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Alice's Garden: Imagining Agency in the Natural World in Clare Boylan's *Black Baby*[1]

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Abstract. The Irish writer Clare Boylan is something of a forgotten figure, despite enjoying significant literary success in her lifetime. Because of her untimely death, little critical work has been done on her fiction. Her blackly comic sensibility responds sensitively to characters situated in culturally specific environments, with particular attention paid to the vexed and contradictory position of women in their relationship to the natural world, and so this essay conducts a reading of her 1988 novel, *Black Baby,* using the insights of feminist new materialism and critical posthumanism, especially as articulated by Rosi Braidotti. In every genre, contemporary Irish women's writing finds space in the natural world to explore alternatives to the status quo. *Black Baby* imagines an interracial family of women (and cats) in the enchanted environment of a miraculously blooming winter garden. By staging Alice's most transformative moments, including her final moments of semi-consciousness, in a garden, Boylan makes recourse to the idea of an unending, generative process. Nothing really dies when life is no longer an individualised experience, but an impersonal moment of radical inclusion that exceeds the material limits of any one life span.

Key words. Irish women's writing, Ecofeminism, Feminist new materialism, Racism, Irish Roman Catholic missionaries.

Resumen. La figura de la escritora irlandesa Clare Boylan parece haber caído en el olvido, a pesar de haber disfrutado en vida de un importante éxito literario. Debido a su prematura muerte, ha habido poco estudio crítico de su ficción. Su humor negro reacciona con sensibilidad en el caso de personajes ubicados en entornos con especificidades culturales y presta especial atención a la posición controvertida y contradictoria de las mujeres en su relación con el mundo natural, por lo que en este ensayo se hace una lectura de su novela de 1988, *Black Baby*, haciendo uso de las aportaciones del nuevo materialismo feminista y el posthumanismo crítico, especialmente tal y como lo articula Rosi Braidotti. En todos los géneros, la escritura de las mujeres irlandesas contemporáneas encuentra espacio en el mundo natural para explorar alternativas al status quo. *Black Baby* imagina una familia interracial de

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mujeres (y gatos) en el entorno encantado de un jardín de invierno que está, milagrosamente, floreciente. Al escenificar los momentos más transformadores de Alice, incluyendo sus últimos momentos de semiconsciencia, en un jardín, Boylan recurre a la idea de un proceso generativo interminable. Nada muere realmente cuando la vida ya no es una experiencia individualizada, sino un momento impersonal de inclusión radical que excede los límites materiales de la duración de una vida.

Palabras clave. Escritura de mujeres irlandesas, ecofeminismo, nuevo materialismo feminista, racismo, misioneros irlandeses católicos romanos.

In every genre, contemporary Irish women's writing finds space in the natural world to explore alternatives to the status quo. Clare Boylan's 1988 novel *Black Baby* imagines an interracial family of women (and cats) in the enchanted environment of a miraculously blooming winter garden.[2] In its challenge to what Michel Foucault theorised as "bio-power" −those technologies of political power that determine what constitutes life as well as who has a right to enjoy it− the novel anticipates debates of interest in the twenty-first century among cultural theorists like Rosi Braidotti, who examine "the shifting boundaries between life and death" (*Nomadic* 335). Boylan's comic, complex novel, "a kind of philosophical comedy", according to Jean-Louise Giovannangeli (171), disturbs literary form as well as received ideas about time, consciousness, death, and life. Its many reversals, surprises, and sly intertextual references enable new readings of agency, subjectivity, and the natural. I will conduct one such reading using the insights of feminist new materialism and critical posthumanism, especially as articulated by Rosi Braidotti.

Clare Boylan is something of a forgotten figure, despite enjoying significant literary success in her lifetime. She died of ovarian cancer in 2006 at the age of fifty-eight, having published seven well-received novels and three short story collections, as well as two full-length non-fiction works.[3] She also worked as a journalist who contributed regularly to newspapers and magazines, and was often consulted to offer insights on questions of the day. She wrote for both the *Irish Press* and the *Evening Press*, during which time she was awarded Journalist of the Year in 1974, and for a time edited the magazine *Image.* Her fiction is funny, surprising, and beautiful, poised, before her untimely death, to be recognised as the work of one of Ireland's preeminent writers. She has been largely forgotten, by not only the reading public, but also by literary scholars. Very little academic work has focused on her fiction, and even less in the twenty-first century. Her blackly comic sensibility responds sensitively to characters situated in culturally specific environments, with particular attention paid to the vexed and contradictory position of women in their relationship to the "natural" world, occupying "a no-man's land between humanity and 'nature'", according to ecofeminist Ariel Salleh, who characterises this place of female liminality as a "fork of contradiction" (211).

The contradiction of women's purportedly inherent closeness to "nature", which they must simultaneously accept and guard against, is one of many structural ironies informing Boylan's fiction, including *Black Baby,* which examines, *inter alia*, the early messaging to girls regarding the imperative they fulfil their "natural" role in the biological and ideological reproduction of the Irish nation. The novel's title refers to the object of missions charity, specifically its role in the Irish version of the Roman Catholic rite of First Holy Communion in which young girls wear bride-like white dresses and veils. The comic charge of the reference might be legible only to Irish readers of a certain age. A short post on the Library of Trinity College Dublin blog provides context for the story of the novel's protagonist, Alice, a

woman in her 60s who, throughout the narrative, obsessively recalls the day of her First Communion and what she thought the money she contributed to the missions on that day meant for her. The blog writer describes an experience very similar to Alice's:

> At that time [1969] there was a practice in Catholic schools for children preparing to make their First Holy Communion to make an offering to become "god-parents" to children in Africa so that they could be baptised into the Catholic faith. [My] teacher … told us to choose a name for our "baby." I was only six years old and I came up with the name Anne. In my young mind I thought that all these babies would be brought to the school and I would get to bring mine home. I puzzled over where she would sleep. The penny dropped when I received my god-parent card with my name and Anne's name handwritten on the back…we would never meet. It was simply a very successful fund raising effort to support mission work in Africa. (Mulpeter)

In an early, short academic piece on the novel, Christine St. Peter recalls a similar misunderstanding about the practice when she made her First Communion in Canada: "For $5 we could buy our own baby and give it a name" (37). Alice, an elderly orphan, at once prematurely geriatric and immature after a life of virtual imprisonment by parents who discouraged friendships and forbade love affairs, recalls "being the first in her class to buy a black baby": "She had thought of a baby of her own, whom she could bathe and look after. Her parents could not object since it had come from the nuns. It would be no trouble. She would see to all its needs. She would put the baby in the little wooden green cradle, which Father had made for her".[4] This "early placation of maternity" (49), the mature fulfilment of which was the sacred duty of every young Irish woman, has continued to haunt lonely, isolated Alice, who repeatedly proclaims, "I have neither chick nor child". Alice's parents infantilised their daughter to keep her at home to care for them in their own old age, frustrating the achievement of a significant cultural marker of womanly maturity in an inverted version of another Irish piety, the patriarchal nuclear family.

When visited by a woman she comes to call "Dinah", a con-woman selling bibles, Alice half-convinces herself that Dinah is the "black baby" whom Alice "purchased" when making her First Communion. She "adopts" Dinah who brings in her life-affirming train other characters and experiences that appear to finally give meaning to the older woman's empty life; for example, painting her home's drab interior and inspiring Alice to become a generous host, offering food and drink, in contrast to years of self-denying bare existence. The fact that Dinah, whose real name is Cora, is black, is not just a kind of punchline connected to the title, however, nor is the novel's stereotypical association of blackness with an essential, animal-like "vitality," less available to overly refined whites, an unthinking one. While Alice is a victim of Irish Roman Catholic strictures against sexuality and especially women's bodily autonomy, strictures enforced and policed through the sanctified nuclear family, Dinah experiences casual racism throughout the novel and is the daughter of an alcoholic African immigrant to London, where she was abandoned by the white Englishman who had impregnated her. In her recent memoir of growing up black in Ireland, Emma Dabiri illustrates the endurance of Irish racism as informed by the country's missionary history as recently as the 1980s:

> I seemed to be a firm favourite of nuns, particularly those who had been missionaries in Africa. I remember on one occasion … [being] presented with a Miraculous Medal by a concerned nun…. And I remember visiting a friend's elderly aunt −another nun− whose watery eyes refocused then blazed upon seeing me. "I spent years in Nigeria,"

> she thundered before proceeding to pull my lips back because "your people have such beautiful teeth!" (2)[5]

The nun's confident sense of entitlement to a black body, pulling a child's lip back as though the youngster were a horse or other animal to be assessed, is an attitude prevalent in Boylan's novel as well. *Black Baby* is concerned to interrogate social structures that enable and encourage the instrumentalisation of bodies and the destruction of life. The text acknowledges both Alice's suffering and her own unconscious privilege, a kind of microcosm for colonial and post-colonial Ireland, which, even while suffering the worst effects of colonial occupation in the midst of the Great Hunger, contributed to the empire's activities abroad.

Ireland has continued to pursue its own agenda of domination after independence, through its missionaries, tasked with creating a "spiritual" empire around the world.[6] Alice's innocent childhood desire for a baby of her own, a naively sexless fantasy that endures beyond menopause, to be realised in the miraculous advent of Dinah, is a desire encouraged and abetted by the illogic of Ireland's traditional, spectacularly limited option for "good" Catholic women: virgin motherhood, an ideal central to the nation's "civilising mission" at home and abroad. Boylan's fiction frequently features women oppressed by this model of unachievable perfection. Many of the stories in her short story collection, *Concerning Virgins*, for example, narrate the frustrations and miseries of Irish domesticity for women trapped by impossible expectations for "proper" and acceptable femininity. In her 1998 novel, *Holy Pictures*, which follows the experiences of a group of friends shaped by the teaching of nuns from childhood to young womanhood, the character of Doll always appears pushing a pram. In the early part of the novel, Doll is in charge of the latest product of her mother's unrelenting reproductive duties; by the age of sixteen, Doll is pushing her own baby in the pram. Jason King recognises the interpenetration of sex and religion, women's mandatory purity and Ireland's neo-colonial ambitions, in the pattern of relationships in *Black Baby*, including the guilt-ridden, ultimately abortive romancing of Dinah by the married Irishman Figgis (who is, appropriately, fanatically and sentimentally devoted to his mother): "Boylan's portrayal of thwarted miscegenation parodies the interracial plotline as well as the idea that Ireland's 'black babies' −the symbolic progeny of missionary encounters with the peoples of Africa− are immaculately conceived from a collective spirit of missionary zeal" (165). An explanation for Alice's early confusion about black babies indicates the power of this missionary imaginary, imbibed from a tender age: "There was no tradition of nursery stories. Instead, it was the dusky heathen who stirred the infant imagination, sleeping his soulless sleep until awakened by God's love and the magic of His holy wizards" (49). Throughout much of the twentieth century, Irish Roman Catholicism deployed its own regime of bio-power in arrogating to itself the right to determine which souls were worthy to be saved and granted ever-lasting life −and even, sometimes, life in this world− from unmarried mothers and their "tainted" offspring at home, to pagan Africans awaiting redemption abroad.

One of the significant modes of the novel's critique of bio-power is conducted through animal imagery. The text opens with a never-fully-explained scene of missionary nuns in Africa, working to "save" the natives. The irreverent, unidentified narrator mixes the Genesis story that has been relayed by "the white mission sister", with evolutionary theory, horticultural knowledge, and, possibly, native creation myths:

> God put his finger through the dust of the earth and into this channel He spits. His spit becomes the river. Because it is Godspit, life grows there, fish and crocodiles. Miraculous water! The fish grow feet and crawl out onto the land. Oh my God, they are heartily sorry. … If they eat the berries on the tree, they eat the seed carrier and the plant will die out. ... Sadly they eat the berries. In due course the wastes of their bodies

> bring nourishment to the dust of the earth. New plants grow, sweet fruit and yellow grain. More fishes climb out of the water to admire the beauty of the earth. New beasts are born and have no words to praise the wonder of the world. Seeking to praise, they rise above themselves. Some of them grow wings and become birds. Some of them grow souls and become men. (1)

This odd opening chapter, with its dream-like, incompletely rendered nonhuman forms, both animate and inanimate, prepares the reader for a novel of tricky diegetic challenges, narrative reversals, and surprises. The receptive, mobile, permeable contours of the dream register are established as important here. The nuns in this chapter produce a photo of a white mother with her adolescent daughter who will be the "spirit mother" of a black baby that has just been born. The reference to "spiritual" motherhood anticipates Alice's confused understanding of her relationship to the imagined recipient of her donated communion funds, in a scene possibly amalgamated of details imagined by Alice and by Dinah, based on her African mother's unreliable memories. The chapter is only three pages long, and no clear reference to it is made again, except insofar as its everted chronology might predict/recall the coming together of Alice and Dinah, whom Alice re-christens and calls her daughter.

The novel's opening offers an ironic, heterogeneous version of the Garden of Eden, founding myth of Judeo-Christian patriarchy, a story that changes with every authoritative telling, according to the nameless natives, who are imperfectly and repeatedly baptised. Another garden appears as significant later in the text when, after moving in, Dinah dons Alice's late father's work clothes and works at regenerating the barren garden. Her efforts result in miraculous winter blooms. This iteration of the Garden of Eden promises paradise as a reward for *succumbing* to, rather than resisting, sensuous temptations. Alice's garden, an alternative space of fecundity and jouissance is, however, doubly imaginary: not only a fictional construct of Boylan's, it is also revealed to be the product of an extended dream Alice has been having while in a stroke-induced coma Jeanette Roberts Shumaker has characterised as "a mental feast" in which "her unconscious is free" (105). In this ambivalent state of living death, a profane kind of after-life, Alice experiences the "life" previously denied her. Renewed love for and connection to the nonhuman are crucial to this transformation that moves Alice toward death, as suggested by Braidotti, when she argues that death is the inhuman inside us: "Making friends with the impersonal necessity of death is an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor. We build our life on the crack, so to speak. … The proximity to death suspends life, not into transcendence, but rather into the radical immanence of 'just a life,' here and now, for as long as we can take" (*Posthuman* 132). The house that Alice's dying imagination rebuilds for herself, Dinah, and other "strays", human and nonhuman, trembles on the unstable divide between life and death.

Braidotti's vertiginous image of balancing over a precipice is an appropriate one for a novel in which the protagonist literally, and paradoxically, falls into a dream-state of "radical immanence". Like Lewis Carroll's little girl in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Boylan's Alice follows an uncanny creature down a hole to enter a kind of wonderland of impossibilities. Halfway through *Black Baby*, Alice, having had a stroke, tumbles into the open grave of her fascinating, much-admired neighbour, the lively widow, Mrs Willoughby. Instead of a white rabbit dressed in human clothes and capable of human speech, the creature who draws this Alice underground is another wild animal brought into unnerving proximity to the human, a fox stole, the first dead body of the text, who initially appears when Mrs Willoughby "gathered up some furry little corpse and flung its paws gaily about her shoulders" (6). This puppet-zombie fox accompanies Alice and Mrs Willoughby to a dinner, at the end of which Mrs Willoughby dies of a heart attack, a death that appears to animate the

"furry little corpse" and arouse unsuspected powers of sympathy: "The vigilant eyes of the fox stared up from the bread plate, its dead paws flung out in alarm beside the dead head of its owner" (98). Alice next sees "the pointy little face of the fox" over the shoulder of a mourner at Mrs Willoughby's graveside. Alice attacks the "fox thief", causing the "helpless little fox" to bounce "from the usurper's shoulders. Alice watched it leaping into the grave, loyal as some trusty pet, and she realised that it was what she should have done −flung herself into the box to keep her neighbour company" (101). Toward the end of the novel it is revealed that this moment of radical identification with the body of a nonhuman animal marks the beginning of Alice's coma and her dream "life".

Mrs Willoughby first appears in the novel's second chapter, which begins with the short declarative, somewhat mysterious sentence, "The cat huddled beneath a golden fir" (4). Alice pities this stray cat out in the frozen garden, but hesitates to feed it, worried about provoking the jealousy of her domestic feline, Tiny, "a Victorian, petite in mind, vast in body and emotion" (5). This recalls the competitive jealousies of Alice's (Victorian) cats in the beginning of Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, when Alice threatens her black cat, Dinah, with being put out into the snow (108). Early in the narration of Alice's coma dream, the reader's own racial assumptions are challenged by a description of Tiny −"a black figure on the bed who paused in the act of washing her behind" (108)− that invites confusion between the animal and Dinah, who shares an imposed name with the cat of Carroll's Alice novels. Boylan exploits, interrogates, and transvalues the long Western tradition of identifying not only women but also non-white people with nonhuman animals. A pattern of such metaphors is established early in the text in a comparison between Mrs Willoughby, observed by Alice coyly stretching out a leg while preparing for a date, and Tiny, "who extended a leg in the manner of Alice's neighbour" (7). In the novel's constellation of historically animalised humans −black Africans, women, the Irish− Boylan acknowledges the similar abjection attending these categories, while maintaining distinctions amongst them. Alice suffers the further abjection of sexless, virtually lifeless old age, though the inevitability of this state is challenged by Mrs Willoughby's active dating life, "her romantic necessities" (82). In Elizabeth Povinelli's work on geontopower, which, in late liberal capitalism, governs difference, she sees this technology that separates life from nonlife as similar to the necropolitics that "operated openly in colonial Africa". Both rely on the "attribution of an inability of various colonised people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life [that] has been the grounds for casting them into a premodern mentality". Even as Alice is the character least prone to distinguish among things according to their conventional claims to agency, her own muddled ideas about race limit the possibilities of her dream vision of living in harmony amongst undifferentiated beings.

Alice first meets Dinah after an unsettling encounter with death and the porous afterlife. Her middle-aged nephews have visited, giving her a birthday gift of a Victrola. Alice cannot shake the conviction that it is a coffin, specifically her father's coffin, and that he is haunting the piece of furniture. After she is left alone with this disturbing object, a knock on the door inspires hope that the nephews have returned, but it is Dinah. She embraces and kisses Alice who "had the sensation, not unpleasant, that she was dancing with a bear. When she grappled with the intruder she was absorbed into a firm and almost comforting embrace" (15). In her attempt to sell Alice an overpriced bible, while scanning the house for easily pocketed valuables, Dinah audaciously turns on a second bar of Alice's space heater, makes her a drink, and sings her a song. Thrown out of her miserable routine of deprivation, charmed and confused, Alice begins to refer to the woman as "Dinah" and asks her about Africa. In growing alarm about her "unseemly" enjoyment of the young woman's company, as well as the bodily comforts of heat and drink, Alice sends her away. As Dinah departs,

Alice sees she is carrying a suitcase, and realises the young woman needs a place to stay. Alice makes "an effort to draw her back but only in her mind" (22). After a restless night dreaming of cats and babies, filled with regret about turning Dinah out and dread of encountering the coffin/Victrola, Alice decides to "go and tidy the attic. An odd inspiration!" (26). In the attic, she pores over "ancient issues" of *National Geographic,* which, of all the "sliding heaps" of magazines, had "suddenly seemed in most urgent need of assortment" (26). Looking for clues to understanding and connecting with Dinah, she lingers over the photographs of black Africans. She makes "the disturbing discovery that blacks were not safely contained in one scorching continent", and finds her attention especially arrested by the women's breasts, "which told more than their faces did" (27). The proprietorial, defining gaze of the anthropologist/coloniser frames and interprets the pictures Alice studies, which treat the people being photographed as exotic objects of scrutiny rather than as independent human subjects. Alice uncritically accepts and adopts this perspective, finding the women's bodies, in particular, fascinating. The women's apparent lack of self-consciousness is striking for someone whose own body has been subdued, and even despised, from childhood.[7]

Alice occasionally sees herself in animalised terms. She remembers appearing, for example, "like a big serious sheep" on the day of her First Communion (40), and, when preparing for her indulgent, but ultimately fatal dinner with Mrs Willoughby, she "knew she looked, as usual, like an animal on its way to the abattoir" (92). Alice is a defeated, hopeless animal, destined for misery and slaughter. Dinah is much more frequently and consistently figured as an animal, but never a victimised one, from her first appearance to Alice as a dancing bear, to being described as "enter[ing] like a buffalo" (104), to the implicit comparison with Tiny, mentioned above, to Figgis calling her hands "black paws" (67), to Alice declaring to her, '"You have no more morals than the cat!"' (116). Alice shares her culture's implicit association of the body and its pleasures with less inhibited (meaning less civilised) non-white people like Dinah, an association that nevertheless constitutes a source of joy and regeneration in Alice's dream world. Uncomfortable with her "animal" body's potentially sinful, self-indulgent demands and sensations, Alice relates to the natural world tentatively. She refrains, as noted, from feeding the stray who appears in the first pages of the novel, and later finds him in the garden as the text's second corpse, "a tufted clump of carrion" (42). Alice's general sense of failure in life reaches a climax with the animal's death, for which she feels responsible: "her heart cracked". She sees herself as outcast from the human and nonhuman living, with whom she cannot successfully connect, the dead, in the person of her eternally disapproving mother, in particular, as well as from both the animate and the inanimate. Though she once imagined the garden provided a companionable, sympathetic corollary to her barren life −"The garden and I, we have run to seed" (30)− after the unnamed garden cat's death, she feels she has "failed also with the garden. It would not let her in. Weeds and trees and nests and webs had closed ranks and formed their own society" (42).

The language of terminal failure, the tragedy of the disused, opens this brief, pivotal chapter: "Alice found a little graveyard of tools, blistered with rust, in the shed of the garden" (42). Having driven Dinah away for a second time with her equivocations and suspicions, Alice reconciles herself once more to dejection, in a life defined by loss, by hopelessly attempting to work on the long abandoned garden, wearing her father's old gloves, still in the garden shed. However, not only does she find "the unimportant corpse of the cat" there, but also the green cradle she had hidden decades earlier, in preparation for her "black baby" (43). She is overwhelmed by memories, of longing for "a baby brother or sister": "She had jealously spied on her mother's pole-like figure, but Mother was getting on and Father had transferred his procreative powers to the back garden. When she was seven, she read in the *National Geographic* of girls in Africa who had babies when they were ten. She prayed it

would happen to her" (43). In her dream world, Alice will confess her own youthful obsession with sex to Dinah, an obsession pursued by reading *National Geographic,* which revealed versions of female embodiment dramatically different from those available to her. She will also reveal her brief romances, including being courted by the unfortunately timid Mr Gosling, and a cruelly thwarted passion for non-white, non-native-Irish Dr Makwaia, who "was a beautiful colour" (167). Alice conceded to her mother's racist dismissal of the "Minstrel Boy", a shameful and regretted capitulation. Despite the garden's seemingly obdurate resistance to Alice's efforts at revivification, it is amongst its deathly "skeletons of leaves" and "canopies of cobwebs" (42, 43) that she recalls her once-intense yearning for new life. She tells Mrs Willoughby over the wall that she has been visited by her "daughter", and resolves to break a lifelong habit of extinguishing desire by putting an advertisement in three newspapers asking Dinah to contact her. This done, she buries the cat "where she found him, under the golden fir, patting down a sorbet of frozen earth, as Father would tuck in his tenderest flowers" (44). Alice resolves that neither homeless Dinah nor any other hungry, freezing cat or human will be turned away from her house from this point on, even before the beginning of her stroke-induced dream.

The garden, erstwhile object of Alice's father's displaced parental tenderness, proves to be a site of the "non-human, yet affirmative life force" Braidotti calls "zoe", a "type of vitality, unconcerned by clear-cut distinctions between living and dying" (*Nomadic* 340). Alice's dream version of Dinah takes an active interest in the garden, despite the chilly, discouraging weather, and, after a day spent hacking and planting, gives Alice a tour of the transformed space, complete with a new stray cat, dubbed Walrus for his extravagant whiskers, who is generously fed and made welcome. Alice "shone her torch down on the resurrected borders where labels named the tulips and crocuses and bluebells. … Smeared with frost in the smoky light, the white labels stuck up like gravestones in a miniature cemetery". She makes the graveyard comparison aloud, and Dinah laughs: "'Maybe I am some kind of gravedigger. Maybe I was sent here to dig up your past'" (114). Dinah's powers to raise and reconfigure the dead in the garden appear to extend beyond the horticultural when Alice later sees "Father striding past the scullery window in the dusk". Peering more closely, she "could make out the ghost again and she saw with astonishment that death had adorned his bald pate with a fine crop of black curls" (126); Dinah has found Alice's father's gardening clothes. Burning dead wood and weeds, she coaxes Alice to roast sausages as Alice wistfully recalls neighbouring children were allowed to do. This recapturing of denied childhood pleasures, granted by an indulgent parent figure, allows Alice to laugh at the Victrola/coffin, and, as she eats the burnt sausage and swigs "like a vagrant" from a shared bottle of sherry, she thinks, "So this is contentment!" (130). Death no longer terrifies when Alice is in an ambiguous comatose condition. Even as she relishes seeing "the garden coming to life again" (129), she feels close to her father and comforted that she will soon meet Mrs Willoughby. Her lingering, liminal state, between life and death, is one enabled by modern technology, which creates, according to Braidotti, the "rather complex relationship to death [that] has emerged in in the technologically mediated universe we inhabit: one in which the link between flesh and the machine is symbiotic and therefore establishes a bond of mutual dependence" (*Nomadic* 326). Alice's complex, technologically dependent experience of death-in-life facilitates a late-blooming appreciation of the possibility of joy in mutual, sustaining interdependencies.

The novel's investment in the dynamic interplay between life and death is suggested when Dinah reveals her real name to be Cora, an alternate name for Persephone (from *Kore,* "the maiden"), embodiment of both fertility and death, a deity of rebirth who brings spring every year when she emerges from the underworld. Just after this revelation about Dinah's name, Alice discovers that "Something is happening in the garden. Strange little patches of

colour, petals soft as cloth, were clawing their way out of the earth … like Lazarus. … It was a phenomenon. Flowers did not bloom in the depths of December" (163). But Alice is no longer "unnerved" by "odd occurrences" or a world that defies received chronologies: "Dinah had made her see that we live with ghosts and miracles…. She was learning every day" (164). Her suspicion of not being wanted by the garden's flora and fauna is replaced by an expectation of acceptance without judgement: "In the garden one does not grow old. The birds and cats did not call her old" (164). This is where Alice makes the novel's only explicit reference to Carroll's Alice, when she compares herself to the character who is never quite the right size. Characters in the Boylan and Carroll texts exchange qualities with animate and inanimate others and undergo metamorphoses to varying degrees. The exchange and sharing of qualities is further performed by an intertextuality that becomes more obvious not long after the December blooming and the explicit Carroll reference, when another stray takes up residence in the house, the homeless prostitute Verity, whose "long neck" makes her "resemble a flamingo" (182). Verity's flamingo-like neck contributes to the novel's Alice-in-Wonderland pattern of imagery that culminates in Alice's attempted embrace of the baby Verity leaves behind. Alice anticipates the infant's "feathery feel … still fluttery from prehensile wings left over from its recent angel state". However, a less heavenly inhumanity develops: "It was like a baby pig. The child's face began to change. Its features drew together and its snout wrinkled up and its eyes vanished into folds of flesh. Its complexion turned the bright unwholesome ruby of a monkey's behind. It grunted. It actually grunted" (199). Just after this, the narrative reveals Alice has had a stroke, complicating the "truth" of much of her relationship with Dinah. Even in fantasy, Alice, who has for too long understood her "animal" embodiment as shameful, cannot imagine motherhood as anything but traumatic and abject as even her dream-self begins to dissolve.

The limits of Alice's imagination have implications for the character of Dinah, who often manifests in this dream world as a kind of servant or parent-substitute, catering to Alice's physical and emotional needs, sometimes by dint of hard physical labour, as in the garden scenes. Alice's dream Verity objects to Dinah's presence, using the racist slur Alice alluded to and unconvincingly disavowed when fully conscious and flipping through the pages of *National Geographic* in the attic, suggesting the epithet is on her mind. Dinah's bawdy earthiness encourages Alice to admit to sexual feelings and desires, and leads her to re-evaluate a life lived in the service of selfish parents, but Alice largely reproduces this selfishness in her relationship to her adopted "daughter", a colonial and patriarchal instrumentalisation of Dinah's animality, her bodily warmth and strength. This exploitative cycle appears set to continue in the novel's last sentence when Dinah pursues another white woman, a pursuit described as "stalk[ing] after her mother" (214). Even in fantasy, it is nearly impossible to transcend the self-centred economy of exploitation and oppression that has dominated Alice's life, which reflects the larger, death-dealing patriarchal structures of oppression. Alice's final impressions are not of Dinah, but of her father, who admires the regenerated garden. Alice has fallen deeper into the rabbit hole, into a dream within a dream, in which her father is revealed to have been reposing in the Victrola after all, and they wander into the garden where "she knew that several seasons were jumbled together but it seemed not so much a confusion as the resolution of some long-standing one. 'The air has cleared,' she thought in great relief" (198). Alice's narrative ends in the garden when "the cat's eyes in the crazy paving winked up at her and her father smiled" (207). She does not finally expire alone, but in the company of the scents and animated objects of the garden. Braidotti argues that "Death is overrated. The ultimate subtraction is after all only another phase in a generative process" (*Nomadic* 333). By staging Alice's most transformative moments, including her final moments of semi-consciousness, in a garden, Boylan makes recourse to this idea of an unending, generative process. Nothing really dies when life is no longer an individualised

experience, but an impersonal moment of radical inclusion that exceeds the material limits of any one life span. In the end, Alice is released into a union with the animate, the inanimate, the dead, and a fecundity unfettered by chronology or even the cyclical, while it is suggested that Dinah/Cora is doomed to a Sisyphean struggle to achieve recognition of her full humanity, a struggle restaged for every reader, herself often caught in a recursive cycle of reading.

Notes

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[2] This material was first presented at a symposium, "The Animal Trope: Irish and Galician Responses," organised by Martín Veiga, and hosted by the Irish Centre for Galician Studies in University College Cork. I would like to thank all of the symposium participants for their helpful comments, especially the interventions made by Marilar Aleixandre and Helena Buffery, who pointed out the significance of Dinah/Cora's names.

[3] Boylan's novels include *Holy Pictures* (1983), *Last Resorts* (1984), *Black Baby* (1988), *Home Rule* (1992), *Beloved Stranger* (1999), and *Room for a Single Lady* (1997). Her last novel, *Emma Brown* (2003), was based on an unfinished novel by Charlotte Brontë. Her short story collections are *A Nail in the Head* (1983), *Concerning Virgins* (1990), and *That Bad Woman* (1995).

[4] Clare Boylan, *Black Baby* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 50. All future references to this edition will be cited in the text.

[5] Racism continues to be a serious social issue in Ireland, as the experience of those living in Direct Provision makes clear. However, even native and "legal" resident people of colour suffer regular racist abuse. Dabiri's Twitter account testifies to this, as do the ongoing threats received by Amanullah De Sondy, a Muslim University College Cork lecturer of Pakistani background. See Áine Kenny's interview with Dr De Sondy for details.

[6] For more on this enterprise, please see Bateman.

[7] Please see Shumaker for an extended analysis of Alice's troubled relationship with her "grotesque" body.

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