Memory resides in things and practices as well as in human consciousness, and non-human elements are participants in memory processes. The assemblage, then, is premised upon the "flat ontology" of new materialism that rejects differences between "natural" and "cultural," human and non-human, mind and matter (Fox and Aldred 2). In the "flat ontology" of new materialism, no single component—for instance, human consciousness—can be privileged in explaining emergent properties.

In this paper, the emergent property I am pointing to is the absent presence of the Troubles—tacitly inscribed into aspects of the poetic text: bodies, animals, moods, objects, and spaces. These need to be understood not merely in mimetic terms—as representations, reflections, or literary themes—but as a *residue*, comparable to a bullet wound or a piece of shrapnel lodged in the body of a casualty of the Troubles. Beyond a purely textual, representational space, the anthology is also a printed book—an object: one that has literally been inscribed (darkened, marked, inked) by Troubles memories. The printed book has a materiality that reifies Troubles memory—not only in the form of printed poems, but through elements of its design, such as its dark, gunmetal-coloured hardcover, or the

Tristram Shandy-esque dark, fully blacked-out page that Matt Kirkham's poem "A Museum in Negative" seems to be an ekphrasis of (191). This page, to me, is itself a *site of memory*, making physical and tangible the absent presence of Troubles memories, welling up, as it were, a traumatic recurrence in the unconscious of the anthology. These individual material components aside, the book itself is an object that circulates—I hold it presently in my hand in a hot, moist room in Kolkata as its images of snow trickle into me as affect; my students read it, learning about its contexts in my classes—in an assemblage; it continues to reproduce, reinscribe, reconfirm the memories its editors were keen to move beyond.

Forgetting as a Political Choice: The Editors' Intention

I am outlining, then, a tussle over the legacy of the Troubles within contemporary Northern Irish poetry. While the affective assemblage of Northern Ireland's memory practices embeds its traces in poetry, the editors of *New Poets* deliberately downplay them. As Sinead Morrissey and Stephen Connolly announce in the Introduction to the volume: "*New Poets* bucks the dominant publication trend of a long look back by focusing on the most recent of timeframes, in the belief that what is happening here, just now, is so special that it deserves a spotlight of its own" (back cover). While the past was marked by a loss of agency, this volume "announces a generation that is confidently poised to make the future its own" (back cover). This is then a deliberate political choice, embedded in a broader cultural moment shaped by neoliberal ideals, expressing as it does a faith in individual agency underpinned by recent economic expansion; an agency set against the dead weight of the past. Again, in the Introduction, the Editors write, "In this anthology readers will find very little poetry that is directly related in its subject matter to the internecine conflict that marked so much of the poetry written by Northern Irish poets in the decades after the 1960s" (14). They also frame the critical suggestion that Northern Ireland's poetry acquires poignance and international significance *only* through reference to a war as an "unsophisticated, if not increasingly irrelevant correlative to draw" (12). Instead, they suggest other

reasons for the high quality of poetry emerging from the region, such as a dynamic poetry culture and the importance given to place-specific poetry in school curricula.

Set against what might be considered this progressive and politically informed agenda of literary forgetting, I am hesitant to once again mire Northern Ireland in an incendiary and traumatic past through my own hermeneutics. Nonetheless, I am convinced that what I am calling the affective assemblage of the region's conflict memories has left its traces in *New Poets*—embedded in four sites of inscription: spaces, bodies, animals, and mood—and that this will be clear to anyone closely reading the poems. The next section closely reads select texts to make this case.

Traces of the Troubles in Four Sites of Inscription

Spaces

Unlike the other 114 poems in *New Poets*, there are two poems which *do* directly foreground the political, explicitly thinking through the Troubles context. In both these poems, the Troubles are inscribed into spaces—and both spaces are representations of actual spaces, thereby functioning as a hinge between symbolic and material, asking to be read through an affective-materialist lens. The first is "Geography and Sweetshops" by Paula Cunningham, which questions the arbitrary nature of borders by discussing a large house that lay on the border such that one may eat breakfast in Northern Ireland, and go to sleep in a bedroom in the Republic of Ireland (38). As such it highlights the arbitrariness and absurdity of political borders—which, while immaterial and abstract, have material and divisive real effects. The poem also remembers the conflict by depicting curfews, the wailing of sirens, home visits by police inspectors, and car-bombing threats. The other such poem is "Pacific Rim" by Caoilinn Hughes, in which the 12th of July bonfires of Belfast, which often led to sectarian violence, are depicted. The poet describes "Police vans with their implied apocalypse…/batons swinging by their hips," "ruptured pavements," and cathedrals spilling their bricks (59). This exemplifies how one aspect of the affective assemblage I have described—Bonfire night and

its embodied memories—has exercised material agency, inscribing itself into Hughes' poem. In fact, the speaker of the poem is, at the time of narration, located outside Northern Ireland, somewhere along the Pacific Rim, and is comparing the affective experience of expecting an earthquake to the affective experience of expecting violence on Bonfire night, revealing how memory is an embodied, affective experience that one may carry.

Bodies

Much of the violent imagery in *New Poets* is inscribed into bodies—by which I mean human bodies—and the particular images used are redolent of the Troubles, even though not explicitly linked to them. The anthology as a whole is rife with decontextualised images of horrific violence, reflecting a generation growing up with memories and postmemories of war/terrorism. Padraig Regan writes, "One day blood will fall as rain" (25), while in another poem he describes bruised heads and smashed church windows (26). Revisiting lines by Ciaran Carson, Caoilinn Hughes writes "The confetti falling from skies is shards of anklebone" (58). Scott McKendry describes a historical war: "the ignition of the powder," the "killing ball," and a dying person's "muffled smack" onto the floor (63). Stephen Sexton describes the moon looking "like melted bone, like something's severed limb" (79). While images of violence may not be unusual in *any* regional anthology of poetry, the particular imagery used in *New Poets* bears the characteristic hallmarks of riots and bombings: explosions, debris falling like rain, bruises, severed body parts, and burned skin.

Imagery of disease and illness are also bearers of Troubles memories. In Paula Cunningham's "A History of Snow," a young child survives a virulent, disfiguring disease, recovering slowly in a hospital while it snows, symbolising Northern Ireland's recovery from civil war. Snow is general in these poems, and is a way to allegorise the political stasis and stagnation in Northern Ireland following the Easter Agreement. Other ways in which the poets think about the lasting trauma of The Troubles include burns from radioactivity (Cunningham, "The Chief

Radiographer Considers" 46) and cancer growing in a petri dish after the host body itself dies (Hughes, "The Moon Should Be Turned" 53).

It is important to my argument that these images of injury, trauma, and disfigurement are not attributable solely to the poets' imagination, but to the material, embodied legacy of the conflict. The Troubles caused as many as 47,500 injuries (Breen-Smyth 244). A 2011 study highlights that survivors of the conflict need long-term medical and rehabilitative care (Breen-Smyth). The thousands injured in the Troubles are visible members of a post-conflict society, cared for in many specialised centres such as the WAVE Trauma Centre and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's Trauma Resource Centre. These individuals and these centres are part of the affective assemblage I have described, and the imagery of bodily injury in *New Poets* is an emergent property of a complex system.

Animals

Certain poems in the anthology seem to treat animals as metaphors. Troubles memories are implicit in Stephen Sexton's "On Betrayal." Sexton depicts a panther slowly stalking through a village in which a young girl seems to have betrayed her own kind (75). Rather than a literal animal, this is more a metaphor for the lurking threat of violence in a post-conflict society. This stalking creature, potentially alluding to W. B. Yeats's "rough beast" in "The Second Coming," causes a tension in the villagers that is expressed in terms of embodied affect— "making the village tremble/ behind each bolted, double-bolted door." In an Erin Halliday poem, "Not One of Them Falls," two adult male sparrows are squabbling over a nest—causing baby sparrows to topple out of the nest and die on the tiled road, thereby allegorising through animal metaphor, the intergenerational trauma of the Troubles.

Mood/Affect I: Paralysis

In a number of poems in *New Poets*, objects and spaces come together to powerfully suggest a mood of paralysis. My earlier mention of snow being general in Ireland might remind one of Joyce, whose *Dubliners* presents a series of pathetic portraits of stagnation and paralysis in early twentieth-century Ireland. *New Poets*

carries this mood—well described here as *affect*—pre-conscious, often embodied emotional intensities with an infectious aspect—of paralysis over into its pages. The editors suggest that images of snow are charged with a spirit of "restiveness" in these poems that reflects the political deadlock and stagnation in Ireland following the ceasefire. Thus, Adam Crothers describes snow as a kind of white noise: "This snow is no quilt of quiet, but the silver discharge of a feedback system" ("Refine," 117). Meanwhile, in a Padraig Regan poem, pedestrians struggle to find their footing on a pavement made slippery by compacted snow, while a young narrator is confined to a cafe ("Tracks," 30). Matt Kirkham describes the peace of a leaderless generation as a silent cathedral: "We are in a cathedral after the civil war, / counting our places, in the absence of saints" ("The Museum of Censorship," 192). In a Stephen Sexton poem about a locked-room mystery, a murder has been committed using a weapon made of ice that conveniently melts away—suggesting the unresolved traumas of a war put on pause; suggesting also killings and injustices during the Troubles that the peace process has invisibilised. These poems bring together symbolically charged objects and a particular, highly characteristic affect of paralysis. In this world of stasis, a young generation is fretting away—in "Elegy for Olive Oyl" by Stephen Sexton, an out-of-work Popeye allegorises the decline of the shipping industry in Belfast, and complains— "I haven't thrown a punch in years" (73), while in another poem restless, drunk youth "sallied in the streets like riderless horses" ("Anniversary," 78). While the youth seem to be almost chafing to throw a punch, adults learn the value of silence. Sexton's award-winning and much-appraised poetry might itself be described as a *mood*. He shares with Haruki Murakami an ability to conjure up an atmosphere of mystery that is sometimes melancholic but more often whimsical. This is the atmosphere of light jazz and rainfall, of inebriated perambulation through rain-drenched and leaf-strewn streets. This is the texture of magical realism, and I read Sexton as a postcolonial poet thinking through the intimately juxtaposed incompatibilities and disjunctions of a layered postcolonial reality through his magic-realist combination of the cryptic and the quirky. His response to postcolonial complexities is not irony as a distancing technique—what Jonathan Dollimore describes as "a rationale for

non-commitment" (xx) but an inviting irony that teases the reader like a locked room mystery, inviting interpretation.

Mood/Affect II: Malaise—Enforced Silences

The mood in *New Poets* is often one of discomfort or malaise, caused by an enforced silence. This reflects the way in which post-Easter-Agreement Northern Ireland has taught itself to repress sectarian discourse, to silence misgivings, and deliberately forget its past. An uncanny affect—reminding us of the Freudian "unheimlich"—results, exemplified for instance, in the mysterious doubles or doppelgangers cropping up everywhere in "The Strange Case of the Movie Star's Double" (83). Miriam Gamble's "Spring in Belfast" talks about buildings in the city hushing up uncomfortable silences: "plush layerings of plasterwork/ behind which silences repair" (87). A Scott McKendry poem voices an uncomfortable truth—the weaponry used by paramilitaries during The Troubles did not vanish—they were simply hidden, often in churches:

> And we are not blind, gentlemen. We have *seen*
> the pikes in the crypt; the muskets in the loft;
> the shafts fixed under the benches of the nave.
> ("Waiting for the Ionians", 68)

In a Stephen Connolly poem, the mere mention of the war makes an elderly priest's face retreat into inscrutable darkness:

> …He told me what I had
> to hear and I was quick to mention war, whereupon
> his boyish eyes receded far beyond the night.
> ("Another Exchange", 200)

A Miriam Gamble poem describes a Protestant's uncomfortable experience of buying potato chips—called Meanies—from a rough Catholic neighbourhood:

> You'd not want to be there when night fell, like,
> Or to tell him you're a Protestant

> Don't tell him you're a Protestant.
> But the Meanies and that are great.
> ("Macken's Van", 88)

To me, this poem squarely tackles the tensions between a new consumerist ethos that celebrates liberation through economic empowerment, food and drink, and the older identity politics.

Conclusion

We have explored through a series of close readings how an affective assemblage has deposited traces of the Troubles in *New Poets*, even while poets in the region increasingly take pride in "a sense of being postnational and post-Troubles" (Bradley 96). These traces are *products* of a material culture, exercising material agency. My reading is posthumanist in that it decentres the individual poetic consciousness and emphasises how poetry is the product of a flat ontology in which human and non-human actors are both implicated in processual and emergent flows of remembering and forgetting. I have argued that traces of the Troubles are embedded both in the poems' representation of material objects, spaces, and bodies, and in the materiality of the book itself. In reading internecine conflict back into an Ireland attempting to move on, my intention in this paper is not to suggest that violence is the essence of the place, or even an inexorable patrimony. Ghosts have unfinished business, and the extent of what I want to say here is that the business of healing the wounds of the past is not quite finished.

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