

## Article

# 'There's No Return Route, Is There?': Conor O'Callaghan's After-Irish Diasporic Aesthetic

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**Abstract:** In this article, I examine Conor O'Callaghan's poetry in the context of post- or after-Irishness and migration. The idea of a traditional Irish national literature has diminished in importance and relevance in recent years. Irish writers are now more sensitized to alternative modes of identification, unbound by the constraints of a singular concept of 'Irishness'. This is especially significant for migrant writers, who are geographically removed from Ireland. O'Callaghan (born 1968) is himself a migrant: having lived in America, he now lives in England. Drawn from his experiences of transnational migration, O'Callaghan explores the different locales that he has known. He also feels free to write about suburban life, love, and the internet in an often quick-witted vernacular. What then is O'Callaghan's aesthetic response to the experience of migrancy? Does O'Callaghan's poetry exhibit an after-Irish diasporic aesthetic? Although O'Callaghan's poetry is imbued with a diasporic multi-locatedness, both intellectual and geographical, his sense of Irish identity remains strong, and his poetry also often expresses a desire for rootedness.

**Keywords:** contemporary Irish poetry; migrancy; after-Ireland; Conor O'Callaghan

## 1. Introduction: After-Ireland and Migration

From Conor O'Callaghan's second collection, *Seatown* (1999)—largely centred around his hometown of Dundalk on the north-east coast of the Republic of Ireland—'East' is a brilliantly lucid and streetwise meditation on the poet's modern sense of Irishness. It is an autobiographical poem. O'Callaghan has revealed in an interview that he considers it to be one of his 'finest accomplishments', and that it is '[d]eliberately intended as a personal manifesto' (O'Callaghan 2013a). Its second stanza reads:

But give me a dreary eastern town that isn't vaguely romantic,  
where moon and stars are lost in the lights of the greyhound track  
and cheering comes to nothing and a flurry of misplaced bets  
blanketing the stands at dawn is about as spiritual as it gets. (O'Callaghan 1999, p. 42)

This is a place that is not even 'vaguely romantic'. Set against the 'moon and stars' and the 'spiritual', we have the real life of the 'greyhound track'. This recalls the work of Revivalist and post-Revivalist writers such as W.B. Yeats who frequently romanticised rural Ireland, and particularly the peasantry in the west of Ireland, as embodying the 'uncontaminated essence of the Irish character' (Schirmer 1998, p. 268). Opposed to this 'elemental guff' (as it is described in the opening stanza) are the images of modern, urban Ireland, such as the dog-racing venue described above. Stanza three elaborates by describing Dundalk as a place 'where back-to-back estates are peppered with satellite discs/and the sign of the *Sunrise Takeaway* doesn't flick on until six' (O'Callaghan 1999, p. 42). Reflecting this 'warts and all' depiction of Dundalk is the deliberate ugliness of the rhyme between '[d]iscs' and 'six'. Here, amongst the symbols of modern life, the thought of 'smoking seaweed doesn't enter your head', a sly allusion to the old peasant cottage industry of kelp production (ibid.).

The speaker then continues his strategy of demystifying Ireland or Irishness in the following stanzas, where he examines the theme of emigration. Migration—which is, put simply, the condition of moving from one place to another—has long been a fact of Irish cultural life, but the speaker is candid here, displaying no deference to sacred cows:

And while it's taken for granted everyone has relatives in Chicago  
who share their grandmother's maiden name and seasonal lumbago,  
it's probably worth remembering, at the risk of committing heresy,  
as many families in Seatown have people in Blackpool and Jersey.

My own grandmother's uncle ran a Liverpool snooker hall  
that cleaned up between the wars and went, of course, to the wall.  
I must have a clatter of relatives there or thereabouts still  
who have yet to trace their roots and with any luck never will. (ibid.)

Irish migration to England, the sometimes-overlooked destination, is addressed here. America is often seen as the great centre of the Irish diaspora, but there are probably as many Irish in England, particularly the north of England, as there are in North America.<sup>1</sup> Given the old colonial relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom, it may complicate the picture to suggest that many Irish have happily settled in places such as Blackpool and Liverpool. The speaker is thus risking 'heresy' in drawing attention to this history. He also subverts with a sort of low-level misanthropy the Catholic idea of the tight familial bond. Of those members of the extended family scattered around the north of England, he expresses his keen desire to never see them, hoping that 'with any luck' they will never trace their roots. The speaker then continues to relate his family history in the following stanza. They have a 'dubious aunt' in Blackburn and 'a colony'—a noun deployed to obvious provocative effect—of their mother's family in Bury (ibid.).

The result of this straight-talking is to position the speaker away from what he terms those who are 'playing Gaelic', that is: subscribing to inherited, and by implication hackneyed or essentialist, views on Irish identity. For the speaker, his sense of identity is his own and is shaped by his own experiences of the contemporary world, rather than any romanticisations of what it should be. The final two stanzas of 'East' are a fitting précis of this argument:

If it comes down to allegiance or a straight choice between  
a trickle of shingly beaches that are slightly less than clean  
and the rugged western coastline draped in visionary mystique,  
give me the likes of Bray or Bettystown any day of the week.

If it's just a question of water and some half-baked notion  
that the Irish mind is shaped by the passionate swell of the ocean,  
I align myself to a dribble of sea that's unspectacular, or flat.  
Anything else would be unthinkable. It's as simple as that. (ibid, p. 43)

The crudeness of the simple AABB rhymes throughout ('[d]iscs'/'six', 'Jersey'/'heresy', 'flat'/'that'), combined with its unashamedly colloquial register, give this poem the rhythm of doggerel. Perhaps this is deliberate, since 'East' is concerned with counteracting the fustian style of Yeats and others. He then subverts the 'half-baked notion', 'that the Irish mind is shaped by the passionate swell of the ocean': if their Irish mind is shaped by the ocean, then they align themselves with one which is 'unspectacular, or flat' (such as that around Dundalk). This is a conscious refusal to indulge in grandiloquent afflatus. To be anything else would be literally 'unthinkable': This would be a betrayal in some way of his

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, 2001 census figures suggested that more Irish-born people live in the UK than America: 500,000 Irish-born people live in the UK, compared with 156,000 in America (Bowden 2006).

artistic principles, so it is ‘unthinkable’ in the sense that it would constitute a kind of moral breach, but it is also inconceivable, meaning that the speaker cannot even compute such an idea in the first place. What we have here from O’Callaghan is a very frank rumination on what it means on one level to be an Irish poet, and also what it means to be simply Irish in modern Ireland. It seeks to cleave through a certain outdated version of Ireland, as he sees it.

I have chosen to begin with ‘East’ because it is a rare poem, rare in that it is a very direct and political, even polemical, take on what being Irish means to the speaker. ‘East’ serves as a useful way into O’Callaghan’s thinking on this point. O’Callaghan is very clear about wanting to avoid depictions of what he sees as an imagined rural (‘rugged’) Ireland, a kind of Ireland that he does not inhabit. This place of ‘visionary mystique’ is an invention. He instead is keen to celebrate the urban realm that he knows so well: Dundalk, the place of his birth. Regarding O’Callaghan’s keen embrace of the local in ‘East’, this also recalls Kavanagh’s famous distinction between the provincial and the parochial: The parochial recognizes and takes pride in the *authenticity* of local experience, where the provincial unthinkingly takes its lead from the cultural and political centre of power. ‘Parochialism and provincialism are opposites’, argues Kavanagh: ‘the provincial has no mind of his own, he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the great metropolis [ . . . ] has to say on any subject’. The ‘parochial’ person, conversely, ‘is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his own parish’ (Kavanagh 2003, p. 237). Refuting the aestheticization of rural life of the Revival, Kavanagh seeks to record the reality of rural life. O’Callaghan is very sure about representing the authenticity of local experience in ‘East’. Yet, in its urban setting, O’Callaghan is diverging from Kavanagh’s often rural County Monaghan.

Perhaps a more obvious connection can be drawn between the likes of Thomas Kinsella, or more recently, Peter Sirr and David Wheatley. These are poets who have all been in different ways chroniclers of the urban realm. Their settings, however, are often either Belfast or Dublin. As Maria Johnston suggests: ‘Kinsella is rightly regarded as the quintessential Dublin prowler-poet and his most agile followers through the city include David Wheatley and Peter Sirr’ (Johnston 2012, p. 499). Of these three poets, it is Wheatley’s urban mode that poems such as ‘East’ bear the most resemblance to. It is the poems of *Mocker* (2006), situated in Wheatley’s then place of residence in Hull, rather than his originary Dublin of *Misery Hill* (2000) that share O’Callaghan’s fastidious attention to and veneration of the everyday qualities of the speaker’s immediate locale. A common strategy of Wheatley’s migration poems is not to look back to Ireland, but to have the speaker immerse himself in the minutiae of his surroundings. Wheatley’s speaker thus seeks to root himself in Hull. *Mocker* opens with ‘City’, a poem with its eye on the ‘unregenerate’ qualities of the Humber city (Wheatley 2012, p. 407). The speaker is travelling through the metropolis, and this is mirrored in the poem’s snaking stanza structure: The various urban phenomena that the speaker documents are all contained within this single, unbroken stanza, as if all witnessed in a single car journey that begins ‘from the moment/[they] come off the ringroad’ (Wheatley 2006, pp. 11–12). The speaker observes the ordinary elements of life: adolescents ‘disappearing down/the embankment or slouched/in the tattooist’s door’, and a ‘line of unfortunates’, ‘the dispersed ones, queueing/on sufferance for/their coupons and stamps’ (ibid.). The subject matter and style of these lines is similar to O’Callaghan’s, ‘where back-to-back estates are peppered with satellite discs/and the sign of the *Sunrise Takeaway* doesn’t flick on until six’. Having depicted the poverty and decline of Hull, Wheatley’s poem ends:

[W]e blink at our good fortune,  
pushing open the front door  
we never bother to lock,  
raising one foot above the other  
at the foot of the stairs and already  
standing on top of the world. (ibid.)

This playful tone is typical of Wheatley, who often falls back on black humour and irony. The great roster of the city’s ‘unfortunates’ is directly contradicted by the phrase, ‘we blink at our good fortune’, with the

obvious semantic linkage between ‘fortune’ and ‘unfortunates’ only highlighting the contradiction. The tone is mocking—perhaps fitting of a collection entitled *Mocker*—but there is a real sense of solidarity here, with the speaker, like O’Callaghan’s, part of the world they describe, not loftily condescending to the proles. This is signalled by the collective pronoun, ‘we’: Had Wheatley employed ‘they’, the tone would have shifted to something more sneering and classist. Evidently, the speakers in O’Callaghan’s ‘East’ and Wheatley’s ‘City’ are seeking to root themselves in the urban world, exalting its ugliness.

*Seatown* as a whole explores this: its very title is an affectionate soubriquet for Dundalk, and the poems therein take the town as their subject matter. The two ‘Seatown’ poems in the collection eulogise the urban realm in a similar vocabulary to ‘East’. The first poem, which opens the collection, remarks upon the ‘reclaimed wad of bins left out a week and dogs in heat/and the fragrance of salt and sewage that bleeds/into our garden from the neap-tide of an August night’ (O’Callaghan 1999, p. 9). Of their hometown, the speaker concludes: ‘May its name be said for as long as it could matter’ (ibid.). There is some mock-portentousness here, but it is only slight. The second ‘Seatown’ poem sets the scene in much the same way, with images such as ‘pubs shut early midweek/and snooker halls half empty’, and ‘a smattering of traffic with the Chinese and the dog track’ (O’Callaghan 1999, p. 36). This is the same *Sunrise Takeaway* and dog-racing venue described in ‘East’. The conclusion of ‘Seatown’ mark two more explicitly describes Dundalk as offering the ‘hope of belonging if only once’ to the speaker (ibid.). It also concludes with the same declarative tone of the previous ‘Seatown’ poem: ‘May the length it takes to leave go some distance to explain/a sense of marking time and that gradual ache inside, despite/a pile of boxes undiminished in the hall, which says, “I could go on”’. This second poem depicts the strong pull that their originary place exerts on the speaker. It is not clear, however, what the source of the speaker’s ‘gradual ache’ is. Is this a longing to leave that is hindered by the speaker’s loyalty to their place of origin, or is their discomfort born of their not yet fulfilled sense of belonging? This complicates the view of *Seatown* as a simple collection of rooted place poems, but in its semi-ironic celebration of Dundalk, it is still, as O’Callaghan has himself phrased it, at least ‘pretending to be rooted’ (O’Callaghan 2017a).

Despite in some ways writing a kind of poetry of place in *Seatown*, O’Callaghan is keen to argue that this does not fall within what Justin Quinn has elsewhere called the ‘larger nationalist objective’ (Quinn 2008, p. 197). O’Callaghan has said as much in an interview with Nicole Fitzpatrick: ‘Sometimes, as an Irish poet, one is expected to write an Irish landscape; to conveniently inhabit an interpretable version of Ireland [ ... ] I assert the right to write about my life, its various settings and concerns’ (O’Callaghan 2014). O’Callaghan’s attitude is also in line with what Anthony Bradley describes as the recent ‘rupture between literature and the nation–state’ within Ireland (Bradley 2017, p. 90). Bradley is taking his lead from Quinn, who observed how Irish poets are no longer interested in the ‘matters of Ireland’ (Quinn 2008, p. 197). What Bradley and Quinn mean is that poets are now uninterested in writing within the bounds of a prescribed nationalist image of what Ireland should be. This image, Bradley suggests, ‘almost always used to refer to rural landscapes and settings, from Yeats’s Sligo, to Kavanagh’s Monaghan, Montague’s Tyrone, to Heaney’s County Derry, all of which in different ways have fed into the discourse of the nation’ (p. 89). Bradley’s ‘rupture’ followed the deaths of two elder statesmen, Seamus Heaney (in 2013) and John Montague (in 2016): ‘Especially after the deaths of Seamus Heaney and John Montague—whose works are haunted by the idea of a hidden, pastoral, and Gaelic Ulster’, argues Bradley, ‘the dominant strain of contemporary Irish poetry now seems, finally, to have become untethered from images of rural Ireland and the discourse of the nation’ (ibid., p. 91). Of course, Bradley is consciously overstating the case, and is using the deaths of the two poets as a short-hand for describing a general shift in attitude among the newer generation of Irish

writers.<sup>2</sup> Bradley is, however, keen to correct Quinn's assertion that we can now observe the total 'disappearance of Ireland' in contemporary Irish poetry (Quinn 2008, p. 197):

Ireland, as a place, has not simply disappeared from recent Irish poetry. What has happened, rather, is that we have cityscapes of Dublin and Belfast, occasionally the suburbs, taking the place of landscapes, and with this shift a corresponding prominence of the flâneur figure, the replacement of outer landscapes with psychic, inner landscapes, and a strain of cosmopolitan poetry that is about other places than Ireland, that is appreciative of the other culture, and shares in it, without the anxiety of exile.

(ibid., p. 103)

In one sense *Seatown* is an example of the idea that within Ireland, 'cultural identity has often been interpreted as bound up with place', such as 'through notions of local culture (the parish, the region, for example)' (Kennedy-Andrews 2008, p. 1). It is also evidence of Bradley's 'rupture', since O'Callaghan venerates a 'cityscape', and is consciously eschewing an 'interpretable' poetry of 'landscape' along with its associations with 'nationalist discourse'. *Seatown* was, however, composed before O'Callaghan's migration away from Ireland. With his subsequent experience of multiple migrations, O'Callaghan moves away from a poetry of one place entirely, to a poetry of multiple places. Many of the poems of *Fiction* (2005), *The Sun King* (2013) and *Live Streaming* (2017) are about 'other places than Ireland', and thus conform even more closely to the trend that Bradley describes.

To pick up on Bradley's use of the term 'exile': As a noun, it describes a period of forced absence from one's originary country, and its attendant homesickness. There is a strain of exilic writing that is pithily summarised by Wheatley in his poem, 'A Backward Glance', from *Mocker*. The speaker mishears the word Yorkshire as 'dhearcas siar./His own small teary/*Dialann Deorai*' (Wheatley 2006, p. 38). The word 'Yorkshire' is near-homophonous with the Irish phrase 'dhearcas siar', which means 'backward glance'. The phrase '*Dialann Deorai*' means 'Exile's Diary' and is taken from the title of a mid-twentieth century memoir written by an Irish labourer living in the north of England. This allusion to the 'Exile's Diary' acknowledges the history of Irish migration to England, in particular, the history of economic migration, a state Wheatley's speaker shares with the worker they evoke. The evocation of the 'Exile's Diary' is also ironic, as Wheatley's speaker does not look back to the Irish motherland, but is instead happy to dwell in both the English and Irish languages. The 'backward glance' of the poem may therefore be freighted with a double meaning: The speaker slyly mocking the old trope of the Irish 'exile' looking wistfully across the water to the motherland, and also the speaker who is looking back through history towards their navvy antecedent.

Much critical attention has been directed towards formulations of 'exile',<sup>3</sup> but, as Peter McDonald has suggested, exile is an idea that 'ha[s] been very seriously abused over the years. There is a limit, I think, to what words can go through and survive' (McDonald 2013, p. 61). A concept such as exile, McDonald adds, 'strike[s] me as being very close now to the end of the line—intellectually, artistically' (ibid.). This line of argument recalls Paul Muldoon's famous attack on Seamus Deane in *The Prince of the Quotidian*. Taking issue with Deane's description of Muldoon as an exile in America, Muldoon retorts: 'To Deane I say, I'm not "in exile"/,though I can't deny/that I've twice been in Fintona' (Muldoon 1994, p. 12). Muldoon makes a fair argument that, for him at least, to be a true 'exile' is to have been denied the choice of both migration and return. What this boils down to, as Dermot Bolger suggests, is that

<sup>2</sup> At the risk of simplifying their poetics, I should add Bradley's useful corrective: 'Heaney's *North*, for example, is not significant because it belongs to the discourse of the nation, but rather, because of the poetry's emotional and intellectual power'. We might say the same of Montague's *The Rough Field* as well (p. 103).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Patrick Ward's *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing*. Ward seeks to grapple with the sometimes overly general way in which the 'exile' term is used, yet he still assumes that 'exile', 'the affective complex that surrounds it and the ways it is understood, expressed, resisted, and ignored in oral and particularly written forms, is a distinctive and distinguishing feature of Irish literary sensibilities and literary history' (Ward 2002, p. xii).



*'Exile and departure* suggest an out-dated degree of permanency. Irish writers no longer go into exile, they simply commute' (Bolger 1993, p. 7, his italics).

In light of these changes or shifts, Brian Ó Conchubhair and Jefferson Holdridge's deployment of the term 'after Ireland' is especially pertinent (Holdridge and Ó Conchubhair 2017, p. 10). This describes the idea that—with rapid social, cultural, and economic change within Ireland over the last few decades—what Holdridge and Ó Conchubhair characterise as a 'certain version of Ireland' has diminished in importance and relevance (ibid.). Declan Kiberd has summarised this 'version' of Ireland as having rested on the three pillars of 'nation, faith, and fatherland' (Kiberd 2009). The idea of 'Irish-Ireland'<sup>4</sup> was originally encoded in nationalist discourse, but has been destabilised in recent decades as a consequence of neo-liberal-driven economic growth and Ireland's new-found (though faltering) confidence as a global and globalised economy; Ireland's increased interconnection with the world, engendered by the virtual networks of the internet and the fact of cheaper air travel; the secularisation of Ireland, evidenced by the recent referenda on equal marriage and abortion rights; and the addition of immigration (to the long-established fact of emigration) as a prominent feature of Irish cultural life. At the same time, whilst *this* version of Ireland may have diminished, the very idea of an Irish identity and literature certainly remains. As Declan Kiberd puts it, having coined the term 'after Ireland': 'in its more familiar guises the national project might be ebbing: but the account of an ending [ ... ] always contains within itself the narrative of a new dispensation' (Kiberd 2017, p. xi).

Linked to this notion of after-Irishness is the question of migrancy. O'Callaghan himself has experienced both transatlantic migration to the USA, and migration to England, where he now resides in Sheffield.<sup>5</sup> Ailbhe McDaid has argued that the act of migration itself is an act of fleeing 'the inherited boundaries of Ireland', and as such, migrant poets bring a new-found 'geographical and creative mobility' to their work (McDaid 2013, p. 38). McDaid's observation is similar to Bradley's description of 'cosmopolitan' poetry, about 'other places than Ireland'. Indeed, making an equivalent point, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews describes the transition evident in the work of some contemporary Northern Irish poets away from an 'exilic' to a 'diasporic [ ... ] subjectivity' (Kennedy-Andrews 2008, p. 18). Since the language of 'exile' is inadequate in describing the condition of modern migration, perhaps Kennedy-Andrews's deployment of the term 'diasporic' is more relevant. The 'diasporic' is often defined as being related to, though quite distinct from, the state of exile: It describes not just the state of wandering of peoples or groups away from their native land, but, in theoretical terms, it usually collocates with other 'conceptual terms, such as "hybridity"', as well as mobility, and pluralism, ideas which undermine old notions of cultural identity as being singularly wedded to one particular place (McLeod 2010, p. 240). Kennedy-Andrews argues that his poets are now unhampered by a 'profound nostalgia for roots' (which is the essence of the exilic mentality), having travelled beyond the traditional frontiers of their originary place. This is because the very notion of 'exile' rests on the now receding nationalist myth of motherland, and as such is inherently unstable. Irishness itself, especially in our era of easy travel, is something that 'often happens elsewhere' (O'Toole 1997, p. 12), as home is not in any one place, but is produced out of an encounter with 'other places, languages and histories' (Kennedy-Andrews 2008, p. 18). The language of the 'diasporic' emphasises hybridity and liminality. It is exemplified by the idea that diasporic subjects are 'the unmistakable products of their original culture, its history, and traditions, but they are also involved in the process of translating

<sup>4</sup> The tenets of Irish-Catholic nationalist ideology are epitomised by the idea of Irish Ireland (as taken up by such politicians as Eamon De Valera), which drew on some of the ideas of the Revivalists (led by the venerable W.B. Yeats). It sought to fix Irishness as essentially Catholic/Gaelic in character, in a way that was both anti-modern and anti-English. It is at its heart a place-bound ideology, borrowing from the Revivalists the idealization of the rural peasant in the West of Ireland. This region and its people was constructed as the embodiment of Irishness, but it was problematic: It ignored the material reality for the rural poor, and, in conflating Catholicism with the Gaelic past, created a 'morally restrictive version of the Gaelic tradition' (Schirmer 1998, p. 268).

<sup>5</sup> O'Callaghan is an economic migrant. He departed for Winston-Salem in North Carolina, because he was offered a position at Wake Forest University, where his then wife Vona Groarke was also working. He now teaches on the Creative Writing BA and MA at Sheffield Hallam University, where his wife, Dr Mary Peace, is a scholar of eighteenth-century literature.

between different cultures, continually remaking themselves' (Kennedy-Andrews 2014, pp. 16–17). Especially for the Irish writer abroad, then, there is no singular version of Irishness that is defined by its relationship to a particular (rural) landscape, but instead multiple and variable versions of Irishness that may also be defined by the 'other culture'.

By way of further explanation, Kennedy-Andrews describes a similar trend in contemporary Irish poetry to Bradley:

Frequently, the desire to belong is in open conflict with the urge to flight. Attention is no longer focussed on 'one dear perpetual place', but on multiple other places [ . . . ] [T]he home place is viewed from foreign perspectives: the poet can be in several places at one time. These new poets, we could say, represent the first genuinely post-national generation.

(Kennedy-Andrews 2008, p. 249).<sup>6</sup>

The appending of the prefix 'post-' to the noun 'national' may be somewhat premature, which is why 'after Ireland' is a more precise formulation, since it signals a kind of departure with the past, but not an end *per se*. Likewise, O'Callaghan's migration poetry cannot simply be called 'diasporic' instead of 'exilic'. Such an opposition established here may well be one of those 'false dichotomies' that Scott Brewster suggests has long characterised Irish cultural life (Brewster 2009, p. 17). Despite these objections, the vocabulary of the 'diasporic' is nonetheless pertinent to the poetry of O'Callaghan. His is a poetry that avoids depictions of an Ireland cowed in 'visionary mystique', whilst also being strongly influenced by his experience of migrancy, frequently taking 'other places' as its backdrop and subject. As O'Callaghan himself has said: 'I love Ireland, but I do take it with a pinch of salt [ . . . ] I can't wait to go home and I can't wait to leave' (O'Callaghan 2014).

The act of migration is by definition dislocating, and it is this experience that is evidently the chief cause of O'Callaghan's displacements from *Fiction* onwards. It is *The Sun King* and *Live Streaming* that demand the most attention here, however, since migrancy is an altogether more prominent theme in these two collections. What then is O'Callaghan's aesthetic response to the experience of migrancy? Does O'Callaghan's poetry exhibit an after-Irish diasporic aesthetic? The poems from *The Sun King* and *Live Streaming* (but also a handful from his previous collections) thrive on their multi-locatedness and reveal the speaker's shifting and multiple sense of identity. Yet what also underlies these diasporic poems is a yearning for origins: they reveal a more familiar desire for belonging and community.

## 2. O'Callaghan's Other Places

The title of the collection *Fiction* is a metapoetic reference. The collection as a whole is about the creative process, and the inherent artifice of writing. Whilst this is the overarching theme, the collection is also very diverse in subject matter. It is here that O'Callaghan's first migration poem appears. 'The Burbs' (a contraction of suburbs) exhibits a diasporic aesthetic. This poem is situated in America, where O'Callaghan previously resided. It begins on a university campus where the speaker is teaching. Formally, this poem lacks the experimentation of the later poems of *The Sun King*, with its simple quatrain structure. There are ten stanzas in total, each with very long lines of fifteen or twenty syllables. It is a reasonably relaxed structure in terms of syllable count at least, despite its strict strophic arrangement, which aligns with the informal register of the speaker. 'Campus is a morgue', it begins, indicating that the speaker is now on their summer break. This is likely to be Wake Forest University in North Carolina, where O'Callaghan taught for some years. The poem is situated at a crossroads, after a period in the United States, but just before a return home to (presumably) Ireland: 'Our sticks and stones are being shipped home/surface, piecemeal, with our accents' (O'Callaghan 2005, p. 30).

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy-Andrews's phrase, 'one dear perpetual place', is from stanza six of Yeats's 'A Prayer for My Daughter': 'O may she live like some green laurel/Rooted in one dear perpetual place', which was originally published in 1921 in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (Yeats 1992, p. 186).

One's accent, a marker of one's class and cultural background, is evoked here to suggest a kind of homecoming. Evidently, America at this time is not a true 'home'. The key lines occur in stanzas four and five, and which confirm the diasporic theme:

We live in central air and shades,  
skittish with heat, the release of feeling neither here nor there  
between several *raisons d'être* and the breezy self each impersonates,  
blasting 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley' to smother

another gospel a cappella 'Star-Spangled Banner' climaxing on the PA. (ibid.)

This is an intriguing stanza and a half. It celebrates 'the release of feeling neither here nor there'. On one level, this is the speaker enjoying their time off work, or exalting in the fact of having completed, or nearly completed, a block of teaching. The speaker is also relishing the clement weather: in the 'central air and shades' they are 'skittish with heat'. They are 'between *raisons d'être*', with few duties to fulfil. Equally, in this poem's more significant context of migrancy—the Irish speaker having temporarily migrated to America and now on the cusp of a departure back to Europe—these lines enjoy the itinerant, diasporic mode of being. The diasporic subject is liminal, they are betwixt and between, with an identity that is protean: they 'impersonate' a number of different 'breezy self[ves]'. Yet this poem is not post-national, it is more precisely after-Irish, since the speaker clearly retains a sense of their Irish identity. 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley' is the name of a nationalist ballad from the nineteenth century (as well as the famous Ken Loach film). As the embodiment of the speaker's Irishness, this tune is deployed to counteract the bullish Christianised American nationalism with which the speaker is continually bombarded (the version of the national anthem is 'gospel', indicating the frequently unconstitutional unity of Christianity with nationalism in the American context). This poem is thus a clear example of O'Callaghan's after-Irish diasporic aesthetic: It is seemingly free of an obsession with identity being immanent in place, celebrates its imaginative and physical/geographical freedom, whilst at the same time still acknowledging its essential Irishness. The allusions to Joyce's short story 'The Dead' (from *Dubliners*) within the poem ('I have [ . . . ] a flotilla of trial assignments on "The Dead"', and 'In the elevator, softly falling through its shaft from class, I eavesdrop "snow"') confirm the speaker's debt to their cultural and literary origins (ibid.).

The speaker of 'The Burbs' is seemingly much more at ease with that sense of being in 'several places at one time' than the speaker in the poems of *The Sun King*. The speaker of these poems is generally more insecure about their relationship to the multiple places they have known and settled in. *The Sun King* as a title has numerous connotations: It could refer to the absolutist Louis XIV's self-given title of *Roi-soleil* (itself an allusion to Apollo, the Greco-Roman Sun God or God of Light). The title instead is rather more humble in origin: "The "sun king" was our family nickname for a handyman who converted an annex of our NC [North Carolina] house into a sunroom. He was called "Roy". The name 'derives from the Gaelic for "red": "rua". He insisted we thank Jesus when the work was done: I scoffed, and then found myself unexpectedly moved' (O'Callaghan 2014). The collection captures in its vision the eight years prior to O'Callaghan's geographical 'movement, a lot of it painful' between Ireland, America, and England (ibid.). This origin story for its title speaks of O'Callaghan's accompanying sense of loss. It also speaks of his still-strong sense of Irish identity. O'Callaghan's sneer at the display of simple-minded Catholicism is soon checked by sadness. Perhaps the Irish handyman's piety evoked a kind of philosophical (or metaphysical) certainty that O'Callaghan now lacks. This small anecdote seems to capture perfectly the despondency at the heart of *The Sun King*.

Place in *The Sun King* is often shifting and multiple, attesting to the diasporic strain at work in these poems. The dizzying 'Lordship' which opens the collection establishes this trend. The Lordship in question is the name of a small and relatively anonymous townland near Dundalk. It is here in the speaker's writing retreat that this poem begins:

He assembled a console inside the stable's glass doors



and had his narrator come this close to banging  
his own mother in half-light in the late '70s. (O'Callaghan 2013b, p. 11)

The writer is here in his writing retreat, diligently working at his 'console' (or desk) on his latest novel. The somewhat crass image of near-incest is an odd opening image, but it does establish the idea that the reader is absolutely at the behest of the speaker's peculiar and restless imagination. It is a surreal journey across places and times. From this initial locale, situated firmly in the past (the speaker is describing himself in the third person and the past tense), we then veer without warning to a city, probably London. Here the speaker (again with an eye for the messiness of human sexuality) relates an affair or tryst of some variety. Stanzas ten to thirteen (of a total of twenty-two loosely iambic and irregularly-rhymed triplets) describe various sexual encounters: 'Twice on the square of two mattresses dragged together' is one of O'Callaghan's more refined formulations. The inclusion of a specific place name, 'Kings Cross', in this section, helps to anchor this sequence in a particular place. A district in central London, it is also the site of London's main terminus, with the speaker's partner having 'tubed first thing from A to B' (ibid, p.12). So we have moved from Ireland to London within a stanza. Then we are uprooted again within the same stanza, this time twice, to Belfast and then to Hope Valley in Derbyshire, England. The speaker is in Belfast, talking to or texting their partner in England:

It's pissing on Belfast City's solitary terminal,  
  
he buzzed to tell you and got lost in the patchy coverage  
of Hope Valley your express was chuntering east of  
and heard next to nothing the guts of August. (ibid.)

This is a free-roaming imagination at work and recalls McDaid's suggestion that the work of Irish poets who have 'fled the inherited boundaries of Ireland' (physically and imaginatively) is imbued with a new-found 'geographical and creative mobility'. This geographical mobility at least is evident in 'Lordship'. This is also Bradley's 'other places', and Kennedy-Andrews's 'several places at one time'.

Following the swift shifts in time and place in 'Lordship', there is a sudden moment of lucidity in stanza sixteen, when the speaker pauses to reflect: 'There's no return route, is there? You sussed that too?/The truth, much as time does, vanishes behind' (O'Callaghan 2013b, p. 12). *There is no going back* would be an equivalent phrase. We have the memory of our past selves, but we cannot ever return to the times and places to which we were once wed. The speaker is desirous of a return to the past, and to origins, but is despairing of the futility of such a desire. Truth, then, like traditional identity, merely 'vanishes behind', it is protean, de-centred. It is this insight that underscores almost all the poems of *The Sun King*.

Even the simple love poem 'Kingdom Come', written to his ex-wife, the poet Vona Groarke, is tinged with this recognition. The poem attempts to rediscover their 'old selves' (O'Callaghan 2013b, p. 48). The intense tragedy and heartbreak of this poem is made apparent in these emotive lines:

Though lately I've been praying, lady,  
  
that whatever kingdom come there is  
  
a street we owned a place on  
where the life we meant to love  
  
and ran screaming from mid-stream  
completes itself without us  
  
and it's evening over and over again. (ibid.)

Whilst on the surface a poem of lost love, of the sad withering of a romantic relationship, this poem can also be read as another expression of O'Callaghan's theme of *no return*, to our past 'old selves', and

places of origin. The speaker desires to relocate himself in a very particular place and time ('a street we owned a place on' in a 'life we meant to love'): their house on the street they used to live on when they were together and happy. The speaker is 'praying', resorting to feeble, juvenile whimpering to a deity they know probably does not exist, to try and effectuate the impossible, that is, for that time and that place and that identity to remain in a state of stasis. This poem seems to voice an anxiety at the indefatigable passing of time and shifting nature of identity for the diasporic subject, whilst yearning for precisely the in-placeness of the speaker's former (married) life.

This angst is everywhere in *The Sun King*. 'Emergency' is situated amongst the images of suburbia: 'This Tecsun transistor propped/among lavender pots and hostas/buzzes close-of-trading stats' (O'Callaghan 2013b, p. 38). It soon exhibits the multi-locatedness of O'Callaghan's diasporic imagination. There is a strange image of a 'yard-sign shrine' in a neighbour's back garden. This is a shrine to their eldest child who was killed in combat overseas. Rain from 'March's cloudbursts' has 'seeped under' the laminate of his photo, 'camouflag[ing]' his face 'with freckles like coppers in a salsa jar' (ibid.). This image leads to one of a shop worker counting out change, before leading back to Ireland: every time she 'tips them in her scales/they are rust scraps of some GI carrier/come unstuck in Free State fog' (ibid.). From here during 'the week of Dresden' in the Second World War, where the speaker's father's friend pilfered a 'charred Zippo' from the wreck (presumably washed up on a nearby beach), we move 'onto a mountain track where Bashō suffers/the entreaties of two fallen concubines' (ibid.). There is also an allusion to the French '*tricolore*'. We are in England, Ireland, France, and then Japan in the space of three short stanzas. Formally, this poem is very disorganised, comprised of a mixture of triplet stanzas, longer quatrains, and strange line-lengths, sometimes with phrases isolated between stanzas. For example, the previously quoted lines are arranged on the page in the following disjointed way:

they are rust scraps of some GI carrier  
come unstuck in Free State fog

the week of Dresden

from which my old man's oldest  
drinking crony looted a charred Zippo  
that flicks petals to this day  
with the tricolore of one

blown from the gingko over my head  
onto a mountain track where Bashō suffers  
the entreaties of two fallen concubines.

The initial two lines here form part of a quatrain, but with the final line lineated mid-way to produce two lines out of one, thus forming a quintuplet stanza. The second stanza here is a quatrain, and the last a more regularly structured triplet. Ian Hamilton suggested that many poets in England and elsewhere now avoid received verse forms in favour of free verse because of their lack of philosophical certainty: 'The idea of shapeliness and regularity in poetry has been dissonant with loss of belief and scepticism' (Hamilton 2013, p. 120).<sup>7</sup> He adds, exempting Auden's strict control of form from this trend: 'He's almost saying: "I have controlled my experience and I am in control of this"' (ibid.). I wonder whether this is what is at work here on some level: the diasporic speaker, ranging freely between times and places, but who is, in any case, lacking sure-footed rootedness, chooses to arrange their thoughts to reflect this spatially on the page. The speaker's lack of formal control reflects their lack of external control. Indeed, the poem's very title, 'Emergency', suggests a lack of control of one's circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> This interview, conducted by Gerry Cambridge, was first published in *The Dark Horse* No. 3 in 1996. It was subsequently included by Alan Jenkins as an appendix to Hamilton's *Collected Poems*.

‘Emergency’ has some of the surrealism and uncertainty of ‘Lordship’, from which emerges a similar conclusion about the modern experience of migrancy:

Tomorrow  
will be wisteria vines far off the beaten path.  
  
Follow, by all means, if you must.  
This goes only one direction  
and we are veering years from a return. (O’Callaghan 2013b, p. 38)

This final image is ambivalent. This is a poem about *elsewheres*. It is fundamentally about a loss of in-placeness. This has a personal dimension for sure: the breakdown of O’Callaghan’s relationship with his wife seems to be the source of the underlying sense of tragedy in many of the poems. Equally, a poem such as ‘Emergency’ is about the modern experience of migrancy. It captures the unmoored nature of the speaker’s identity, their itinerant or nomadic nature. The final stanza invites us to follow the speaker if we must insist, on their one-directional journey. Like ‘Lordship’ and ‘Kingdom Come’, we are left aching with the loss that the speaker continually experiences, and the impossibility of any kind of return to origin: ‘we are veering years from a return’.

O’Callaghan’s lithe vernacular and verbal flashiness in ‘Emergency’ are again redolent of Wheatley. Both poets share a penchant for dazzling lines. A Dubliner by birth, Wheatley is also a migrant to England. He lived and worked in Hull from 2000 to 2012, with *Mocker* his first collection to reflect this experience. Wheatley’s ‘A Fret’ from *A Nest on the Waves* (2010) is a fine example of his verbal virtuosity. A poem situated in Hull’s docklands, it is much more restless and searching than the poems of *Mocker*, conjuring up strange images such as in stanza six: ‘Here the last of empire has meandered/past the fag-end of the North Sea fleet/to a scrapyard sculpture park’, whose ‘remaindered/Edward VII accepts a vain salute/from a yawning Ford Fiesta’s bonnet’ (Wheatley 2010, p. 12). There is a sense of immediate discovery in these lines, as if the speaker is being borne along by the spontaneity of language. In the same poem, though, this lightness is tempered by the way in which ‘[t]he air is thick with the sloughed/skin of dead selves: they fall and settle,/a load too imperceptible to shift’, and how the speaker is apt to ‘dodge and move/through the liquid fixities of past and present’ (Wheatley 2010, p. 12). Sensitive to the porousness of identities, Wheatley in this migrant poem is almost precisely describing the same process that is at work in ‘Emergency’. O’Callaghan, like Wheatley, also tends to be mournful of this transience: Where O’Callaghan is unsettled, Wheatley’s speaker describes the ‘liquid fixities’ as leaving them ‘bogged down and imprisoned’ (ibid.). O’Callaghan’s earlier poem ‘The Burbs’ seems more at ease with these ‘breezy selves’, where ‘Emergency’, like Wheatley’s ‘A Fret’, is much more anxious. O’Callaghan’s poetry is now more formally experimental, however, and even more kaleidoscopic in terms of imagery than Wheatley’s (Wheatley’s poem is composed in ABAB rhyming pentametric quatrains). The restlessness of O’Callaghan’s speaker, their jumble of images, places, and times in ‘Emergency’ reflect their sheer rootlessness. O’Callaghan here—in a way that is similar to although distinct from Wheatley—creates a vocabulary befitting the diversity of the migrant experience.

O’Callaghan’s poems find him moving dizzily and confusedly between different places and times, recording fragments of thought. His migrant poems often lack a sure and stable sense of where they are or of where they are heading. They are often highly opaque in terms of imagery, as in ‘Required Fields’. Like ‘Emergency’ from the same collection, this poem is founded on a similar sense of *no return*. Here the speaker asks a series of questions about origin and homecoming. At first, the speaker posits an easily solvable personal–historical question: ‘The number and month between “Hey Jude”/and the student riots that a corridor in El Paso/was filled with yelps on your behalf?’ (O’Callaghan 2013b, p. 40). As strange and obscure a line of questioning as this is, finding its answer is ‘no sweat’ for the speaker. Even stranger is the following question: ‘A combination of the last four digits in a line/long disconnected and the name of the border terrier/that met its maker under an artic?’ (ibid.). This is an inaccessible and highly personal image, but it is also answerable, although this time with more

difficulty, 'at a stretch' (ibid.). As we move through the poem, the questions posed about roots or origins become harder and harder to solve, leading the speaker to conclude, somewhat bleakly:

Perhaps at times it's better  
to submit to the pin-drop of forgetfulness,  
  
accept that there are questions of provenance  
no amount of empty boxes can hope to answer,  
leave the past to time itself back to a Square One. (ibid.)

The initial bleakness of these lines is tempered slightly by the ultimate line. The speaker is letting go of that which has vexed them, though there is still a residual tone of resignation here. Of these actual or imagined 'empty boxes', elsewhere described as 'outsized plywood cubes', which are the vessels of memory and the symbols of origin, and that contain the 'flotsam of an old life', the speaker finds nothing which will 'translate' (ibid.). That is, nothing of this old self and this old life in a particular place can be carried over into the new place. All these images of the old life 'belong to a blank we are moved too far from now to fill' (ibid.). Perhaps this poem then develops beyond the chronophobia of previous poems, accepting that, for the diasporic subject, multi-locatedness is the new ontology. If our origin, the specific place where we are from, is difficult to recover, we can try and make our home in the places to which we travel, however temporary these may be. As if to confirm the poem's departure from a preoccupation with the erstwhile self, 'Required Fields' culminates with an observation of someone else, 'a chap from Blackpool', also a migrant. We are told how 'this side of the water, whenever he can't sleep,/he stocktakes stars above the Turf Road, the Windy Gap' (ibid., p. 41). It is not entirely clear which 'side' of the water we are on in this poem, but we are in a place other than the speaker's and the man from Blackpool's, place of origin.

*Live Streaming* is O'Callaghan's most recent collection. Its title would suggest that the phenomenon of the internet would feature prominently, as to live stream is to broadcast on the internet in real-time. The collection is instead more preoccupied with O'Callaghan's relationship with his alcoholic, absentee father: 'none of us had seen our father for the last 15 years of his life', O'Callaghan states in an interview (O'Callaghan 2017a). Felix O'Callaghan, as he was known, died in 2013, as the collage poem, 'His Last Legs', reveals: 'Our father died in June 2013. I saw him in a coma a week before. [ . . . ] There is nowhere to put grief. I leave it here, for the time/being' (O'Callaghan 2017b, pp. 32, 33). This poem, in particular, is doing precisely this, working through this grief in often confused terms. The title poem of the collection also takes as its subject the speaker's father, hinging on an 'inkling' of their presence post-mortem: 'Late father,/better than never,/come to life', it concludes (O'Callaghan 2017b, p. 17). The collection as a whole is haunted by O'Callaghan's father.

Bound up with the complex emotions of bereavement is O'Callaghan's more familiar preoccupation with the indefatigable passing of time, and with it, a kind of homesickness. This longing for home, a result of migration, is also entwined with loss. In a similar way to a poem such as 'Kingdom Come', which mourned the speaker's loss of a place in time with a former partner, so many of the poems of *Live Streaming* explore the double homesickness of losing a parent who had remained in the speaker's originary Ireland. This is apparent from the outset in the strange migrant poem, 'Two Thousand and Nine'. The speaker seeks to recapture the atmosphere of yesteryear. He is also imaginatively restless, whilst being uneasy about this nomadism. It begins:

The purchase of a triplex repo goes through.  
The postgrads upstairs worship Remain in Light.  
My father has four years still to squander.  
'And the beat goes on, and the beat goes on . . . ' (O'Callaghan 2017b, p. 18)

Situated four years prior to the speaker's father's demise, this poem is evidently looking back. Despite O'Callaghan's long term estrangement from his father, even in 2009, there is some hope for reconciliation perhaps. *Remain in Light* is the title of a 1980 Talking Heads album. The concept of

this album is driving rhythms over which David Byrne, the lead singer and creative force of the band, chants and croons disconnected lyrics. The final line of the first stanza here is a purposeful misquotation of a refrain within the album's initial track, 'Born Under Punches (The Heat Goes On)' (this is also possibly an allusion to the arguably more famous song by The Whispers, 'And the Beat Goes On'). O'Callaghan is drawing the reader's attention to the steady beats that underscore the album as a whole, but he is also drawing the reader's attention to the steady iambs of his poem. The refrain of the song becomes, in modified form, the refrain of the poem, appearing twice. This refrain may also serve as a way of marking the passage of time throughout the year 'Two Thousand and Nine'. The poem is comprised of eight loosely pentametric quatrains. It may well owe something of a debt to Byrne here in its style and content too. It is composed of fragments of disjointed remembrances, as stanzas two and three confirm:

There's a mattress on cement painted cream.  
There's comfort in the chants and footfalls  
of away fans from Bavaria, the Basque,  
like horses wild in the lane beside my head.

At any one time I've a rice kilo, a cider flagon.  
I've stopped hearing the extractor vents  
of the dim sum buffets and teppanyaki grills.  
My son and daughter wish to be told the truth. (ibid.)

Whilst the year in which the poem is situated is clear, the place is not. These seemingly unrelated images only contribute to this confusion. What, for example, is the significance of 'a mattress on cement painted cream'? Is the speaker in northern Spain, southeast Germany, or east Asia? What is the 'truth' that the speaker's offspring are desirous to learn? Stanzas four and five are equivalently obtuse ('Our early bird is black ... I must wait to be contacted ... Bank or flight crashes? ...'), before the relative clarity of six and seven emerges:

Like one interrupted repeatedly midstream  
I say 'Where was I?' to reduced-to-clear shelves,  
parking spaces, the letterboxes' pigeon traps,  
the map of a campus farce on my big wall.

Such exiles as one becomes an epicurean of,  
industrial backwaters as one seems drawn to,  
hurt no less for having no one else to blame! (ibid.)

Is the fragmentariness of this poem's content a reflection of the speaker's ontological insecurity? A migrant, 'interrupted repeatedly midstream', forever mobile and deracinated, the speaker enquires "Where was I?" in a kind of fit of existential angst. Stanza seven deploys the noun 'exile' with marked irony, for their geographical mobility is not enforced. Indeed, the speaker (again with irony) seems drawn to 'industrial backwaters' out of an innate 'epicurean' tendency. The poem 'East' is an elegy to the backwater of Dundalk (as the speaker describes it). Perhaps there is a kind of warped homing instinct at work here: since a simple return to their actual place of origin is troublesome, the speaker is instead seeking out new places that remind them of home. The fractured and disparate images of this poem thus serve as an apt representation of the speaker's experience with their multiple 'exiles'. The poem then strikes a poignant note at its conclusion: 'My past life was in town and asking for me' (ibid, p. 19). The 'past life' recalls the 'old selves' of 'Kingdom Come': this nagging need to return to a sure-footed place-in-time is as strong at this poem's conclusion as it is here. If the content of the stanzas seems to be fittingly disordered, then the strict pentametric quatrains are the speaker's way of ordering or making sense of this experience. This poem is still concerned, however, with the deracination of the migrant experience, but it is now more self-consciously ironic in its treatment of its subject matter.



O'Callaghan is evidently still mining the rich vein of his displacement. This is neither embraced nor celebrated, but is frequently a source of discomfort: the speaker is seemingly ever-desirous of the rootedness that they lack in these poems. 'In Memory of the Recent Past', also from *Live Streaming*, is O'Callaghan's most explicit rumination on his theme of *no return* since 'Lordship' ('there's no return route, is there?', was the lucid conclusion of that poem). 'Think of like this', 'In Memory' begins:

If antiquity is  
 an elevation in silhouette  
 on the horizon,  
 and what we pause on  
 as one might a scenic overlook at evening  
 is present,  
 then past must form  
 the vale that falls between  
 in grades of recentness.  
 Most recent is nearest.  
 Too near to see,  
 it recedes from us as noise.  
 We hear it. (O'Callaghan 2017b, p. 54)

It seems that O'Callaghan is seizing upon and amplifying the theme of chronophobia, then abstracting it. This figuration is attempted as a way of resolving the speaker's persistent neurosis. It is a kind of truth-seeking, poetic catharsis. 'Antiquity', the distant past, is represented as 'an elevation in silhouette/on the horizon', where the present is a 'scenic overlook'. The '[p]ast', therefore, is what falls between in 'grades of recentness'. It is close, but too near to see, so, shifting senses, we can only 'hear it'. Stanza two elaborates on this. The recent past is not yet 'sufficiently distant/to laugh about'. It is the 'traumatic quotidian/of yesterday' (ibid.). The speaker describes the trauma of the everyday, or, perhaps, everyday trauma. This is an intriguing shift for a poet who had previously been so preoccupied with exalting the quotidian in their surroundings. The bleak reality of their permanent displacement, out of time and place, sees the 'recent past' say '*I want us back*' in the 'same breath/with *This can be undone/(but never how)*' (ibid., p. 55.). Its promise of stability is, however, false. It is illusory. Going back is not only impossible, but its motive is nostalgia for something unreal. Its pretty-seeming 'fruit' is, on closer inspection, 'blown with flies' (ibid.). This is a macabre metaphor. The speaker's dream is tainted and corrupted, inherently. The impossibility of return is seemingly the cause of trauma: it 'haunts' the speaker, its 'horrors are/of small hours' (ibid., p. 55). These are the early hours of each morning where the speaker is awake and alone and is ruminating on their condition. This is a very candid depiction of the speaker's latent anguish. O'Callaghan has described his 'permanent sense of displacement', and this poem seems to be the most direct representation of this feeling, as the ultimate stanza makes clear (O'Callaghan 2017a):

Just there, even,  
 in a place we're no longer.  
 You smiled. I smiled too.  
 As if we both could hear,  
 amidst us, a thing,  
 that must remain implicit  
 to cling to living, dearly.  
 At the core of every waking moment  
 is slippage  
 so granular, so infinitesimal,  
 to be as near inaudible  
 as makes no difference.

We still hear it.

The trick is not to listen. (O'Callaghan 2017b, p. 56)

This deracination is also entwined with personal loss, yet again: the speaker mourns for a place that 'we're in no longer', where both protagonists 'smiled' with contentedness (ibid., my italics). This could be with his father or his ex-wife, or both. There is a 'slippage' at the 'core of every waking moment'; this is the passing of time. It, like time itself, is abstract yet 'granular' and 'infinitesimal', ungraspably small, yet tangible, nonetheless. It produces a feeling, an ever-present ache or yearning. Still unmoored, the migrant speaker seeks an imagined place of peaceable groundedness. If 'Required Fields' from *The Sun King* concludes that it may well be a healthier strategy to submit to the 'pin-drop of forgetfulness', and let bygones be bygones, 'In Memory of the Recent Past' only reverses this progress. O'Callaghan seems no closer to fixing this problem, because his conclusion is familiarly bleak: 'We still hear it./The trick is not to listen'. This poem then ends with the speaker back where they started, no further towards resolving their persistent sense of displacement, loss, and chronophobia.

O'Callaghan has talked about *Live Streaming* in another more recent interview for Wake Forest University Press. Following *The Sun King*, where he felt that he had 'maxed out' as a poet, O'Callaghan vowed that he was 'done with poetry' (O'Callaghan 2017a). It took his publisher to gently cajole him into a collection's-worth of poetry to get him to write again in earnest. This suggests that the poems of *Live Streaming* were something of an afterthought. As he suggests, the poems that appear each side of the longer collage poem in the collection were '15-odd poems that I had written in the margins of the novel' (ibid.). That novel is *Nothing on Earth* (2016), which O'Callaghan worked on from 2012 to 2016, a medium he confesses to have been more happy in than poetry. 'His Last Legs' was composed because O'Callaghan 'sat down and [ ... ] had 20 to 25 pages to fill out to make it an average book-length of a poetry collection' (ibid.). O'Callaghan rightly considers *The Sun King* to be his strongest and most important collection. Yet, as 'Two Thousand and Nine' and 'In Memory of the Recent Past' demonstrate, even his seemingly casual verses are worthy of attention. O'Callaghan's experience of migration still finds its way into his poetry, even within a collection seemingly dominated by the death of his father. O'Callaghan is very candid about this feature of his work in the same interview:

I think there's a sort of, a placelessness and a rootlessness to my poetry. [ ... ] I live in England, my mother lives in my hometown of Dundalk, I own an apartment in Dublin, my son lives in Moscow, and my daughter lives in New York. And I'm very tired most of the time because I tend to find myself moving between the two. [ ... ] I feel from Dundalk [sic] but I haven't lived there in 30 years, and I don't think I'll ever live there again really. And I think in many respects that informs the poems, [ ... ] there is a sense of displacement in the poems.

(ibid.)

O'Callaghan's earlier poetry, particularly the collection *Seatown*, sees the poet attempt a kind of rootedness in place. The likes of *The Sun King* and, latterly, *Live Streaming* more honestly reflect O'Callaghan's experience of migration, to and from various elsewhere. They chart O'Callaghan's very modern experience of migration in aesthetically similar ways. Far from being the relatively sure-footed elegies to Dundalk that characterise *Seatown*, these later poems reveal a speaker who is now uprooted and homesick: this is reflected in the looser, freer forms of these poems, their swift shifts in time and place, and their overall uncertainty. Where 'East', with its simple pentametric quatrain structure, and regular AABB rhyme scheme, concludes with a clear statement of loyalty to Dundalk—'I align myself with a dribble of sea that's unspectacular, or flat [ ... ] it's as simple as that'—O'Callaghan's poems of migration frequently end on a note of profound insecurity. Whilst O'Callaghan's poetry is now frequently located in many places, and sometimes delights in its lack of in-placeness and its intellectual and geographical freedom (most notably in 'The Burbs'), it frequently expresses a yearning for a stable sense of home as well (as in 'Lordship', 'Kingdom Come', and 'In Memory of the Recent Past'). This is ultimately why O'Callaghan's aesthetic is best described as after-Irish diasporic, for this term

embodies the complexity of his poetry: its still strong sense of Irish identity, its multiple influences and allegiances to place, its diverse subject matter, and its conflicting urges to belong and to flee.

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