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Memory Studies and Famine Studies: Gender, Genealogy, History

I'll begin with three quotations, which serve as epigraphs for this talk. The first is the commentary provided by artist Rowan Gillespie, which accompanies his sculpture 'Statistic 1 and Statistic II', on view in 'Gorta Mór' museum, Quinnipiac, Connecticut:



Under one small municipal parking lot on Staten Island, some 650 human bodies have been discovered. Most are the remains of Irish immigrants who, having fled the devastation of Famine, survived the horrors of the "coffin ships," had, on arrival in the New World, died in quarantine from the diseases they carried with them. Amazingly it has been possible to identify the name, age, date, and cause of death of most of those who were so unceremoniously disposed of in this mass grave. Having spent some time at the site and with those involved, I felt the need to offer some small dignity to those forgotten dead by cutting their names into bronze. It was my way of taking time to contemplate the horror behind these statistics. I would need to make 5,000 tables like these to record the known deaths resulting from the Famine in Ireland.¹

My second quotation comes from Philip Roth's novel, *The Plot Against America*: "Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as "History," harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic." ²

And my third epigraph is taken from Mick Heaney's *Irish Times* review of the Blighted Nation radio series, first broadcast by RTE in January 2013³:

But while his righteous, nationalist-flavoured rhetoric lacked subtlety, Coogan's insistent focus on the suffering of the Famine's victims struck a more sympathetic chord than the scrupulously even-handed approach of Daly and Gray, who afforded more balance to the ruling establishment than seemed necessary. Detachment may be vital for academic studies, but in the context of a popular history show, Coogan's polemics resonated more.

Heaney is referring here to one of a number of recent debates featuring writer Tim Pat Coogan,⁴ sparked by the publication of Coogan's controversial work *Famine Plot* and his comments have been an important springboard for the subject of this paper. I want to consider a key middle term between those of 'famine studies' and 'memory studies', namely historiography, and to examine and interrogate some current trends in recent historiographical famine works. More specifically, I want to explore the existence – or perceived existence – of an 'affective gap' in existing historiography, which is seen to justify the wave of new publications concerning the Great Irish Famine which have appeared in recent years.

These include Coogan's book (published by Palgrave Macmillan), Enda Delaney's *The Curse of Reason* (published by Gill and Macmillan), and John Kelly's *The Graves Are Walking* (published by Faber), along with the immense achievement of the *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork University Press), recent work by David Nally and Ciaran Ó Murchadha, and the significant essay collections *Holodomor and Gorta Mór* and *Recollecting Hunger: An Anthology.*⁵

I have to acknowledge my own surprise that such a range of publications would emerge in recent years, given what had seemed, by 2000 or so, the definitive historiographical work by James Donnelly and Peter Gray, most especially with regard to questions of government culpability. But one of the lessons of feminist methodologies – and here I'm revisiting in part my own publication *Feminization of Famine* (1997) – is that what may appear 'findings' are often 'refindings', and that the process of discovering and uncovering very often brings an encounter with earlier processes of forgetting.

In this talk I wish to open up for consideration and reflection a series of observations regarding trends in recent historiographical work on the Great Famine. The first is their appropriation and deployment of narrative and fictive tropes, usually defended as the means of establishing greater narrative intimacy. Delaney's history provides numerous examples. From the outset the work is presented as 'a narrative history, with an interpretative dimension' (preface). Its objective, we are told, is 'to draw on the existing scholarship, much of it not accessible to a broader audience, and present a distinctive interpretation', though the evidence for such 'inaccessibility' – of books still in print and circulation – is not given.⁶ Delaney chooses to individuate this narrative history through accounts of four people (John MacHale, John Mitchel, Elizabeth Smith, Charles Trevelyan); in his words, 'each of these characters brings a unique viewpoint... retelling the well-known events of the Great Irish Famine through the lives and experiences of these four very different individuals allows for an intimate view

on these tragic years.' The prologue ends as follows: 'Our story opens in Co. Mayo in the late 1790s.'

The marketing of this history emphasizes that it is 'first and foremost a survey history', offering an 'intimate and compelling portrayal of these hungry years.' This is a strategy that has significant limitations and despite the sought-after intimacy, many of Delaney's rhetorical flourishes have a clumsy and curiously distancing effect. On a number of occasions, not least in the odd title *Curse of Reason*, one senses that Delany is seeking to engage with deeper political, even philosophical, issues concerning catastrophe, the relative weightings of natural and human disaster, and how these complex issues can be apprehended; the last line of his book reads 'Reason exacted an apocalyptic toll...'. Ultimately this emerges as a much more complex, though unrealized, ambition for a 'survey history'.

John Kelly's *The Graves are Walking* takes its title from Yeats's *Countess Cathleen*: 'They say that now the land is famine struck/The graves are walking'. The reviews of the novel are especially striking; Adam Hochschild writes: 'I wish more people wrote history like this: fast-paced but carefully documented, lively as a novel...'. Its 'powerful intimacy' is praised by Amanda Foreman, Richard Rhodes, and Kathleen Kennedy Townshend, senior advisor to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, while a lengthy and highly positive endorsement is provided by President Bill Clinton: '*The Graves are Walking* is a cautionary tale for all who would risk calamity – human, economic, or ecological – in the name of scoring an ideological victory.' A globalization discourse might lead us to read such comments with a certain 'complexity', and to note the positioning of this history within a specific economic ideology and political practice.

Yet Kelly's history is at its best in its analysis of political policy and the material consequences of its implementation; this includes the role and impact of the various 'celebrity experts' (his excellent term) who visited Ireland earlier in the nineteenth century. However, on a number of occasions, the fictive mode takes over, to poor effect: for example the beginning of Chapter 10 'Snow', 'On the morning of November 29, Elizabeth Smith looked out her bedroom window...It was December now, and mass death was beginning.'⁸ At such moments, the now apocryphal exam question from the late 1960s ('*The Great Hunger* is a great novel. Discuss...') returns to mind.

More problematic is the history's premature ending: it concludes its coverage in 1847 with a rushed survey of the post 1848 period in the afterword. In his closing comments, Kelly offers a direct engagement with the 'genocide thesis' – in his words, 'the intent of those policies may not have been genocidal but the effects were' – but then finishes with the remarkably banal conclusion: 'No wonder, in the decades after the famine, so many Irish immigrants were incapable of saying "England' without adding 'Goddamn her."'9

The third and final work to be addressed briefly here is Coogan's *The Famine Plot: England's role in Ireland's greatest tragedy* (Palgrave Macmillan). The publisher's note describes it as 'thoroughly researched and passionately argued'

while the self-description as 'an intelligent, thought-provoking and well-written history' suggests an already defensive mode. Coogan's motivation in writing the history is at once clear and contradictory: in his words, 'The silence of Irish historians about the official hate creation and the stimulation of anti-Irish prejudice that accompanied the Famine was, and to a large extent still is, remarkable. (Take Curtis, for example). To put it mildly, Irish historians as a class have not done justice to the Famine.' And what I've been terming the 'fictive mode' is frequently apparent: for example at the conclusion of chapter 3, 'Such was the stage setting for the horror story that was about to unfold in Ireland. It is now time to turn to the role of a number of the chief actors in the drama. There were of course millions of bit players, but their lines were not listened to and echoed only in graveyards.' 11

Although the reviews on the book's cover emphasise Coogan's 'meticulous research', very few footnotes are given and, as others have noted, few if any primary sources are employed. Yet lines like the following have a marked rhetorical resonance, which links back to Heaney's review quoted earlier: 'A people seeing food flowing along Irish roads to be exported from Irish ports, very likely under the guard of Irish soldiers in British uniforms or Irish men in the police force, as their fellow countrymen died horribly in ditches along the roads, does not have its anger abated by references to economic theory.¹² And while Coogan's references to a starving people inflamed by 'the sight of a single sandwich' have a bizarre quality, his castigation of 'the theoretical arguments of the well-fed in a lecture hall' is not without charge.

Unsurprisingly, within the reviews and commentaries on Coogan's book, the issue which has dominated is that of government culpability – more specifically Coogan's restatement of the charge of genocide – yet other historiographical features within his and other works have remained largely unremarked upon to date. One of these, arising directly from the trope of 'famine as story' is the positing of famine as a narratable event i.e. possessing a narrative that can be directly established and that can be told from beginning to end.

This was an especially striking feature of the *Blighted Nation* four-part radio series wherein episode 1 sought to establish a historical record of what happened and what was experienced. While aspects of this were very compelling, the episode lacked any reference to the difficulties of establishing that knowledge – 'how we know what we know' – and its gaps and limitations.

This leads me to identify a second trend in recent histories, linked to their use of their fictive tropes, which is their elision of earlier historiography and their suppression of historiographical complexity, of the processes through which our knowledge of past is mediated. Thus eyewitness accounts are frequently quoted without contextualization, or in some cases without an attribution of source. This suppression of the problematics of knowledge is linked to the avoidance of an especially significant area for famine studies – namely that of intergenerational acts of transfer and their role in constructing and shaping a shared 'understanding'. The *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, which I mentioned earlier, is an immense contribution to famine scholarship, offering, in editor

William Smyth's words, 'a geography of the dead', of 'where and why people died'. Yet it too is not free of a tendency to what I would call 'historiographical flatness' with regard to the generations of interpretation which have made its work possible or to the problematic status of that testimony which does survive. How succeeding generations came to know of the earlier disaster, and the modes of understanding made available to them, remain especially pertinent questions for famine scholarship; in other words, can we map a historical geography of knowledge, comprehension and interpretation?

In this context, the lack of detailed attention to the 'generation after' – what Marianne Hirsch has called the 'generation of postmemory' – is especially regrettable. Some recent scholarship, most especially the Relocated Remembrance project led by Marguérite Corporaal in Nijmegen which examines the Great Famine in Irish diaspora fiction, has begun to undo this neglect, and a turn to the subject of famine is a striking feature of scholarship on James Joyce and more recently W.B. Yeats. In the author's note to his dramatization of 'The Dead', Frank McGuinness notes that his play is haunted by two events': 'One is the Irish Famine (1845-1848) which occurred within the childhood of Kate and Julia Morkan and would be an abiding memory to all the guests at this dinner.'

A recent article by Vincent Comerford, entitled 'Grievance, Scourge, or Shame? The Complexity of Attitudes to Ireland's Great Famine', sees a welcome redirection of attention to John O'Rourke (1809-1887), author of the 1875 History of the Great Irish Famine, a key historical text for 'the generation after'. As Comerford notes, despite O'Rourke's having lived through the Famine and his experience of a wide range of 'business, associational and devotional life in Co Wicklow and Dublin city', 'one of the most remarkable features of this book is the almost total exclusion of the author's own recollections of the period....His book speaks of the arrival and impact of a nationwide famine, but largely in the abstract.'¹⁴

Comerford continues: 'The denial in which O'Rourke and his public engaged is compatible with deeply held grievance, but only if that grievance is subordinate to sentiments such as shame and insecurity.' ¹⁵ Comerford's ensuing observations on the reasons for the absence of significant scholarship about the Famine before the late 1940s include an important rejoinder to some of the simplifications of recent commentaries on famine as trauma. In his words, 'This is not to imply that some ineluctable collective psychological trauma was in play: the explanation was to be found in a somewhat less tragic tactic of cumulative social dissimulation' ¹⁶ (dissemble: to conceal, cloak, disguise).

O'Rourke's narrative does include some powerful individual moments, most especially in his account of his visit, some twenty years after the end of the famine (or in O'Rourke's words, 'after the famine-scourge had passed away'), to what Comerford terms the 'iconic famine pit at Abbeystrewry cemetery outside Skibbereen'. That 'iconic' status is more accurately, however, an effect of O'Rourke's 1875 narrative, partly due to the memorably detailed – and material – quality of his reflections:

A difficulty arose in my mind with regard to the manner of internment in those pits. Great numbers, I knew, were interred in each of them; for which reason they must have been kept open a considerable time. Yet surely, I reflected, something resembling interment must have taken place on the arrival of each corpse, especially as it was coffinless. The contrivance, as I afterwards learned, was simple enough. A little sawdust was sprinkled over each corpse, on being laid in the pit, which was thus kept open until it had received its full complement of tenants.¹⁷

O'Rourke's passage is followed by a strikingly early and self-conscious discourse on what we might term 'memorialization' or 'commemorative practice":

To trace one's steps, slowly and respectfully, among the graves of those who have reached the goal of life in the ordinary course, fills one with holy warnings; to stand beside the monument raised on the battle-field to the brave men who fell there, calls up heroic echoes in the heart, but here there is no room for sentiment; here in humiliation and sorrow, not unmixed with indignation, one is driven to exclaim:

O God! That bread should be so dear, And human flesh so cheap.¹⁸

The nouns employed by Comerford, 'grievance, scourge or shame', are an important reminder of the laden quality of famine terminology. Yet it is striking how little we who work in famine scholarship have theorized an emotional and affective register. Nouns such as 'shame' and 'guilt' are often blithely deployed, sometimes along with an unthinking use of terms such as 'trauma' or elsewhere as part of a bluntly expressed suspicion of 'emotionalism' and a repeated underestimation of the power of the emotive.

Little attention is paid to the production and circulation of emotions as a discursive economy, or, in Sara Ahmed's words, 'affective economies'. More precise differentiations of 'shame' and 'guilt' – not as different emotions but involving a different relationship of self to self and self to others – are usefully provided by Ahmed and Eve Sedgwick. Ahmed, quoting Donald Nathanson, notes that 'guilt implies action, while shame implies that some quality of the self has been brought into question'. Thus, 'in shame, more than my action is at stake; the badness of an action is transferred to me '20. Similarly Eve Sedgwick writes: "In interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity'; and thus 'survivor's guilt and, more generally, the politics of guilt will be better understood when we can see them in some relation to the slippery dynamics of shame'.²¹

The persistence of 'shame' in an affective register has been movingly expressed by sculptor Rowan Gillespie in his contribution to Vincent Woods' fine Arts Tonight programme on 'the Famine in Art', first broadcast on RTE Radio on December 2012. Here Gillespie recalls that, following his securing of the commission for the famine sculpture on Custom House Quay, his father enjoined him to stop: 'he thought it was so shameful'.²²

Writing in the context of the discourse of reconciliation in Australia, specifically in relation to the mistreatment of aboriginal peoples, Ahmed warns about the consequences of 'the detachment of shame from individual bodies' to a collective politics. To quote in detail from Ahmed,

The projection of what is unjust onto the past allows shame to be represented here as a collective shame that does not affect individuals in the present, even as it surrounds and covers them, like a cloak or skin. Despite its recognition of past wrongdoings, shame can still conceal how such wrongdoings shape lives in the present... It is shame that allows us 'to assert our identity as a nation'.... But in allowing us to feel bad, does shame also allow the nation to feel better?²³

Ahmed's remarks resonate powerfully with remarks by Gary Hynes concerning her recent staging of the DruidMurphy cycle, including the, for some, surprising choice of Murphy's *Famine*:

It seems to me that in these three plays Murphy writes an inner history of Ireland, a nation that has now, critically, under the pressure of a debt crisis that has become an identity crisis, to re-examine the materials and rhetorical strategies out of which it makes itself – to throw them out, it may well be, and start again.

But this timeliness has something to do with much more than nationhood.... It has to do with the question of trust – if we can ever trust to nations to complete our sense of ourselves. We clearly can't trust them to ensure a livelihood... 24

Fuller attention to the deployment of emotional register, which can include 'shame', 'guilt' or 'trust', is in turn related to the need to examine more carefully how the writing of famine history attempts to create the sought after 'intimacy' of representation. What Aby Warburg termed in 1929 a 'storehouse of preestablished expressive forms' is a useful characterization of famine representations whereby certain figures and testimonies – Bridget O'Donnell, Captain Wynne, Nicholas Cummins – recur throughout recent studies. Whether these enable understanding through a productive 'disruptive emotion', or banalize through what Hirsch has termed 'melancholy replay', emains a difficult question to answer.

One narrative strategy which is underused in contemporary famine historiography would involve a greater attention to their original context of these scenes, or more precisely a restoration of their force as human encounters. As Ahmed usefully comments in her work *Strange Encounters*, ²⁷

encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular – the face to face of this encounter – and the general – the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism. The particular encounter hence always carries traces of those broader relationships. Differences, as markers of power, are not determined in the 'space' of the particular or the general, but in the very determination of their historical relation.

It may be worth restating the obvious here: at the heart of these encounters lie differences, as markers of power: between those who are vulnerable and those who carry responsibility, in its fullest sense.

New digital technologies offer renewed opportunities to trace these genealogies of images, as textual records, and to investigate the processes of their transmission as 'tropes and technologies'. The use of GIS technology to link civil parish maps to a Census database by contributors to the Atlas of the Great Irish Famine has made dramatically the Famine and its consequences more strikingly visible.

Alongside its extensive mapping are 'quieter' contributions which have a powerful impact: one such example is Hilary O'Kelly's short essay on 'famine and workhouse clothing'. What Willy Smyth has termed the 'saddest map' in the Atlas is that which details the percentage change in distribution of children under five years of age, between 1841 and 1851 where many parishes – including my own home area of Mallow – experienced a devastating two thirds decline due to deaths or births that did not take place. Other contributions provide intriguing insights into changes in family occupations, changes in the occupations practiced by women and men, and the gender distribution of workhouse inmates.

While it is important to acknowledge that significant limits exist as to the demographic information available and to the reliability of what exists, more work could be conducted, for example, on the comparative fate of individuals within various institutions in relation to famine mortality and survival. Within Irish famine historiography more generally, the gendered dimensions of mortality and distress remain insufficiently explored beyond brusque references to general patterns of mortality. Instead a historical perspective attuned to issues of gender might direct us to some further consideration of what occurred within and across families, combining 'the domestic and the public' – not towards a valorization of the experiences of men or of women but towards a scale of enquiry other than the national, regional and the vanishing point of the individual.

My final diagnostic comment, therefore, with regard to famine historiography is to highlight its failure to engage with gender as a category of analysis. The arguments for undoing this failure, or perhaps more accurately this suppression or rejection, involve my revisiting aspects of *Feminization of Famine* after some 15 years, but with the benefit of the deeply suggestive models of enquiry offered by Ahmed, Hirsch, Sedgwick, Cavarero and others. Why gender matters involves a three fold answer, and I am borrowing heavily from Hirsch here:

- (1) the possibility of new frames and scales of enquiry;
- (2) the 'foregrounding' in Hirsch's terms, of 'structures of mediation and representation.²⁹ In other words, gender perspectives require a problematisation of knowledge (rather than its valorization).
- (3) the reinstatement of political questions, attending to the 'power structures that animate forgetting, oblivion and erasure'. 30

In summary, gender, again in Hirsch's words, 'can offer a lens through which to read the domestic and the public scenes of memorial acts.' 31

Many recent studies of memory emphasise their ambition to forge 'connective histories'; in the context of Irish famine studies, in contrast, one is struck by various fissures and newly apparent disjunctions: for example, between 'academic' and 'popular' histories; and between aspects of Irish America and famine studies in Ireland.

What remains relevant here are the continuing limitations in our imaginative apprehension of 'the relentless unforeseen' and how such limitations can be appropriated and manipulated. It is worth reexamining why this knowledge matters and what a 'connective history' means; since it has become almost fashionable to express suspicion of 'easy solidarity' with Ireland's famine history.

While the lines of continuity between then and now can be, and have been, articulated in overly simplistic terms, their total refutation - and the resulting vacuum - has itself negative consequences, wherein objections to the genocide thesis can be heard as an apolitical, even antipolitical hollowness. At stake in current debates are quite urgent issues relating to our contemporary structures of knowledge: what mediating forces are gathering power, and how, deserves our conscious reflection and continuing engagement.

NOTES

- ¹ See http://ighm.nfshost.com/ for images of art works in An Gorta Mór museum and accompanying commentaries.
- ² Philip Roth, *Plot Against America* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 113-4.
- ³ Mick Heaney, radio review, *Irish Times* 5 January 2013.
- ⁴ See transcript of a debate between Tim Pat Coogan and Liam Kennedy, on Dublin Review of Books: http://www.drb.ie/blog/writers-and-artists/2013/02/25/was-the-famine-a-genocide-
- ⁵ Holodomor and Gorta Mór: Histories, Memories and Representations of Famine in Ukraine and Ireland editors Christian Noack, Lindsay Janssen and Vincent Comerford (London: Anthem Press, 2012); Recollecting Hunger: An Anthology: Cultural Memories of the Great Famine in Irish and British Fiction, 1847-1920 edited by Marguerite Corporaal, Christopher Cusack and Lindsay Janssen (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012).
- ⁶ Enda Delaney, *The Curse of Reason: The Great Irish* Famine (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2012), preface.
- ⁷ Delaney, Curse of Reason, pp. 4-5.
- ⁸ John Kelly, *The Graves of Walking: the History of the Great Irish Famine* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 176,
- ⁹ Kelly, 'Afterword', p. 338. Strong echoes of the ending of Woodham-Smith's conclusion to *The Great Hunger* can be traced here.
- ¹⁰ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 3.
- ¹¹ Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, p. 42.
- ¹² Coogan, *The Famine Plot*, p. 70.
- ¹³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁴ Vincent Comerford, 'Grievance, Scourge, or Shame? The Complexity of Attitudes to Ireland's Great Famine' in *Holodomor and Gorta Mór* p. 52.
- ¹⁵ Comerford, 'Grievance, Scourge, or Shame?', p. 53.
- ¹⁶ Comerford, 'Grievance, Scourge, or Shame?', p. 58.
- ¹⁷ Canon John O'Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine* (1875; abridged edition Dublin: Veritas, 1999), p. 158.
- ¹⁸ O'Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 158.

- ¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 45: 'Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs. Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become'.
- ²⁰ Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, p.105,
- ²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) p.36, p. 64.
- ²² http://www.rte.ie/radio1/podcast/podcast_artstonight.xml (podcast 18 February 2013).
- ²³ Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, p.102.
- ²⁴ Gary Hynes, Director's Note, *DruidMurphy Plays by Tom Murphy* (London: Methuen, 2012), xvii-xviii.
- ²⁵ Quoted in Hirsch, Generation of Postmemory, p. 42.
- ²⁶ Hirsch, Generation of Postmemory, p. 108.
- ²⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 8.
- ²⁸ Hirsch, Generation of Postmemory, p. 6.
- ²⁹ Hirsch, Generation of Postmemory, p. 9.
- ³⁰ Hirsch, Generation of Postmemory, p. 16.
- ³¹ Hirsch, Generation of Postmemory, p. 18.