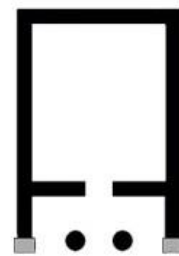


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Inserting Gender into the Historical-Political Binary in Anna Burns’s
*Milkman***

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antae, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Jun., 2020), 42-55



antae

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‘This was the “I’m male and you’re female” territory’: Inserting Gender into the Historical-Political Binary in Anna Burns’s *Milkman*

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Control over language has a huge significance in a divided society like Northern Ireland, where historical signifiers of identity demand absolute loyalty and any attempt to negotiate more flexible conceptions of self attracts bitter, often physical, resistance. Names and labels are of central importance to the opposing communities, which find themselves both defined and trapped by the limitations of the language on offer to them. Anna Burns’s 2018 novel *Milkman* is set in an unnamed city in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, the euphemistic name given to the civil war in which over 3,500 people died between 1969-2001.¹ Her characters inhabit a society filled with borders and restrictions, where in the name of perpetuating tribal dualisms women in particular are silenced and forced into socially sanctioned roles. This essay will analyse the tactics used by Burns and her unnamed protagonist to challenge the authority of those who have assumed control over the naming and narration of the past, with a specific focus on the ways in which gender identity has been submerged by hegemonic constructs based on historical and political binaries. It will argue that, through the fragmentary style of her narrative voice, Burns introduces precisely the kind of subversive openness needed to challenge the privileging of the political conflict, deconstructing linguistic constructs in order to reveal widespread collusion in the silencing of women.

Although widely read as reflecting Troubles-era Belfast, *Milkman* is in fact set in an unnamed city, during an undefined period of conflict.² This deliberate withholding of specific contextual pointers enables Burns to claim a wider relevance for her themes of silencing and entrapment: ‘Although it is recognizable as this skewed form of Belfast, it’s not really Belfast in the 70s. I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian society existing in similarly oppressive conditions’.³ The novel recounts a period during which the narrator, known only as ‘middle sister’, is stalked by a local paramilitary strongman called milkman. His slipperiness as an individual is reinforced by his name, which bears no relation to his social role and thus offers no insight into his identity: ‘He wasn’t our milkman. I don’t think he was anybody’s. He

¹ See Malcolm Sutton, *An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland* (University of Ulster: CAIN, 2019), <<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/index.html>> [accessed on 1st May 2020]. Although the Belfast Agreement officially brought the conflict to an end in 1998, paramilitary killings have continued, with an estimated 158 further deaths committed by 2018. See also Michael Sheils McNamee, ‘Figures show 158 paramilitary killings since the Good Friday Agreement’, in *The Belfast Telegraph* (April 23 2018). <<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/figures-show-158-paramilitary-killings-since-the-good-friday-agreement-36835612.html>> [accessed 1st May 2020].

² For a discussion of the many subtle hints about context and location provided in the novel, see Clare Hutton, ‘The Moment and Technique of *Milkman*’, *Essays in Criticism*, 69(3) (2019), 349-371, p. 350.

³ Lisa Allardice, ‘Interview with Anna Burns’, in *The Guardian* (17th October, 2018), para. 5. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/17/anna-burns-booker-prize-winner-life-changing-interview>> [accessed 1st May 2019].

didn't take milk orders'.⁴ In fact, none of the characters are named but instead referenced either through nicknames ('Somebody McSomebody') or their relationship to the narrator ('first brother-in-law', 'maybe-boyfriend'). The lack of any definite names gives a redacted feel to the text, as though characters are hiding their true identities in order to protect themselves from our scrutiny. Moreover, because names tend to be closely aligned with political affiliation in Northern Ireland, Burns's refusal to use any in her novel suggests that she may be trying to avoid the assumptions that would otherwise preclude an honest response from the reader. The narrator's recollections of specific names may also be hazy because she is narrating the events from a distance of about twenty years, a slippage which facilitates a critical revision of many of her experiences. Clare Hutton suggests that the narrator's fragmentary recollection allows the author to illustrate the sense of trauma that continues to suffuse narratives of the Troubles long after the Belfast Agreement officially brought the conflict to an end.⁵ Burns herself notes the need to distance oneself from one's memories of the past in order to understand the extent to which a violent environment skews one's perception of what constitutes 'normality'.⁶ Of particular interest to this essay is the way in which the narrator rereads her memories of being stalked through a contemporary, gendered perspective, suggesting that the language to identify and voice sexual harassment was not available to her younger self and thus allowed such behaviour to go unchallenged. Although the novel was completed in 2014, it was not published until 2018, a fortuitous delay which, as Hutton argues, links its concern with the historical invisibility of women's harassment to the growing #MeToo movement, which thrust incidences of stalking, sexual abuse, and coercion into mainstream consciousness.⁷ It is only in the process of remembering and piecing together her memories that the narrator begins to recognise many of milkman's incursions on her younger self as sexual in nature.

A central concern in the novel is with the narration of the Troubles, specifically with those who claim the authority to determine how this narrative should be constructed. Focusing her attention in particular on language, Burns analyses how words and labels are used to marginalise and render voiceless those whose perspectives may challenge dominant interpretations. Her persistence in undermining the hegemonic terminology and tropes of accounts of the Troubles enables her to inhabit what Michèle Forbes calls the 'interstices of language' in order to 'give articulation to the slippery machinations of prejudice and intimidation'.⁸ Burns subverts socially imposed signifiers of identity by refusing to use the accepted terminology, choosing instead to undermine and mock the dubious political rationale used to justify the paramilitary violence by forcing words to reveal themselves truthfully. Eschewing the official names of the terrorist groups, which potentially confers a quasi-authority on their activities, Burns refers to them as 'defenders-of-the-state' (unionists) and 'renouncers-of-the-state' (nationalists), terms that suggest the infantile nature of their assumed roles (*M*, 22). The characters in the novel are well aware of the power such terms have in

⁴ Anna Burns, *Milkman* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2018), p. 2. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*M*, page number/s).

⁵ Hutton, p. 351.

⁶ Allardice, para. 6.

⁷ *Milkman*'s resonance with the concerns of the #MeToo movement was cited by Booker prize judge Kwame Anthony Appiah as a significant factor in its awarding of the prize in 2018. See Hutton, p. 354.

⁸ Michèle Forbes, 'Review', in *Milkman*.

deflecting a truthful assessment of the conflict. They are reluctant to devolve from the accepted terminology, with the result that many of their conversations resemble secret codes, expressing and withhold information simultaneously: ‘ordinary people said “their side did it” or “our side did it”, or “their religion did it” or “our religion did it” [...] when what they really meant was “defenders-of-the-state did it” or “renouncers-of-the-state did it”’ (*M*, 22). The novel is full of quotation marks, suggesting the myriad unsaid assumptions replete in every phrase and encouraging the reader to closely examine every seemingly innocuous word for a hidden meaning. Underlying all communication is a system of categorisation that divides labels, activities, and choices into binarily opposed groups that constantly remind users of which ‘side’ they are on: ““Us” and “them” was second nature’ (*M*, 22). Although the monitoring of appropriate language is fundamental to the control wielded by the community leaders, Burns’s narrator suggests that coercion is unnecessary as this binary perspective on the world has long been accepted and internalised by community members, trapping them within its illogical, endlessly self-generating, Kafkaesque dystopia.

Interestingly in a novel set during the Troubles and underlining her determination to move beyond the historical binary, Burns omits even a single character from ‘over the road’ (Unionist) or indeed ‘over the water’ (British)—the traditional sources of repression for the nationalist community. Instead, she focuses her attention on the no less restrictive and divisive rules enacted by the nationalist community against its own members. Burns’s nationalist community is depicted as inward-looking and paranoid, with members subjecting each other to panoptic-like scrutiny. The men in the novel are expected to perform strict ideals of hegemonic masculinity, with any potentially deviant behaviour causing suspicion. In spite of his uber-male job as a brickie, for example, one of the male characters is the source of deep concern for the community because of his interest in cooking. The narrator helpfully explains that only certain forms of cooking are acceptable for a man who does not want his sexuality to be questioned:

Contrary to other chef parts of the world, a man here could be a *cook*, though even then he’d better work on the boats, or in a man’s internment camp or in some other full-on male environment. Otherwise he was a *chef* which meant homosexual (*M*, 32).

The matter-of-fact statement of this ridiculous segue from occupation to sexual preference is one of the many examples Burns gives of the danger inherent in this unquestioning acceptance of constructed truths.

Although repressive, the scrutiny of men pales in comparison to the entrapment of women within limiting, patriarchal narratives, and their effective silencing by the prescribed gender roles to which they are forced to adhere. The privileging of the male perspective and attendant marginalisation of women is of course a common theme in contemporary feminism, where language—the power to name—is often cited as a significant source of patriarchal control. Catherine Belsey specifically indicts the role of language in constructing limiting social roles for women:

Subjectivity is discursively produced and is constrained by the range of subject positions defined by the discourses in which the concrete individual participates [...]. In this sense existing discourses determine not only what can be said and understood, but the nature of subjectivity itself, what is possible to be.⁹

Certainly, the gender binary in *Milkman* is as widely accepted and obeyed as the more publically stated political binary, its many dictates governing all interaction between the sexes:

This was the “I’m male and you’re female” territory. This was what you could say if you were a girl to a boy, or a woman to a man, or a girl to a man, and what you were not – least not officially, least not in public, least not often – permitted to say (*M*, 8).

The subtle but telling admission towards the end of this statement that the publicly obeyed rules are perhaps not fully accepted after all introduces a glimmer of hope that the narrator will eventually learn to challenge them openly.

It is clear throughout *Milkman* that there are but two acceptable roles for women within the nationalist community. The first is to perform the traditional role of wife and mother, confined to the domestic sphere. Ann Rea cites the strongly patriarchal family structure promoted in nationalist narratives as indicative of the determination of men to control women both within the home and in the wider public spaces: ‘masculine weakness will be evident in a daughter, wife, or lover who escapes from domestic confinement, who takes up aberrant political allegiances, or whose sexuality and reproduction escape control’.¹⁰ The narrator’s mother repeatedly pressures her to get married: ‘Marriage [...] was a divine decree, a communal duty, a responsibility, it was acting your age, having right-religion babies and obligations and limitations and restrictions and hindrances’ (*M*, 50). The clear emphasis here is on fulfilling one’s duties to the community by perpetuating its monolithic ethnicity. The other acceptable role for a young woman is to become a mistress or ‘groupie’ of a powerful paramilitary male, the attendant status affording protection and even privilege within the community: ‘To the groupies [...] men who were in the renouncers signalled not just wonderful specimens of unblemished toughness, sexiness and maleness, but through attaining to relationship with them, these females could push for their own social and careerist ends’ (*M*, 119-20). Many commentators have noted that the powerlessness experienced by nationalist males at the hands of the British state was at least partly behind the determination to articulate their masculinity through control of the more vulnerable women in their community, a tactic Derek Lundy calls the performance of *machismo*: ‘The wounded and degraded male compensates for his original humiliation through the exaggeration and glorification of male brutality, toughness and apparent self-sufficiency’.¹¹ The uncompromising loyalty expected of nationalist women and the drastic punishments meted out to those considered to bring their community into disrepute (women were ‘tarred and feathered’ if suspected of dating British soldiers) illustrate the active

⁹ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ Ann Rea, ‘Producing the Nation: Nationalism, Reproduction, and Paternalism in Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone*’, in *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities*, ed. by Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Dublin: Wolfhound, 2000), pp. 204-26, p. 223.

¹¹ Derek Lundy, *Borderlands* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2020), p. 123.

interest the community took in ensuring that women adhered to their socially-sanctioned roles as loyal and dutiful supporters of their men.¹²

This expectation that women would sacrifice their own identities to support the nationalist cause is commonly cited in research into the Troubles. Women's experiences were widely excluded from historical accounts which privileged the nationalist narrative and marginalised any potentially disruptive voices, a decision Eavan Boland describes as 'the power of nationhood to edit the reality of womanhood'.¹³ Research reveals the systematic exclusion of Irish women's voices from narratives of the past in order to strengthen what Kathy Cremin calls 'a dominant (nationalist) history based on long past notions of Irish unity', a privileging of nationalism predicated on the silencing of women.¹⁴ This silencing is evident in the omission of women writers from literary anthologies,¹⁵ and their overuse by male writers in symbolic terms: 'Male Troubles writing has often portrayed women as either heroic suffering mothers [...] or seductress women'.¹⁶ The result is a dichotomy between the women's right to tell their own stories and their use in nationalist texts as symbols of an idealised, ordered, and nationalist utopia, predicated on the activism of men and the supportive passivity of women. The result of this privileging of the needs of nationalism over the rights of women is, as Ailbhe Smyth states, that '[w]omen are coerced and intimidated into silence [...] in many ways, not least of which is the primacy attributed to "The Cause", always male, on whatever side'.¹⁷

It is unsurprising that the dictates imposed on women by their communities made it difficult for an organised feminist movement to take roots in Northern Ireland. As Imelda Foley explains, the obligation on women to ensure that their behaviour did not conflict with the ethos of their communities meant that feminist issues were consistently side-lined in favour of the political conflict.¹⁸ Even when women from the two communities did manage to overcome their differences, such as through the formation of the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement in 1975, they were inevitably split apart again when contentious issues brought the ethnic divisions back to the fore.¹⁹ The prominence given to the ethno-political binary thus

¹² Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry suggest that women living amongst terrorist communities often fit into what they call the 'mother, monster, whore' paradigm. See *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2007).

¹³ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 136.

¹⁴ Kathy Cremin, 'The Hungriest Narrative: Devouring Mother Ireland', in *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by John Arnold et al., (Shaftesbury: Donhead, 1998), pp. 141-54, p. 141.

¹⁵ See Alex Pryce, 'Ambiguous Silences? Women in Anthologies of Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry', *Peer English*, 9 (2014), 56-73.

¹⁶ Mercedes del Campo Del Pozo, "'Mother Ireland, Get off our Backs": Gender, Republicanism and State Politics in Prison Short Stories by Northern Irish Women Writers', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 9 (2014), 13-26, p. 21.

¹⁷ Ailbhe Smyth, 'Paying Our Disrespects to the Bloody State We're In: Women, Violence, Culture and the State', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, ed. by Anne Crilly et al., vol. 5 (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), pp. 405-08, p. 406. For further analysis of the marginalisation of women within the nationalist tradition, see Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh, "'Take plight's sure paradoxes with you. Jump.": Dismantling Canons and Transcending Gender Constructs in the Poems of Colette Bryce and Sinéad Morrissey', in *Community Boundaries and Border Crossings: Critical Essays on Ethnic Women Writers*, ed. by Kristen Lillvis et al., (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 127-50.

¹⁸ Imelda Foley, *The Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theatre* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2003), p. 27.

¹⁹ See *The Field Day Anthology*, p. 1478.

made it all but impossible for women from across the political divide to unite behind the feminist cause.

In *Milkman*, an attempt by a group of local women to found a feminist group is perhaps inevitably doomed to failure, given the hostility of the local community to any enterprise that did not directly relate to or further the 'Cause'. As the narrator wryly explains: 'The word "feminist" was way beyond-the-pale. The word "woman" barely escaped beyond-the-pale. Put both together, or try unsuccessfully to soften things with another word, a general word, one in disguise such as "issues" and basically you've had it' (*M*, 152). The witty use of inverted commas in these sentences enables Burns to highlight the marginalised position occupied by women who, it seems, hardly merit their own noun. Any 'issues' that could possibly be of significance to them are automatically suspected of harbouring deviant and potentially dangerous ideas. The drive to dismantle and thus contain the threat posed by the feminist group is immediately spear-headed by two long-standing enemies of feminism, the church, and patriarchy. The church refuses the women permission to hire one of its 'hutlets' for their meetings. These small buildings were commonly made available to paramilitary groups to host a range of their illegal activities, but the church's willingness to turn a blind eye to this activity while refusing the women's innocent request speaks volumes of women's status in the hierarchy of priorities. The language used by the church to justify their refusal to host the women reflects the traditional fear of women's sexuality and determination to control it at all costs: "If they get a hutment," said the area, "they could be up to anything in it. They could be plotting subversive acts in it. They could be having homosexual intercourse in it. They could be performing and undergoing abortions in it" (*M*, 156). This hysterical escalation enables Burns to reflect centuries of similarly dramatic incursions on the rights of women in the name of morality. Indeed the use of the age-old language of 'depravity, decadence, demoralization' reminds the reader that such terminology continues to be evoked in contemporary society to maintain control over women's bodies (*M*, 153).

The male paramilitaries are equally determined to shut down the group, pointing out the potential danger that these local women might have the opportunity to mix with and thus be infiltrated by feminists from 'over the road' as their justification. Claiming the moral high ground, they burst in on one of the meetings, threatening the women with violence if they do not immediately disband their movement. Although the district's 'normal women' intervene on their behalf, the activism being suggested by the feminists makes no sense to them, not least because it reverses the hierarchy that puts the nationalist cause above all other concerns: 'These female participants hailed not just from the two warring religions here, but also from a smattering of the lesser known, lesser attended to, indeed completely ignored, other religions' (*M*, 153). This suggestion that the historical binary could be dismantled in order for women from both sides to work together is too much for the community to contemplate. Like their real-life counterparts, the feminists in *Milkman* fail to inspire a conversation about the sacrifice of women to the Cause and the subsequent abuse that goes unarticulated and thus unpunished.

Burns uses the episode with the feminist group to insert a contemporary gendered perspective on the treatment of women during the Troubles, exposing uncomfortable truths about the extent to which widespread support for the political cause masked its misogynistic, often abusive, agenda. Matters come to a head when the media descend on a demonstration in which both the 'issue women' and the 'normal women' are participating. The feminists pose no threat to the group identity of the 'normal women' when they stick to the traditional themes of feminist activism; their campaigns against 'injustice towards and trespasses against women [...] witch-burnings, footbindings, suttee, honour killings' are easily dismissed as contrived, clichéd and inapplicable to their own context (*M*, 161). To their horror, however, the 'issue women' eschew this expected, global narrative, focusing instead on everyday examples of sexual harassment, behaviour to which most of the local women are so commonly subjected they dare not scrutinise it too closely lest it destabilize the narrative of unity so carefully constructed by the community:

Instead these local issue women spoke of homespun, personal, ordinary things, such as walking down the street and getting hit by a guy, any guy, just as you're walking by, just for nothing, just because he was in a bad mood and felt like hitting you or because some soldier from 'over the water' had given him a hard time so now it was your turn to have a hard time so he hits you. Or having your bum felt as you're walking along [...]. Then they spoke about ordinary physical violence as if it wasn't just normal violence [...] or getting felt up in a fight wasn't violence that was physical so much as it was sexual violence all along [...] everyone was laughing at them (*M*, 162).

This determination to laugh off examples of the everyday, systematic abuse of women by males within their own communities reflects the selective blindness that is needed to live with the politically motivated violence being perpetrated in their name. As the narrator notes, in a conflicted society denial of reality is a key prerequisite for survival: 'Along with everybody, I dealt with these inner contradictions by turning from them whenever they appeared on the horizon' (*M*, 44). It is only with the benefit of hindsight that she begins to challenge the hegemonic norms that defined so much of what was acceptable in her youth, her matter of fact recollection of incidences of 'ordinary physical violence' and 'normal violence' highlighting the everyday abuse women were conditioned to accept. The prevailing narrative that blamed the British state for the frustration of the men effectively excuses their violence towards the women, and casts it as political, rather than gendered, behaviour.

The narrator's own experiences of sexual harassment offer a further exposé of the collusion of nationalism and patriarchy in the repression of women. In the first page of the novel, she offers a number of examples of her voicelessness as a woman and subsequent vulnerability to her definition by men and on male terms. She contrasts her inability to speak for herself with the countless words men have at their disposal to describe women, all of them reductive and sexualised: 'He made lewd remarks about me from the very first moment he met me – about my quante, my tail, my contry, my box, my jar, my contrariness, my monosyllable – and he used words, words sexual, I did not understand' (*M*, 1-2). It is worth noting that the man subjecting the narrator to this barrage of sexual terms designed to humiliate and silence her is a member of her own family, her 'first brother-in-law', who resents her independence and

refusal to treat him with the deference he feels is his due. He assumes his male privilege in naming and imposing a specifically sexual gaze on her. The narrator, although uncomfortable, is unable to defend herself as she does not have the language needed to challenge his reductive definition of her identity.

A similar attack on her right to define herself is observed in her stalking by milkman, who inserts himself into her routine without any preamble: 'He appeared one day, driving up in one of his cars as I was walking along reading *Ivanhoe*' (*M*, 3). Milkman's casual assumption that the narrator will gladly succumb to his desire reflects the privilege he expects due to his position as a known paramilitary 'renouncer' and as a male. His determination to control her begins subtly when he joins her on her habitual run through the local park. His conversation is polite and even friendly, but she notices after a while that there is a subtext to every question he asks her: 'his questions weren't real questions [...]. These were statements of assertion, rhetorical power comments, hints, warnings, to let me know he was in the business of knowing already' (*M*, 104). This power extends to knowing and being able to describe to her every element of her daily routine. Although uncomfortable with his interest, the narrator has no means of identifying his behaviour as predatory. This is partly because his assertion of control is so subtle, although it is no less powerful because it is not overt:

He slowed the run down though, right down, until we were walking [...]. He implied it was because of pacing, that he was slowing the run because of pacing, but I knew pacing and for me, walking during running was not that. I could not say so, however, for I could not be fitter than this man, could not be more knowledgeable about my own regime than this man, because the conditioning of males and females here would never have allowed it (*M*, 7-8).

This account of how milkman inserts himself into and then completely changes the pace of her run is an excellent example of hegemonic patriarchy; the narrator's consent, as Noam Chomsky phrases it, 'manufactured' so subtly she has completely changed her behaviour before she is aware of it.²⁰ She also acknowledges the power of the prevailing gender narrative that assumes the physical superiority of the male, as well as the obligation it places on her as a woman within the nationalist community to support it. The narrator is powerless to challenge milkman's behaviour because her context requires that she collude in the fiction of *machismo* of the local men in order to maintain the primacy of the Cause.

A significant problem is that milkman's coercion, like the many rules and restrictions internalised by the community, is assumed rather than defined. The narrator cannot imagine herself asking for help because she cannot clearly explain what exactly the problem with his behaviour is: 'He could have meant what I thought he meant, but equally, he might not have meant anything' (*M*, 181). One complication is that her word as a woman would never be believed over that of a man, in particular a man respected in the community because of his paramilitary activities. Indeed, so unlikely is it that a young girl would resist a local hero, the community have already concluded that their affair is ongoing and the narrator finds herself

²⁰ Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power* (New York: The New Press, 2002), p. 15.

the helpless focus of local gossip: ‘The scandal of this milkman affair had mushroomed to the point where it was now rabid and raging and fast becoming a best-seller’ (*M*, 170). Another problem, firmly rooted in the context of the Troubles, is that because milkman’s assault on her is verbal rather than physical, she does not have the vocabulary to pinpoint what exactly about it is wrong and threatening: ‘if no physically violent touch was laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then’, she concludes, ‘nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn’t there?’ (*M*, 6). In other words, in a society in which violent death is an everyday reality, there is neither sympathy nor the language to describe the impact of an assault that is psychological rather than physical.

Transcending the context of the Troubles, and apparent to the narrator as she reflects back on her harassment by milkman, is that her younger self was voiceless in part because of a lack of a vocabulary of sexual harassment which, before the advent of feminism, did not arm women with sufficient words to articulate and resist unwanted male attention:

Kerb-crawling [...] may have been a term recognized, but it was not recognized as a practice. Certainly I had never come across it [...]. I did not want to get in the car with this man. I did not know how to say so though, as he wasn’t being rude and he knew my family for he’d named the credentials, the male people of my family and I couldn’t be rude because he wasn’t being rude (*M*, 3).

This statement encapsulates Burns’s concern with patriarchal language and its facility to silence women. Because the narrator does not have the words to name the harassment, she is unable to challenge it. Moreover, milkman is known to the males in her family. Any overt rejection of his advances would thus potentially be regarded as rebellion against the patriarchal order in the home. The narrator also finds herself trapped by the social niceties that are embedded within socially constructed ideals of femininity. Much worse than experiencing sexual harassment, after all, would be for a woman to act rudely. Even though she begins to see that his behaviour is a form of sexual harassment, the use of such terminology is so alien she cannot imagine using it to explain her predicament:

Even if I were to be heard, people here were unused to words like “pursuit” and “stalking”, that is in terms of *sexual* pursuit and *sexual* stalking [...] the Hollywood phenomenon of sexual prowling would have been overshadowed, as everything here was overshadowed, by the main topic of conversation in the place (*M*, 182-83).

‘Pursuit’ and ‘stalking’ are terms commonly associated with guerrilla warfare and thus positive verbs when associated with nationalist paramilitaries. The suggestion that such behaviour is negative when imposed on women would never be tolerated by the community. The narrator’s inability to escape from the coercive control of milkman thus stems both from her subservient position as a woman within a patriarchal society and a nationalist whose loyalty to the active combatants is assumed. This allows Burns to interrogate the intersection between gender and other historical and social forces that have traditionally scripted women’s roles, locating her

novel firmly within contemporary feminist campaigns, such as the #MeToo movement, to re-examine and indict the historical acceptance of harassment and abuse.

Without the support of contemporary feminism, all the narrator's younger self can do is try to find a way to live with the everyday harassment: 'At eighteen I had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment [...] did not know I had the right not to like, not to have to put up with, anybody and everybody coming near' (*M*, 6). Unable to verbalise her resistance, she employs a variety of tactics throughout the novel to protect herself.²¹ The first and most original of these tactics is the narrator's much commented-upon 'reading-while-walking', a habit that allows her to avoid being drawn into the surrounding drama by immersing herself in the significantly more stable world of 19th century fiction.

Closely related to this deliberate retreat from external reality is her performed ignorance when challenged by her community: 'So "*I don't know*" was my three-syllable defence in response to the questions. With it successfully I refused to be evoked, drawn out, shocked into revelation' (*M*, 174). The narrator recruits her own face in this performance of ignorance, thus effecting a schism between the bland expression she presents to the outside world and the growing sense of injustice she nurtures underneath. This split self, she suggests, is the inevitable result of living in a society in which every gesture is endlessly scrutinised for a hidden meaning: 'how to live otherwise? This was not schizophrenia. This was living otherwise. This was underneath the trauma and the darkness a normality trying to happen' (*M*, 112). Instead of growing in strength, however, her underlying normality begins to disintegrate under the pressure of milkman's relentless othering, resulting in a diminishment of her own sense of self. She begins to give up all the activities that once defined who she was in order to hide from him: 'For the first time ever I did not do my reading-while-walking. I did not do my walking. Again I did not tell myself why. Another thing was I missed my next run session' (*M*, 11). When the narrator cedes control of her identity to milkman, she disintegrates both physically and psychologically: 'My balance went weird. It had grown lopsided, a lameness of stance setting in and overtaking me. At the time I tried to tell myself that it was *me* giving up the running, *me* not doing as much walking, that no one was forcing me' (*M*, 185). Her mistake, as Toni Morrison argues in a different context, is that she fails to understand that language does not merely describe, but is itself a significant agent of violence and oppression: 'Oppressive language does more than represent violence, it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge, it limits knowledge'.²² By allowing milkman's narrow, sexist gaze to define her, the narrator has acceded to her own silencing: 'Too late I realized that all the time I'd been an active player, a contributing element, a major component in the downfall of myself' (*M*, 178).

²¹ I use 'tactic' in this argument in Michel de Certeau's sense of the small moments of transgression open to citizens as they attempt to negotiate the rules or 'strategies' put in place by those in power to control and restrict their movements. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. xix

²² Toni Morrison, *Mouth Full of Blood, Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2019), p. 104.

A potential lifeline is offered to Burns's narrator through a conversation that occurs during one of her weekly French language classes, an episode that can be read as offering a clue to the contemporary significance of the novel. Although the stated function of the class is the practical acquisition of the language, the French teacher takes it upon herself to liberate her students from the closed, binary constructions of their habitual mentality. One evening, she reads them a passage from a French novel, in which the author asserts that the sky is not blue. The class react with outrage at this apparent falsehood. The problem, the narrator explains, is that this claim goes against the received consensus, a consensus that ironically unites the class 'regardless [...] of church affiliation' (*M*, 72). The danger of allowing this consensus to go unchallenged, even in the seemingly innocuous discussion of the sky, is that it could suggest that other unquestioned tenets of belief are also open to revision. In spite of their initial resistance—even antagonism—to the concept, the class put down their books and look with their own eyes at the setting sun outside the window. They begin to notice the varied colours of the sunset and to admit that the signifiers to which they had previously confined their discussion were inadequate, even completely false: 'It became clear as I gazed that there was no blue out there at all. For the first time I saw colours [...] these colours were blending and mixing, sliding and extending, new colours arriving, all colours combining, colours going on forever' (*M*, 77). The potential ramifications of this experience evoke panic amongst the students, aware that they are potentially on the threshold of a revelation they may not be able to forget. The teacher exhorts them to fight against received ideas and make their own choices about what they see around them in order to forge a brighter future for themselves: 'we must let go of the old, open ourselves to symbolism, to the most unexpected of interpretations, that we must too, uncover what we've kept hidden, what we think we might have lost' (*M*, 80).

It is surely no coincidence that the class in which this revelation manifests is French, for the teacher's exhortation that they resist the patriarchal control—imposed on their reality by stretching words beyond their breaking point in order to liberate the myriad potential meanings they contain—closely reflects the linguistic practices associated with French feminism. Inserting Derridean *différance* into language fatally destabilises meaning and precludes the imposition of static and fixed interpretations. Hélène Cixous's description of the feminist voice emphasises its refusal to subscribe to historically imposed limitations, choosing instead to be unmediated, unembarrassed and free: '*Voice!* That, too, is launching forth and effusion without return [...]. And this is how she writes, as one throws a voice—forward, into the void'.²³ Her exhortation to the feminist writer to be brave enough to dispense with the limitations of traditional language is clearly relatable to Burns's idiosyncratic use of words, a style Maureen Ruprecht Fadem has described in terms that closely echo Cixous: 'Burns writes antinovels that fragment and bamboozle all its generic building blocks'.²⁴ Burns's narrator leaves her French class inspired to open herself up to the potential she has just begun to sense for the first time. Somewhat disappointingly, Burns does not afford her the chance to harness her inner strength

²³ Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays', in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), pp. 91-103, p. 98.

²⁴ Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem, *The Literature of Northern Ireland: Spectral Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 20.

and learn to view the world through the alternative perspective suggested by the French teacher. Instead, just as she appears to be on the verge of succumbing to milkman, he is killed by state forces for reasons supposedly related to his paramilitary activities, leaving the narrator free to resume her running and reading-while-walking in peace. Although this ending does not satisfy our desire for a feminist heroine who confronts her nemesis and overturns centuries of historic patriarchal control, perhaps Burns's use of this contrived *deus ex machina* is her way of suggesting that there cannot be an easy fix for the legacy of violence and that any moving forward from the Troubles must come from within the community in order to be a success. Most importantly, Burns insists that violence can never be a viable option. Instead, it is only when language is used to interrogate rather than hide the truth that the community can begin to confront the legacy of its violent past and move beyond its divisions. Acknowledging and bringing to light the 'unmentionable' is indeed, as Morrison states, the only way to break the power of language to obfuscate the truth: 'Literature refuses and disrupts passive or controlled consumption of the spectacle designed to nationalize identity in order to sell us products'.²⁵ Burns's refusal to provide us with a heroic ending can perhaps be related to this demand that literature resist imposing a neat, and thus controlling, structure on its portrayal of society.

This essay has argued that Anna Burns's *Milkman* makes a significant intervention into narratives of the Northern Irish Troubles by reinserting gender as a significant source of entrapment and coercion for women within the nationalist community. The narrator's dilemma enables Burns to analyse the silencing of women in two different contexts. Women in the nationalist community during the Troubles were subjected to huge pressure to conform to their socially sanctioned roles of silent supporters to the males who played the active roles in the conflict. By giving her narrator an insight into how repressive this was for women, Burns is challenging those who assumed authority over the narration of the Troubles both during and after the conflict, a narration that generally excluded the young female perspective. The narrator also gradually learns to identify milkman's harassment as sexual rather than political in nature, thus linking the novel with contemporary feminist activism which seeks to empower women to highlight the kind of predatory behaviour that went unchallenged until relatively recently, not least because women lacked the precise vocabulary to verbalise it.

²⁵ Morrison, p. 100.

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