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Queer Irish Young Adult Fiction: Queertopian Imaginings

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Abstract. Irish young adult (YA) literature during the turn of the millennium was slow to confront and address systems of heteronormativity and homonormativity or to propose alternatives for queer belonging and queer futures. Since the legalisation of marriage equality in Ireland in 2015, there has been a notable increase of Irish YA works embracing young LGBTQIA+ characters and queer experiences. Informed by José Esteban Muñoz's reading of queerness as hopeful and future-oriented, I will examine the evolving representation of queerness in Irish YA fiction over the last three decades and the radical potentiality of contemporary Irish YA fiction for queertopian (re)imaginings.

Key Words. Queertopia, Irish YA literature, queer YA, queer futurity, heteronormativity, homonormativity.

Resumen. La literatura juvenil irlandesa de finales de siglo XX y comienzos del XXI fue lenta a la hora de cuestionar los sistemas sociales de heteronormatividad y homonormatividad, sin apenas proponer alternativas para crear un sentido de pertenencia y futuridad queer. Desde la legalización del matrimonio igualitario en Irlanda en 2015, ha habido un gran aumento de obras juveniles irlandesas que integran personajes jóvenes LGBTQIA+ y sus experiencias. Haciendo uso de la noción de José Esteban Muñoz sobre una futuridad queer orientada hacia la esperanza, analizaré la representación cambiante de lo queer en la ficción juvenil irlandesa durante las últimas tres décadas, así como la potencialidad radical de la ficción juvenil irlandesa contemporánea para (re)imaginar lo "queerutópico".

Palabras clave. Queertopía, literatura juvenil irlandesa, juventud queer, futuridad queer, heteronormatividad, homonormatividad.

Since the legalisation of marriage equality in Ireland in 2015, there has been a notable increase of Irish young-adult (YA) fiction embracing young LGBTQIA+ characters and queer experiences. While the slipperiness and ambivalence of queerness resist a settled definition, I will be using Halberstam's working definition of "queer" which encompasses "nonnormative logic and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and

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time" (2005: 20). My discussion of the representation of queerness and queer imaginings in recent Irish YA fiction draws upon José Esteban Muñoz's reading of queerness as hopeful and future-oriented in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*: "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (2009: 1). In his emphasis on queerness as relational and forward-reaching, Muñoz rejects the linking of the death drive, queer theory, and queerness and the anti-social thesis of queer theorists such as Lee Edelman. Arguing that the symbolic figure of the child as a signifier of family and figure of futurity operates to eliminate queerness and alternative formations of sexuality and kinship, Edelman coined the term "reproductive futurism" for the pervasive, naturalised compulsory narrative which reserves "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2004: 2). Although Muñoz shares Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism and a recognition of the power of the heteronormative order, he refutes Edelman's negativity and presents instead an optimistic embracing of the queertopian potentiality, seeking "to reimagine a hopeful, forward-reaching, world-making queer theory that matters as the future" (O'Rourke 2012: 108). Exploring queertopian potentialities in Irish YA literature opens up new possibilities for analysis that have not yet been examined in the existing scholarship in Irish studies, queer studies, and Irish youth literature studies.

Homonormativity centres cisgender identities and presentations, Whiteness, masculinity, and ableist models of embodiment, polices access to queer spaces and identities, and re-affirms heterosexual familial and relational norms such as monogamy, domesticity, and marriage. Homonormativity's mainstreaming drive is towards defending homosexuality as no different from heterosexuality as well as emphasising sameness rather than imagining queer difference and anti-normative sexualities. Moreover, homonormativity can create adversarial and hierarchical tensions between different sexual and gender minority groups. The importance of recognising and disrupting assumptions and regimes of both homonormativity and heteronormativity holds a particular significance for YA literature and these texts' powerful impact on their young readers. As Adam Kealley states, because homonormativity represents "anything but genuine queer liberation, […] homonormative stereotypes are typically introjected by young queers before they have the opportunity to participate in queer communities, that is: long before the opportunity to realise just how diverse and complex most queer people really are" (2021: 159-60). There are many ways in which reproductive futurism, heteronormativity, and homonormativity especially impact minoritised groups and their queertopian potentialities. Adopting a framework of hope which resonates with Sciurba and Bell's argument that "a queertopian (re)imagination of the world is possible, and pain doesn't have to be the only norm of queer existence in children's literature" (2024), I will consider the radical potentiality of contemporary Irish YA fiction for queertopian imaginings and the affirmation of queer love, joy, and community. My discussion analyses how contemporary Irish YA literature has engaged with the traditional silencing of lesbians and erasure of bisexual characters, and with the intersectionality of racism, heteronormativity, and homonormativity, and the emerging wave of queertopian imaginings in Irish YA fiction which addresses the experiences of queer youth during and since the cusp of marriage equality in 2015 and the current temporal moment of post-marriage-equality Ireland.

The Evolving Engagement with Queerness in Twentieth-Century and Early Twenty-First -Century Irish YA Fiction

While children's literature in Ireland has a long and established tradition for over three centuries (such authors as Maria Edgeworth, L. T. Meade, Padraic Colum, Patricia Lynch and Eilís

Dillon), Irish YA literature – which involves teenage protagonists and is preoccupied with adolescent scenarios and "coming of age" narratives – emerged as a separate and distinctive field from literature for pre-teenage readers during the 1990s. Although "attempts to patrol" normative and anti-normative sexualities throughout twentieth-century Ireland "actually resulted in the proliferation of sexual discourses, sites and subjects, such that sex and sexuality became the defining issues or problems for Irish culture to grapple" (Walsh 2016: 63), Irish YA literature during the turn of the millennium was slow to confront and address systems of heteronormativity and homonormativity or to propose any alternatives for queer belonging and queer futures. Informed by Muñoz's intersectional theorisation of oppression and social transformation**,** I will examine in the subsequent sections of this article the extent to which recent Irish YA queertopian fiction recognises and addresses intersectional experiences of minoritised groups. As Angel Daniel Matos and Jon M. Wargo ask in their introduction to a special issue for *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* on queer futurity, "Which youth have the privilege of tomorrows that are open, utopic, or even possible?" (2019: 5). In addition to proposing a critical potentiality of hope in refutation of anti-social frameworks of queerness, Muñoz also contests Edelman's centring of Whiteness and the presumption of the Child as always White, thus erasing young people of colour as well as other minoritised non-normative, queer, disabled, and transgender young people.

The turn of the millennium and the Celtic Tiger "marked a significant transformative moment for queer Irish visibility […] where queer sexualities were framed as positive, upbeat and optimistic and associated with the newfound affluence of the Celtic Tiger" (Kerrigan 2021: 141). At that time, Ireland was "characterized by a far greater visibility of LGBT people in media and popular culture than ever before" (Ryan-Flood 2014: 350) yet Irish youth literature during these decades was relatively slow to recognise or involve queer and LGBTQ+ voices and experiences. Although traditions of LGBTQ+ literature for young people emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the UK and the US, Margrit Cruikshank's 1992 novel, *Circling the Triangle*, is regarded as the first Irish YA novel that included a gay character. Perhaps predictably for a pre-criminalisation work, this adult gay cis, male minor character followed homonormative patterns and posed no serious or lasting threat to the moral integrity of the narrative or to the presumption of the "natural" nature of heterosexuality. Emma Donoghue's debut novel, *Stir-Fry* (1994), which follows Maria, a naïve seventeen-year-old who moves to Dublin for university and unknowingly moves in with a lesbian couple, was generally praised as an authentic and sensitive coming-of-age story about sexual awakening. Although the novel straddles the categories of young adult and new adult (literature bridging YA and adult fiction, focusing on protagonists typically aged 18–25 navigating the transition to independence), it constitutes a pioneering text in Irish queer YA literature, especially in relation to how lesbians and lesbianism "remained relatively invisible when compared to gay sexuality" (Carregal 2021: 7) and "hetero-patriarchal Ireland's need to keep lesbianism silenced, repressed, and condemned" (17) in 1980s and early 1990s Ireland. Tom Lennon's 1993 novel, *When Love Comes to Town*, is regarded as a landmark moment as the first Irish novel with a queer teenage protagonist which was directed at teenage readers. While precedent-setting, Lennon significantly used a pseudonym to publish the novel since "to use his real name would probably have cost him his job" (Hennessy 2022b: 16) as a schoolteacher due to Catholic hegemony in Irish schools. Lennon's novel was published in the same year that Ireland officially passed legislation which decriminalised homosexuality and is part of the post-decriminalisation resurgence of the gay Bildungsroman genre during challenges to Catholic morality posed by the new values of the Celtic Tiger. The novel's publication history "reveals significant changes in cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in Ireland" (Whyte 2011b: 73): in 1993, the novel's publisher, The O'Brien Press, initially placed the book on its adult list but the 2003 reprinted edition was subsequently re-categorised on the publisher's website as young adult.

Throughout the novel, Lennon unsentimentally explores toxic regimes around hegemonic masculinity, misogynistic and homophobic systems, and Neil, the novel's protagonist, must navigate a society and time "when popular ideas about gay sexuality were highly influenced by religious doctrine, heterosexist assumptions, and the gender anxieties of masculinity" (Carregal 2021: 73). Considering the challenges and socio-cultural pressures posed during the time in which the novel was written and published, the novel deserves recognition for its attempts to consider how entrenched homophobia, gender performativity, and the didactic pressures of Catholic doctrine might be contested as well as constructed. As such, the novel "can be read as the first example of an Irish queer bildungsroman that explores homosexual subjectivity in a society that is both homophobic and heterosexist" (Jeffrey 2022: 117). Jennifer Jeffers observes that "[i]t would have been easy" for Lennon "to provide a monolithic portrait of the unsympathetic and prejudiced heterosexualist culture" yet the novel "provides degrees of acceptance of the homosexual on the part of individual heterosexuals" (2002: 84). Neil's straight friend, sister, and her boyfriend accompany him to gay bars and these characters act as "representatives of the 'new Ireland': young, hip, and aware that homosexuality exists" (Jeffers 2002: 85). However, a range of heteronormative and conservative conceptions of gender and class relations underpin the narrative. The novel is threaded with middle-class homonormative bias and inherited class power which persist despite Neil's meeting gay and queer characters from a range of classes and his surprise at the unexpected "liberalism" and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people shown by the working-class family of Daphne, the flamboyant queen of Dublin gay subculture who is dying of an AIDS-related illness. Daphne's family presents Neil and the reader with the tantalising potentiality of queer-inclusive family life. While the novel does not ultimately progress notions of queer relationality or queer solidarity – the novel ends "not… with the protagonist becoming politicized through his contact with a queer subculture, but with his discovery of love with another straight-acting boy in his own South Dublin suburb" (Cronin 2004: 257) –, it nonetheless is a significant publication in the historical trajectory of queer developments in Irish YA literature.

While decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1993 marked a significant transformative moment in Irish sexual politics and legislation, "the country had not changed overnight. This was before divorce was legalised, before the last Magdalene laundry closed" (Hennessy 2022b: 16). The small number of Irish YA queer characters during the turn of the millennium includes the questioning male protagonist in Larry O'Loughlin's 2001 *Breaking the Silence*, the gay male protagonists in Jarlath Gregory's *Snapshots* (2001) and *G.A.A.Y.: One Hundred Ways to Love a Beautiful Loser* (2005),[1] the bisexual narrator in Claire Hennessy's 2004 *Good Girls Don't*, the eponymous lesbian protagonist of Geraldine Meade's 2010 *Flick*, and the lesbian and gay teenage main characters in Anna Carey's *Rebecca* series (2011-2014). Although they present a liberatory aim of representing queer sexualities, many of these early YA texts demonstrated the relatively limited and limiting approach of what Jennifer Miller terms the "old queer children's literature" (2019: 1645) in their presumption and replication of traditional adult-child power dynamics, reproductive futurism, and normative regimes. Yet, "the pace of change" transforming Ireland during the turn of the twenty-first century had been "so fast that it is, however, probably unrealistic to hope for its immediate absorption into our children's literature" (Dunbar 2001: 85). It was not until the cultural shift regarding the re-imagining of the Irish family, queer futurity, and the "social revolution" (McDonagh 2021: 1) created by the legislation on marriage equality in 2015 that Irish queer YA literature began to build a critical mass of visibility and depth.

By 2020 (the year of the fifth anniversary of the Marriage Equality referendum by popular vote), there was a "boom in Irish YA literature with LGBTQIA+ representation" (Duffy

[1] See Carregal-Romero (2019) for an interview with Jarlath Gregory on his early novels.

2020: 26) which increasingly anticipates Muñoz's optimistic vision of queer utopia. Irish YA fiction which centres lesbian and female bisexual protagonists by writers such as Ciara Smyth, Helen Corcoran, and Caroline O'Donoghue who "experienced a post-decriminalisation adolescence, and [who] doubtlessly benefitted from greater LGBTQ+ representation in the global media" (Hennessy 2022b: 16) has particularly flourished since 2015. These YA works are part of the wider surge of what Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahajan call the "increased visibility and publication, dynamic activism, and collective engagement' (2021: 3) of Irish women's writing during the last ten years. The emerging canon of Irish YA fiction engaging with queer futurity and especially sapphic experiences reached a key moment in 2019 with the publication of Sarah Maria Griffin's *Other Words for Smoke* in March, Deirdre Sullivan's *Perfectly Preventable Deaths* in May, followed by *All the Bad Apples* by Fowley-Doyle in August. As part of these authors' exposing, interrogating, and disrupting of Irish histories of misogyny, trauma, abuse, institutionalised violence, homophobia, and the patriarchal silencing of Irish women and girls, they also use the figure of the witch to re-inscribe sapphic women and girls within Irish family life, history, and culture. Involving a rich range of queer, bisexual, lesbian, non-binary and genderqueer characters, Caroline O'Donoghue's trilogy – *All Our Hidden Gifts* (2021), *The Gift That Bind Us* (2022), and *Every Gift A Curse* (2023) – continues this engagement with the radical potential of the adolescent witch for queer liberation and dismantling heteronormative and queerphobic Irish religious, social, and political regimes.

These YA novels' feminist and fierce engagement with the role and impacts of religious norms and religious systems on Irish queer people and queer youth signals a significant departure from the "reticence of many children's authors" regarding explicit recognition of religion and denominational differences and the tendency of religion to be "invisibly present but not discussed" (Coghlan 2011: 59) in the preponderance of twentieth-century Irish youth literature. In their commitment to hope and queer relationality, these works can be read as anticipating Muñoz's emphasis on "concrete utopias" which are "relational to historically situated struggles" (2009: 55). These concrete utopias involve "map[ping] our oppression, our fragmentation, and our alienation" (55) and imagining new futures in which these have been refuted and de-centered. As James Joshua Coleman states, "queer futurity is an orientation that locates in painful histories a potential for learning" (2019: 14) towards more just futures and the imagining otherwise for queer joy, love, and community. In the next section, I will discuss heteronormative as well as homonormative traditions regarding the minoritised subjects of lesbian and female bisexual characters and the capacity of Irish YA fiction for queertopian imaginings. I will then explore the representation of queerness and race and the increasing momentum in these works for unsettling White privilege and white normativity.

Queer Intersectionalities and Queertopian Imaginings

Many scholars have noted the relative invisibility of lesbians in Irish society due to the omission of lesbians from Irish cultural and legal discourse until the late twentieth-century. For example, Páraic Kerrigan argues that "lesbians still occupy a liminal space within the story of queer Irish visibility" (2021: 167). However, as Amy Jeffrey asserts in her study of space, queerness, and Irish lesbian fiction, the "indeterminate nature" of liminality "can confer the possibility of transformation" (2022: 1). YA literature which engages with lesbian and sapphic sexuality possesses a "uniquely subversive cultural and literary" capacity in its empowering presentation of lesbian young adults who accept themselves and their anti-normative sexualities as "sexual agents, desirous and desirable" (Jones 2013: 76). There has been a similar homonormative tradition of the relative absence and erasure of bisexuality due to what Kenji Yoshino termed an intertwined heteronormative and homonormative "epistemic contract" of bisexual erasure (2000: 353). Common biphobic stereotypes include the trope that bisexuals are merely

"confused" and the theme of bisexual promiscuity and infidelity as bisexuals are presumed not to be able or willing to be satisfied with a monogamous relationship (Dyar and Feinstein 2018). Although there have been recent successes in YA literature and media with bisexual protagonists such as Alice Oseman's popular *Heartstopper* series, bisexuality is still relatively "missing or, if it does appear, it is portrayed in such a way as to imply that it is less acceptable than being heterosexual or homosexual" (Epstein 2014: 110).

Since 2015, there has been an increasing momentum of future-oriented and hopeful Irish YA by women's writers that unsettles these normative traditions. Realist novels such as Claire Hennessy's *Like Other Girls* (2017) and Orlagh Collins' *All the Invisible Things* (2019) explore ambivalences around use and perception of the term "bisexual" and tackle biphobic stereotypes and assumptions. Hennessy's protagonist, Lauren, is attracted to girls and boys and has not chosen any term to identify with as she does not like the word bisexual because of bisexuality's association with selfishness and greed: it "sounds like you need to have two partners on the go at all times to satisfy your needs" (2017: 61). However, by the conclusion of the novel, Lauren has developed her confidence and feelings of agency in her sexuality, supported by both the found family of her heterosexual friends and the queer collectivity of her school's Q Club. Collins' bisexual protagonist, Vetty, struggles to articulate her bisexuality and "greedy heart" (2019: 21) amidst fears of misunderstanding and rejection from her friends and family, including her lesbian aunts whom she lives with and who get married during the novel. While Collins does not flinch from acknowledging and depicting realities of biphobia by heterosexual as well as queer family members, *All the Invisible Things* ultimately presents a hopeful message of transformation, queertopia, and intergenerational solidarity for its bisexual protagonist with the novel concluding with Vetty proclaiming to herself and to the world that "Today is my launch point. Today I am real" (2019: 355) while surrounded by her straight as well as LGBTQIA+ family and friends.

Helen Corcoran's 2020 high-fantasy novel, *Queen Of Coin and Whispers* and the 2023 sequel, *Daughter of Winter and Twilight,* offer one of the most successful and sustained queernormative projects of queertopian worldbuilding for female queer characters to date in Irish YA literature. Heteronormative regimes – manifested through the embedded importance of monarchical bloodlines, characters' lineage, and plots around the importance of marriage and reproduction – have tended to underpin much of international and Irish fantasy literature. Observing the "commonly heteronormative nature of fantasy as a genre", Stephen Kenneally asserts that "many texts that combine LGBT content and fantasy content do not fulfil the queer potential inherent in such a fusion" (2021: 8; 10). In addition to heteronormativity, fantasy literature can also often be homonormatively complicit in silencing lesbian and sapphic sexualities. In her article "'Incloseto Putbacko': Queerness in Adolescent Fantasy Fiction", Anne Balay asked "where are all the fantasy lesbians?… Research shows that even as offerings in the gay YA category multiply, the proportion of male to female queer folks holds steady at 2 to 1 […] and in fantasy fiction, the imbalance is even greater" (2012: 936). Corcoran's novel radically contests this tradition with queered families of straight and LGBTQIA+ members across a rich and equitable range of queer orientations and anti-normative sexualities. The novel constitutes a significant Irish youth-literature landmark in recognising the full spectrum of sexual orientations: the representation of the first demisexual character (who is also a lesbian woman of colour) in Irish youth literature to date. Importantly for the integrity of this queertopian project, it is not homophobia or heteronormativity that constitutes the main barrier to being together that the lesbian and female bisexual protagonists but class differences and the monarchical criteria of a state marriage and providing a biological heir which are infused with reproductive futurism. Posed with the dilemma of "how would a lesbian queen handle the two main pillars of monarchy: a state marriage and an heir?" (Imi 2021), Corcoran rewrites the traditional heteronormative wedding that symbolically marks reproductive futurism and instead

presents a utopic affirmation of queer parenting and the viability of queered families. The novel concludes with the two sapphic protagonists married as royal equals and formally adopting the orphaned queer daughter of their political enemy as their child and heir. Corcoran ultimately creates a dynamic and incisive subversion of the conservative power regimes which infuse the genre of European fantasy literature and offers a compelling queer re-imagining and re-centring of minoritised queer women's and girls' voices as leaders as well as members of queer, queered, and inclusive families.

While literature of the fantastic might be expected to possess potentiality for transformation, romantic comedy is often regarded as governed by hegemonic conventions of reproductive futurism. Recent Irish YA romantic comedies have demonstrated a future-oriented critique and hopeful re-imagining of the traditional heteronormative presumptions of this genre in order to affirm the joyful and transformative potentiality of lesbian relationships. For example, the genre-savvy lesbian protagonists in Ciara Smyth's 2020 novel, *The Falling in Love Montage*, playfully yet seriously interrogate the formula of the tradition of romantic comedies and succeed in their stated aim to reinvent the genre with "Our own experiment with a different type of lesbian story. The fun stuff. The kissing and the talking and the dating and no one dies at the end" (2020: 89). The romance novels of queer Bangladeshi-Irish YA author and teacher, Adiba Jaigirdar, share Smyth's commitment to celebrating and affirming queer joy, queer girls' sexual and romantic agency, the queering of familial love, and the disruption of sexual hegemony while also exploring the intersectionality of queerness with race and White privilege. In particular, Jaigirdar's works act as an important reparative to what Lynch and Veale term "the total absence" of academic research and literature in Ireland "that addresses the experience of [Irish] Muslim youth in the years since 9/11" (2015: 2003-4). Clíona Ó Gallchoir has noted the scarcity of Irish literature for young readers since the 1990s that engages with race or with migrant communities and concludes that the "relative silence in the field of Irish children's literature on the subject of race since 2004" is "arguably suggestive of a lack of faith in a truly inclusive Ireland" (2016). In her study of sexuality and religion in Jaigirdar's novels, Iria Seijas-Pérez observes how these stories "reflect a multicultural Ireland from the lens of diverse and nonmainstream characters" and engaged "with experiences that are often invisible in mainstream narratives, thus helping to consolidate queer and diasporic communities in Ireland" (Seijas-Pérez 2024: 357). Jaigirdar's novels, *The Henna Wars* (2020) and *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating* (2021), offer a thoughtful, witty, and energetic intervention regarding the intersection of sexual, cultural, religious, and racial politics and the familial positioning of queer youth within contemporary Ireland and the Bangladeshi diaspora.

Jaigirdar's protagonists (Nishat in *The Henna Wars* and the eponymous Hani and Ishu in *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating)* navigate queerness not only as a sexual identity but as a cultural and racialised position within Ireland: "In a literary landscape where religion is scarce, Jaigirdar brings to the forefront adolescent sapphic protagonists who must negotiate their religion and sexuality, as well as the intersection of these two factors with other elements of identity such as ethnicity and race" (Seijas-Pérez 2025: 141). The novels integrate queer romance and diasporic identity formation, reframe Ireland as a multicultural queer landscape, and offer models of queer joy which are creative, culturally grounded, and relational. In her centring of LGBTQIA+ Irish Muslim, South Asian, and Bengali girls as first- and second-generation Irish citizens as well as the experiences of LGBTQIA+ girls of colour in Ireland, Jaigirdar exposes cultural appropriation, Islamophobia, racism, homophobia, gaslighting, colonialism, bisexual erasure, family religious and cultural traditions, and White privilege. While Jaigirdar's queer young women of colour must navigate pervasive intersectional systems of Islamophobia and homophobia, Stefanie Jakobi and Ashly Isac highlight how "Jaigirdar offers a counternarrative through intergenerational solidarity and peer relationships" which "creates a space for positive and uplifting representation for not just queer Muslims but their

surrounding community as well" (2025: 291; 285). Jaigirdar adapts romance conventions such as enemies-to-lovers and slow burn to foreground queer joy rather than queer suffering and as narrative structures for normalising queer love and building queer community. *The Henna Wars* deploys henna as a queer symbol as a site of cultural pride and an assertion of Nishat's heritage in the face of her classmates' cultural appropriation and micro-aggressions as well as a metaphor for self-inscription and creative reclamation of selfhood, space, and culture. In *Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating,* Jaigirdar deploys the romance trope of fake dating to explore queer joy through relational growth, queer intimacy, and mutual transformation. Her novels present queer joy as relational rather than individual and as resistance against homophobia, racism, and cultural erasure. Jaigirdar's novels offer a queertopian response to the challenge posed by Angel Daniel Matos and John Michael Wargo: how does literature for young people "balance the act of crafting texts that offer queer readers a sense of hope about the future without diminishing the effects of the historical and contemporary realities that people have and will continue to face in a time that has yet-to-come?" (2019: 9). Emphasising intersectional and decolonial queer experiences, the novels acknowledge structural oppression without centering suffering and reimagine Ireland as a site of queer possibility where queer futures are imaginable and attainable.

Queertopian Possibilities and Marriage Equality in Contemporary Irish YA Literature

The radical potentiality of the queer-affirming home, queer parenting, and the queering of the family have particular significance in the Irish context of the official privileging of the patriarchal family unit within the 1937 Constitution which marginalised and excluded "sexualities, genders and identities not conforming to such heteronormative models" from "the canon of national belonging" (Woods 2014: 29). While the introduction of marriage equality in Ireland in 2015 has been hailed by many as a landmark anti-homophobic cultural and legal shift and progressive triumph for gay rights and sexual liberation, queer theorists have also critiqued its mainstreaming and normative nature which privileges a hierarchy of sexual citizenship centring assimilative, respectable and monogamous queer cultural subjects. For example, Joseph Valente views the Irish referendum for marriage equality as a "paradoxically normalizing" story of queer politics, by which homosexuality, "the epicenter of the queering project", was joined to marriage, "the single most normative of sexually informed institutions" (2019: 1). Marriage equality and its homonormative dimensions raise tensions with Muñoz's critique of the desire for marriage equality as assimilation-driven politics which are embedded in heteronormative and homophobic regimes yet which offer the appearance of utopian attainment. Muñoz also wrote that in the queer utopia, "[h]ope and disappointment operate within a dialectical tension" and that "to access queer visuality we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now" (2009: 155; 22). It is in this sense that I will consider the simultaneously normative and queering world-making in Irish YA literature's exploration of marriage equality. I will focus on two YA works of contemporary fiction which are set during the weeks before and the summer months following the introduction of marriage equality in 2015. Youth and its positioning within the institution of the family as well as the larger idea of the family of the nation have been profoundly intertwined with Irish ideas and ideals of itself. The temporal settings, positioning of Irish queer youth, and queertopian strivings of these works – Moïra Fowley-Doyle's 2019 short story, "Love Poems to the City", and Jarlath Gregory's 2021 novel, *What Love Looks Like* – offer a rich opportunity to explore Muñoz's argument for "hope as a critical methodology [that] can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (2009: 3).

Moïra Fowley-Doyle's short story, "Love Poems to the City", powerfully renders the pains as well as the joys of queer experience in contemporary Irish society and signals Muñoz's

framework in which queerness becomes "a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity" (2009: 16). The text occupies a consciously hybrid zone juxtaposing the realities of contemporary Irish social, legal, and cultural life with queertopian potentiality and the cusp of the referendum on the Thirty-Fourth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland: it was published in 2019 in a consciously post-marriage-equality context while being set in early 2015 during the campaigning in the weeks before the referendum. The bisexual 17-year-old narrator, Sarah, and her straight and queer friends are too young to vote but this only strengthens their convictions and efforts as activists for change in their schools and on the capital's streets. The story joyfully concludes with all the narrative's young straight and LGBTQIA+ characters coming together outside their school the day after the referendum in order to spray-paint the remaining "army of hateful *no* posters with the largest, brightest rainbow we can paint" only to find that the city has created a rainbow vista of solidarity in the puddles "all across the road outside, under the car tyres and bike wheels and feet and street signs […] footpath to footpath: no words, just colours splashed all the way across the road. It's the loudest thing the city's ever said" (2019: 310-11). Fowley-Doyle incisively depicts how the figure of the child and the enshrined integrity of the family are strategically deployed by protestors against the legislation to bolster their heteronormative claims as defenders of the presumed "natural" way of organising married and familial lives and sexualities. As a hopeful and dynamic counterpart, she centres and affirms the agency and transformative capacities of young people to agitate and bring about political and social change in alliance with their family members.

Jarlath Gregory's 2021 *What Love Looks Like* presents intriguing insights into the shifts in Irish YA literature's acknowledgment of and positioning of queer Irish adolescent characters, queer affirmation, and queer futurity over the last thirty years. It could be read as a queertopian sequel as well as a counternarrative to Lennon's 1993 bleak novel, *When Love Comes to Town*, which affirmed systems of reproductive futurism. There are many continuities between the two novels: they both centre the experiences and voices of seventeen-year-old gay cis male Dubliners who want to be teachers and positively shape generations of future children; their titles share a preoccupation with finding and sustaining queer happiness; and the temporal settings of both novels are located at pivotal moments of key legal, political, medical, and social changes regarding LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland. However, *When Love Comes to Town* cannot envision a queernormative Irish society beyond its immediate publication moment of the year of the decriminalisation of homosexuality while *What Love Looks Like* combines a resolutely future-oriented energy with a commitment to celebrating recent socio-cultural change, the transformation of the Irish family and family relational life, and the celebration of a diverse range of genders and sexualities. Published in 2021, the novel was written and set during the summer of 2015 immediately after the Marriage Equality Referendum in May and during the passing in July of the Gender Recognition Act which enabled all trans people in Ireland to have full recognition of their preferred gender. The novel unsentimentally engages with many urgent social and political issues such as racism, homelessness, and class hierarchies, and demonstrates the potentiality of Irish YA fiction to offer "qualified hope and an orientation toward the future that equips this genre with the power to offer significant structural critique" (Cahill 2020: 254).

Refreshingly, Gregory's working-class protagonist, Ben, is already out to his family who support and routinely offer him embarrassing dating advice. While Ben and other LGBTQ+ and queer characters (including his best friend who transitions as a trans boy during the novel) must navigate realities of transphobia and homophobia, these difficulties and the characters' sexual orientations are not the focus of this future-oriented narrative. An important factor in enabling this queer-normative familial and relational potential is Gregory's emphasis on recognising and fulfilling the need for emotional expression and physical intimacy between men which were despised throughout Lennon's novel, steeped in homophobia and internalised homophobia.

Kind, compassionate, a future student teacher, and regularly affectionately hugged by his stepdad, Ben enjoys, seeks out, and reciprocates non-sexual intimacy and physical affection as well as sexual intimacy with other male characters. In his study of Irish gay male narratives at the end of twentieth century, Ed Madden highlights the anxiety about male-male intimacy in 1990s Irish texts amidst the rapid social, political, and economic changes during the Celtic Tiger era and the growing visibility and viability of Irish queer culture. While Lennon's *When Love Came to Town* shares this 1990s understandable yet flawed "focus on the limitations of traditional masculinity" (Madden 2010: 83), Gregory's novel nearly thirty years later demonstrates a more expansive and liberatory capacity for queer world-building and envisioning new, alternative versions of masculinity and relationality.

Conclusion

In her 2000 survey of twentieth-century and turn-of-the-millennium Irish youth literature, Carole Redford observed that "difference, generally, in Ireland's for the young" was "almost always seen as negative" (123). This reactionary and hegemonic paradigm has been increasingly challenged and disrupted in the growing and welcome emergence of queer Irish YA literature published since 2015 which is committed to inclusive worldbuilding, anti-normativities, and affirmation of queer youth. While this literature has demonstrated a rich capacity for anticipating Muñoz's project of queer utopia, admittedly there is still work to do in extending and embracing the fully radical nature of this queertopian project. Although there has been an increasing and welcome number of Irish works for young readers that reflects and represents the diversity of gender and sexual orientations and experiences, Irish YA literature has only started to substantially address intersectionality of queerness with a diversity of classes, ethnicities, races, disabilities, and religions. However, works such as Adiba Jaigirdar's romances, Helen Corcoran's epic fantasy, the social-realism novels of Jarlath Gregory, and Moïra Fowley-Doyle's magical realism present a range of literary modes and genres which authentically and sensitively navigate "the tension between depicting the queerphobic world as we know it and offering more optimistic roadmaps to both queer and nonqueer readers" (Browne 2020: 20). In their commitments to affirming queer joy and queer belonging alongside the recognition of historical and contemporary traumas, inequities, and minoritised experiences of queer youth, these works mobilise a queer hope which, in Yener Bayramoğlu's vision of queer-futuring, is "not this naïve or neoliberal faith in the future that everything will get better" but which "puts the current and past negativities into the center of the project of futuring" (2022: 10). Such texts demonstrate contemporary Irish YA literature's potentiality for disrupting regimes of reproductive futurism and for anticipating queertopian (re)imaginings.

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