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Hearth Lessons: Paula Meehan's Ecofeminist Economics

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Abstract

Paula Meehan's *Painting Rain* conveys the socio-cultural impacts of the Celtic Tiger's collapse through an eco-feminist framework. Within this framework, environmental, gender, and class inequities are intimately intertwined. The poetry conveys a pre-modern non-rationalism that disrupts the alignment of land, women, and the working class as objectified terms of binaries. Whereas patriarchal capitalism is premised on transcending nature through knowledge that licenses its exploitation, Meehan's ecological tropes present nature as an irreducible Other to be appreciated through an embodied experience rather than being rationally known and commodified. Her descriptions of embodied experiences are premised upon the same land as body equation prevalent in news media descriptions of economic catastrophe, but her poetry presents tropes that counter the reductive economic clichés of journalism. While Meehan engaged in political protest at the Occupy Dame Street movement, she presented a collection of poetry that also resists any perceived divide between art and activism.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, Celtic Tiger, binaries, cognitive frames, crisis, economic rhetoric, Paula Meehan, Irish poetry

Résumé

Le recueil *Painting Rain* de Paula Meehan traduit l'impact socio-culturel de l'effondrement du Tigre celtique par le biais d'un cadre théorique éco-féministe. À l'intérieur de ce cadre, les inégalités de genre, de classe et d'environnement sont intimement liées. Sa poésie évoque un non-rationnalisme pré-moderne qui remet en cause l'équation terre, femme et classe laborieuse en tant qu'éléments objectivés d'oppositions binaires. Alors que le capitalisme patriarcal est fondé sur la transcendance de la nature par un savoir qui en justifie l'exploitation, les tropes écologiques de Meehan présentent la nature comme un Autre irréductible ; elle peut être appréciée par une expérience sensible mais pas connue rationnellement ou transformée en produit de consommation. Ses descriptions d'expériences sensibles s'appuient sur la même équation entre terre et corps qui domine les descriptions médiatiques de la catastrophe économique, mais la poésie de Meehan offre des images qui battent en brèche les clichés économiques réducteurs des journalistes. Alors qu'elle s'impliquait dans le mouvement de protestation Occupy Dame Street elle a produit un recueil qui résiste aussi à toute division entre art et activisme.

Mots-clé : Éco-féminisme, Tigre celtique, binarités, cadres cognitifs, crise, rhétorique économique, Paula Meehan, poésie irlandaise

Paula Meehan's 2009 collection, *Painting Rain*, is a continuation of a poetic project that runs throughout her work, one that seeks to express an eco-conscious public voice through poetry. She is a globally-oriented, yet community-focused poet with, in her words, "an impulse to express collective memory"¹. One of her most prolific critics, Jody Allen Randolph, insightfully places her "at an intersection of counter cultural ideas and Irish lyric tradition" and notes the influences of the American Gary Snyder's "regard for the natural world" and "his ecological activism" but also Eavan Boland's feminist engagement with the Irish tradition². In an interview, Meehan says that Snyder's liberationist politics "prepared me to hear the powerful arguments that feminism put at my disposal"³. As a female poet from a working-class background, Meehan's work has continuously viewed her ecologically and communally derived sense of place through the lenses of class and gender to express her own environmentally conscious liberationist aesthetic. Unlike her contemporary, the late vocational poet Dennis O'Driscoll, whose working-class voice is known for engaging economic issues and especially the excesses of Celtic Tiger culture, Meehan's poetic activism has focused more broadly on historical injustices and social critiques that view social class, gender, and environmental exploitation as intimately connected. Meehan has said, "poetry acts as a lightning rod to earth the energies of the Zeitgeist you are living through"⁴, and thus *Painting Rain* is necessarily concerned with conveying the communal sense of loss and displacement leading to the Celtic Tiger's demise during the 2008 global financial crisis. In an interview I conducted with Meehan about the collection, she makes her economic concerns clear and explains the way she quite literally "grounds" economics through an eco-critical stance. She states:

So many of our vulnerable ecosystems were (are still) under threat from mindless turbo development. Late century capitalism run riot. Now that the boom is over and we've gone into recession and the government is using taxpayers' money to bail out the banks, we may have a breathing space to estimate what's been lost through the unmediated and rampant greed that characterized both planning and building in nineties and noughties Ireland⁵.

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1. Jody Allen Randolph, "The Body Politic: A Conversation with Paula Meehan", *An Sionnach* 5.1-2 (2009), p. 260.
 2. Jody Allen Randolph, "Text and Context: Paula Meehan", *An Sionnach* 5.1-2 (2009), p. 7.
 3. qtd. in Jody Allen Randolph, "Text and Context: Paula Meehan", p. 10.
 4. Rip Van Winkle, "Paula Meehan". Scottish Poetry Library Podcast, August 2013, [http://scottishpoetrylibrary.podomatic.com/entry/2013-09-03T22_00_00-07_00].
 5. Amanda Sperry, "An Interview with Paula Meehan", Wake Forest University Press, November 2008, [<http://wufupress.wfu.edu/an-interview-with-paula-meehan/>].

The collection, therefore, engages the economic collapse through Meehan's environmental and feminist perspectives that allow her poetry to convey social losses accrued during the Celtic Tiger.

In addition to Meehan's own words, this reading of *Painting Rain* for its ecofeminist economics is indebted to the critical work of Kathryn Kirkpatrick who first examined Meehan's "Eco-feminist Poetics" in which "the gender, class, and ecological concerns of Meehan's poems [are] interwoven" and "inseparable"⁶. She cites Meehan's "willingness to weave pre-colonial and pre-modern ways of knowing with modern secular rationalism and a socialist politics" as that which lends her poems to ecofeminist readings⁷. Kirkpatrick also challenges Meehan's readers to acknowledge "the interconnections between exploitative economic systems, social inequalities, and environmental degradation"⁸. This challenge can be extended to current economic concerns by focusing on the way Meehan's work in *Painting Rain* engages economic rhetoric and popular economic concerns through ecological tropes that counter the cognitive frames offered in newscasts and newspaper headlines as methods for understanding the economic crisis. A cognitive frame is a socially constructed conceptual metaphor that affects the way an individual perceives ideas⁹. Often the cognitive frames used to explain economic issues draw on environmental and gendered language that promotes objectivist ideologies.

The first poem of the collection, "Death of a Field", acts as a statement for an ecofeminist economic aesthetic that runs throughout the collection. It directly engages one of the most pressing economic issues in Ireland, the excessive housing development that led to a scarred landscape of "ghost estates", housing developments wherein many of the houses were left only partially constructed and became derelict. The poem also engages the environmental and gendered rhetoric surrounding this issue that affects the way these housing estates are perceived and limits the potential solutions for this massive problem. "Death of a Field" is an anti-pastoral elegy to the loss of a green space that begins when it is transformed into a construction site with a notice posted by the county council that a housing development will be built there. Meehan writes, "The field itself is lost the morning it becomes a site/ When the Notice goes up: Fingal County Council – 44 houses"¹⁰. Already the poem draws attention to construction vocabulary

6. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Paula Meehan's Gardens". *New Hibernia Review* 17.2 (Summer 2013), p. 45.

7. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Between Country and City: Paula Meehan's Ecofeminist Poetics", *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts*, Ed. Christine Cusick (Cork, Cork U P, 2010), p. 111.

8. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Paula Meehan's Gardens", p. 45.

9. Alan Cienki, "Frames, Idealized Cognitive Models, and Domains", *Cognitive Linguistics*, Eds. Derk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens, Oxford, Oxford U P, 2007, p. 179.

10. Paula Meehan, *Painting Rain*, Winston-Salem, NC, Wake Forest UP, 2009, 13. Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.

with “site” and “Notice” as well as the impact of linguistic choices. As soon as a written notice labels the space “site” instead of “field” it is “lost”. Approximately halfway through the poem, Meehan writes, “The end of the field as we know it is the start of the estate” (13). The way the space is cognitively processed changes from “field”, open green space, to “estate”, a word that now ironically connotes derelict dwellings rather than grand living spaces. Just as the poem is linguistically constructed, just as the houses are constructed, our relationship to nature is constructed through cultural perceptions. Instead of naturalizing the economic processes of turbo development that results from the very recent change in economic policies that capitalized on the neo-liberal global financial structure, Meehan’s focus on linguistic construction, on naming the green space, draws attention to the constructed nature of the economic system in which the residential development occurs.

When housing construction ground to a halt leading to and as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis, journalists began to frame reports on the problem of derelict estates through repeated use of cognitive frames. Headlines in Ireland announced that it was haunted by ghost estates, and major Irish newspapers picked up the language of US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner’s somatic, or body, metaphors about stress testing banks as if they were human heart patients rather than financial institutions doctoring global markets. Much of the language in the texts of these newspaper pieces, however, commonly slipped between ecological and somatic tropes that drew on historical injustices yet maintained equations between land and body. For example, excessive development was often framed as a disease on the land. An opinion writer in *The Irish Examiner* said that “the country is blighted with unfinished or ‘ghost’ estates and public money is being used to rescue banks and property developers whose recklessness has undermined the economy¹¹”. Noel O’Driscoll in *The Kildare Nationalist* wrote about the “development bonanza” in Athy and said the town “is a black spot for ghost estates¹²”. An article in *The Irish Times* also discussed “the type of ghost estate that blights many Irish towns” in comparison to other countries’ experiences of the global economic crisis¹³. A search of an international newspaper database of Ireland and the United Kingdom’s newspapers for the three years from 2008 through 2011 returned 482 articles with the phrase “ghost estate”. Of those, approximately ten percent contained the terms “scarred” or “blighted” in reference to the land or included reference to a country stricken by turbo development. Although this vocabulary seems critical of the development problem, their use maintains equations between land and a diseased body.

11. “Ghost Estates – Don’t Knock Them Down”, *The Irish Examiner*, April 15, 2010.

12. Noel O’Driscoll, “Athy is a Blackspot for Ghost Estates”, *The Kildare Nationalist*, August 9, 2011.

13. Jamie Smyth, “‘Perfect Storm’ Rages in Latvia”, *The Irish Times*, September 24, 2010.

These terms draw on the cultural memory of the years of the potato blight and famine when the land in Ireland could not sustain the Irish people. Framing the contemporary economic crisis through the cultural memory of the Great Famine, through terms that emphasize a diseased body of land, certainly dramatizes the importance of the financial crisis, but it also suggests the political response to the Famine offers solutions for the current crises. For example, Graeme Wearden reports in his “Business Blog” for *The Guardian* that the financial crisis is the “biggest crisis since the Famine”, and his account of emigration and austerity measures are reminiscent of accounts of Famine Ireland. He writes:

The human cost of austerity demanded in return for the bailout has been huge. Around 300,000 people have left the country since 2010, and the unemployment rate has risen over twelve percent. The poster child to Europe’s response to the crisis may be back on its feet, but it will be walking gingerly for some time¹⁴.

Here the land is a recovering body that has once again been insufficient to meet the needs of the Irish people. A 2012 report from the UCD Geary Institute suggests one reason that the 2008 financial crisis is read in terms of Irish history rather than through the frame of a global financial meltdown. This report concludes that the Irish financial crisis did not result from exposure to complex financial products or to the US sub-prime fallout but is: “a plain vanilla property bubble” caused by a failure to regulate real estate development and is therefore a “home-made” problem influenced by international developments¹⁵. Therefore, this great homegrown financial crisis is easily linked to the Great Famine, which was the most devastating economic crisis in Irish history. Many historians of the famine detail laissez-faire policy that exacerbated the effects of the potato blight, and the contemporary crisis has been marked by an ideological affinity for austerity measures that affect the individual Irish citizen by guaranteeing Irish banking debt. Although the comparison between the Great Famine and the contemporary fiscal crisis is an overstatement of the case, the cultural memory of political responses to the famine affects the language used to describe the current land crisis of “ghost estates” as an economic land crisis rather than as an effect of a global financial meltdown.

In “Death of a Field”, Meehan engages the cognitive frames of the land as an exploitable body, not by critiquing them or offering alternative metaphors, but

14. Graeme Wearden, “Ireland Prepares to Exit Bailout After ‘Biggest Crisis Since the Famine’”, *Business Blog, The Guardian*, December 13, 2013. [<http://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/dec/13/ireland-prepares-to-exit-bailout-business-live>].

15. UCD Geary Institute, “Crisis in the Irish Banking System”, Discussion Paper Series No. 3, February 2012, p. 5-6.

instead by offering what Kirkpatrick called “the pre-colonial and pre-modern ways of knowing” that change the way the frames are perceived¹⁶. At the end of the poem, Meehan presents the land as a body. The speaker wants to “know the field... Through its night dew, it moon-white caul/ Its slick and shine” (14). The dewy field becomes a newborn baby whose “caul”, or amniotic sack, was linked to superstitions of good omens and was thought to be a charm against drowning¹⁷. Although, the “slick and shine”, makes the field seem both new and like a newborn, the descriptor of “moon-white” for the caul also gives this metaphor the expanded association with a woman’s white close-fitting cap known by the same term¹⁸. The metaphorical frame has multiple layers that allow the association of land and women through the reference to both birth and dress. The primary association to birth draws on pre-modern associations that are receptive to a spiritual dimension, preventing the land from being devalued or valued as a commodity at all.

The focus on an alternate form of value occurs when Meehan refers to the field’s “profligacy”, a word that connotes reckless or extravagant spending but also is used to convey “sexual promiscuity” (14)¹⁹. In an interview entitled “The Body Politic”, Meehan says that she has learned to value the “historic valence”, or to feel what Pasternak calls “the ghost of each word”, as an “external power” that when combined with the internal “breath work” of the body is the beginning of poetic magic, what Meehan called “the cauldron where the brew starts fermenting²⁰”. The historical valences of “profligacy” change the field’s system of valuation. When the land as body frame is forced to contain both the realm of the pre-modern spiritual experience and the realm of modern rationalism turned irrational consumerism, the cognitive frame provides its own critique. Instead of the profligacy of global capitalism, the field is profligate because it is unknowable. The poetic speaker wants to “know the field/Through the soles of [her] feet”, and yet this attempt would be like trying to know the expansive and spiritual experience she describes as the “million million cycles of being in wing” (14).

Whereas capitalism is premised on transcending nature through knowledge that licenses its exploitation as a resource, the field’s value is in its unknowable quality. This quality draws on the language of the land as a body to be valued, but the historical valence of the language and the emphasis on an embodied sense of experiencing the field is a way of knowing that values what is irreducibly Other rather than what is exploitable. The usual purpose of a cognitive frame is

16. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, “Between Country and City: Paula Meehan’s Ecofeminist Poetics”, p. 111.

17. “Caul, n.1”, *OED Online*, September 2014, Oxford University Press.

18. *Ibid.*

19. “Profligacy, n.”, *OED Online*, September 2014. Oxford University Press.

20. Jody Allen Randolph, “The Body Politic: A Conversation with Paula Meehan”, p. 251.

to draw on embodied experiences to make an unknowable concept more familiar, yet Meehan transforms a familiar cognitive frame to defamiliarize the field, to convey its mystery. This alternative system of valuation disrupts the way in which the land as body metaphor serves to naturalize a system of exploitation. Throughout Meehan's work Kirkpatrick claims Meehan refuses the binary of nature and culture that places nature in a separate and subordinate position and instead "represent[s] the human and nonhuman in intimate relation, sustained, paradoxically, by a tension between the known and the unknowable²¹".

In addition to "Death of a Field", poems in *Painting Rain* mourn fields as animistic Others lost to construction projects. "Not Weeding" mourns a "back field" that becomes a "building site" (15). The weeds of the former field are personified as "refugees" and "former sworn enemies" that have become "cherished guests" and "emissaries of the wild" (15). Meehan mourns "The Mushroom Field" located "at the edge of the estate" and its floral resident, "hawthorn", contrasts with its new residents, "a ten storey apartment block/ and a shopping centre" (87). In "Death of a Field", Meehan clearly states that "the memory of the field disappears with its flora" (13). The personification of flora, "the yearning of the yarrow" and "the plight of the scarlet pimpernel", juxtaposed with the naturalization of the human endeavors, "the site to be *planted* with houses" that becomes a "*Nest* of sorrow and chemical", (13, emphasis added) creates the sense of intimate relation between the human and nonhuman. This intimacy disrupts the traditional separation of nature and culture and therefore places into question nature's subordination as an exploitable commodity.

After Ireland's economic crash, Meehan was to be found at the Occupy Dame Street movement to add her physical protest to her poetic ones. Like Occupy Wall Street in the US, protestors expressed anger about class stratification and specifically the government's rescue of banks at the expense of working class taxpayers through the implementation of budgetary austerity measures. The protest was organized through Facebook and Twitter to establish an encampment outside the Central Bank in Dublin on Dame Street. An RTE News report on the movement's goals stated:

The protesters say they want the EU and the IMF to "stay out of Ireland's affairs"; an end to the burden of private debt on the people of Ireland; the return of ownership of Ireland's oil and gas reserves to the people of Ireland; and for "real participatory democracy²²".

21. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Between Country and City: Paula Meehan's Ecofeminist Poetics", p. 112.

22. "No Plans to End 'Occupy Dame Street' Protests". RTE News, October 11, 2011. [<http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/1011/307260-damestreet/>].

Meehan's Facebook page, curated by Jody Allen Randolph, contains a Vimeo clip of Meehan at Occupy Dame Street, supporting the cause through her celebrity. The post dated December 8, 2011 shows Meehan and Irish folk singer Christy Moore at Occupy Dame Street in which Moore expressed solidarity with the international Occupy Movement occurring throughout the Republic²³.

In addition to her physical presence, Meehan has lent her artistic celebrity to the Occupy movement. A website entitled *occupiedchicagotribune.org*, created to support the Occupy movement in Chicago, reports in a newsletter on artists' participation that Paula Meehan wrote a poem entitled "Occupy Language" to be posted on their website²⁴. She later read the poem on an RTE television program entitled *The Works*. The poem explores what it means to "occupy" something. The repetition of the imperative to "occupy language", or "occupy Spring", or to "occupy love" expresses a consciousness of experience, or a truthfulness, suggested in the first lines of the poem²⁵. Meehan writes: "The word 'truth' glistening like a new born leveret in its form. Occupy language²⁶." As in the poems of *Painting Rain*, this experience is tied to the natural world, here a young rabbit in its nest. Occupying language is a conscious task and yet Meehan suggests a non-rational spiritual quality through natural imagery that she describes as "truth." As with the Occupy movement itself, Meehan occupies language for justice. After her command to "Occupy language", she writes of "the word justice, the scales of a rare beast rumored extinct", and she alludes to other movements for social justice including the Arab Spring through her command to "Occupy. Occupy Spring if you dare. The mocking sap is arising. Refuseniks Spring that occupies us²⁷". Meehan sees the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring through an appreciation of the spirit of the "refusenik", a protestor who refuses to obey the law²⁸. Meehan also suggests a pre-modern spiritualism that provides a sense of universal inclusion through an allusion to William Blake's "the Eye altering alters all" when she writes: "The mind which alters, altering all²⁹." The allusion to spirituality and the natural imagery convey a sense of power and an optimistic inevitability for the social justice movements. This global experience happens/occurs for

23. Paula Meehan's Facebook page, curated by Jody Allen Randolph, December 8, 2011, accessed August 11, 2014. Link to video: [<http://vimeo.com/33322018>].

24. *Occupied Chicago Tribune* claims, "Poet Paula Meehan's '#Occupy Language', a mesmerizing work from Occupy Dame Street, is available exclusively on the *Occupied Chicago Tribune's* website." See *Occupied Chicago Tribune*, "Revolution in Bloom: Occupy Chicago Launches Arts Collective". March 2012, [www.occupiedchicagotribune.org].

25. Paula Meehan, "Occupy Language". *The Works*, season 1, episode 1; aired January 26, 2012 on RTÉ One.

26. *Ibid.* The text quoted is my transcription of a video recording.

27. *Ibid.*

28. "refusenik, n.", *OED Online*, September 2014, Oxford University Press.

29. William Blake, "The Mental Traveller", *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982) 485. Paula Meehan, "Occupy Language".

Meehan when we “occupy language. Reclaim the words³⁰”. The poem’s distribution through the website and popular television show attests to Meehan’s desire to engage with and facilitate the social justice protests through media activism in a way that renews the power of words such as “truth” and “justice”.

In *Painting Rain* economic issues about protest or historical and systemic critiques are not ancillary to the more biographical poems that mourn the loss of family or remembrances of childhood. Economic concerns are embedded in many of those moments as well. In “Hearth Lesson” economic issues are central to family tensions. The colloquialisms “*money to burn, burning a hole in your pocket*” trigger childhood memories of parental discord (85). Meehan writes, “Even then I can tell it was money,/the lack of it day after day,/at root of the bitter words” (85). A poem about a visit to the seaside mourns the Celtic Tiger and its “dream/ of empire – dissolved, wrecked. Gone badly wrong” (24). A poem about Aunt Cora on the edge of death includes the memory of her emigration to London for better economic opportunity (38-40). Memories of Uncle Peter include the poet’s younger self described as “all prickles and class anger” (41-44). Other anecdotal poems, like “Note from the Puzzle Factory”. include economic references such as a person that checked herself in to a mental facility after she “went to the limit on Visa” (58). In “A Change of Life”. a poem about what a poet must know in order to write poetry, the speaker writes of a people “Enslaved by money and the lure of power... This new fever has a grip on the island/ and everyone wants, wants, wants” (62-63). Not only are the public poems about economic anxieties, but Meehan’s sense of her own poetic identity is intertwined with such anxieties.

In the sequence “Troika”, Meehan explores the level to which economic issues that stem from class and gender oppression, and the objectivist ideologies that underpin them, have shaped her poetic engagement with language. The title of the section, “Troika”, has become synonymous with Ireland’s economic troubles. According to *The Financial Times*, “Troika”, came to prominence as a term used to describe the European Commission of the EU, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, the three international bodies that funded Ireland’s banking bailout in 2010, and the term rose to popularity during the Occupy Dame Street Movement. Nigel Farage, a UK member of the European Commission, began using the term in a derogatory manner with regards to the EU, ECB, and IMF financial engagement with Greece³¹. The term now culturally resonates within the context of the financial crisis vocabulary after the plethora of newspaper headlines covering the impact of the austerity measures and Ireland’s

30. Paula Meehan, “Occupy Language”.

31. “Farage: EU-ECB-IMF Troika Driving Greece Towards Violent Revolution”. YouTube video, 1:52, from a speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on February 15, 2012, posted by “UKIP MEPs”. February 15, 2012, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vd6EC-BJlaI>].

fulfillment of the agreement on December 15, 2013. Meehan's composition of the poem predates the term's use to refer to the EU-ECB-IMF engagement with the debt crisis. However, her use of the term reflects the same concerns about sovereignty and, more broadly, power relationships in economic activity that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Leading up to the Lisbon Treaty vote in 2009, which allowed Ireland to accept the Troika's funds, much of the opposition to the vote concerned whether Ireland would still be a sovereign nation and how much control it would cede to international political bodies. Irish voters initially rejected the Treaty at the height of the economic crisis because of these fears, but the Treaty was ratified in 2009 after an extensive advertising campaign about the government's desperate need to recapitalize the banks³². In the October 31, 2013 *Belfast Telegraph* report, Labour TD Kevin Humphreys saw the end of the Troika program as a recuperation of national sovereignty. Humphreys stated: "When the Troika goes, they are gone for good, and we will get our independence and our sovereignty back³³." In Meehan's poem, the term captures the connotation of political power, and the experience of class and gender oppression experienced within that system in the context of her childhood.

In the first section, the speaker's discovery of rhyme coincides with her family's eviction from a housing complex. Meehan writes, "my father had done a deal with a man/ key money down on a house/ in Bargy Road, East Wall,/an illegal corporation tenancy" (74). This ill-advised transaction was necessary in an age of "no work, no roof,/no hope" (74). The poem describes the receipt of "the Eviction notice./Some neighbour had ratted us out" and goes on to detail how the children "came home from school to bailiffs/boarding up the windows, to all/we had on show in the garden,/paltry in the dying light" (75). Although the phrase echoes Dylan Thomas raging into the dying light, Meehan presents an image of resignation. The family's mattress "with its shaming stain/nearly the shape of Ireland" makes this domestic plight a part of a larger national crisis in the face of which they are powerless (75). The eviction and the class oppression it represents seem to be accepted or at least expected as just the way things are in the historical moment.

The moment of rhyme derives from the chickens the family cared for in exchange for illegally renting the house. As the family chases the chickens, Meehan writes, "the winter stars come out and/ feathers like some angelic benison/ settl[ed] kindly on all that we owned" (75). Here rhyme is a metonym

32. This campaign included Seamus Heaney. See Henry McDonald, "Seamus Heaney Launches Fierce Attack on Irish Opponents of Lisbon Treaty". *The Observer*, September 12, 2009, [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/13/seamus-heaney-ireland-lisbon-referendum>].

33. "Troika 'Optimistic' About Future". *The Belfast Telegraph*, October 31, 2013. [<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/ireland/troika-optimistic-about-future-29715872.html>].

for poetry and the poetic moment when the plight of the chickens reflects the plight of the family roused from their roost. This perception of rhyme calls forth Heaney's Sophocles translation that draws on Vaclav Havel's definition of hope. Heaney writes: "But then, once in a lifetime/the longed-for tidal wave/Of justice can rise up./And hope and history rhyme³⁴." For Heaney and Meehan, rhyme is the historical condition reflected through immediate human circumstance. The aesthetic quality of the feathers makes problematic the sharp divide of the chicken between economic object and artistic subject when it reflects the family's class position. Nicole Shukin argues that the animal sign, like the racial sign, can be read as a site of what Homi Bhabha terms "productive ambivalence" that enables "vacillations between economic and symbolic logics of power". The animal as a commodity fetish "represents the simultaneous play between metaphor as substitution (masking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack)³⁵". The feathers settling on the possessions of the evicted family at once affirm the poor working class family as a part of an aesthetically created whole that attempts to register the condition of the working class and yet highlights the family's lack of work and shelter.

Meehan rhymes the plights of the working class with the treatment of animals and sees both as aligned with "object" in the subject/object binary, an objectification essential to the capitalist economy. Kirkpatrick writes Meehan "explore[s] and challenge[s] the binary oppositions informing sexism, classism, and speciesism. Indeed, the degraded terms on which systems of cultural dominance rely – woman, working-class, and animal – are reclaimed and valued in her poems³⁶". Meehan signals this value by juxtaposing the commodity with spirituality. The chicken becomes an "angelic benison" or blessing like the field manifested as a spiritual experience, and in that way becomes more than a product to be consumed. Cultural critic Teresa Brennan writes that the Marxist argument is that "Profit depends on the difference a living subject makes to a dead object³⁷". Brennan goes on to argue that a critique of subject/object distinction as it relates to the economy begins in ecological and environmental writings that reveal humans

34. Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991, p. 77. In an interview Heaney states about the quoted lines, "I quoted with great pleasure Vaclav Havel on hope. His view is that it's not optimism but it's something worth working for." See Jenny McCartney, "Seamus Heaney: He's Seen It All". *The Telegraph*, September 9, 2007, [<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3667813/Seamus-Heaney-Hes-seen-it-all.html>]. See Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, Trans. Paul Wilson, London, Faber, 1990.

35. Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota press, 2009. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 74-75.

36. Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Between Country and City: Paula Meehan's Ecofeminist Poetics", p. 118.

37. Teresa Brennan, "Why the Time is Out of Joint: Marx's Political Economy without the Subject". *Strategies for Theory: From Mark to Madonna*, Ed. R. L. Rutskey and Bradley J. MacDonald (Albany, NY, State University of New York P, 2003), p. 25.

are not the only subjects adding energy or labor to the economic system, and in treating nature and the animal kingdom as dead objects instead of producers of energy for the economic system, class conscious economic critiques often reinforce the objectivist ideology crucial to maintaining class oppression³⁸. Meehan's poetic expression of class conscious critique avoids an objectivist ideology through a spiritual quality that recognizes difference, perceives similarity, and therefore prevents a collapse into the subject/object binary³⁹.

Michel Foucault proposed that dominant tropes determine the *episteme* of an age because they determine how and what we know. Meehan's ecofeminist aesthetic manipulates these cognitive frames to make speaking subjects of exploited objects. Her fields and plants become archives of a way of living that values non-rational experience in order to disrupt the capitalist cycle of knowledge as the power to commodify. During the Celtic Tiger, Meehan's discontent with the various forms of oppression it exacerbated appeared within poetry that sought to renew language in support of social justice activism. Instead of creating a binary between political activism and creativity, Meehan's poetry, according to Randolph, shows that the "communal and creative can coexist, with neither limiting the other"⁴⁰.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

39. Sherryl Vint, *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (Liverpool, Liverpool U P, 2010), p. 204. A collapse into the subject/object binary normally occurs for the animal when the animal is treated only as a commodity. This treatment is common with animals such as chickens that become only the next meal rather than living creatures to be treated with dignity.

40. Jody Allen Randolph, "Text and Context: Paula Meehan", p. 13.