

Reappearing in Different Forms: Ancient and Contemporary Irish Hunger in *Bog Child*

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Abstract

Siobhan Dowd's novel *Bog Child* explores a legacy of self-sacrifice in Ireland. From a contemporary context, it explores the second hunger strike of Long Kesh prison in the 1980s and a fictionalised famine in the first century as a more ancient example. Using Kathleen Jamie's notion of 'surfacing' and Oona Frawley's 'memory cruxes' as launching points to explore *Bog Child*, this paper works to illuminate how these temporally distant events are intricately connected through an extended history of self-sacrifice and hunger in Ireland. In the process, it also explores how, in that extended history, gendered notions have crept in, how they are reinforced and how they can be challenged. *Bog Child* is at its core a novel about the repetition of history, and particularly of historical cultural trauma, but one that ultimately works to offer a compassionate end to this repetition, as the paper will conclude.

Keywords: Bog Child, The Troubles in Northern Ireland, hunger strikes in Long Kesh Prison, hunger strikes and Brehon Laws, Irish famines and British Imperialism

In her collection of essays, *Surfacing* (2020), Kathleen Jamie explores, through the lens of personal memory and her first-hand accounts of archaeological digs, the ways in which the past 'surfaces' into the present and becomes part of it, an irruption in the typically linear configuration of time. Following her experiences at an archaeological dig in Alaska, where artefacts of the Yup'ik people's ancestors were being uncovered as the descendants watched and lived alongside the dig, Jamie muses: 'The past can spill out of the earth, become the present' (2020: 31). These artefacts then are not only a temporal irruption, but a literal and physical eruption from the earth. This kind of irruption/eruption, or 'surfacing', to use Jamie's terminology, is at the heart of Siobhan Dowd's novel, *Bog Child*.¹

Dowd's novel follows a young man, Fergus, after he discovers a body from around 80 CE preserved in a bog in Northern Ireland. Over the course of the novel, Fergus has a series of

ephemeral dreams in which he is given insight into the life of the eponymous ‘bog child’, named Mel. Through these dreams, we learn that Mel was accused of being a witch and the cause and/or perpetrator of a famine, and that she was subsequently executed in the belief that this would bring the famine to an end. Concurrent to his discovery of Mel’s body and his ethereal visions of Mel’s life, Fergus’s brother, Joe, is participating in a **hunger strike** in Long Kesh prison. Members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) imprisoned in Long Kesh underwent two hunger strikes to secure the rights to be treated as prisoners of war and not as common criminals, as they were at the time of the novel’s main setting. The first of these hunger strikes failed. The second, on the other hand, was successful: led and engineered by Bobby Sands, ten strikers died and concessions in favour of the strikers demands were subsequently made by the British government. Joe participates in, but survives, the latter.

The revelation of how Mel came to be in the bog draws parallels between her and Joe through starvation in the former’s experience of famine and the latter’s commitment to the hunger strike. Moreover, the two become linked by their willing self-sacrifice, as Mel allows herself to be scapegoated and consequently executed, and Joe starves himself in the name of an independent Ireland. Through the juxtaposition of the hunger strike in which Joe participates, and the famine for which Mel is scapegoated, Dowd uses Mel’s ‘surfacing’ to highlight the uncanny relevancy between the past and the present. As Jamie says elsewhere in her essays: ‘time is a spiral [...] events remote to one another can wheel back into proximity’ (Jamie, 2020: 161). It is a more poetic reiteration of the aphorism ‘history repeats itself’, and is expressed differently again by Dowd in *Bog Child* through the resurrected voice of Mel prophesying Ireland’s future: ‘*old grudges leapfrogging over generations, reappearing in different forms*’ (Dowd, 2015: 312; emphasis original). Throughout the novel, as Fergus becomes a conduit through which the past and present of Ireland are explored, the legacy of hunger – be it famine or strike – on Ireland’s cultural memory emerges as a site of crippling violence and grief. This paper seeks to explore the nuanced ways in which Dowd’s novel explores this legacy, which simultaneously reinforces and challenges long-standing notions of hunger striking in Ireland. Moreover, this paper means to elucidate how the fictional, although still plausible, famine of Mel’s narrative connects directly to the hunger strike in Long Kesh prison, nearly two millennia later.

Oona Frawley has developed some useful terminology for this paper. What I have in the introduction referred to as an irruption/eruption or, borrowing from Kathleen Jamie, the

process of surfacing, is symptomatic of what Frawley refers to as ‘memory cruxes’ (Frawley, 2014: 1). For Frawley, ‘memory cruxes’ are events that stimulate ‘the transposition of the process of remembrance from the level of the individual to the cultural’ (2014: 1). Memory cruxes, then, are central to the way in which *Bog Child* is able to thematically contrast and pivot between 80 CE and the 1980s with little distortion. Memory cruxes ‘represent an ongoing attempt to debate the past and enter into a dialogue with it’ (2014: 1), and *Bog Child* uses these temporally distant yet comparable moments to develop such a dialogue. More importantly, Frawley sees memory cruxes as intricately and particularly connected with historical sites of trauma, identifying, for example, the Great Irish Famine (1845–52) as especially impactful on Irish culture and politics (2014: 3–4). Further, as memory cruxes ‘[refuse] to allow us “closure”’ (2014: 5) they ‘induce a cycle of repetition and recurrence of trauma’ (2014: 7). There is, then, nothing random about time’s repetitiousness nor the way in which apparently disparate events spiral into proximity (Jamie, 2020: 161) because there is, according to Frawley, a cultural structure, a cultural trauma, that ‘haunts us’ (Frawley, 2014: 5). We can therefore understand Fergus’s ephemeral dreams to be a haunting by Mel, but on the broader cultural level of a memory crux, evidence of Ireland’s haunting by the legacy of famine, its literal surfacing through Mel and its figurative resurfacing through the hunger strikers in Long Kesh prison.

If ‘hunger’ is an Irish memory crux, it is no surprise that the history of hunger strikes in Ireland occupies ‘an integral part of Irish history and mythology’ (Sweeney, 1993: 421). Therefore, in order to understand the significance of the invocation of such history and mythology in *Bog Child*, it is important to clearly outline the historically charged and culturally important context that a hunger strike holds in Ireland. Firstly, hunger striking is rooted in the **Gaelic** societal codes of Brehon laws (Aretxaga, 1997: 82; Sweeney, 1993: 421), and it is important to understand that Brehon laws were not a legal system in the way that ‘laws’ are understood now, but part of a ‘strong tradition of oral legal codes’ (Sweeney, 1993: 241). George Sweeney explains that one of these laws suggested an indebted party could claim from their debtor such assets as was a suitable alternative payment, until the debtor was otherwise able to fulfil their obliged debt (1993: 421–22). We see this within one of Fergus’s dreams in *Bog Child*, in which Mel’s family’s goats are forcefully claimed in payment for a debt owed to the community chief, Boss Shaughn, which pushes Mel’s family to the brink of starvation (Dowd, 2015: 161). However, ‘for many people [...] this method was neither a realistic option nor a practical solution’ (Sweeney, 1993: 422), and as an alternative, ‘the

aggrieved would 'fast against' his debtor [...] a tactic usually employed by the powerless against the powerful' (1993). Sweeney highlights the use of fasting to resolve a kind of economic contract; however, Begoña Aretxaga contextualises it within a broader 'juridical mechanism for arbitration of certain disputes' (Aretxaga, 1997: 82) wherein Brehon laws 'allowed those who were unjustly wronged to fast at the door of the wrongdoer until justice was done' (1997). Brehon laws, then, can be seen not only as the process by which debt was repatriated, but also by which justice more generally itself was upheld in Gaelic society. Success for the aggrieved was often assured by the fact that if someone was to die by 'fasting against' a debtor or wrongdoer, not only was the family of the aggrieved to be compensated, but the threat of magical retribution lingered over the transaction (Sweeney, 1993: 422).

Magical retribution aside, it is important to be able to recognise the parallels in the fasting preceded by Brehon laws and the hunger strikes of the 1980s. While remembering that the two acts are indisputably distinct (Aretxaga, 1997: 82), 'the link of continuity between ancient Gaelic tradition and contemporary political practices is powerful in republican imagination' (1997). Through such continuity, not only could one infer that the hunger strikers were 'fasting against' the British government, but the ideological significance of the protest is elevated by invoking ancient Irish law to defy modern British law. As such, the hunger strikes also reveal the broader potentials of fasting, demonstrating its ability to expand beyond a process to claim material compensation, as in Sweeney's description, to ideological compensation, meaning justice, as in Aretxaga's description. Such continuity is vividly present in Annie MacSwiney's hunger strike in 1922, during which she 'camped outside the gates of Mountjoy [Prison] and began a hunger strike' protesting the imprisonment of her sister, Mary MacSwiney, who was holding a hunger strike of her own in the prison, protesting British domination of Ireland (Sweeney, 1993: 429). Annie MacSwiney's hunger strike is more directly derived from Brehon laws as she 'fasts at the door of the wrongdoer' (Aretxaga, 1997: 82), but Mary MacSwiney's protest from within the prison is illustrative of **republican** 'political identity as direct descendants of their preconquest ancestors' (1997) through a looser application of Gaelic tradition and invocation of Brehon laws. The latter then is more akin to the hunger strike by republicans in Long Kesh in the 1980s and in *Bog Child*.

In that 'loose' invocation of the Brehon laws, there is a streamlined continuity between the MacSwiney sisters' hunger strike and that of the hunger strikers in Long Kesh. To understand this, we need to explore what inspired hunger strikes and opposition to British rule in the first

place. The history of Ireland's invasion and occupation by forces hailing from Britain is long and storied, beginning at least as early as Norman invaders arriving from Britain in the 1100s (Radden-Keefe, 2019: 11). For the British, Ireland was 'their first colonial frontier'² (Patel and Moore, 2018: 51) and '[many] of the techniques of social control developed at home were practiced and refined [...] in Ireland' (2018: 190). Ireland was to Britain a testing ground for imperial rule. This is firstly illustrated by the industrialisation of Ireland into a colonial agricultural centre in the 1500s (2018: 190), followed by the Scottish and English protestants who emigrated to Ireland and 'established plantation systems' in the 1600s (Radden-Keefe, 2019: 11). Secondly, the enforcement of these industrial agricultural structures was ensured by 'military mobilization to protect colonial property' (Patel and Moore, 2018: 191). Militarised action, used as a response to Irish rebellion against British colonisation, became cyclical: the 'savagery' of violent rebellion, the unwillingness to become 'civilised', meaning opposition to modern farming methods of that era and British colonial rule more generally, inspired further justification for colonisation of Ireland by the British, which in turn fostered more 'savage' rebellion (2018: 191).

The resilience of such a conceptualisation of the Irish as 'savage natives' is clear in the military's attitudes expressed to Fergus by a British soldier: 'as far as my unit's concerned you're the **taigs**. A crew of mad, bad Irish bog-men, straight out of the stone age' (Dowd, 2015: 127). Although this is said tongue-in-cheek to Fergus by a clearly disillusioned British soldier – he is Welsh and thereby from a comparable British imperial testing ground to Ireland – it highlights the resilience of prejudiced ideologies, bordering on stasis. This stasis is emphasised by the comparison of contemporary locals to 'bog-men' and the exhumation of a centuries-old body from the bog nearby. The quality of Mel's preservation in the bog also serves to create a feeling of stasis: '[it] was as if the child was on the cusp of a second coming' (Dowd, 2015: 99). Early on in the novel, we are alerted to the local land's capability to preserve the past. Foreshadowing Mel's discovery, we are told that the peat in which Mel is found is 'made from things that lived here in millennia gone by and pressed by time into a magic frieze' (Dowd, 2015: 5). As much as Fergus becomes a haunted conduit through which the past surfaces, the land – Ireland itself – is revealed to be a gateway to the past, a repository that has absorbed history into it and preserved it in pristine condition.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Ireland was a profitable frontier for the British Empire. '[At] the height of the [1845–48] potato famine, Ireland was exporting around three hundred

thousand tons of grain a year to feed the mother country [England]' (Sweeney, 1993: 145). Some have estimated that the exports of corn during the famine would have been enough to feed 2 million people (Kinealy *et al.*, 2019: 19). That such disproportionate distribution of resources would have exacerbated the death toll the famine wreaked on Ireland's population demonstrates the extent of the institutional and economic violence that the British inflicted on Ireland.⁵ This had a long-standing impact on Ireland to the extent that as late as

the turn of the [twentieth] century, the wake of the cataclysmic social and economic upheaval of the famine was still evident. Irish society was still nurturing the resentment of a crippling exploitation and the gradual peeling away of its cultural heritage

(Sweeney, 1993: 423)

which, in brief, would ultimately lead to the **Easter Rising** of 1916,⁴ and then the partitioning of Ireland in 1921 following the Irish War of Independence (1919–21), which is what would lead to 'the troubles' of the 1970s and 1980s.

As such, there is a poignant irony in the Irish utilising a hunger strike to protest British rule of Ireland when Britain has sought to control and exploit Ireland through agricultural frontiers that led to famine. By invoking the historical violence of British rule, hunger strikes become continuations of violent British rule over Ireland. Not only does it invoke the violence inflicted, but also the resistance to it: 'the hunger strike, linked as it is to religio-political martyrdom [...] [was] a weapon of last resort, of those nurturing a sense of oppression and frustrated in their attempts to resist' (Sweeney, 1993: 421). While '[the] political prison seeks to [delegitimise] its inmates' struggle by casting them as individual common criminals' (Whalen, 2019: 96–97), the hunger strikes cast inmates within 'the pantheon of Irish heroes' (Sweeney, 1993: 421). This pantheon 'provided role models in the 1970s and 1980s for republicans who sought an end to British rule in Northern Ireland' (1993: 435). However, attempts to delegitimise the opposition to British rule extended beyond merely misclassifying prisoners, but through a wider delegitimation of the movement altogether: hunger striking 'was to become linked to militant republicanism along with Arthur Griffith's Sinn Fein party, a movement opposed to the use of physical force prior to 1916' (1993: 425). More troublingly, Sinn Fein would consequently be 'deliberately and wrongfully blamed by the British for what was officially called 'the Sinn Fein rebellion'' (1993: 425), which was a violent opposition to

British rule in Ireland, and is now more commonly referred to as the Easter Rising. John Pickering, a hunger striker, explains how such delegitimation was re-employed during the 1980s:

there was this battle going on for hearts and minds and it centres around terminology. They [the British] started using words like Bandit Country for South Armagh, and Godfathers for the IRA leaders. The criminalization of the republican struggle was part of that.

(cited in Howard, 2006: 91)

This is the core reason the hunger strikes occurred in the 1980s. The British government aimed to strip imprisoned members of the IRA of their political autonomy by creating a narrative of common criminality rather than legitimate, militant opposition to an oppressive regime. Those imprisoned used hunger strikes to win back that political autonomy.

However, criticism of the mythologisation and cultural formulation of the figure of the hunger striker has arisen. Fundamentally, 'the hunger striker remains gendered male in the archetype' (Whalen, 2019: 113), which is problematic when the hunger strikes of the early twentieth century 'became the gold standard of republican protest' (McConville, 2015: 338), but exclusively in a male paradigm. Not only is the archetype of the hunger striker a male 'character', but the act of undertaking one is perceived to be a male act of heroism: 'the very *men* who do represent the will of Ireland and are endeavouring to vindicate *her* liberties' (Gannon, 1920: 449; emphasis mine). When one considers that 'Irish and British suffragists turned to the hunger strike as a form of political protest well before republican men' (Whalen, 2019: 97), it is unsurprising that there are suggestions that 'women hunger strikers [...] largely have not received the attention their stories deserve' (2019: 95). However, although Irish suffragist Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington claims a '[hunger] strike was then a new weapon – [Irish suffragists] were the first to try it out in Ireland' (cited in Whalen, 2019: 97–98), this ultimately ignores the Gaelic legacy of the Brehon laws. However, this does not mean that suffragists were not pioneers of hunger striking as a mode of political protest (2019: 98), invoked by cultural right, as did Annie and Mary MacSwiney in 1922, and Dolours and Marian Price – perhaps the most well-known female hunger strikers of the IRA – in 1973, 'in an effort to secure repatriation to Armagh Gaol' (Whalen, 2019: 99) from a prison in mainland Britain. Rather, what this is more indicative of is that the discourse surrounding the Brehon laws is

also framed within a male context, reinforced by the fact that Sweeney's description of the Brehon laws uses male pronouns to describe the process (Sweeney, 1993: 421–22).

However, 'we must [recognise] the efforts of contemporary republicans (and republican prisoners in particular) to ensure that their female comrades were not forgotten by the general public, beginning in earnest in the 1980s' (Whalen, 2019: 113). For example, Jackie McMullan's account of the work his mother did to raise awareness of the hunger strikes: 'These women were extraordinary. They organised protests the length and breadth of the country, then took it abroad – America, France, Austria – generating publicity, drawing people's attention to the issues' (cited in Howard, 2006: 83). While there is no use in undermining this work, especially when Aretxaga reminds us of how vital it was and how crucial it is to combat the typical figuration of women in guerrilla warfare as 'victims of a violent conflict over which they have little control' (1997: 9), it seems that this was perhaps not exactly in the spirit of what Lachlan Whalen refers to, however well-intentioned it may be by McMullan. As deserving of attention as McMullan's mother's work may be, the story, coming from a male hunger striker (McMullan), in an article that fails to mention female hunger strikers, reinforces gendered and inaccurately represented divisions of labour: 'mobilizing was informally defined as women's work' (Kauffman, 2018: 36). This division of labour is a continuation of the way in which imperial (read: capitalist) structures worked to devalue the labour of women. '[We] continue to think of 'real work' solely as wage work and forget that [unpaid labour] makes it all possible' (Patel and Moore, 2018: 116). Of course, male hunger strikers were not financially compensated either, but were culturally compensated by the regular recognition of their sacrifice. Reflecting on this, we need to recognise that free – meaning here also uncredited – labour is disproportionately thrust upon women, and that even while the dictates of capitalism devalue free labour, it is far from invaluable but is to an extent the very foundation of Western society, as observed by Patel and Moore, above (2018: 116).

Mel does not escape such configuration, responsible as she is for numerous domestic tasks around the home. However, following the murder of Boss Shaughn by Mel's brother, after the family's goats are taken, Mel allows herself to be scapegoated for the famine that follows, interpreted as magical retribution lingering over a botched transaction governed by Brehon law. As such, *Bog Child* engages with a cultural history of self-sacrifice in Ireland, both in its more immediate and contemporary relevancy in the form of hunger strikes, as well as its place

in an ancient heritage wherein it implicates Mel within that ‘pantheon of Irish heroes’ (Sweeney, 1993: 421) and martyrs. In this sense, *Bog Child* is a curious text for the way in which it recodes the traditionally male space of the mythological hunger striker as female, but maintains and reiterates the archetype of the contemporary hunger striker as male through the character of Joe. However, as archaeologists in the novel compose a reality of Mel’s life, based on the cryptic clues that surround her death, their failure to realise a faithful comprehension of the events indicates a societal amnesia. That is to say, the failure to recognise Mel as a martyr, a figure of self-sacrifice, could be read as a commentary on the omission of female self-sacrifice within canonical Irish history. This also aligns with Frawley’s ‘memory crux’ as she notes that trauma oscillates between the extremes of erasure (forgetting, silence) and omnipotence – the inability to forget (Frawley, 2014: 6).

Yet, the representations of women in the novel are not so straightforwardly progressive towards a consciousness of the important role women played in the legacy of hunger striking. This becomes particularly prevalent in the part of the novel set in the 1980s. For example, in the wake of the death of a hunger striker, it is noted that ‘women across the North had taken to the streets with dustbin lids, crashing them down on the tarmac, cymbals of protest’ (Dowd, 2015: 206). Although brief reference is made to the hunger strikes of suffragists (2015: 299), this is largely the only direct action women take in any form of protest within the novel. This, unfortunately, continues the misrepresentation of women in the hunger-strike movement – and throughout the troubles more generally – as merely reacting to male action as opposed to being autonomous protesters themselves, with their own agency. Furthermore, the use of dustbin lids within *Bog Child* confines women to passive protest, confined within preconfigured domestic spaces. Although this scene is historically accurate, it omits the more radical purpose for which dustbin lids were employed: to actively aid paramilitary agents by ‘sending up a great gnashing din [...] alerting the rebels that a [British] raid was underway’ nearby (Radden-Keefe, 2019: 42). Such action illustrates an autonomous reclamation of domesticity in order to actively participate in paramilitary operations. Women were not passive bystanders in the troubles, but active participants, even when confined within domestic spheres. Moreover, Aretxaga provides a further example of how women were able to reappropriate domesticity in service of the republican cause. Following a curfew in Belfast, 1970, violently enforced by the British military, 3000 women marched through Belfast carrying placards that read ‘British army worse than the Black and Tans, women and child beaters’ (*Irish News*, cited in Aretxaga, 1997: 58) – the Black and Tans being a British mercenary force,

notorious for extreme and unprovoked brutality, sent to fight against the Irish in the Irish War for Independence. Aretxaga notes that the invocation of the brutal Black and Tan forces ‘posed a powerful and odious force (Black and Tans) against a powerless people (women), thereby underscoring the shamefulness of the army’s actions and delegitimizing its authority’ (1997: 58). So, although credit is due women for their comparable efforts of hunger striking, so too should we recognise that not only did Irish women combat and challenge their regular portrayal ‘as victims of a violent conflict over which they had little control’ (1997: 9) by directly intervening and participating in it, but they were also savvy enough to understand how to use that portrayal effectively to undermine British occupation in a similar way that male hunger strikers are credited with employing the optics and legacy of the famine that Britain inflicted on Ireland through their hunger strike.

It is regrettable to see, then, women be further stripped of their autonomy in *Bog Child*. In the novel, the decision to take Joe off his hunger strike by putting him on a drip after he goes into a coma – although instigated by the matriarch – is ultimately made by the family patriarch (Dowd, 2015: 293–94). In actuality, it was the decision of a hunger striker’s mother to put a striker on a drip, leading to others doing the same for their loved ones, that would ultimately lead to the end of the second hunger strike in Long Kesh (Howard, 2006: 77). Although he ultimately makes the decision to intervene, Fergus’s father is initially vehemently against it: ‘You’d interfere with everything Joe’s done, everything he’s done for his country, everything he’s tried to achieve by this amazing, courageous sacrifice’ (Dowd, 2015: 284). Thus, in his reluctance to save Joe, there is a recognition of the political implications of doing so. If ‘[the] aim of the hunger strike was to crank up the moral pressure on the British government by a series of drawn-out, highly [publicised] deaths’ (Howard, 2006: 78), a hunger striker surviving without a concession from the government was in some ways a failure of the purpose and aims of the hunger strike.

However, there is a far more insidious implication here that unites male and female hunger strikers. The forced feeding of female hunger strikers in the 1970s and early twentieth century highlights ‘the [intersection] of [the] patriarchy and medical discipline [...] that [pathologise] and ‘treat’ the protesting female body’ (Whalen, 2019: 97). The forced feeding of women and the saving of men by drip – insofar as a drip is, in this context, essentially a form of force feeding coded as medical action – represents the intersection of state control and the medical discipline.⁵ If ‘[a hunger striker’s] object is to bring the pressure of public opinion to bear upon

an unjust aggressor to [...] advance a cause for which he might face the certainty of death in the field' (Gannon, 1920: 450), but the state does not allow them to make the ultimate sacrifice, it is possible that the full force of public opinion is ultimately mitigated, whether the hunger striker is male or female. While admittedly, in the latter case, the act of force feeding via drip is instigated by the next of kin, this ultimately provides state actors plausible deniability of state interference.

There is also another way in which to read this, and one that is far less cynical, and through which the family matriarch regains autonomy lost in *Bog Child's* historical inaccuracy. In *Bog Child*, Dowd challenges the default righteousness of sacrifice that is the legacy of hunger strikes (Sweeney, 1993: 435–36). Instead she raises, through Mel's voice, a vision of Ireland's violent history as the product of '*old grudges leapfrogging over generations, reappearing in different forms*' (Dowd, 2015: 312; emphasis original). In realising the futility of Mel's self-sacrifice – that the troubles are an extension of the conflict which Mel tried to end – Fergus comes to understand that, even if Joe were to die, '*the British will still own the North. The bombs will still go off*' (Dowd, 2015: 294; emphasis original). This conclusion was already reached by one character in the novel: Fergus's mother. Through the voice of Fergus's mother, Dowd challenges the status of strikers as secular saints (Sweeney, 1993: 425): 'Sacrifice is what Jesus did. He saved us all. Who did Bobby Sands save?' (Dowd, 2015: 32). On the one hand, this resignation to the futility of self-sacrifice in the face of imperial oppression might be seen as a white-washing of the institutional violence of the British; but on the other, it seems also to be a critique of that affliction of the Irish: self-sacrifice. Such resignation does not delegitimise the struggle of the protesters, but rather laments the living cost of such a protest, and Fergus's mother consistently voices a compassionate opposition to the hunger strike, the success of which is counterintuitively measured in lost lives.

Bog Child ultimately invites the reader to question who in Ireland is driving the conflict and paying the price. To return to the disillusioned British soldier who Fergus befriends, Owain: as a Welshman, he had a choice between '[the] army or the mines' (Dowd, 2015: 129). Owain finds himself trapped between two protests of the 1980s. Had he not joined the army and ended up in the mines, he would have found himself participating in a strike of his own later that decade. The novel emphasises the economic violence employed by Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal agenda and, in so doing, clearly situates the conflicts and violence within British

neo-imperialist rule which mirrors older British imperial rule over Ireland. However, *Bog Child* asserts that it should not be the oppressed who pay the price, however idealistic this may be.

Through the narrative of Joe and his participation in the hunger strike in Long Kesh prison, *Bog Child* raises questions of an ethical nature around such a method of protest. What is critically different about *Bog Child*'s oppositions to such a strategy is that they are divorceable from a religious ethos. While hunger strikes have been conflated with suicide – and thus argued to be a moral sin against God – republican members of the clergy, such as P. J. Gannon, have argued contrary to this. Dowd's discourse, however, lies not in the ethics of religion, but in the unquestionable sanctity of life. This cleaving of the question of the hunger strike's morality from its context of 'religio-political martyrdom' (Sweeney, 1993: 421) leaves room for a more compassionate view. While it perhaps underestimates the insidiousness of imperialism, it ultimately inspires search for an alternative mode of protest that does not leave a divided nation, so full already of grief and violence, with more left to reconcile.

Further, in its paralleling of ancient and contemporary self-sacrifice, *Bog Child* illustrates the toxic effect memory cruxes have on cultural memory, especially when those memory cruxes are rooted in trauma. Not only do memory cruxes reinforce the cyclical recurrence of the trauma and its violence – in this instance, variances of hunger – but they also lead to the erasure of history. The latter effect is visible in the typically male archetype of the hunger striker and erasure of female autonomy in the history of the troubles. Although it is perhaps all too idealistic, *Bog Child* does offer a salve for the ills of memory cruxes: breaking the cycle. Mel's irruption/eruption and subsequent haunting of Fergus inspires him to realise that the cyclicity of violence creates stasis, immobility, a 'magic frieze' (Dowd, 2015: 5). Instead then, the decision to save Joe brings with it the promise of possibility, the chance for the cyclicity to end. Instead of the same thing reappearing in a different form, something new will emerge, a future, rather than being anchored to the past, forced to spiral outwards endlessly from the same trauma.

Notes

¹ Although I do not reference it – or develop any comparative analysis to it – because I did not find the parallels to be explicit or significant enough to distract from my main discourse, it is well worth noting that Seamus Heaney’s collection of poetry *North* (2001) also takes as its main metaphor the bog bodies unearthed in north-east Europe.

² That Ireland was once a colony of Britain should not be in dispute. However, as Begoña Aretxaga has observed, ‘the status of Ireland as postcolonial nation is anomalous [...] compounded by the fact that Ireland is not only the oldest British colony but also an undeniably European country’ (1997: 15). Moreover, Northern Ireland is ‘both the unaltered “other” of Britain and the suppressed internal “other” of Ireland’ (1997: 15). Special care should be paid when considering the (post-)colonial status of Ireland, with necessary nuancing to its unique situation.

³ The harvesting of, and overreliance on, potatoes by the native Irish population itself was instigated by ‘Oliver Cromwell’s orders [to] the Commonwealth Army to destroy Irish agriculture’ (Patel and Moore, 2018: 239). As potatoes grow underground and remain hidden, they were a perfect agricultural subterfuge against Cromwell’s forces. Truly, then, the Great Famine is all the more traumatic for its cause originating simultaneously in the failure of Irish resilience to the British and Britain’s continued violent exploitation of Ireland.

⁴ It is interesting to note that Patrick Pearse, an instigator of the Easter Rising Rebellion, considered ‘bloodshed a “*cleansing*” thing’ (Pearse, cited in Radden-Keefe, 2019: 11; emphasis mine), language which mirrors that of pre-eminent post-colonial thinker, Frantz Fanon, who famously said ‘[at] the level of individuals, violence is a *cleansing* force’ (1963: 94; emphasis mine).

⁵ While I aim here to draw a parallel between male and female hunger strikers, it is important to understand the gendered differentiation maintained even in this commonality, namely that the act of forced feeding is, by its nature, inherently more violent than a drip, meaning state reaction to protesting bodies remains undeniably gendered, and especially more violently so towards female bodies.

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Glossary

Easter Rising: also known as the Easter Rebellion, was an armed insurrection in Ireland during Easter Week in April 1916 against British rule, and was defeated by a British military response. However, it signalled the start of the Irish republican revolution and the move towards the independence of the Republic of Ireland.

Gaelic: Referent to the prehistoric culture and society of Ireland. In broader terms, especially linguistic contexts, it can be referent to both Ireland and Scotland, but in this paper its use refers only to Irish Gaelic society.

Hunger strike: A means of protest by which an individual starves themselves, to death if necessary, in order to draw attention to their cause and extract concessions from their opposition.

Republican: Not to be confused with the American Republican Party, Irish republicanism is the political movement championing a united Ireland, under a single republic. Republicanism is opposed by the Unionist movement which advocates for Northern Ireland's place within the

United Kingdom. Neither are necessarily militant political movements, but both have militant factions.

Taig: A derogatory term for a Catholic and/or Irish Nationalist (Republican).

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