

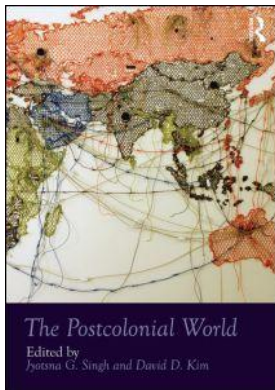
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PART VII

ECOCRITICAL INQUIRIES IN
POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES



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CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

“ILL FARES THE LAND”
 Ecology, capitalism, and literature
 in (post-) Celtic Tiger Ireland¹

—♦—
Eóin Flannery

Locating the fields of postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism as adjacent in their respective materialist critiques of global capitalism and neo-imperialism, Graham Huggan suggests the following:

Both are invested, for example, in the situated critique of current globalizing practices that use capitalist ideologies of development to justify corporate expansionism and technological managerialism; and both are equally concerned with critically analysing the representational mechanisms that lend legitimacy to these practices, demonstrating the power of culture to (re)shape the word and, through it, the world.²

Huggan’s comments are “global” in themselves, but they are no less useful for that; his convention of postcolonial and ecocritical methodologies, at a general, abstract level, can be productively applied to specific local instances of global capitalist incursion. In this case we will attend to the situation and experience of Ireland, a country with a protracted colonial heritage and a postcolonial history that belatedly became deeply entwined with the machinations, and ecological costs, of modernization and global capital. A combined postcolonial and ecocritical prism is a profitable way in which to read the Irish context. As Joe Cleary argues, while Ireland is geographically European, historically speaking, it has always been out of sync with the cycles of industrial modernization and capitalist expansion characteristic of many other European nations. For Cleary, “although Ireland belonged to the same geo-cultural locale, the same orbit of capital, as the major European imperial powers, it was integrated into that orbit of capital in a very different way to its main European neighbours.”³ In other words, despite its proximity to the central ruling geographies of global imperialism, Ireland was viewed and governed as a colony. Again in the current context, we need to think about how such a historical pedigree has informed social, economic, environmental, and cultural developments during, to use David Lloyd’s term, Ireland’s postcolonial “moment,”⁴ and, more precisely, during the period of economic and financial buoyancy: the “Celtic Tiger.”

“Even in an era when capitalists went out of their way to destroy capitalism,” Michael Lewis argues, “the Irish bankers had set some kind of record for destruction.”⁵ Such is Lewis’s conclusion, having traversed Europe in the wake of the serial, and interlocked, economic implosions since 2008.⁶ Lewis’s *Boomerang* has its origins in a series of extended articles published in *Vanity Fair*, a sequence covering the cases of Greece, Ireland, and Iceland.⁷ The Irish State’s catastrophic bank guarantee, and the country’s property and housing crashes, are two of Lewis’s primary foci, as he meditates upon, and interrogates, the causes and effects of Ireland’s financial and economic demise since 2008. Chiming with many of the critiques and appraisals of the end of the Celtic Tiger produced by scholars and commentators from within Ireland, Lewis underscores the “abnormality” of Ireland’s drive to become “normal.”⁸ He suggests: “Not knowing why they were so suddenly successful, the Irish can perhaps be forgiven for not knowing exactly how successful they were meant to be. They’d gone from being abnormally poor to being abnormally rich without pausing to experience normality.”⁹

The principles of social and economic convergence gestured to here by Lewis echo equivalent sentiments expressed by Fintan O’Toole in his *Ship of Fools*, an earlier polemic on the failures of Celtic Tiger Ireland. As part of an altogether more unforbearing assault on the institutional facilitators and beneficiaries of the country’s economic prosperity, O’Toole reflects upon the fact that “[f]or most of the twentieth century, Ireland had struggled to be like other countries. But between the late 1990s and 2008, other countries were told they must struggle to be like Ireland.”¹⁰ O’Toole’s latter point – that other countries were enjoined to pursue the pathways to economic buoyancy led by Ireland – takes the idea of Irish “exceptionalism” in a dramatic new direction. Rather than continuing as one of the peripheral and impoverished constituents of the European Union, a perennial draw on centrally generated capital funding, Ireland became a “model” for other aspiring smaller continental economies, such as Greece, on the basis of its apparent talent for attracting and securing inward multinational investment.¹¹

Returning to Lewis’s survey, we are in more sobering territory, as he invokes the shadowy, yet tangible authority of credit rating agencies in his reading of Ireland’s economic status and prospects. At the time of his research on the Irish economy, according to Lewis, “[p]rofessional credit analyst firms now judge Ireland the third most likely country in the world to default. Not quite as risky for the global investor as Venezuela, perhaps, but riskier than Iraq. Distinctly, *third world*, in any case [my emphasis].”¹² Clearly, Ireland has not defaulted and its ranking is not as depressed at the current juncture, but Lewis’s idiom is revealing. In this context of debt repayment, labeling Ireland “third world” might seem crude and anachronistic given the general standards of living experienced by many of the country’s citizens. Poised between the pejorative and the empirical, Lewis’s wielding of “third world” resurrects a term more familiar from ethical and economic debates associated with the period of decolonization during the post-Second World War geopolitical settlement. Yet, in other ways, such a nomination might speak sensibly to the nature and the extent of the country’s financial decline. Whether Lewis is conscious of it or not, employing such an adjectival description in relation to Ireland’s financial status recalls a conference and a publication from 1991 and 1992 respectively.

Edited by Therese Caherty, *Is Ireland a Third World Country?* showcased the proceedings of a conference held in April 1991 in Dublin. Surveying prevailing Irish

economic and social conditions, and factoring in its history of colonization, the participants actively considered the very real possibility that Ireland was utterly out of step with the social and economic norms of the so-called “first world.” Despite two decades of membership of the European Economic Community, as it was known at the time, Ireland’s social and economic realities were more closely allied to those of the developing world. The *Centre for Research and Documentation* provided much of the energy behind the event and the publication, and their analogies between Ireland and other “typical” non-European countries of the “third world” were contextualized and justified in the following ways by Caitriona Ruane:

CRD [Centre for Research and Documentation] was founded by Irish people who have either worked in Third World countries, or are interested and active in development issues. Many of those involved in CRD returned to Ireland and began to work in solidarity, community and human rights groups. We quickly realised that a lot of problems which Irish communities experienced, for instance, poverty, marginalisation, human rights abuses and inequality, were similar to those encountered in Third World countries, albeit on a different scale. There were also similarities in the processes through which Irish communities tried to remedy their problems. We felt it would be beneficial for groups in Ireland and the Third World to exchange experiences, information and ideas.¹³

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see just how acutely Ireland’s economic fortunes have spiked since this publication. But what is remarkable is that within half a generation Ireland can be thought of, in some measure of economic value, as a “third world” country once more. Granted, the earlier debate took the form of a lateral survey of Irish society, whereas the latter refers to the country’s level of indebtedness. Nevertheless, the recrudescence of the term “third world” in relation to Ireland signals the scale of the heights and the drop in the country’s economic performance. Likewise, it can be read as symptomatic of the extremity of behavior that is fundamental to Ireland’s progress from “bust” to “boom” to “bust” in such a brief period of time. What is equally true as well, as our discussion of creative writing during and after the Celtic Tiger has revealed, is that many Irish citizens never left the initial “bust” phase during the Celtic Tiger and, given the condition of the economy today, coupled with the burdensome legacies of the “boom,” such individuals are only likely to continue in situations of economic hardship. We might ask, then, should we give more credence to Lewis’s terminology about Ireland’s current and future prospects? Are the parallels drawn in the early 1990s by Caherty et al., modified by degrees of scale, useful to ongoing reflections upon the realities of “everyday economics” in Ireland? In any case, simply by invoking both allusions to “third world” Ireland alerts us to the levels of crisis and of dependence the Irish economy and the State finds itself in at the current juncture.¹⁴

Reading Donal Ryan’s literary responses to Ireland’s fateful embrace of unfettered and de-regulated capitalist “casino” economics in *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and *The Thing About December* (2013), the discussion will draw upon both postcolonial and ecocritical methodologies, but will place a premium on materialist strains within, and across, each of these interconnected theoretical and critical resources. The most effective postcolonial readings of Irish economic, political, and cultural histories have been

those that are mobilized postcolonial theorization as a critique of modernization, especially the works of Joe Cleary, David Lloyd, and Luke Gibbons.¹⁵ As Cleary argues:

From the perspective of postcolonial studies, modernisation discourse is simply a contemporary variant on the nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology of evolutionary progress, the occluded side of which has always been European imperialism and the colonial subordination of the greater part of the world to metropolitan domination.¹⁶

Arguing that Ireland's uneven historical incorporation into industrial modernity via a coerced experience of imperial modernization, these arguments attend to the material disparities that have accrued between indigenous Irish and colonial settlers, between native Irish economic and cultural practices and those that are grafted unevenly and violently onto Irish society. In other words, these critics anatomize the ways in which the internal dynamics of Irish economic practices – as cultural formations – which were influenced by and/or dictated to by – exogenous politico-economic agencies. And for the purpose of this essay, such analytical strategies seem apposite in the wake of the internal fallout from Ireland's often uncritical negotiations with global capital at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, which, as Lewis suggests above, have returned the Irish State to a condition of financial dependence and have had grievous consequences for tracts of Ireland's environment.

The economic historian Jason W. Moore has provided a series of lengthy and insightful interventions on the interconnected histories of modern capitalism and lateral environmental degradation. In the process, he has forwarded a novel conceptual category, or “thinking tool,” in the form of “world-ecology.” Moore's project is historical at root, and rather than confine his focus to the standard time-frames of “high” capitalist activity – usually understood as beginning at the end of the eighteenth century – he argues for a much earlier point of origin:

Now what capitalism does when it begins to emerge, in a very powerful and real way after 1450, is to accelerate the pace of environmental degradation as a way to accumulate money capital. [. . .] So there was a radically accelerated pace of transformation that goes from the earliest moments in the rise of capitalism. What that meant is that there was a constant search for a new frontier, a new green field site.¹⁷

The final term (“green field site”) here is uncannily prescient in the context of a discussion of the topographical ruination of so many localities across Ireland in the service of property speculation during the Celtic Tiger. The (local) politics of zoning and rezoning “green field” lands in order to render them available for property development is one of the primary plot lines of Ryan's *The Thing About December*, and was a dominant “plot line” of Irish political life during the Celtic Tiger property frenzy. For Moore, capitalism is ecological, and we have been misguided in thinking that there are physical and conceptual boundaries between the “social” and the “natural.” In his view:

Capitalism as world-ecology, unifying the production of nature and the accumulation of capital, becomes a means of re-reading the diversity of human

experience in the modern world-system as unavoidably socio-ecological. [. . .] The upshot is that “nature” (however one defines it), like capitalism, is not an invariant structure. It is a *historical* structure.¹⁸

The logic pursuant to such a latter claim about the combined or interlinked historicity of capitalism and nature is that we need to attend to the modes in which this historically contingent and uneven relationship has been culturally narrated, for our purposes, within literary fiction. As Sharae Deckard suggests, deploying Moore’s work on world-ecology in a literary critical vein:

As the social form of capitalist modernity, literature necessarily registers the ecological regimes that constitute the world-ecology, revealing the structures of feeling, affects, bodily dispositions, and lived experiences that correspond to particular socio-ecological relations. As such, literary forms provide insight into the ideologies and geocultures which stabilize capitalist social relations over different cycles and temporalities.¹⁹

The literary works discussed here, though individually different in form and focus, can offer some insight into, and critique of, the “capitalist social relations,” to borrow Deckard’s terms, that contributed to the property “boom” cycle of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger.²⁰ Ryan’s narratives track both the temporal and spatial dynamics of Ireland’s recent foray into the networks of global credit and speculation. Operating in tandem, and in succession, *The Thing About December* and *The Spinning Heart* narrate the contentious genesis, as well as the violent, and tragic, dénouement of a single, yet representative, Irish locality’s experiences of the contingencies of global capital. Each of the primary literary texts describes experiences related to the personal, communal, and ecological impacts of the housing and property “booms,” and “crashes,” in Ireland. While it is a truism that there is always already a “delay” in narrating the history of the present moment, and of the contemporary, Ryan’s narratives are convincing efforts to realize such ambitions. At the same time, *The Thing About December* retains a “historical” quality, in that it relates the events that occasioned the property “boom” of the Celtic Tiger period.

Though published a year after *The Spinning Heart*, *The Thing About December* was, in fact, the first to be completed by Ryan, and its action precedes that played out in the later volume. The latter novel, in fact, recounts the prehistory of how the land on which the “ghost” housing estate now stands became available for development. Johnsey Cunliffe is the vulnerable protagonist of Ryan’s narrative, and the story charts a single calendar year of his life across twelve chapters. *The Thing About December* provides us with the background to the scenes of financial aftermath in *The Spinning Heart*; set almost a decade beforehand, Ryan dramatizes the conflictual and violent events in Johnsey’s life that led to his death and loss of his inherited land. While there are melodramatic notes to Ryan’s portrait of an embattled and intellectually feeble central character, he does convincingly convey the individual and collective avarice that may not have dominated, but certainly significantly punctuated, Irish society during the property boom. Johnsey’s relative intellectual simplicity is also suggestive, of course, of the simplistic financial calculus of those who prey on him; they unquestioningly equate land with property and profit, and instinctively jettison local historical

ties in lieu of insubstantial promissory notes. Johnsey is consistently a victim of local, random taunting and violence throughout his life, and, eventually, is orphaned as a young adult, inheriting land that has been designated for development. But Johnsey's instincts tell him that his affective relationships with the land and with those of his family, who inhabited and worked it, are stronger motive forces than the external pressures of grasping neighbors. Failing to yield to such pressures, Johnsey becomes a maligned local hate-figure; his intransigence is adjudged as being entirely out of kilter with the opportunities and the demands of the zeitgeist in Celtic Tiger Ireland:

Isn't it a fright to God to say a man could end up being a bar to progress and could deny jobs to half the village and wealth to all by just being alive. [. . .] Seemingly the whole village was all of a sudden looking out of their mouths at him to know what would he do about selling the land to this *consortium* of bigshots so that they may get on with their plan for houses, shops, a school, new roads and what have you. And none of it for profit – all them great men wants is to *give employment*, according to Herbert Grogan. The Creamers and the McDermotts and Paddy Rourke had apparently all already entered into *agreement-in-principle* with regard to their share of this famous land deal.²¹

Though often an uncomprehending and inarticulate protagonist, Johnsey is not entirely without insight; these are often personal and/or superficial insights. In this extended extract from the “July” chapter, we can glean a sense of the isolation foisted upon Johnsey by the rising tide of greed and speculation afoot in the locality. But Ryan also gives us an insight into: the relations that existed between private investment and the State; the linguistic and cultural mutations within Irish society at this time; and the co-existence of impoverished vulnerability and opportunistic materialism during the Celtic Tiger years. Relative poverty actually increased during the so-called “boom years,” and the promises of these investors, while not explaining in its entirety, do hint at the State's abdication of social responsibility, particularly with respect to marginal constituencies in Ireland. In short, the State should provide such facilities, and relinquished the opportunity to make the accruals of elevated taxation revenues operative and beneficial for large swathes of the Irish working class population. Johnsey, and several of the narrators in *The Spinning Heart*, are voices from marginal locations within Celtic Tiger Ireland; historically speaking, they are barely registered, hence their importance for Ryan. They chafe against the consented-to narratives of progress and affluence, and, again, in the extract above, Ryan expresses this relative alienation in formal terms. The first and the third italicized words belong to the new idioms of affluence, which predominated in popular and public discourse in Celtic Tiger Ireland. Ryan's emphasis here suggests the ways in which capitalism is itself cultural as well as ecological; in this context, the rhetoric of capitalism further alienates the protagonist, even though they refer to the development of his property. Pointedly, the use of the term “consortium” by Ryan, but also the corporate employment of the word, are contemporary debasements of the original Latin meaning, which referred to “fellowship, society and participation.” The language of capitalism, then, is purely contextual and historical sense or roots are traduced at the level of signification in the mid-west of Ireland.

Johnsey's alienation continues, and is intensified, at the level of discourse by the publication of damning newspaper articles detailing his apparent greed, and alleging

that he is holding the locality to ransom in his excessive demands for financial compensation on the sale of his land. Again, Ryan underscores the lack of agency of the individual in the face of local and, in this case, national scrutiny and misrepresentation. The invocation of the Irish media is deliberate by Ryan, as a large proportion of the news media were active cheerleaders for the unfettered expansion and speculation of the Irish property “boom.” Not content with conveying information and opinion, newspapers, in particular, fetishized the value and prestige of property, tantalizing readers with images of over-priced and unobtainable properties.²² Though clearly not to blame, the media’s cultivation and propagation of desire, through verbal and visual signification, are targeted here by Ryan. The intrusion of the metropolitan journalist and accompanying photographer are references to the multi-scalar nature of the narrative, and suggest the ways in which localities became aggregated and normalized into a “national” narrative of progress and affluence. Johnsey’s resistance to such uniformity, then, legitimizes his demonization at the local level, but also on a national platform by the journalist. Accompanying an unflattering photograph of Johnsey, the first newspaper article reads:

This is the young bachelor from rural Tipperary whose obscene demands are threatening to derail plans to transform the fortunes of an entire community [. . .] this young bachelor, who has turned a deaf ear to his neighbours’ appeals for sanity in his approach to brokering of a massive property deal, was left the land by his late parents and has shown little interest in working the land, choosing instead to lease the farm to neighbours and live a life of luxury.²³

The content of this newspaper extract is entirely at odds with the character encountered at length by the reader across Ryan’s narrative; Johnsey’s lifestyle could not be more removed from the excess depicted in the media report. In this isolated mediation of Johnsey’s attitude and behavioral patterns, Ryan draws on a familiar trope within modern Irish literary fiction: the vulnerable, abject loner. Johnsey is demonized as pursuing a lifestyle of unashamed individualism; basking in the inevitability of his own good fortune, insensible to the needs of those of his community. But, as the narrative reveals, the individualism attributed to Johnsey is, in fact, the conditioning feature of that community. Johnsey is portrayed as the “enemy within,” as being parasitic upon his fellow denizens, and the media report is an explicit ironization of both the role played by the media and of the governing mind-set of influential constituencies within Irish society during the Celtic Tiger “boom.” In effect, read in the context of the entire narrative, the newspaper article functions as a simulacrum, demonstrating the emptiness of mainstream signification and discourse as they fomented crisis-inducing desire for property and profit.

Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* is a novel as, to use Deckard’s term, story-cycle; while there is a primary protagonist in the character of Bobby Mahon, Ryan’s narrative is delivered from the perspectives of twenty other characters. It is assuredly not a story-cycle in the tradition of the short story, of a text like Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*; rather it details the events of a single summer in 2010, and these events are, at one level, solidly rooted in a single location: a small regional town within commuting distance of the larger city of Limerick. Thus, while Ryan’s novel clamors with diversity in terms of its formal presentation, there is a solidity and fixity to its siting

and to its time-frame. The primary drama of the text's 2010 events revolves around the collapse in the fortunes of a local, and corrupted, property developer and builder, and the variegated yet interlinked consequences for the locality's population. Therefore, one of the motifs of contemporary Irish history drawn on by Ryan is that of the "ghost estate," that is, housing estates consisting of unfinished, semi-constructed homes. The majority of the "ghost estates" that remain are in rural Ireland, concreted hauntings of futures that will never materialize, and they are artifacts that testify to the cultural and economic investments made in advanced capitalism during the Celtic Tiger. In a recent astute appraisal of how Irish photographic art has re-presented such scenes of abandonment, Justin Carville writes:

In a land littered with historical ruins, [Anthony] Haughey's and [David] Farrell's topographies of terror confront the viewer with Ireland's newest of ruins drawn down to earth, not through nature's power but through the speculative forces of capital. Many of these topographies have been formed through a series of leaps of faith into a future that seemed certain.²⁴

And it is just such a "topography of terror" that confronts the denizens of the small town in the mid-west of Ireland in 2010; what manifests is an uneven engagement between the global machinations of capitalism and the misguided faiths of local actors in regional Ireland. Ryan's narrative, and the recent history of the Celtic Tiger, does not disguise the facts that many were willing investors in and victims of such ethereal financial faith. But in Ryan's narrative we get a sense of the exhausting and divisive aftermaths of the collapse of capitalism's exercises in one specific locality.²⁵

Deckard foregrounds the values of global experimentalism of narratives that trade in multi-scalar spatial and temporal settings, whose formal features enable a critique of capital's linear mode of narration. For Deckard:

Whether as world-systems novels, novels-in-fragments, story-cycles, or composite novels, a variety of literary forms in contemporary world-ecological literature have emerged which attempt to move beyond realist metonymy and model systemic-relations in their very structure.²⁶

Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* cannot be labeled as hugely experimental, in the sense outlined by Deckard, but there are limits to its attention to locality and place, and together with its patterning as a "story-cycle," the imprints of the national and the global are evident across the text, and it is these features that align Ryan's work with Deckard's argument. As is abundantly clear from Ryan's texts, the immediate action may appear to concern itself with the micro-politics of local opportunism, but there is no failsafe prophylactic against the influences of globalization. And, in both thematic and formal terms, *The Spinning Heart* acknowledges and indicts the imprints of the global on seemingly remote localities, yet in both of his texts, he also allows the registration of resistance to such globalizing agencies.²⁷

Ireland's historical implication in the global took the shape of its status as a colony of the British Empire; its exemplarity as a Catholic nation and society; and fluctuating patterns of enforced and voluntary emigration and migration across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much of the country's previous experiences of

the global have been in the context of its uneven and coerced incorporation into British imperial modernity. As O’Toole maintains, the Irish voluntarily adopted the lifestyles and value-systems of capitalist globalization, adopting consumerist values with alarming alacrity; importing and adapting neoliberal economic and social policies with little concern for resulting social inequalities; and playing host to a large and international community of immigrant workers from Europe, Asia, and Africa.²⁸ And it is self-evident from both of Ryan’s texts that there are exacting human and communal costs to such willing self-abasement; with cruel historical irony, latter-day efforts to retain agency in the global context – previously unavailable under British imperial modernity – have now returned the Irish State, and its citizen taxpayers, to the roles of quasi-vassals of international political and economic institutions.

The Spinning Heart opens with Bobby Mahon’s first-person narrative, two months after he has been made redundant, and now reduced to financial penury with a young family for whom he needs to provide. He recalls at suggestive length the revelation that the financial management of the building firm was corrupted, before giving a mordant account of the heyday of his professional life as the property bubble expanded relentlessly:

And now I can’t pay for the messages. Christ on a bike. I had a right swagger there for a couple of years, thinking I was a great fella. *Foreman*, I was clearing a grand a week. Set for life. Houses would never stop going up. I’d see babies like our own being pushed around the village below and think: lovely, work for the future, they’ll all need their own houses some day too. [. . .] Once they buried that boy of the Cunliffes years ago and his auld auntie grabbed that land and divided it out among the bigshots, we all thought we were feckin elected.²⁹

Bobby Mahon furnishes a micro-history of the past, present, and the aborted future of this locality, but also, *in parvo*, that of many communities across Ireland during the same period. The “Cunliffe” boy mentioned here is the protagonist of *The Thing About December*, and, as such, there is a gothic element to this local drama, with the sins of the past returning to haunt those who benefited from the original violent death. And while Bobby’s account here emphasizes the embedded futurity that sustained so many myths of prosperity during the Celtic Tiger property “boom,” history and the past are just as crucial to any understanding of these texts and of the Celtic Tiger itself. Thus, the relations between past and present and between locality and globality are profoundly important to our readings of these literary texts. In terms of historicizing the property “boom,” the period that allowed Bobby Mahon to earn such a lavish wage, and that nurtured his dreams of perpetual progress, history is germane both as presence and absence at the same time.

There are conflicting theories about what precisely drove so many Irish people to accumulate staggering levels of personal debt in order to secure homeownership – often multiple properties. But one of the most convincing proposals links such acquisitiveness to Ireland’s history of colonialism:

The sheer frenzy around homeownership was clearly a latent outcome of a post-colonial anxiety around land, exacerbated by government housing policies that

supported developers and speculators over households [. . .] itself indicative of the administrative deficit stemming from postcoloniality. Rather than being a mere footnote illustrating the more recent (and thus important) histories explaining the property boom, the postcolonial context was in fact integral to how it was produced and sustained over time.³⁰

Of course, the histories of capitalism and colonialism, especially British variants, are heavily interconnected, so that Ireland's historical experiences of colonialism were simultaneously a series of harsh, uneven, and exploitative exposures to capitalist modernity. A toxic compound of local forms of political clientelism, instrumental in zoning land for often unnecessary property development, and the adoption of neoliberal political and economic *credo*, then, overexposed the Irish economy to the cyclicity of the capitalist market. These were key contributory factors in the view of Sean O'Riain, with the consequence that: "The property and banking 'growth machine' drove many of the key economic decisions of the decade while corporatism was hollowed out in part to become a more narrow form of political exchange in an increasingly *speculative* economy [my emphasis]."³¹ Thus, the greed for land, facilitated and encouraged by national and local government, during the Celtic Tiger can be read, at one level, as a contemporary instance of one country's interface with global capital and new networks of financial neo-imperialism, but it is also the latest in a cycle that has its predecessor in the history of British imperial capital's expropriation of the country's resources prior to independence in 1922. And it is precisely in being attuned to this cyclicity that we can divine history as presence and absence in Ryan's work, and in the broader history of the Celtic Tiger property boom. History, as we have just seen, manifests as presence in the production of desire for property, for "landed" security into the future. Yet, such presence is haunted, and ultimately undone, by history as absence; namely, the failure to read the history of capital as one of cycles of "booms" and "busts," of productive, expropriative visitations and remorseless exits from peripheral economies and societies.

There may be twenty-one narrators in Ryan's novel, but implicit in the text is the fact that this is no isolated instance of post-boom economic and social dislocation. Ryan exposes the greed that conditioned the decisions and policies of property developers in a market that was overheated and under-regulated; his narrative captures the compulsion induced in people, even the fear of being deprived of some tangible material security, as the performance and appearance of value supersedes the quality and material substance of the commodity exchanged. The materiality of land and place, the hard-earned territories of Irish culture, and the contested topographies of Irish colonial history are, then, transvalued into sites of transient and self-destructive capitalist exchange. And again, later in the same chapter cited above, Josie Burke's reflections chime with those of Bobby Mahon; the roots of this crisis indeed are inauspicious, and history haunts these sites of suburban ruination:

We should have known it would all end in tears. Around here, it all started with tears: that boy of the Cunliffes getting shot in his own yard by the guards, and his land going to his auntie, who shared it out among us like the Roman soldiers with Our Lord's purple robe. That was no way for good times to start.³²

Josie Burke repeats, but elaborates on, the background to this locality’s immersion into the property boom detailed by Bobby Mahon, a fact that consolidates the aforementioned level of coherence and continuity across the text despite the numerous narrative perspectives. Such a technique re-enforces the “locality” of the action and of the prehistory, but does not preclude us from reading beyond the local in relation to the incursions of global capital, and, in particular, finance and credit, across a host of similar “localities” in Ireland.

The formal architecture of both of Ryan’s novels focus our attention on “place,” on interpersonal dynamics within a confined geography.³³ In *The Spinning Heart*, the employment of twenty-one different narrators offers a wide plurality of voices and perspectives, but there is a loose coherence retained due to the limited spatial context of the narrative. The multiplicity of voices within a single community is also suggestive of the tentacular reach of global capital into diverse and peripheral physical and cultural ecologies. One of the voices encountered is that of a migrant laborer, Vasya, whose heritage is that of a Khakassian reindeer herder. Tellingly, Vasya’s narrative partly worries over the primacy of place and home, a function of his own displacement, no doubt. Yet, as he reflects upon the local topography to which he has become accustomed through a pattern of regular walking, his thoughts work counter to the labor of property development in which he was previously employed: “Houses are hidden at the end of long avenues. [. . .] These people are fixed, rooted, bound to a certain place. I think of my father’s camp and the moving of the herds across thousands of miles of openness.”³⁴ There is an element of wish fulfillment or fantasy about Vasya’s imaginative projections here, but, more importantly, he alludes to the vagrancy of his family and of his tribe. While there is a dignity to the historical itinerancy of his heritage, Vasya’s “mobility” is within the networks of global capital. His presence in this rural Irish town is a testament to the reach and the contingency of these global agencies, and it is further evidence of the attention given by Ryan – across both of the texts – to the multi-scalar fabric of the community’s interface with global capital.

Indeed, a later narrative, relayed by Kate, a nursery school owner in Limerick city, opens with a reference to the vagaries of depending upon the fluctuating fortunes and priorities of multinational capital: “One awful thing that happened since the recession started is Dell closing. Like, it nearly finished us all. They were bloody *all* Dell.”³⁵ Across 2009 and 2010, the computer manufacturer shed 1,900 employees in Limerick, relocating operations to Poland; Ireland’s open door policy to Foreign Direct Investment, which includes its contentiously low rate of Corporation Tax, has, historically, allowed it to compete on the global market, but also brings high risk stakes, as such manufacturing closures, and the parallel global banking crisis demonstrate. Ryan’s narratives display how these macro-crises are entwined with government policy and media discourse at national levels, as well as conditioning trends in communal and individual behavior at local levels. As we noted above, reading the patterns of consumption and property speculation during the Celtic Tiger in terms of Ireland’s colonial history is instructive. Likewise, such a reading strategy can offer potential insights into state management of land politics and property ownership; and individual and communal attitudes to land and tenurial security beyond Ireland and across other postcolonial societies who cannot but be affected by the mobile and mutating cycles of capitalist neo-imperialism.

Ryan's narrative offers hints at the multi-scalar sources and implications of this localized manifestation of Ireland's property frenzy, and does so effectively in another instance from the viewpoint of a single mother, Realtin, one of the few residents of an uncompleted and sparsely populated "ghost estate":

There are forty-four houses in this estate. I live in number twenty-three. There's an old lady living in number forty. There's no one living in any of the other houses, just the ghosts of people who never existed. I'm stranded, she's abandoned.³⁶

There is an unreal quality to life on the "ghost estate"; a feeling of aftermath at the same time as a sense of lives never quite lived or commenced. Here the failed past and the unrealizable future commingle amid the emptiness and dereliction. But the origins of the agencies that manufactured these local spaces of private grief at past mistakes and at bleak future prospects are always present as hauntings, though not as physical forces with which one can reckon. And we divine such absent presences in the retrospective portions of Realtin's narrative. In the same opening section of her narrative, Realtin explains how she came about living in such circumstances, how fear of being left remote from the "inevitable" durability of propertied prosperity was a primary motive force in her decision making. Recalling her conversation with the estate agent:

He said he couldn't promise us any of the houses would be available the next day. [. . .] Daddy got all worried and flustered then, and drove like a madman back to the Credit Union to get me the cash.³⁷

But this is not only the instance of a fear-induced purchase; working in a legal office, Realtin is witness to further demonstrations of this culture in which credit and profit have commandeered common sense, and the ownership of property is an end in itself, with little thought given to price or value. In short, absolute trust is placed in absent forces that guarantee the future value of a product one has been all but coerced into acquiring. As Realtin reflects later, and this is commonly the case across similar estates and in major Irish cities, homes have become punishing financial burdens as their value has fallen away. "Across Ireland," Lewis writes:

People are unable to extract themselves from their houses or their bank loans. Irish people will tell you that, because of their sad history of dispossession, owning a home is not just a way of avoiding paying rent but a mark of freedom. In their rush to freedom, the Irish built their own prisons.³⁸

There is a conspiratorial air to the exploitation and silence confronting the consumer; financial numbers are seen as arbitrary, yet all too powerful at the same time. And, crucially, as in the extract detailing of Realtin's own experience, it is credit, and the ease with which credit for mortgages can be sourced, that is the unifying feature of these local lives. The properties, the builders, the estate agents, the legal firms, and the mortgages provided may well be familiar and indigenous, but the lifeblood, the nourishing agent, of the entire system is the credit underwritten by the Irish banking system and its own indebtedness to international financial markets. Thus, these

isolated and pressurized individual consumers, lenders, and producers act at local levels.

Commentators of all political and economic persuasions and affiliations have framed their diagnoses and prognoses for the current global capitalist conjuncture in several different ways. For some, nationally located mis-steps precipitated the worst legacies of economic ruination, while others apportion blame to the corrupted, and corruptible, machinations of the global market itself. And such polarities have been in evidence in debates pursuant to the demise of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger.³⁹ Yet such simple dichotomies are not sustainable within a nuanced explication of how the uneven exchanges between international global capital and finance, and the particularities of the Irish economic and political systems, eventuated in the seemingly unbounded economic growth during the country’s economic “boom.” In the current context, too, we are presented with such nuance across Ryan’s linked fictional narratives. Ryan presents the intense and claustrophobic fallout from the collapse of the Irish banking system through narratives that teem with local voices, but, as Deckard argues, such story-cycles are never unmindful of the broader global context and forces that condition the smaller scale economic ecologies. *The Spinning Heart* and *The Thing About December* represent what Edna O’Brien terms “a debt-saddened landscape,”⁴⁰ a physical and cultural terrain that is specific and historical, but whose current condition cannot be unwedded from the past and present histories of global imperial and neoliberal capitalism. In their aggregated and interconnected narrations of Ireland’s postcolonial embrace of neoliberal modernization and capitalist ideologies, both texts speak beyond the boundaries of Ireland’s geographies to other postcolonial landscapes that are more than simply, or are more acutely, “debt-saddened.” Ryan’s texts, then, must be read as “imaginative” critiques of the globally connected yet resolutely local consequences of this strand of the Celtic Tiger period. In their respective representations of the troubling prehistory of, and subsequent fallout from, Ireland’s property “boom,” both texts track the transvaluation of the Irish nonhuman environment, as well as many of its cultural and ethical reference points. Such concentrations, then, are unquestionably exemplary for other equivalent postcolonial societies and cultures whose human and nonhuman ecologies are laid sieged under the varied and uneven manifestations of global capitalism.

ENDNOTES

1. The original source for the essay’s title is Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1770), “Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, / Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.” But the more recent reference is to Tony Judt’s *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin, 2010), which is a powerful polemical essay on the failures of modern political and economic thought and structures.
2. Graham Huggan, “Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Limits of Green Romanticism.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 40.1 (March 2009): 6, 3–14.
3. Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Books, 2006), 18.
4. See David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993).
5. Michael Lewis, *Boomerang: Adventures of a Financial Meltdown Tourist* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 84.

6. Lewis's article includes significant input from the Irish economist, Morgan Kelly, who was a dissenting voice against prevailing economic practices during the Celtic Tiger: <http://www.ucd.ie/economics/staff/profmorgankelly/>
7. These case studies in *Vanity Fair* cover Iceland, Greece, and Ireland: "Euro Disasterland Part 1: Iceland," April 2009; "Euro Disasterland Part 2: Greece," November 2010; and "When Irish Eyes Are Crying," March 2011.
8. Representative of such publications are: Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009); *Up the Republic!: Towards a New Ireland* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012); Peadar Kirby, *Celtic Tiger in Collapse: Explaining the Weaknesses of the Irish Model* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010); Debbie Ging, Michael Cronin, and Peadar Kirby, eds., *Transforming Ireland: Challenges, Critiques and Resources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); Caroline Crowley and Denis Linehan, eds., *Spacing Ireland: Place, Culture and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Eugene O'Brien and Eamon Maher, eds., *From Prosperity to Austerity: A Socio-Cultural Critique of the Celtic Tiger and Its Aftermath* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
9. Lewis, *Boomerang*, 88–89.
10. O'Toole, *Ship of Fools*, 9–10.
11. As Peadar Kirby, a trenchant critic of Ireland's neoliberal model concedes in an otherwise caustic account of the inequalities that score Irish society during the Celtic Tiger: "Ireland's economic boom of the 1990s catapulted it from being a relative laggard in development terms to become the 'Celtic Tiger,' achieving high growth rates, full employment and rising living standards in contrast to the sluggish growth managed by most of its European neighbours during the same period," "Globalization, the Celtic Tiger and Social Outcomes: Is Ireland a Model or a Mirage?" *Globalization* 1.2 (2004): 205–206.
12. Lewis, *Boomerang*, 85.
13. Caitriona Ruane, "Preface." In *Is Ireland a Third World Country?*, ed. Therese Caherty (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), ix. The social issues mentioned by Ruane above are undeniably relevant to critical discussions today in Ireland, but they are not simply accruals of the post-Celtic Tiger "bust"; they were persistent across the "boom," but have been cruelly exacerbated since the end of its tenure in Ireland.
14. Colin Coulter suggests that the Celtic Tiger "narrative" was "managed" in such a way that the real economic inequalities of Irish society were not a permissible part of the celebratory version of the story: "The notion that the economic boom has conferred benefit upon all Irish people represents, perhaps, the most pernicious of the myths that have bloomed during the Celtic Tiger era. The Republic of Ireland exhibits, of course, all those class distinctions and inequalities that are the hallmark of a capitalist society," "The End of Irish History? An Introduction to the Book." In *The End of Irish History: Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*, ed. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 21.
15. An indicative sample of such work would include: Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Books, 2005); David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800–2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996).
16. Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, 14.
17. Jason W. Moore, "The Socio-Ecological Crises of Capitalism." In *Capital and Its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult*, ed. Sasha Lilley (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), 139.
18. Jason W. Moore, "Ecology, Capital and the Nature of Our Times: Accumulation and Crisis in the Capitalist World-Ecology." *The Journal of World-Systems Research*, 17.1 (2011): 135.

19. Sharae Deckard, “Mapping the World Ecology: Conjectures on World-Ecological Literature.” Unpublished paper, School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin. https://www.academia.edu/2083255/Mapping_the_World-Ecology_Conjectures_on_World-Ecological_Literature.
20. Neil Murphy argues that many of the works of major contemporary Irish novelists “repeatedly revolve around the problems of historical reconstruction, the vagrancy of memory, the indistinct nature of human perception and the inevitable transformative effect of linguistic expression,” “Contemporary Irish Fiction and the Indirect Gaze.” In *From Prosperity to Austerity: A Socio-Cultural Critique of the Celtic Tiger and Its Aftermath*, ed. Eugene O’Brien and Eamon Maher (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 178.
21. Donal Ryan, *The Thing About December* (Dublin: Doubleday Ireland/Lilliput Press, 2013), 126.
22. In her Celtic Tiger novel, *The Devil I Know* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), Claire Kilroy touches on similar phenomena; her narrator describes his business partner’s cultivation of just such publicity about property. The relationship between property sale and voyeuristic media also crops up in Justin Quinn’s novel, *Mount Merrion* (Dublin: Penguin Ireland, 2013).
23. Ryan, *The Thing About December*, 137–138.
24. Justin Carville, “Topographies of Terror: Photography and the Post-Celtic Tiger Landscape.” In *From Prosperity to Austerity: A Socio-Cultural Critique of the Celtic Tiger and Its Aftermath*, ed. Eamon Maher and Eugene O’Brien (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 116.
25. In a related vein see Luke Gibbons “‘The Wild West of European Finance’: Anachronism, Modernity and the Irish Crisis.” *Field Day Review* 7 (2011): 122–137.
26. Deckard, “Mapping the World Ecology.” https://www.academia.edu/2083255/Mapping_the_World-Ecology_Conjectures_on_World-Ecological_Literature.
27. Reflecting on the historical and contemporary nature, and variety, of Ireland’s immersion in the flows of global economics and cultural exchange, Fintan O’Toole writes: “Over this period [the Celtic Tiger], after all, Ireland did not merely become more globalised. It became, according to the A.T. Kearney/*Foreign Policy* magazine Globalisation Index, the most globalised society in the world in 2002, 2003 and 2004. [. . .] There is a qualitative difference between being affected by globalisation, as Ireland was for previous centuries, and being its poster child, as it became in the recent boom years,” “Foreword,” In *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland*, ed. Eamon Maher (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), x–xi.
28. See O’Toole, “Foreword,” x–xi.
29. Donal Ryan, *The Spinning Heart* (Dublin: Doubleday Ireland/Lilliput Press, 2012), 13.
30. Rob Kitchin, Cian O’Callaghan, Mark Boyle, and Justin Gleeson, “Placing Neoliberalism: The Rise and Fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger.” *Environment and Planning A* 44 (2012): 1317.
31. Sean O’Riain, *The Rise and Fall of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger: Liberalism, Boom and Bust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 233.
32. Ryan, *The Spinning Heart*, 26.
33. See Eileen Battersby’s review of *The Spinning Heart*: “District with the Downturn Blues,” *The Irish Times*, November 10, 2012.
34. Ryan, *The Spinning Heart*, 39.
35. *Ibid.*, 97.
36. *Ibid.*, 42.
37. *Ibid.*, 42.
38. Lewis, *Boomerang*, 103.
39. Terrence McDonough points out: “A rancorous debate has opened up over who or what was responsible for the debacle, with the government emphasising the international

- aspects of the crisis, while opposition parties sought to lay the blame at the feet of a domestic cabal of developers, bankers, and governing party politicians,” “The Irish Crash in Global Context.” *World Review of Political Economy* 1.3 (2010): 442.
40. Edna O’Brien, *Country Girl: A Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 321.

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