“Beidh ár dTigh Hughes féin againn”: Music, Dance, and Overcoming the Disorientation of COVID-19 in Meadhbh Ní Eadhra’s “Cuairteoirí”

“Beidh ár dTigh Hughes féin againn” : la musique et la danse pour lutter contre la désorientation induite par la COVID-19 dans « Cuairteoirí » de Meadhbh Ní Eadhra

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/12007>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.12007

ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 December 2021

Number of pages: 119-139

ISBN: 978-2-84133-157-0

ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Chris McCann, “Beidh ár dTigh Hughes féin againn”: Music, Dance, and Overcoming the Disorientation of COVID-19 in Meadhbh Ní Eadhra’s “Cuairteoirí”, *Études irlandaises* [Online], 46-2 | 2021, Online since 17 December 2021, connection on 04 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/12007> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.12007>

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“Beidh ár dTigh Hughes féin againn”: **Music, Dance, and Overcoming the Disorientation of COVID-19 in Meadhbh Ní Eadhra’s “Cuaireoirí”**

Abstract: This article examines the symbolism of music and dance in Meadhbh Ní Eadhra’s short story “Cuaireoirí” [“Visitors”], published in the October 2020 edition of *Comhar*. “Cuaireoirí” is set in a Connemara nursing home, where two residents come to terms with disorientation and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The arrival of a band of musicians to perform a concert presents an opportunity for rejuvenation. Drawing on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework including social geography and music theory, this article examines Ní Eadhra’s employment of music and dance as narrative and symbolic devices. In particular, it explores the ability of these forms to function as praxis for reorientation in disrupted time and space. Literary parallels are examined, including Seán Ó Ríordáin’s experience of tuberculosis and Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s emigration fiction, to place Ní Eadhra’s text within the Irish literary lineage.

Keywords: Meadhbh Ní Eadhra, Irish literature, music, dance, time-space, COVID-19, institutional care, nursing homes.

Résumé: Cet article porte sur le symbolisme de la musique et de la danse dans la nouvelle de Meadhbh Ní Eadhra, « Cuaireoirí » [« Les visiteurs »], publiée dans le numéro d’octobre 2020 de la revue *Comhar*. Le cadre de la nouvelle est celui d’une maison de retraite du Connemara dans laquelle deux résidents font l’expérience de la perte de repères et de l’isolement durant la pandémie de COVID-19. L’arrivée d’un groupe de musiciens et le concert qu’ils donnent sont l’occasion d’une régénérescence. Cet article adopte une perspective pluridisciplinaire (géographie sociale, musicologie) pour étudier l’emploi que fait Ní Eadhra de la musique et de la danse. Il s’attache à montrer, en particulier, que ces pratiques contribuent à retrouver des repères dans l’espace et dans le temps et à vaincre la désorientation induite par la COVID-19. L’œuvre de Ní Eadhra est examinée dans le contexte de l’histoire de la littérature irlandaise. Des ponts sont, par exemple, jetés entre son écriture et celles de Seán Ó Ríordáin (sur la tuberculose), ou de Máirtín Ó Cadhain (sur l’émigration).

Mots clés: Meadhbh Ní Eadhra, littérature irlandaise, musique, danse, espace-temps, COVID-19, institutions de soin, maisons de retraite.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in late February 2020, life in Ireland has faced significant upheaval. Government-mandated restrictions instituted to address the pandemic have resulted in a socio-spatial paradigm reflecting Gaston Bachelard’s inside-outside dialectic, where claustrophobia and agoraphobia are juxtaposed.¹

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [La poétique de l’espace, 1958], Maria Jolas (trans.), Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, p. 220.

This is particularly noticeable in Ireland's aged care system, which has been badly affected by the incursion of the virus. Nursing homes already occupy a liminal space between institution and community. As the Irish Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) states, "A good indicator of the quality of a nursing home is the extent to which it is part of the local community".² The implementation of bans on visitors to nursing homes during the pandemic has highlighted the liminality and precarity of these places for the people who live in them.

Another group – seemingly unconnected at first – that has been affected by the pandemic is professional musicians. The beginning of intermittent nationwide lockdowns in March saw the closure of live music venues, from theatres to pubs, cutting off many performing musicians from their livelihoods. Managing social distancing in performance spaces is difficult, and so audiences (the musicians' "visitors") have been largely banned. In a socio-spatial sense, like with the absence of visitors from nursing homes, this state of affairs draws attention to the "borderline [...] between inside and outside" which is "painful on both sides".³

Official acknowledgement of this is visible in various schemes whereby musicians and nursing homes have been brought together for musicians to perform live for residents. This has been a source of great relief to both residents and musicians.⁴ However, the steps necessary to avoid transmission of the COVID virus such as social distancing, or performance setups where musicians are outside and residents watch and listen through windows, mean the insecurities of the pandemic are ever-present.

Published in the October 2020 edition of the Irish-language literary and cultural journal *Comhar*, Meadhbh Ní Eadhra's short story "Cuairteoirí" ["Visitors"] sympathetically explores the coming together of these two groups of people.⁵ The story centres on Máire-Brid and Beartla, two residents of a Conamara nursing home whose senses of place, time, and self are disoriented by pandemic restrictions. The arrival of a band of musicians to play a concert aids Máire-Brid and Beartla in coming to terms with their place in the pandemic-stricken world. The excitement they feel about the concert is contrasted with the fear and isolation they experience in the nursing home. Combined with the present tense narration, music and dance function as narrative devices to both facilitate and chart the characters' reorientation and rejuvenation.

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2. Health Information and Quality Authority, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Nursing Homes in Ireland*, Mahon, HIQA, 2020, p. 33.
 3. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 218.
 4. Eleanor Mannion, "COVID Care Concerts' Tour Delights Care Home Residents", RTÉ News, 18 September 2020, online: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/0917/1165855-COVID-care-concerts>. One such initiative was the "COVID Care Concert", established in the south-east of the country between the Mobile Music Machine company, the Blackwater Valley Opera Festival, and funding from Creative Ireland. The scheme saw over eighty concerts performed in the months leading up to Christmas 2020.
 5. Meadhbh Ní Eadhra has published fiction in the Young Adult genre, including *Rua* [Red] (2003), *Fáinne Fí Fífi* [Fifi's Vicious Circle] (2008) and *Faye* (2017). "Cuairteoirí" is one of two stories published outside of that genre since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The other, "Spás Aisteach" ["Strange Space"] does not address the pandemic; it appears in *Biseach 2020: Iris Chumann Forbartha Chois Fharraige*, 2020, p. 80-81.

This article explores how Ní Eadhra’s short story interrogates constructions of power, time, and space that have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The story demonstrates how music not only assists in alleviating the symptoms of isolation, but also functions as a praxis of reorientation. The analysis draws on a theoretical framework combining social geography and musical theory to explore how music helps Ní Eadhra’s characters restore their sense of self-agency as the narrative progresses. The article finally locates literary parallels, including Seán Ó Riordáin’s experience of tuberculosis and Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s short fiction of emigration, to place Ní Eadhra’s use of music within Irish literary lineage.

COVID-19 and its impact in Irish nursing homes

The Republic of Ireland recorded its first case of COVID-19 on 29 February 2020. After the first clusters in nursing homes were reported on 16 March, cases continued to increase in this setting.⁶ By 29 June, 25,435 cases had been confirmed in the Republic; 5,808 of these had occurred in nursing homes.⁷ This represented 22.8% of infections. However, the mortality rate in Irish nursing homes was excessively high. Of the 1,735 people who had died of COVID-19 by that date, the number of deaths linked to nursing home cluster outbreaks was 967. This meant that nursing home deaths had accounted for almost 56% of all deaths caused by COVID-19 in Ireland.⁸ According to the World Health Organisation, this placed Ireland at the “upper end of the spectrum”⁹ globally in terms of deaths in nursing homes.

Although advanced age and other comorbidities contributed to this state of affairs, it was hardly unforeseeable. From 2017 onwards, the issue of care for older persons was “the subject of many reviews and reports”.¹⁰ On 13 March – only two weeks into the pandemic in Ireland – HIQA reported that cramped buildings and large numbers of residents in nursing care facilities “created a situation where isolation for the purpose of preventing infection was ‘nearly impossible’”.¹¹ Because of this, the government deemed it necessary to restrict access for external visitors to nursing homes. This course of action was, according to the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE):

[...] not a decision taken lightly as visiting of family members is a fundamental component of social connectiveness and extremely beneficial to residents’ well-being as well as for safeguarding residents’ welfare.¹²

6. Houses of the Oireachtas, *Interim Report on COVID-19 in Nursing Homes, Special Committee on COVID-19 Response*, Dublin, Tithe an Oireachtais, July 2020, p. 3.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Yet, as the chairman of the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 Michael McNamara TD noted in July 2020, the HSE was still responsible for the placement of older persons in nursing homes “with known infection control risks”, an “indefensible”¹³ state of affairs. Thus, older persons were cut off from family at “a time of great stress and uncertainty”, emotions amplified by the “constant fear of an outbreak”¹⁴ within their immediate surroundings.

This resulted in residents’ increased anxiety over their own vulnerabilities, something noted by Safeguarding Ireland in its submission to the Oireachtas Committee.¹⁵ In “Cuairteoirí”, Beartla and Máire-Brid are acutely aware of the danger of an outbreak in their own nursing home. When Máire-Brid says that “*Ar a laghad níl an víreas tagtha chomh fada linne*” [“At least the virus hasn’t come as far as us”], Beartla is quick to respond: “*Ní go fóill. Ach ar chuala tú Jimín Óg ag casacht aréir?*”¹⁶ [“Not yet. But did you hear Jimín Óg coughing last night?”]. After they debate whether Jimín Óg has COVID-19, Máire Brid declares, “*Beidh mise ag coinneáil amach uaidh mar sin*” [“I’ll be keeping away from him then”]. Beartla responds pointedly: “*Conas? Tá sé ina chónaí linn*” [“How? He’s living with us”]. Beartla declares with a trembling voice, “*Tiocfaidh cuid againn tríd ach ní gach duine. Caithfimid bheith réalaióch*” [“Some of us will come through it but not everyone. We have to be realistic”] (p. 11). The inadequacies of the system have paradoxically left them in greater danger.

In this respect, HIQA reported that nursing home residents felt “fearful, confused, angry, frustrated and lonely”. The absence of a “human touch”, exacerbated by frequently changing government public health advice, left a “sense of abandonment and isolation that many found difficult to cope with”.¹⁷ These emotions are encapsulated in a particular exchange between Máire-Brid and Beartla. Beartla comments on the danger of the disease, and observes “*an oiread sin daoine básaithe leis*” [“the amount of people dead from it”]. Máire-Brid responds, “*In áiteanna cosúil leis seo ach go háirithe*” [“Especially in places like this”] (p. 11). They are clear about who is to blame:

“*Is cuma sa tsíoc leo fúinne!*”

“*Pleidhcí, gach uile duine acu!*”

“*Tá súil agam nach ag caint fúinne atá sibh,*” a deir Treasa, *duine de na haltraí, í ag siúl isteach sa seomra.*

“*Ní fúibhse atá muid ag gearán,*” arsa Máire-Brid. “*Ach an rialtas! Paca leibidí!*” (p. 11)

[“They don’t give a damn about us!”

“Fools, every one of them!”

13. Houses of the Oireachtas, *Interim Report...*, p. iii.

14. Health Information and Quality Authority, *The Impact of COVID-19...*, p. 31.

15. Houses of the Oireachtas, *Interim Report...*, p. 43.

16. Meadhbh Ní Eadhra, “Cuairteoirí”, *Comhar*, vol. 80, no. 10, 2020, p. 11. Page numbers in brackets refer to this source; translations are mine.

17. Health Information and Quality Authority, *The Impact of COVID-19...*, p. 31-32.

“I hope it’s not us you’re talking about,” says Treasa, one of the nurses, walking into the room.

“It’s not about you we’re complaining,” says Máire-Brid. “But the government! Pack of fools!”]

Modern technology is no comfort. Beartla cries, “*Ní fhaca mé mo gharpháistí le trí mhí. Trí mhí!*” [“I haven’t seen my grandchildren in three months. Three months!”] (p. 11). When Máire-Bríd points out that at least he has Zoom and the Internet to keep contact with them, he responds:

“*Agus b’fhéidir gur cuma liom faoi scáileáin agus zoom agus emojis agus b’fhearr liom barróg a thabhairt do na páistí agus iad a bheith thart orm,*” a deir Beartla d’aon anáil amháin.

“*Tá’s agam. Tuigim go maith. Ní mar an gcéanna atá sé [...]*” (p. 11)

[“And maybe I don’t care about screens and *zoom* and *emojis* and I’d prefer to give the children a hug and them to be around me,” says Beartla in one breath.

“I know. I understand well. It’s not the same [...]

Perception of time and space

This is an important observation, and one crucial to Ní Eadhra’s story. As Mary Dunnion of HIQA told the Oireachtas Special Committee, an “essential component of a person’s life in a nursing home” includes the ability to have visitors and the right to “freedom of space”.¹⁸ The perception of space and time has been altered for Máire-Bríd and Beartla. They feel trapped, locked inside their nursing home to keep them from the dangers outside, but also limited in their abilities to move freely within.

In the modern globalised world, our relationship with place is understood in relation to other places. David Harvey has described the phenomenon of “time-space compression”¹⁹ wherein the time-space between places speeds up due to the influence of technology. That is, places that are far away from each other seem closer because of the ease of reaching them. However, as David Bissell has observed, the enforced limitations of COVID-19 quarantines and lockdowns radically altered our perception of this schema. Places previously within reach suddenly seem very far away, and time-space compression changes to time-space expansion.²⁰

18. Houses of the Oireachtas, *Interim Report...*, p. 32.

19. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford – Cambridge, Blackwell, 1989, p. 240.

20. David Bissell, “COVID-19 and Geography: What It Means for Melbourne”, University of Melbourne, 11 June 2020, video, 1:01:13 (14:40-15:30), online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3D8Jqr5Yh7o&t=38s>.

In this respect, the role of music becomes important in “Cuairteoirí”. When they are discussing the band that is coming to play for the residents, Máire-Brid says: “*Chuala mé go bhfuil siad sin ar na ceoltóirí is fearr i gConamara!*” [“I heard that they’re among the best musicians in Conamara!”]. Beartla responds, “*I gConamara? [...] Na ceoltóirí is fearr sa chontae, nó fiú sa tír, déarfainn féin*” [“In Conamara? [...] The best musicians in the county, or even in the country, I’d say myself”] (p. 10). While this appears to be a simple debate on matters of musical appreciation, it comments on perceptions of scale, of inside and outside. This is reinforced in their discussion of where the band will play when they arrive:

“Bhuel ní bheidh aon chead acu teacht isteach anseo leis na srianta agus na rialacha go léir. Agus tá neart spáis amuigh ansin, féach!” (p. 10-11)

[“Well they won’t be allowed to come inside here with all the restrictions and the rules. And there’s plenty of space outside there, look!”]

From a practical point of view, the spatial disruptions of COVID-19 make a fortress of the nursing home. This also increases the significance of inside-outside dialectics. As Bachelard observes, “the dialectics of outside and inside is supported by a reinforced geometrism, in which limits are barriers”.²¹ The walls of the nursing home represent both a physical and psychological barrier between inside and outside:

“Beidh mise i mo shuí anseo sa seomra gréine, arsa Máire-Brid go teasaí. Agus beidh an banna lasmuigh. Sin sin.” (p. 11)

[“I’ll be sitting here in the sunroom,” says Máire-Brid heatedly. “And the band will be outside. That’s that.”]

Christine McCarthy observes that usually interiority is “safe”, and “safety comes from isolation, from the protection of the vulnerable, or the protection of those outside”. However, she notes – pertinently in the context of COVID-19 quarantine – interiority also “does not guarantee safety in its intimacy”.²² Where the walls and windows of the nursing home are boundaries between inside and outside, they are also “ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility”.²³ While the band is forced to play outside in order to prevent the incursion of the virus, the nursing home’s inside is also a fearful place. Máire-Brid declares, “*Beidh an radharc is fearr san Áras agamsa [...]. Díreach in aice na fuinneoige*” [“I’ll have the best view in the building [...]. Right next to the window”] (p. 10). Although the window permits her to see “the best view”, it also reinforces barriers between her and outside. The window is a liminal space that represents the “non-satisfaction of

21. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 215.

22. Christine McCarthy, “Toward a Definition of Interiority”, *Space and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2005, p. 117.

23. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 218.

a want”.²⁴ Indeed, everything that Máire-Bríd and Beartla want is on the outside: family, the band, Conamara, even Ireland itself.

Although Máire-Bríd proclaims to be more satisfied remaining inside, Beartla cries: “*Ba bhreá leat a bheith amuigh ansin ag bogadh agus ag úsáid do choirp agus ag brath d’anáil ag tapú agus do chroí ag preabadh!*” [“You’d love to be outside there moving and using your body and feeling your breath quicken and your heart beating!"]. But Máire-Bríd *does* want to be outside, lamenting: “*Ní haon áit é seo do dhuine cosúil liomsa*” [“This is no place for a person like me”] (p. 12). She explains that her son and daughter-in-law placed her in the nursing home, and if not for that, “*bheinn bhreá sásta sa bhaile*” [“I’d be nice and happy at home”]. She exclaims:

“*Dia ár sábháil! Dhéanfainn rud ar bith le dul abhaile,*” arsa Máire-Bríd, tocht bróin ina glór agus na srutha deor ag síleadh uaithi. “*Rud ar bith ar domhan.*” (p. 12)

[“God save us! I would do anything to go home,” says Máire-Bríd, a catch of sadness in her voice and streams of tears shedding from her. “Anything in the world.”]

Her home is certainly not the place she lives currently, but somewhere outside. This echoes Ami Harbin’s suggestion that disorienting experiences – such as a global pandemic – can feel as if we are “not at home”.²⁵

Space-time disorientation and the longing for “home”

In their discussion of disorienting experiences within “home” environments, David Bissell and Andrew Gorman-Murray identify two aspects pertinent to the phenomenon Máire-Bríd and Beartla are experiencing. The first is that disorientation involves the “undoing [of] relations” between persons and their environment, resulting in “incomprehension, confusion, and disintegration”.²⁶ Most pertinently in the context of COVID, disintegrative disorientation “refers to the felt space between us and our control of a situation”.²⁷ Both Máire-Bríd and Beartla are disoriented in this way, realised in a moment of epiphany:

Breathnaíonn an bheirt acu thart ar an áit ina bhfuil siad ina gcónaí, ar na cathaoireacha ina bhfuil siad ina suí, agus orthu féin, iad imithe in aois sular thug siad féin faoi deara fiú; an bheirt acu ró-ghnóthach ag maireachtáil ó lá go lá chun aird a thabhairt ar na hathruithe caolchúiseacha atá tarlaithe dá gcoirp agus dá n-aighe thar na seachtainí agus na míonna agus na blianta. Nó b’fhéidir nach raibh mórán suime acu sna hathruithe sin; iad ró-ghafa leis an saol. (p. 12)

24. Jasmine Rault, “Occupying E.1027: Reconsidering Le Corbusier’s ‘Gift’ to Eileen Gray”, *Space and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2005, p. 172.

25. Ami Harbin, *Disorientation and Moral Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 2.

26. David Bissell, Andrew Gorman-Murray, “Disoriented Geographies: Undoing Relations, Encountering Limits”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2019, p. 709.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 714.

[The two of them look around at the place where they are living, at the chairs in which they are sitting, and at themselves, elderly before they even noticed it; the pair of them too busy living from day to day to pay attention to the subtle changes which had happened to their bodies and to their minds over the weeks and the months and the years. Or maybe they didn't have much interest in those changes; too absorbed with life.]

The coming of the musicians has forced them to reassess their understanding of the passage of time. Time-space has expanded; weeks, months, and years blur; and suddenly even the chairs in front of them are far away in both space and time.

This leads to the second aspect of disorientation: "encountering limits", which is "characterised by a sense of being distanced from other people, from future actions, and from situations".²⁸ Doreen Massey has characterised the dialectic of mobility-immobility in terms of spatial power. She argues:

[In] power geometry of time-space compression [...] [d]ifferent social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; [...] some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.²⁹

Those who are mobile are "in charge of time-space compression", but on the "receiving end [is] the pensioner in a bed-sit"³⁰ – or in this case, the nursing home. The power exerted by the compulsory lockdown of nursing home residents and the ban on visits from (mobile) relatives exacerbates time-space expansion of the pandemic, and serves to "weaken the leverage of the already weak".³¹ In suddenly seizing the enormity of the change in time-space, Máire-Brid and Beartla have realised their own immobility through the mobility of others.

One of these "others" is in fact each of their past selves. Beartla, now in a wheelchair, laments: "*Ní raibh an bolg mór seo orm i gcónaí [...] Bhí mé aclaí an t-am sin!*" ["I didn't always have this big paunch [...] I was athletic at that time!"] (p. 12). Although Máire-Brid protests, the realisation of their limitations occurs in a single exchange:

"Bhuel caithfidh duine éigin aire a thabhairt duit, nach gcaithfidh?"
"Nach amhlaidh an scéal duitse?" (p. 12)

["Well someone has to take care of you, don't they?"
 "Isn't it the same story for yourself?"]

As Massey observes, "those who today worry about a sense of disorientation and a loss of control must once have felt they knew exactly where they were, and

28. David Bissell, Andrew Gorman-Murray, "Disoriented Geographies...", p. 710.

29. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 149.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

that they *had* control”.³² When Máire-Brid expresses her wish to return “home”, she is not just describing a physical place, but a time-space in which she has control over her environment and therefore her very sense of self.

Nostalgia and praxes of recovery

Máire-Brid’s longing is characteristic of the more commonly used term, *nostalgia*. As Svetlana Boym observes, “at first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams”.³³ In discussing the role of nostalgia in Irish sociocultural history, Emilie Pine notes that in an “alienated” present, “The past can act as a counterpoint to the present: where the present is changing, the past can be fixed”.³⁴ It is also the act of crying out for a lost *habitus*, a result of the disintegration of “intuitive routine bodily knowledges that control a situation”.³⁵ Borrowing the term from Bourdieu, Edward S. Casey defines *habitus* as the “mediatrix of place and self”³⁶ through temporality. The “repetition of practices in specific milieus”³⁷ orients the self through the “enactive vehicle”³⁸ of the body; the loss of those milieus causes disorientation. In this case, praxis is required such as Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* [sites of memory], to “stop time [and] block time and stop the work of forgetting”.³⁹ This is necessary where “there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of [embodied] memory”.⁴⁰

Musical *lieux de mémoire* are praxes of recovery and reorientation for Máire-Brid and Beartla. Reminiscing on their youth, dancing becomes a place of “home”. Beartla recalls: “*Chaith mise na blianta ag damhsa i m’óige*” [“I spent the years dancing in my youth”] (p. 11):

“*Raibh aon mhaith leat? Ag damhsa?*” a fhiafraíonn Máire-Brid.

“*Bhí. Aon uair a thosaigh mé ag damhsa, stop gach duine ag caint le breathnú orm.*”
[...]

“*Raibh tú éadrom ar do chosa?*”

“*Bhí. Éadrom agus sciobthaí agus lúfar [...].*” (p. 12)

32. *Ibid.*, p. 165 (emphasis in original).

33. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001, p. xv.

34. Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 7.

35. David Bissell, Andrew Gorman-Murray, “Disoriented Geographies...”, p. 716.

36. Edward S. Casey, “Between Geography and Philosophy: What Does it Mean to Be in the Place-World?”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2001, p. 686-687.

37. David Bissell, Andrew Gorman-Murray, “Disoriented Geographies...”, p. 709.

38. Edward S. Casey, “Between Geography and Philosophy...”, p. 687.

39. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”, *Representations*, no. 26, 1989, p. 19.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

["Were you any good? At dancing?" asks Máire-Brid.

"I was. Any time I started dancing, everyone stopped talking to watch me."

[...]

"Were you light on your feet?"

"I was. Light and swift and agile [...]."

Even though Beartla is now in a wheelchair and Máire-Brid claims to be apathetic towards exertion, the imminent arrival of the musicians offers them an opportunity to reclaim lost habitus. As Beartla hints,

"[...] *Cúpla tiúin agus beoir nó dhó, beidh an áit seo ar nós Tigh Hughes.*"

"*Tá Tigh Hughes imithe le blianta anois.*"

"*Tá's agam, is mór an trua. Ach beidh ár dTigh Hughes féin againn anseo níos déanaí. Fan go bhfeicfidh tú!*" (p. 12)

["[...] A couple of tunes and a beer or two, this place will be like Tigh Hughes."

"Tigh Hughes has been gone years now."

"I know, more's the pity. But we'll have our own Tigh Hughes here later. Wait till you see!"

Tigh Hughes may be gone for "years", but by music and dance it will be recreated through the "capacity for metamorphosis"⁴¹ inherent in *lieux de mémoire*. This psychologically reverses time-space expansion, and removes barriers of the inside-outside dialectic.

This imagery also foresees the social exchange between the musicians and the residents of the nursing home. Máire-Brid says:

"[...] *Nach bhfuil an t-ádh leo a bheith ag teacht anseo agus muidne mar lucht éisteachta acu?*"

"*Pé rud a deir tú,*" arsa Beartla, ag straoisíl. "*Is dóigh go mbeidh an gig seo mar bhuaicphointe 2020 dóibh.*"

"*Féadann tú ag gáire fúm, a Bheartla, ach gach seans nach raibh cead ag an mbanna seo gig ar bith a chasadh le cúpla mí anuas.*" (p. 11)

["[...] Aren't they lucky to be coming here with us as their audience?"

"Whatever you say," says Beartla, grinning. "This gig will probably be a highlight of 2020 for them."

"You might be laughing at me, Beartla, but it's every chance this band hasn't had permission to play any gig for the last couple of months."]

Máire-Brid acknowledges that the band is also suffering from a loss of habitus, anticipating reciprocity between audience and performer. Although the musicians are "mobile" in comparison to the nursing home residents, the closure of their own embodied milieus in performance venues leaves them powerless in time-space expansion. In a short documentary film produced by Creative Ireland and

41. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History...", p. 19.

hosted by RTÉ that snapshots a “COVID Care Concert”, the musicians’ testimonies reveal many of the same fears as nursing home residents, as well as the sense of reorientation after performing. Baritone singer Simon Morgan emphasises that music is a “process, rather than a product”;⁴² pertinently, the group’s viola player Lisa Dowdall says:

Being able to play myself with my friends, to play for people, to share, communicate through music – it’s like I’ve clicked back into who I am normally, and it’s amazing to remember that.⁴³

Equally, a resident in a Waterford nursing home described music as making her feel “as though I’m in another world”.⁴⁴ This demonstrates the power of the musical praxis in “clicking back” into the self for both musician and audience. Concepts like *process* and *communication* are important here. Through its own semiotic systems and associated culturally specific meanings, music constitutes an extra-linguistic form of communication. At the same time, Lillis Ó Laoire sees dance as a “nonverbal symbolic discourse in its own right”, a way of knowing, “configured in the body without reference to linguistic expression”.⁴⁵ Deirdre Sklar calls this “embodied knowledge”, expressed not in words but “sensations in which are stored intertwined corporeal, emotional, and conceptual memories”.⁴⁶ When dance accompanies music, its movements manipulate or abrogate the perception of time and oriented space.⁴⁷

The final scenes in “Cuairteoiri” depict this. Earlier, when Beartla spoke of missing his family, Máire-Bríd struggled to find the words to comfort him.

Tá fonn ar Mháire-Bríd a rá le Beartla gan a bheith buartha, go mbeidh gach rud ceart go leor, nach fiú a bheith imníoch mar nach réiteoidh sé sin rud ar bith. (p. 11)

[Máire-Bríd wants to tell Beartla not to be worried, that everything will be fine, that it’s not worth being scared because that won’t fix anything.]

However, she cannot find it to actually say anything. In the end, music and dance give her a way to communicate. When the concert begins, Máire-Bríd asks Beartla to dance. Hinting at his physical disability, Beartla responds, “*Ní féidir liom siúl i gceart, gan trácht ar dul ag damhsa*” [“I can’t walk properly, let alone

42. RTÉ and Creative Ireland, “Mobile Music Machine: COVID Care Concerts”, RTÉ, 3 December 2020, video, 3:17 (1:08), online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVnn9Fb9zmY>.

43. *Ibid.* (2:27-2:43).

44. Eleanor Mannion, “‘COVID Care Concerts’...”.

45. Lillis Ó Laoire, *On a Rock in the Middle of the Ocean: Songs and Singers in Tory Island*, Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2005, p. 127-128.

46. Deirdre Sklar, “Can Bodylore Be Brought to Its Senses?”, *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 107, no. 423, 1994, p. 14.

47. Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Dance in an Anthropological Perspective”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 7, 1978, p. 32; Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 128.

go dancing”]. But Máire-Brid reassures him: “*Is cuma. Tabhair dom do lámha. [...] Táimid chun damhsa dár gcuid féin a chumadh*” [“It doesn’t matter. Give me your hands. [...] We’re going to invent a dance of our own”] (p. 12). At first their dancing is awkward and clumsy, and they feel uncomfortable. However, Ní Eadhra describes their dancing using a crucial phrase: “*iad ag iarraidh dul i dtaithí ar an mbealach nua seo len iad féin a chur in iúl, bealach nach raibh ceachtar acu ag súil le*” [“they are looking to become accustomed to *this new method of expressing themselves*, a method neither of them were expecting”] (p. 13; emphasis mine). Their communication takes place through embodied knowledge. As they become more relaxed, Máire instructs Beartla: “*Dún do shúile ar feadh nóiméid agus éist leis an gceol*” [“Close your eyes for a minute and listen to the music”]. As he closes his eyes, the band plays more slowly, “*ag dul in oiriúint don bheirt damhsóirí sa seomra gréine*” [“adjusting to the pair of dancers in the sunroom”] (p. 13). At this moment, the musicians and dancers achieve “a kind of communal coperformance”⁴⁸:

Diaidh ar ndiaidh, iad faoi gheasa ag an gceol, ligeann Beartla agus Máire-Brid dá gcoirp bogadh go nádúrtha, iad ag scaoileadh leis an teannas, an t-amhras, an smacht. Éiríonn siad níos réchúisí agus níos scaoilte agus níos saoire lena gcuid gluaiseachtaí, ag aimsiú bealaí le bogadh i dteannta a chéile le rithim an cheoil. (p. 13)

[Little by little, under the spell of the music, Beartla and Máire-Brid let their bodies move naturally, releasing the tension, the doubt, the restraint. They become more relaxed and more unconstrained and freer with their movements, finding ways to move together to the music’s rhythm.]

Boundaries melt in this moment, as they become “unconstrained” and “free”. The band plays “*tiúin i ndiaidh tiúine, ag scaipeadh sceitimíní san aer nár bhraith éinne san Áras le tamall fada*” [“tune after tune, spreading excitement in the air that no-one had felt in the building for a long time”]. The band is playing outside: “*Tá na doirse dúbáilte agus na fuinneoga ar oscailt [...] agus tá duine amháin ina shuí ar an mbinse taobh amuigh, cúpla méadar ó na cuairteoirí*” [“The double doors and the windows are open [...] and one person is sitting on the bench outside, a couple of metres from the visitors”] (p. 13). Where Máire-Brid’s window once represented the “pain” of liminal barriers and the tantalising unsatisfaction of want, the doors and windows are now flung open to symbolise the dissolution of inside and outside. One resident is even physically outside. Most notably, however, the musicians are no longer simply musicians, “ceoltóirí”: they are “*cuairteoirí*” – visitors.

The symbolism is complete when Máire-Brid and Beartla have completely lost themselves in the moment, “*sa damhsa neamhghnách tarraingteach seo*” [“in this unusual attractive dance”]. Beartla throws his head back in relaxation, and we are returned to his earlier invocation:

48. Cathy Larson Sky, “A Lot of Notes but Little Music: Competition and the Changing Character of Performance”, *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1997, p. 158.

Feiceann sé Máire-Brid os a comhair [sic] – í ag bogadh, agus ag úsáid a coirp, an aclaíocht ag cur lasadh in a grua. Braitheann sé beocht uaithi. Mothaíonn sé a chroí féin ag preabadh. (p. 13)

[He sees Máire-Brid in front of him – moving, and using her body, the exercise putting a flush in her cheek. He senses life from her. He feels his own heart beating.]

Beartla previously used these terms when talking about the want of being outside. Now, joined together in the dance, they are *both* “outside” even though they have not left the sunroom. Music has created a state of what Bachelard calls “oneirism”,⁴⁹ wherein they are no longer limited by boundaries. This state remains even after the musicians have departed; energised, Máire-Brid and Beartla sit in their usual spots, talking about the colours they would use to paint the walls of the nursing home, “*an áit seo a athnuachan*” [“to rejuvenate this place”]:

“B’fhearr liomsa gorm, gorm na farraige agus na spéire,” ar sé.

“Níl an spéir gorm, sin raiméis,” a deir Máire-Brid. “Breathnaigh amach an fhuinneog. Tá sí liath agus gruama.”

“Bíonn sí gorm in amanna,” ar sé. “Laethanta breátha, nuair a bhíonn an ghrian ag scaladh.” (p. 13)

[“I’d prefer blue, blue of the sea and the sky,” he says.

“The sky’s not blue, that’s nonsense,” says Máire-Brid. “Look out the window. It’s grey and gloomy.”

“It does be blue at times,” he says. “Fine days, when the sun is bursting.”]

The sky’s colours are imagined on the walls, embodying the perspective they have gained. When another coughing fit from Jimín Óg breaks the peace, they are able to think without fear. Máire-Brid remembers: “*Bhí an chasacht sin air i bhfad sula raibh caint ar bith ar an gcoróinvíreas*” [“He had that cough long before there was any talk of the coronavirus”] (p. 13). Suitably reassured, the story ends on a note of hope:

“Táimid sortáilte mar sin,” arsa Máire-Brid go sásta.

“Tá,” arsa Beartla, é ag smaoineamh ar an tocht bróin a bhí i nglór a chara níos luaithe, agus ar an gcaoi gur éirigh sí óna cathaoir uilleach le dul ag damhsa leis tamall níos déanaí, ainneoin na n-ainneoin.

“Beimid togha.” (p. 13)

[“We’re sorted then,” says Máire-Brid with satisfaction.

“Yes,” says Beartla, thinking of the catch of sadness that was in his friend’s voice earlier, and of the way that she rose from her armchair to dance with him a while later, despite everything.

“We’ll be grand.”]

49. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 226.

“Fonn”, language, and “Cuariteoirí” in historical-literary context

The difficulty in assessing a piece of COVID-19 pandemic fiction is that its frame of reference is still continually being established. The uncertainty of the period has led some scholars to look back to historical pandemic literature,⁵⁰ or find analogues in speculative genres such as dystopian fiction.⁵¹ However, as Ailise Bulfin predicted in May 2020, fiction “which is no longer speculative”⁵² has become more common over the course of the pandemic.

Thus, a complex range of texts and contexts informs Ní Eadhra’s “Cuariteoirí”. In order to assess where Ní Eadhra’s work sits within this schema, I offer three strands useful in the Irish context: contemporaneous responses to the pandemic in *Comhar*; recent historical analogues (in this case the poetry of Seán Ó Riordáin and his experience with tuberculosis); and thematic analogues, such as emigration in Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s short fiction. Music’s role in the negotiation of time-space and overcoming the fallibility of language are particularly pertinent for the latter two authors.⁵³

In April 2020, a month after the first lockdown in Ireland, *Comhar* published a special edition of immediate literary responses to the pandemic. Notwithstanding their own literary qualities, some of these early texts deal superficially with domestic (middle class) isolation, “safely distant from the world of layoffs, mass graves, Zoom funerals”.⁵⁴ For example, the short story “Cíocras” [“Greed”] by Caitlín Nic Iomhair describes an extramarital affair at the onset of the pandemic; the framing of Liam Prút’s poem “Bun agus Barr” [idiomatically “Entirety”, but playing off “bun”, “bottom”] recalls the hoarding of toilet paper that accompanied early lockdown confusions; and while a humorous diversion, Paddy Bushe’s limerick “Faoi Ghlas” [“Locked Up”] avoids seriously confronting the virus. After more than a year of the pandemic, these responses take on an ephemeral quality and echo Lily Meyer’s observation of early American “quick response” pandemic fiction, namely, insufficient time to “truly refine” ideas.⁵⁵ Arguably, the most impactful *Comhar* pieces address these problems directly. Two poems in particular are especially effective: Lisa Nic an Bhreithimh’s harrowing poem of domestic abuse during lockdown, “Coraintín” [“Quarantine”]

50. See Frederick Luis Aldama, “What Literature Tells Us about the Pandemic: An Interview with Frederick Aldama”, *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2021, p. 24-27.

51. See Tânia Cerqueira, “Pandemics in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: Rethinking the (Post) Human”, *SFRA Review*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2021, p. 191-198.

52. Ailise Bulfin, “Pandemic Fiction and COVID-19”, *Irish Humanities Alliance*, 5 May 2020, online: <https://www.irishhumanities.com/blog/pandemic-fiction-and-covid-19>.

53. Also notable is that both Ó Riordáin and Ó Cadhain published in *Comhar* extensively in the early decades of the journal’s existence.

54. Paul Sehgal, “In Search of Time Lost and Newly Found”, *The New York Times*, 19 May 2020.

55. Lily Meyer, “The Literature of the Pandemic Is Already Here”, *The Atlantic*, 22 July 2020, online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/zadie-smith-decameron-project-pandemic-literature/614458>. Notably within Meyer’s critical purview is *The Decameron Project* (2020), an anthology of twenty-nine short stories commissioned by *The New York Times* that contains, according to her, many “emotionally neat and one-note” pieces.

(in the April 2020 edition), and John Caulfield’s “Idir Dhá Bhaile” [“Between Two Towns”] (February 2021), which describes a cross-country journey to attend a funeral.

A sustained prose fiction engagement is Pádraig Fhia Ó Mathúna’s short story “Cuimhní na Cille” [“Cell Memories”], published in *Comhar*’s January 2021 edition. This story narrates the COVID-19 lockdown experience of Seán, a former H-Block Republican prisoner exiled in New York City in 2020. Seán is “*as obair agus faoi ghlas mar gheall ar ráig den víreas corónach*”⁵⁶ [“out of work and locked up on account of the coronavirus outbreak”]. Being confined indoors, “*D’éirigh sé bréan den seomra suite agus de na taibhsí a bhí istigh leis*”⁵⁷ [“He grew sick of the sitting room and of the ghosts that were inside with him”]. Wandering aimlessly around the park, he thinks of “*an víreas agus éiginnteacht an tsaoil*” [“the virus and the uncertainty of life”]. The sound of an ambulance siren leads him to reflect indifferently on the parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic, the HIV crisis and heroin “epidemic” of the 1980s “*ag déanamh slad ar an chathair*”⁵⁸ [“devastating the city”]. Both inside and outside are dangerous for Seán, who is later assaulted by a policeman at a Black Lives Matter protest.

Stylistically, the battle-scarred protagonist’s detached engagement with traumatic memory and future uncertainty recalls post-War modernist anxieties. The story’s sprawling subject matter starts with COVID-19 lockdown and concludes with early Black Lives Matter protests, touching on illegal immigration, the Vietnam War, police brutality, and Troubles memory in between. Watching the death of George Floyd on television, Seán wonders, “*Cad é an chéad chéim eile i mbliana? [...] ceathrar marcach apacailipseach cosa in airde as a gcapall síos sráid 237th*”⁵⁹ [“What’s the next step this year? [...] four apocalyptic horsemen galloping down 237th street”]. In this (and in interjections of noises like sirens) there are certainly echoes of Virginia Woolf and Septimus Smith: “The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?”⁶⁰

Though removed from the day-to-day experience of the pandemic in Ireland, “Cuimhní na Cille” examines the time-space of exile and speaks to the tension of uncertain futures. In this respect, as Pól Ó Muirí argues, the writer who would have understood the COVID-19 pandemic most acutely is the Cork poet Seán Ó Ríordáin (1916-1977).⁶¹ Diagnosed with tuberculosis as a young man, Ó Ríordáin grappled with the liminality of its “living death” for forty years. As Ó Muirí observes, the daily threat of the virulent respiratory disease is not the only thing Ó Ríordáin would have understood about COVID-19, but also the days, weeks and months “*ag leá isteach ina chéile*”⁶² [“melting into each other”]. Between quarantine stints

56. Pádraig Fhia Ó Mathúna, “Cuimhní na Cille”, *Comhar*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2021, p. 27. Translations are mine.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 28-29.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

60. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, London, Penguin, 1996, p. 17.

61. Pól Ó Muirí, “Agus thit an Meitheamh siar isteach sa Gheihmreadh”, *Comhar*, vol. 80, no. 4, 2020, p. 32.

62. *Ibid.*

in sanatoria as a “professional patient”, Ó Ríordáin largely limited his interaction with other people for “practical, emotional and intellectual reasons”.⁶³ Mental and physical anguish from his circumstances are central to his poetic voice. Although many of his poems resonate with the COVID-19 era, two in particular prefigure the themes of Ní Eadhra’s “Cuairteoirí”.

“Claustrophobia” explores an inside-outside dialectic and takes up the metaphor of the window as a barrier between the two exchangeable states. In the poem, “outside” is a dangerous, insidious “night” contrasted by the candlelight of the poet’s “inside”. Outside / night is “*mar shluaite sa chlos, / Tá rialtas na hoíche / Lasmuigh den bhfuinneog*”⁶⁴ [“like crowds in the alley, / The government of night / is outside the window”]. The poet fears:

*Má mhúchann mó choinneal
Ar ball de m’ainneoin,
Léimfidh an oíche
Isteach im scamhóg.*⁶⁵

[If my candle goes out
Now in spite of me,
The night will leap
Into my lungs.]

The alternative meaning of the verb “*múch*”, “suffocate”, increases the terror and uncertainty associated with nighttime symptoms of tuberculosis. On 17 February 1956, Ó Ríordáin wrote in his diary, “*Seo maidin amárach cé gur fada ó mhaidin í. Táim ag lorg m’ánálach*”⁶⁶ [“This is tomorrow morning even though it’s far from morning. I am searching for my breath”]. A similar image regarding COVID-19 appears in “Cuairteoirí”, when Jimín Óg’s nocturnal coughing prompts Máire-Brid’s observation, “*Is beag nár phléasc a chuid scamhóg*” [“His lungs nearly exploded”] (p. 11), as well as Beartla’s concern that not everyone will “come through”. But the movement of “Claustrophobia” also mirrors “Cuairteoirí”, finishing in the future tense on a note of hope:

*Ach má mhaireann mo choinneal
Aon oíche amháin
Bead im phoblacht solais
Go dtiocfaidh an lá.*⁶⁷

63. Ciara Breathnach, “‘Heavier in the Interval Than the Consummation’: Bronchial Disease in Seán Ó Ríordáin’s Diaries”, *Medical Humanities*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2014, p. 13.

64. Seán Ó Ríordáin, *Na Dánta*, Indreabhán, Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2011, p. 174. Translations are mine.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Seán Ó Ríordáin, *Anamlón Bliana: ó dhialanna an Ríordánaigh*, Tadhg Ó Dúshláine (ed.), Indreabhán, Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2014, p. 166. Breathnach (“‘Heavier in the Interval Than the Consummation’...”, p. 12) argues that Ó Ríordáin, “ever conscious of his mortality, penned his diaries mindful of their legacy: 30/6/54 Wednesday 11pm, he wrote: ‘In case I die today I am writing a few words.’”

67. Seán Ó Ríordáin, *Na Dánta*, p. 174.

[But if my candle lasts
Through one night
I’ll be a republic of light
Until the day comes.]

Ó Riordáin also explores the mediation of claustrophobic and expansive space in “Ceol” [“Music”]. Trapped inside his “*cheolphríósún*” [“musicprison”], the poet describes the room’s heavy air: “*Bhí fallaí ceoil gach taobh / Is fuaimdhíon os mo chionn*”⁶⁸ [“Walls of music were on every side / And a soundshelter over my head”]. But music also provides him with an escape: while he reads a book of poetry from Wales, “*Nár fháiltigh romham ar dtús*” [“that did not welcome me at first”]:

*Is do phógas beol ar bheol
An beol ón mBreatain Bhig
Is bhí ceol ag brú ar cheol
Is ceol trí cheol ag cith.*

*Le fód dem intinn féin,
Is fód ón mBreatain Bhig
Do chruiceogas an t-aer,
Dhein both sa cheol istigh.*⁶⁹

[And I kissed mouth to mouth
The mouth from Wales
music was pressed to music
music showering through music.

With a sod of my own mind,
And a sod from Wales,
I hived the air,
Made a hut in the music inside.]

Both this poem and the hallucinatory spatiality of “*Fiabhras*” [“Fever”], create what Seán Ó Tuama called the “*geografaíocht fiabhrais*”⁷⁰ [“geography of fever”]. Frank Sewell explains this as a “landscape [...] a region of illness, miles and miles from health”.⁷¹ As Breathnach observes, displacement and (not) belonging are among the “strong discourses”⁷² in Ó Riordáin’s poetry; he is an emigrant by virtue of his quarantine. So, in “Ceol”, the Welsh poetry and music together form an embodied knowledge, represented by the highly physical kiss (something otherwise

68. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

70. Quoted in Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, “Seán Ó Riordáin agus Aisling na Feola”, in *Fill Arís: Oidhreacht Sheáin Uí Riordáin*, Liam Mac Amhlaigh, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith (eds.), Indreabhán, Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2012, p. 49.

71. Frank Sewell, *Modern Irish Poetry: A New Alhambra*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 36.

72. Ciara Breathnach, “Heavier in the Interval...”, p. 12.

forbidden to tuberculosis patients). This enables the contraction of time-space and a sense of orientation for the immobile, febrile patient.

The geographical imagery here points to the shared anxieties of the historical moment of COVID-19 (especially in care settings) and a central aspect of Irish culture: emigration. Each is connected through conceptions of mobility, time-space compression / expansion, isolation, and (dis)orientation. Emigration is a central theme of Irish literary output, and music and dance are frequent narrative devices in emigration literature, including in exploring questions of language (and its failure).⁷³

As Nuala Johnson has discussed, official ideologies delineating Gaeltachtaí as discrete geographical regions has historically not been met with commensurate socioeconomic development. As a result, Gaeltacht residents have “experienced a sense of peripherality [both] structurally and culturally”.⁷⁴ Indeed, in “Cuairteoirí”, Máire-Bríd and Beartla feel ignored by the government response to the pandemic. The opening of the first nursing home for Irish speakers in Carna, south Conamara, in December 2003 is illustrative here. Previously, because of undersupply and underinvestment, residents’ only options could be as far away as Kinvara or Loughrea in the south-east of the county. As Lorna Siggins reported in *The Irish Times*, the Carna nursing home’s establishment was prompted by concerns of “isolation from family, friends, and community [and] also the break with the Gaeltacht environment and the native language”.⁷⁵ This demonstrates the sensitivities surrounding what essentially amounts to forced internal migration exacerbated by sociolinguistic tensions. Another observation in *The Times* article is telling:

Since emigration has been a harsh fact of life in the area, the nursing home’s catchment is expected to extend across the Atlantic. One of its first bookings came from a Connemara native living in Massachusetts.⁷⁶

The Carna nursing home allows both internal and overseas migrants to return “home”; Siggins earlier compared the opening of the Carna home to an act of repatriation.⁷⁷ These metaphors direct us toward the role of literature in representing these experiences.

Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s fiction demonstrates these themes and provides context to Ní Eadhra’s use of music. “An Bhliain 1912” [“The Year 1912”] narrates the American Wake of a Conamara girl, Máirín, who is about to emigrate to South

73. See, for example, Aisling Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín Nic Eoin, *Ar an gCoigríoch: Díolaim Litríochta ar Scéal na himirce*, Indreabhán, Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2008; Christopher McCann, *Singing Exile: Music in Irish Emigration Literature*, master’s thesis in literature, University of Notre Dame Australia (Fremantle), 2017.

74. Nuala Johnson, “Making Space: Gaeltacht Policy and the Politics of Identity”, in *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, Brian Graham (ed.), New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 182.

75. Lorna Siggins, “First Home for Elderly Irish Speakers Opens Doors”, *The Irish Times*, 31 December 2003, p. 2.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Lorna Siggins, “Gaeltacht Agency to Contribute to Home for Elderly”, *The Irish Times*, 3 December 2001, p. 2.

Boston. Imminent time-space expansion is foreshadowed when we learn that “An Ghealchathair an t-achar ab fhaide ó bhaile a bhí Máirín riamh”⁷⁸ [“The Brightcity was the furthest distance from home Máirín had ever been”]. In the “mental map of [her] native Gaeltacht community”,⁷⁹ South Boston, Montana, Minnesota and California are closer “do chomhláí a tuisciana agus a samhlaíochta” [“to the thresholds of her understanding and imagination”] than Dublin, Belfast, Wexford, or even “áiteacha nach raibh thar chupla míle ar thaobh an Achréidh den Ghealchathair”⁸⁰ [“places that weren’t more than a couple of miles on the (eastern) Achréidh side of the Brightcity”].

This observation is instructive. Galway is Ireland’s second largest county, divided into eastern and western halves by Loch and River Corrib. To the west, Conamara is mountainous, rocky, and traditionally associated with maritime industries. The Achréidh region lies in the flatter, more arable and mercantile surrounds of East Galway (indeed, its name comes from “eachréidh”, “level plain”). This division has historically resulted in linguistic and sociocultural differences. Another Ó Cadhain story, “An Bhearna Mhíl” [“The Hare-Lip”], depicts a Conamara girl’s alienation after her arranged marriage into a wealthy Achréidh family – an act of internal migration enforced by economic necessity. Echoing Máirín in “An Bhliain 1912”, “[ní] raibh Nóra riamh ní ba ghaire don cheantar seo ná Gaillimh”⁸¹ [“Nóra had never been nearer to this district than Galway”]. Her new husband speaks “de ghlór righin téachta ar chuir canúint Ghaeilge an Achréidh barr coimhthíos ann” [“with a tough frozen voice that had a coating of strangeness from the Achréidh dialect of Irish”], while reflecting the gradual ascendancy of English in the region, at one point she is called “Mrs. Ryan”.⁸² Nóra’s perception of time-space expands as her linguistic boundaries contract to symbolise her immobility.

Throughout “An Bhliain 1912”, Máirín’s mother similarly grapples with the disorientation of impending immobility in relation to her emigrant daughter’s mobility. Unable to verbalise her struggle, a “perceptible chasm” opens between mother and daughter “making satisfactory communication of emotion impossible”.⁸³ When one attendee at the Wake sings a lamenting song so loudly that it disrupts the atmosphere, the mother chides him. However, she acknowledges:

78. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *An Braon Broghach* [1948], Dublin, An Gúm, 1968, p. 159. “An Ghealchathair” [“The Brightcity”] is Ó Cadhain’s pseudonym for Galway city.

79. Aisling Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín Nic Eoin, “Ar an gCoigríoch: Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Irish-Language Literature”, *The Irish Review*, vol. 44, 2012, p. 61.

80. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *An Braon Broghach*, p. 156.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 106-107. See also: Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *An Ghaeilge Bheo: Destined to Pass*, Baile Átha Cliath, Coiscéim, 2002; Ciarán Bairéad, S. O’D., “Scéalta agus Seanchas Ón Achréidh”, *Béaloidéas*, vol. 32, 1964, p. 99-147. For a more recent assessment of the state of the Irish language in the region, see Colm Ó Cinsealla, *Plean Teanga: Limistéar Pleanála Teanga Eachréidh na Gaillimhe (Eanách Dhúin, Baile Chláir agus an Carn Mór)*, Coiste Stiúrtha Pleanála Teanga an Eachréidh, 2019, online: <https://udaras.ie/assets/uploads/2020/05/20-An-tEachreidh.pdf>.

83. Aisling Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín Nic Eoin, “Ar an gCoigríoch...”, p. 62.

*Ach thabharfadh sí cuid mhaith ar an ala sin dá mbeadh fonn aici mar a bhí ag Tom, leis an ualach a bhí ar a croí a chur amach de in a shile cheoil.*⁸⁴

[But she would give a good amount at that moment to have a song like Tom did, to express the burden that was in her heart through a stream of music.]

This recalls Máire-Brid's "*fonn* [...] *a rá le Beartla gan a bheith buartha*" ["desire to tell Beartla not to be worried"] in "Cuairteoir" (p. 11). The dual meanings of "*fonn*" enhance the symbolism in each story. Máire-Brid's use of "*fonn*" means "desire" or "wish"; Máirín's mother's "*fonn*" means "tune" or "song", but the alternate meaning is contextually significant. When the band in "Cuairteoir" becomes melded with the dancers, they are "*ag casadh fonn mall*" ["playing a slow song"] (p. 13). It is at this moment, when the dual meanings of "*fonn*" overlap, that Máire-Brid is able to communicate through embodied knowledge. A similar effect is observed in "An Bhliain 1912". Pádraigín Pháidín dances passionately to express his desire for Máirín. The mother understands the dance and its implications:

*[...] An rud a bhí cinnte uirthi féin a rá lena teanga bhí seisean á rá as damhsa. Bhí a chosa agus a cholainn ag cumadh rídháin [...].*⁸⁵

[...] The thing she was struggling to express with her language he was saying through dance. His feet and his body were composing a majestic poem [...].]

Conclusion

The ultimate failure of linguistic expression in this final example returns us to the literature of the COVID moment. In July 2020, while surveying the early output of American COVID fiction, Lily Meyer observes the scattered nature of two particular collections and the struggle for language to "channel inner experience outward" and "truly refine [...] ideas about personal life in a state of widespread isolation and existential dread".⁸⁶ However, recalling the baritone singer Simon Morgan's assertion that music represents process rather than product, Prieto observes musical fiction looking *inwards*, "listening in" to the "interactions between consciousness and world":

Music acts as a guide for reconfiguring the narrative text in such a way that it can better represent those elements of thought that had theretofore been considered to be ineffable, unrepresentable, or otherwise inaccessible to language.⁸⁷

84. Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *An Braon Broghach*, p. 156.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

86. Lily Meyer, "The Literature of the Pandemic..." (emphasis mine).

87. Eric Prieto, *Listening In: Music, Mind, and the Modernist Narrative*, Lincoln – London, University of Nebraska Press, 2002, p. x.

COVID-19 has forced us to redescribe our reality as time-space expands, control diminishes, and barriers arise. Where Beartla’s “mental map” is threatened by the alienating “dialect” of Zoom and emojis in “Cuariteoirí”, music and dance offers “a new way of dwelling [and] of orienting”⁸⁸ himself in the world. In this respect, the achievement of Ní Eadhra’s fiction is twofold. First, her use of musical narrative device draws on the “cultural treasure”⁸⁹ used in the past by authors like Ó Cadhain. But Ní Eadhra adapts the musical device to the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which “brings forth new aspects in the principal subject”,⁹⁰ offering an experience of “the body, time and sociability”, so as to “place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives”.⁹¹ Ní Eadhra’s use of present tense in the narration is crucial to this effect, as the reader’s experience unfolds simultaneously with the characters.

The other effect of her story is the foregrounding and recording of voices marginalised by the pandemic. In this respect “Cuariteoirí” is an important social document, recording a time of upheaval from the point of view of nursing home residents whose liminal place within the community is exacerbated by shifts in socio-spatial power dynamics. Ní Eadhra’s composition in the Irish language and correlations to real-world examples of aged care enhance the story’s importance. Together with contemporaneous and historical literary analogues, “Cuariteoirí” demonstrates music and dance’s ability to provide a praxis for reclaiming agency and reorienting one’s sense of self. During the uncertainty of the pandemic, this allows the final line of “Cuariteoirí” to ring true: “*Beimid togha*”.

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88. Paul Ricoeur, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, Mario J. Valdés (ed.), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991, p. 85.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

90. *Ibid.*

91. Simon Frith, “Music and Identity”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall, Paul du Gay (eds.), London, Sage, 1996, p. 124.