

Irish Studies Würzburg

Workshop

Strange Encounters?

Irish Short Fiction, the Experience of Migration and (Im)Possible Communities

Alessandra Boller

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Agenda & Aims

Part 1: Basic Information and Food for thought

Part 2: The Distribution of the Sensible and Strange Encounters: Concepts, Life Writing and Short Fiction

Part 3: Donoghue and Okorie: Recognition, Encounters and New Communities

“Positionality – as a specific form of relationality – foregrounds the situatedness of an individual within a society’s ideological matrix”

Bergmann/Balestrini , “Intermediality, Life Writing, and American Studies: A Brief Introduction” 2

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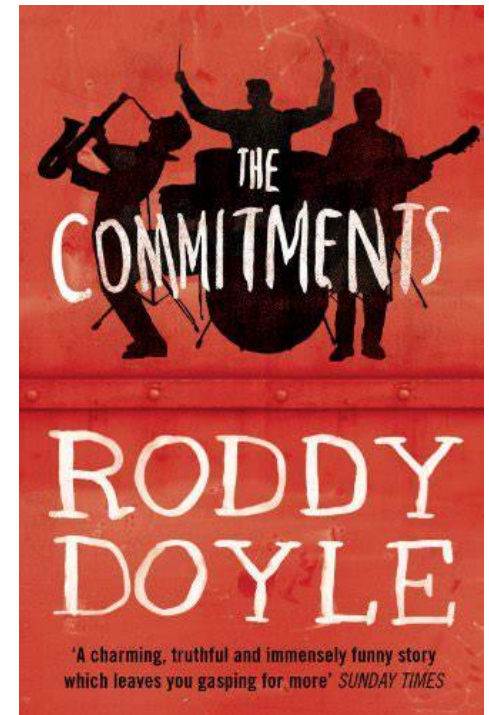
Participants have gained an idea of how encounters and a new politics of representation (= a re-distribution of the sensible) can decentre whiteness and contribute to more inclusive community-building.

By reading Donoghue's and Okorie's stories and essays through the lens of Ahmed's and Rancières concepts, they can discuss how "strange encounters" through short fiction and forms of life writing can give rise to subjectivization, recognition and new communities based on shared experience.

‘Blackness’ – *The Commitments*



The Commitments (1991)



"Your music should be about here you're from and the sort of people yeh come from - Say it once, say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud." They looked at him - James Brown. They were stunned by what came next. "The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads." They nearly gasped it was so true. "An' Dubliners are the n***** of Ireland . . . An' the northside Dubliners are the n***** of Dublin - Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud."

“In 1987, in the midst of the continuing Troubles in the North, long posited by some as an anti-colonial war, and ongoing poverty in the Republic, Rabbitte’s statement had a particular resonance. It captured the confused ethnic identity of the Irish throughout the 19th and 20th centuries as well as framed their contemporary underprivileged status in a metaphor that was immediately understandable to the lads and the book’s/film’s audience. “Celtic Calibans,” “Black Irish,” “Simians,” “Paddies,” “the niggers of Europe:” these slurs against the Irish recall a colonial history of violence that positioned them as an inferior race vis-à-vis the British, yet also positioned the Irish as frequent collaborators in the work of Empire in India and other outposts. Thus, the contradictions and immediate emotional appeal contained within Jimmy Rabbitte’s assertion indexes an Irish history of engagement with race, ethnicity and power that is far from simple.”

McIvor, Charlotte, “I’m Black an’ I’m Proud”: Ruth Negga, *Breakfast on Pluto*, and Invisible Irelands“

<https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/cmcivor.pdf>

The Celtic Tiger



economic boom in the Republic of Ireland
(1995-2008, two phases)

period of rapid economic and cultural changes

rupture & turning point

2008: world financial crisis

Kipper Williams, [*The Guardian*](#)

The Celtic Tiger

towards a global & 'modern' identity?

“Ireland was effectively transformed from a premodern, peasant rural community to a postmodern, high-technology urbanised society”

Kuhling/Keohane, *Cosmopolitan Ireland*

economic event and signifier, which eventually “came to be understood as the culmination of, or escape from, Irish history”

Buchanan, Jason. “Living at the End of the Irish Century: Globalization and Identity in Declan Hughes’s *Shiver*.” (303)

establishing whiteness as hegemonic frame?

from emigration to immigration country?

amnesia of experience of oppression/ of emigration (Christa de Brun)

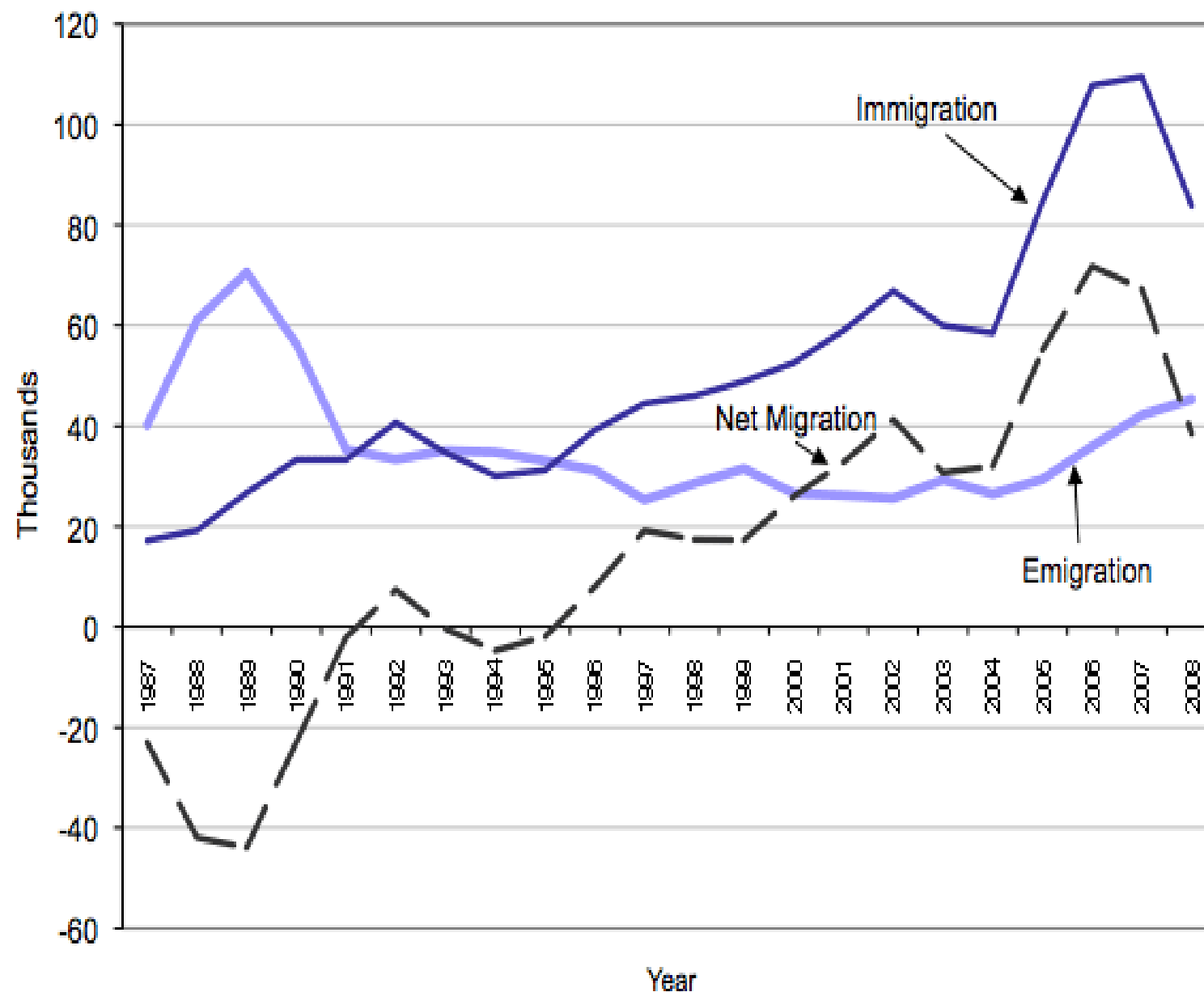


Figure 1. Immigration, Emigration and Net Migration in Ireland, 1987 to 2008

Note: Immigrants are defined as individuals who are usual residents of Ireland who did not usually live in the country on April 30 of the previous year.

Source: Central Statistics Office (CSO), Dublin. Ruhs, Martin/Quinn, Emma. "Ireland: From Rapid Immigration to Recession." 2009

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/ireland-rapid-immigration-recession/>

see also: Ruhs, Martin/Quinn, Emma. "Ireland: From Rapid Immigration to Recession." (2009)

On Direct Provision

One of the first documents given to asylum seekers in Ireland who enter direct provision is the Reception and Integration Agency's *House Rules* for accommodation centres. The House Rules proclaim that the direct provision centre 'is your home while your application for protection is being processed.' 'Home' is an interesting concept as, within law, the protection of an individual or families 'home' is a central concern. The right to respect for one's home is an underlying theme of all core international and European human rights instruments. Article 40.5. of the Irish Constitution states that:

The dwelling of every citizen is inviolable and shall not be forcibly entered save in accordance with law.

"Direct provision is the name used to describe the accommodation, food, money and medical services you get while your international protection application is being assessed or while you are an asylum seeker, which means the same thing."
(<https://www.citizensinformation.ie/e>)

and Integration Agency implemented in direct provision centres. Yet, in 'This Hostel Life' we are immediately drawn into the mundane, the everyday, but also something quite alien – the fact that direct provision does not seem to be like a home. Waiting. Lots of waiting. Waiting for a decision. Waiting to be provided with basic provisions for living. Waiting for somebody to tell you when you can eat, and what you can eat. Subject to the whims of 'the manager'. 'This Hostel Life' provides such a troubling picture of how Ireland treats asylum seekers. Direct provision includes accommodation and the provision of either meals or, more unusually, the ability for a person to cook their own meals with ingredients provided by the direct provision accommodation centre. Direct provision is also used in a short-hand manner to describe the rights and services all asylum seekers in Ireland should be guaranteed. This includes a weekly payment of €21.60 per adult and per child, the right of children to an education, at least up until completion of the Leaving Certificate and the medical card that asylum seekers are provided allowing them access to healthcare free of charge

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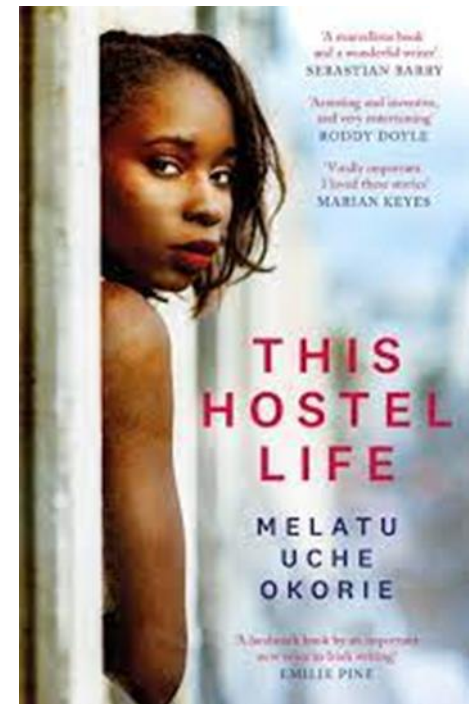
Melatu Uche Okorie: *This Hostel Life*

opera adaptation

What did they want to achieve? How?

What effect could this opera have on its audience?

- **immersive experience**
- **claustrophobic encounter**
- **Okorie: shift focus from DP as a place to the behaviour of society (how do people speak, act, think...)**



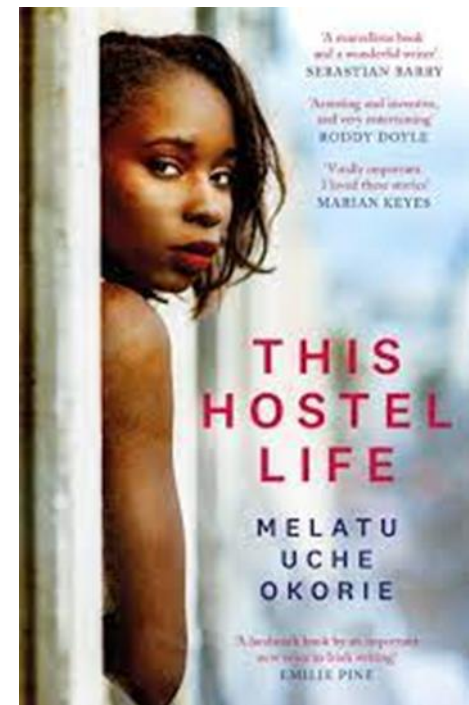
Melatu Uche Okorie: *This Hostel Life*

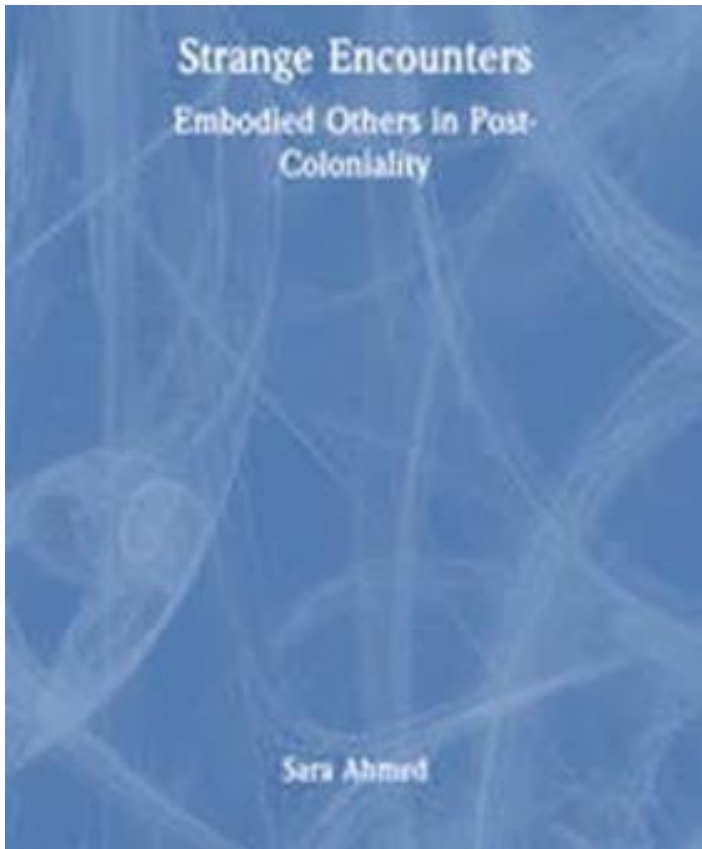
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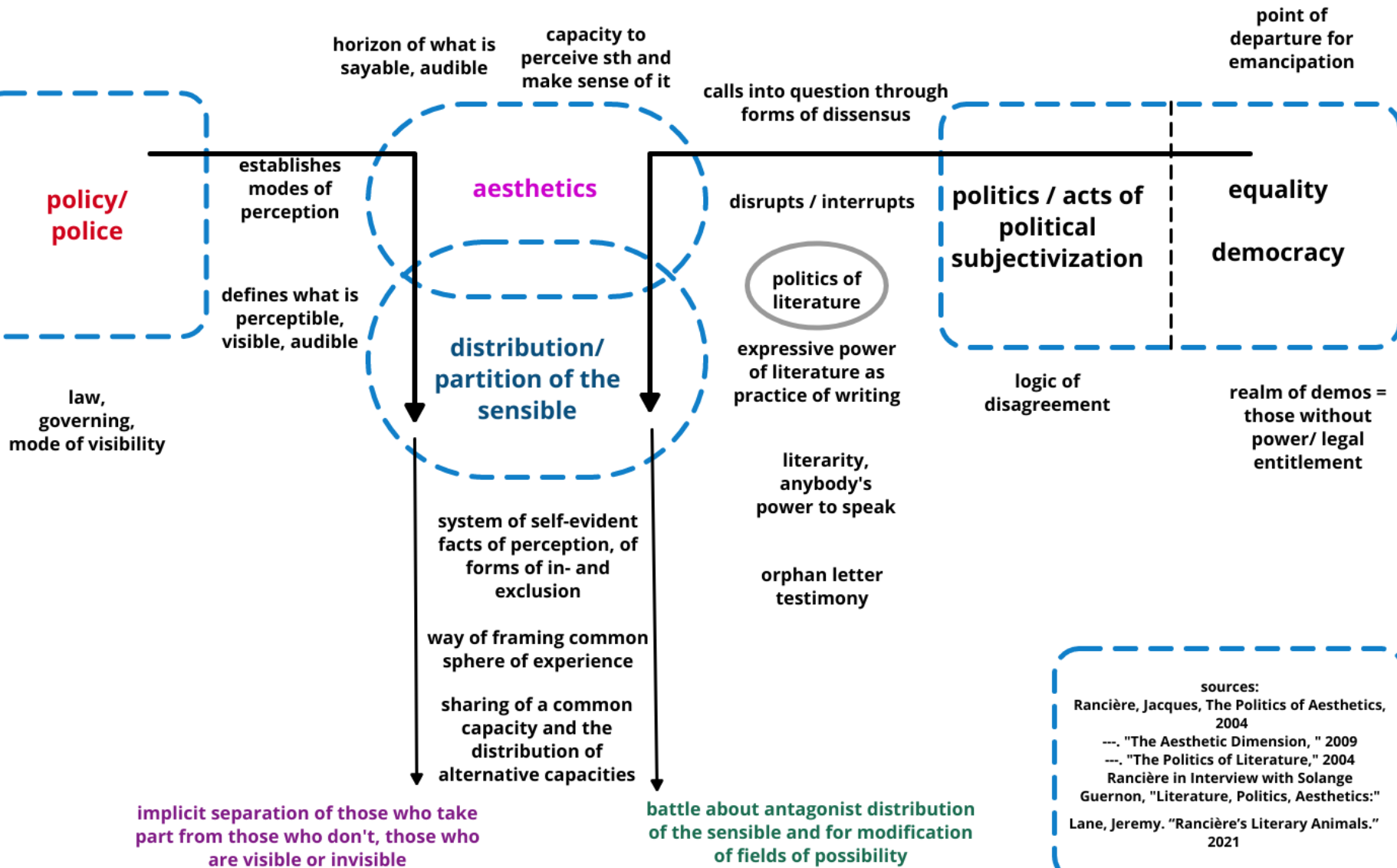
“Through strange encounters, **the figure of the ‘stranger’ is produced**, not as that which we fail to recognise, but **as that which we have already recognised as ‘a stranger’**. In the gesture of recognising the one that we do not know, the one that is different from ‘us’, we flesh out the beyond, and give it a face and form.” (3)

“I would argue, in contrast, that we need to understand how **identity is established through strange encounters** without producing a universe of strangers.” (6)

“we need to consider how **the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living (dwelling and travel), as well as epistemic communities.**” (6)

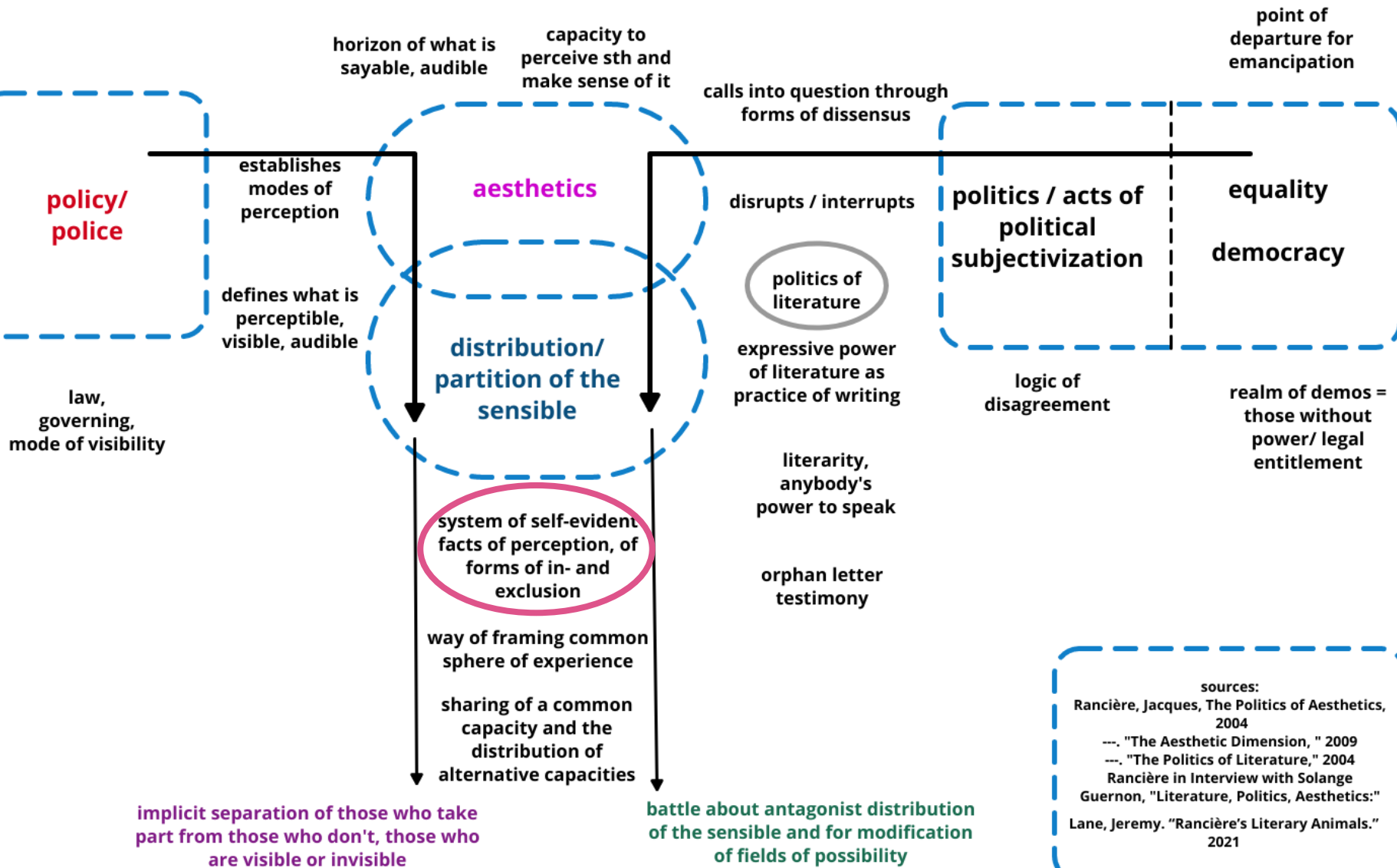
organizational system of political-aesthetic order

process of emancipation



organizational system of political-aesthetic order

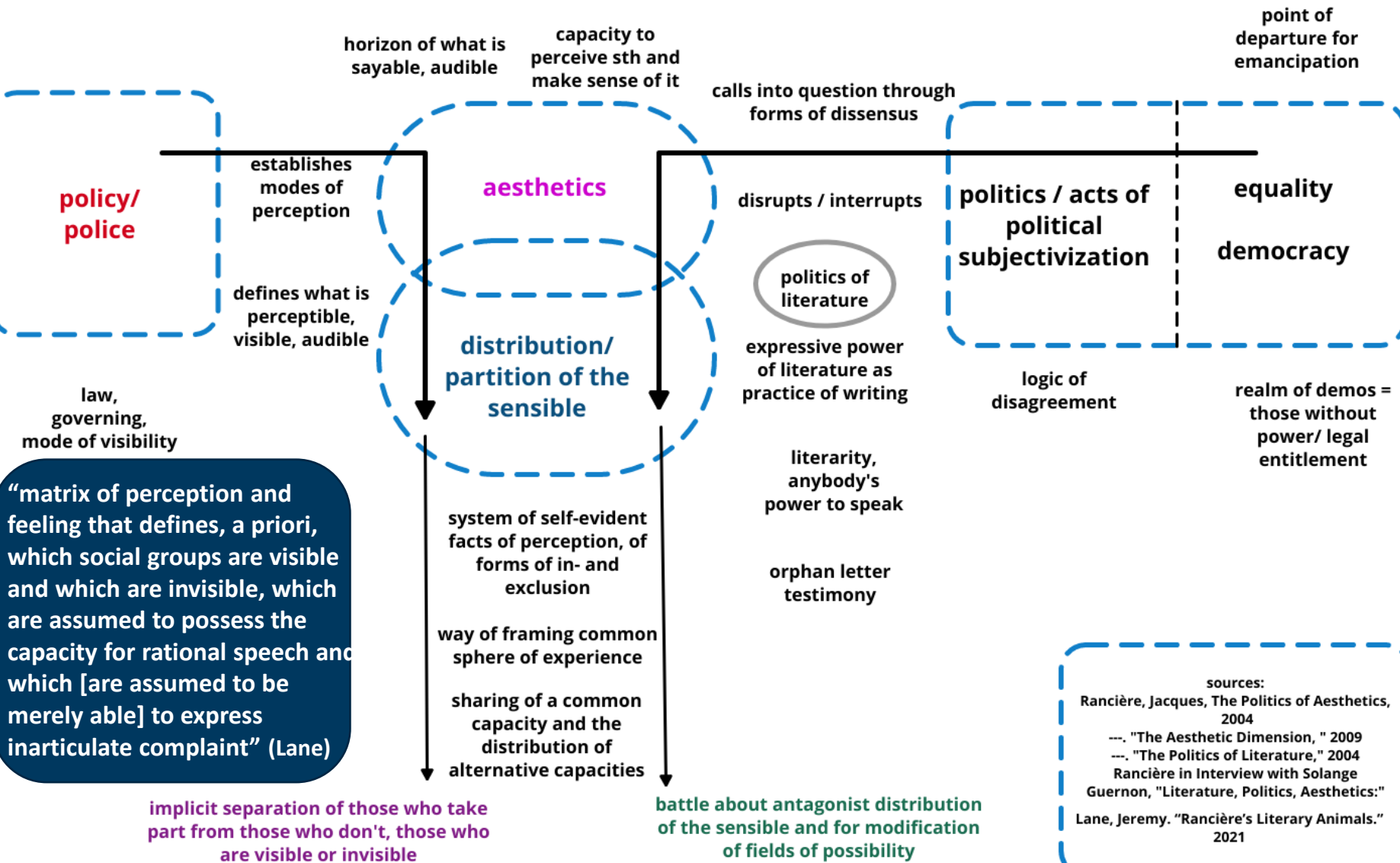
process of emancipation



sources:
 Rancière, Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2004
 ---, "The Aesthetic Dimension," 2009
 ---, "The Politics of Literature," 2004
 Rancière in Interview with Solange Guernon, "Literature, Politics, Aesthetics:"
 Lane, Jeremy. "Rancière's Literary Animals." 2021

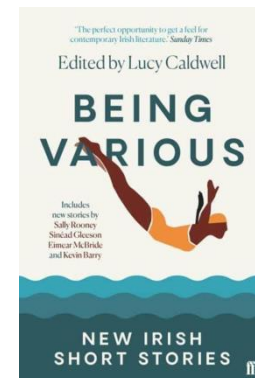
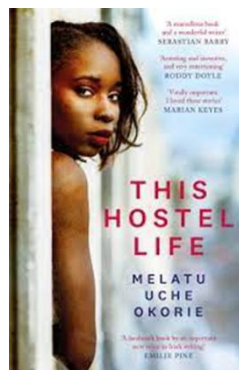
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“Okorie’s work **shines a light** onto issues that for far too long have been swept **under the carpet**. Irish society’s ability to condemn, institutionalise, and castigate persons due to differences is ever present in 2018. Ireland for generations has been a country of emigration. The experience of the migrant **has been told** in word and verse; the mythical Irish emigrant pining for home, or getting along with life in the new-found land (...). This question of ‘who belongs’ has been an underlying current of debate within Irish society.” (Thornton, “Asylum Seekers and Refugees” 79)



Caldwell, Lucy. “Introduction.” *Being Various*. 3

What makes a writer Irish? is the question that has enervated and energised me for the whole of my writing life. (...) Who is more Irish: a writer born in Ireland who moves and stays away, or a writer born elsewhere who chooses to come (...). A writer born outside of Ireland to parents who keep it alive through songs, St Patrick’s Day and waking up in the wee hours to watch the rugby? A writer born to parents from elsewhere, who constantly has to answer the deadly question, ‘No, but where are you *really* from?’”

The present work approaches the issue from the standpoint of national identity, more specifically the normative boundaries that demarcate inclusion in versus exclusion from the national ingroup. Using comparative opinion data from the International Social Survey Program's "National Identity Module," I develop a measure that taps respondents' relative prioritization of ascriptive, immigrant-exclusive characteristics (namely ancestry and nativity) over looser, more inclusive factors (namely respect for institutions and laws and "feeling" like a national). I demonstrate the strong links between this measure of ascriptive nationalism and policy preferences in the realm of immigration and test their responsiveness to social and economic threats at both the individual and contextual levels. Analysis of the 2003 ISSP cross-section indicates strong relationships between individual measures of both economic and cultural threat and ascriptive nationalism. It also demonstrates that recent immigrant growth at the contextual level is associated with a more tightly bounded notion of the national ingroup, though economic prosperity appears to have a minimal impact. Over-time analysis of repeated ISSP samples in 1995 and 2003 provides further evidence of these contextual-level dynamics longitudinally.

Defining and Measuring Normative Conceptions of the Nation at the Mass Level

Across the vast literature on nationalism and national identity, references to nations as "imagined communities" are common. They are groups of people with a common "we feeling," a sense of mutual belonging and obligation (Anderson, 1991); nationhood is "a claim on people's loyalty, on their attention, on their solidarity" (Brubaker, 2004, p. 116). While national identity also has cognitive and affective dimensions (e.g., Citrin & Sears, 2009), my emphasis here is on its normative content, or, in other words, the criteria individuals use to distinguish "us" from "them." From the standpoint of comparative public opinion, the debate has largely been focused on the extent to which the ideal-typical distinction between "ethnic" and "civic" definitions of nationhood—the former emphasizing ethno-cultural characteristics such as ancestry, religion, and language and the latter emphasizing more inclusive factors such as citizenship and allegiance to political institutions—put forward by historians of nationalism (e.g., Brubaker, 1992; Greenfeld, 1992) holds up empirically (e.g., Jones & Smith, 2001; Kunovich, 2009; Shulman, 2002).

Importantly, the survey items typically employed in the comparative

national identities

inclusion, exclusion, feeling
of belonging

'ethnic' and 'civic' definitions
of nationhood

Wright, Matthew. "Diversity and the Imagined
Community: Immigrant Diversity and
Conceptions of National Identity." (2011).


Reactions to Immigration

2004 citizenship referendum

79% of the Irish in favour of a definition of citizenship that is determined by ancestry ('ethnic' definition on nationhood)

Direct Provision

criminalisation/poverty / strangeness of Afro-Irish bodies enforced by DP
Martín-Ruiz, "Literature and Dissidence under Direct Provision"

 An Coimisiún Reifrinn
Referendum Commission

Previous Referendum

Irish Citizenship

Referendum on the Twenty-Seventh Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2004 (Irish Citizenship)

[Home](#) / [Previous Referendums](#) / [Irish Citizenship](#)

A referendum on a proposal to change the rules about the constitutional entitlement to citizenship by birth was held on 11 June 2004.

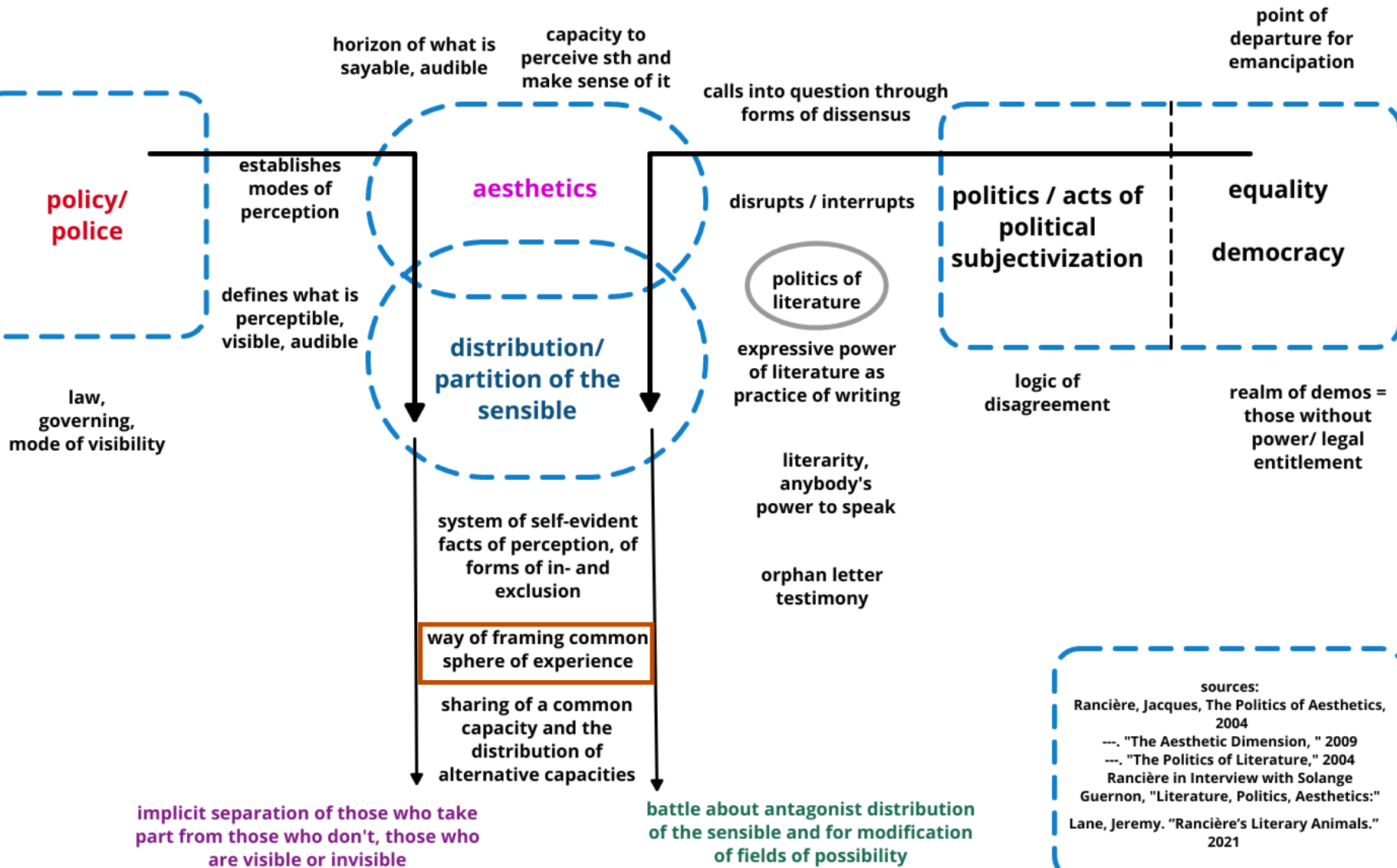
The change meant that:

People born in the island of Ireland after the constitutional amendment took effect would not have a constitutional right to be Irish citizens, unless, at the time of their birth, one of their parents was an Irish citizen or was entitled to be an Irish citizen. The Oireachtas would be in a position to pass legislation which governs how other people born in Ireland may become Irish citizens.

The proposal was approved by the people.

organizational system of political-aesthetic order

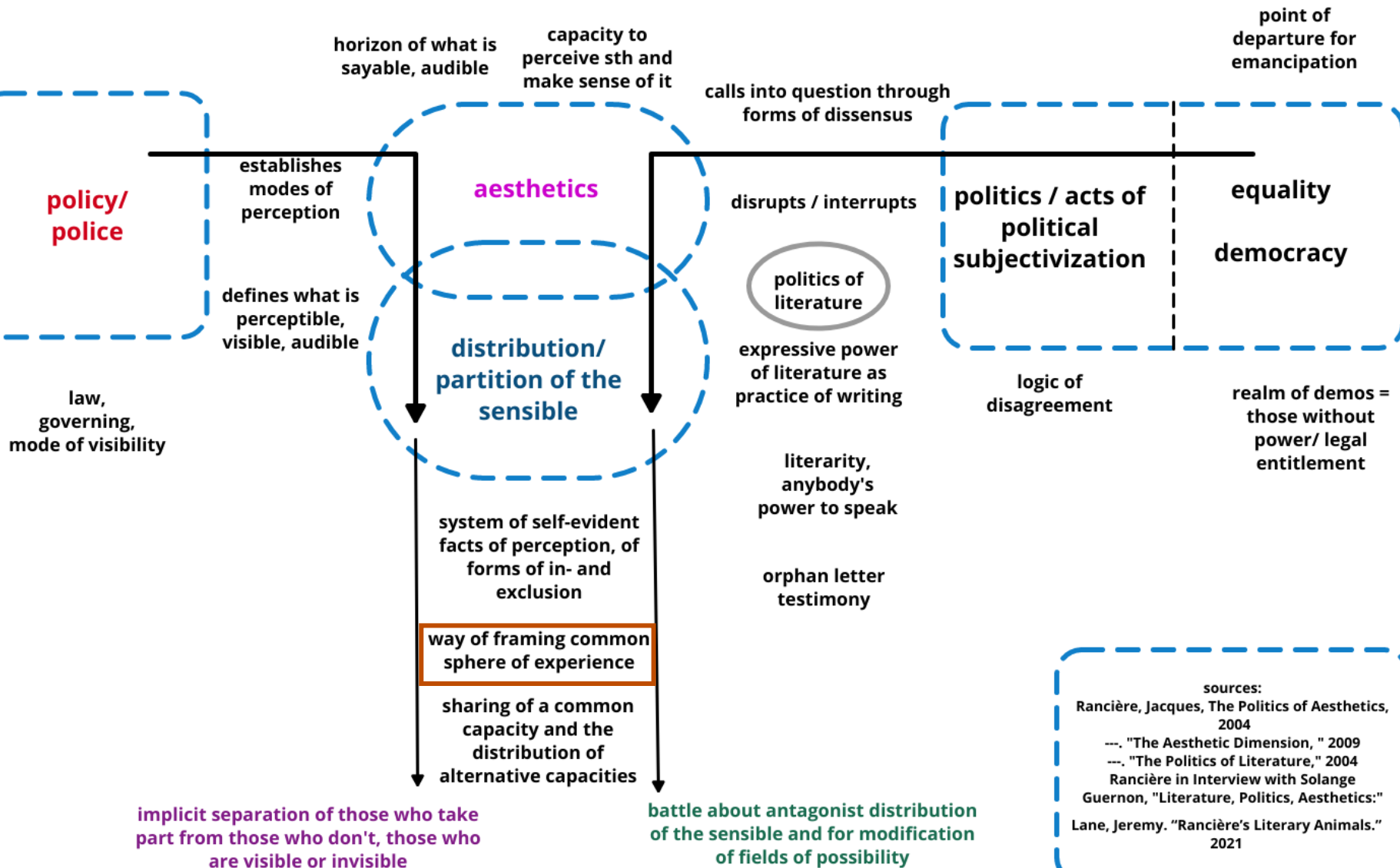
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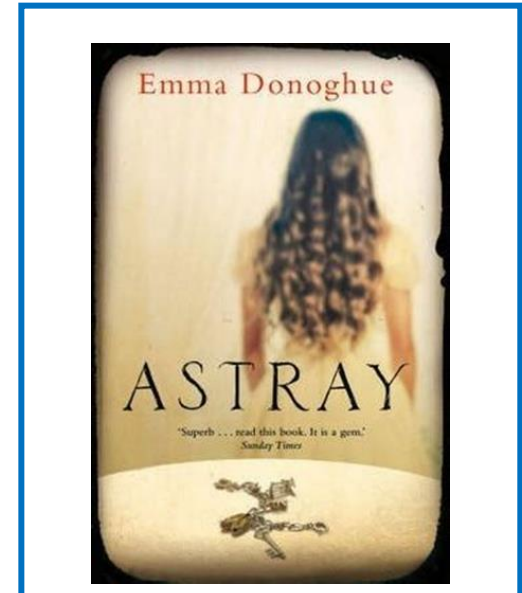
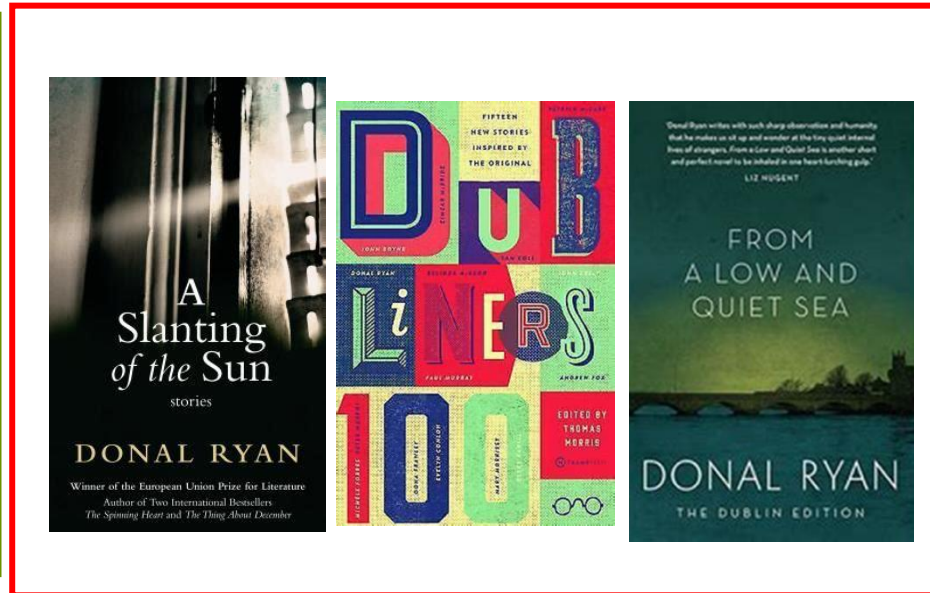
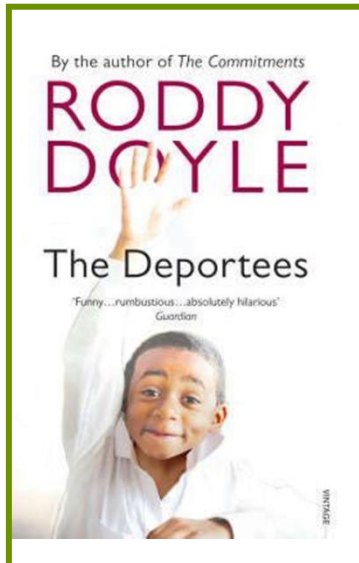
process of emancipation



“we can think of reading as a meeting between reader and text. In this context, to talk of encounters as constitutive of identity (that which makes a given thing a thing) is to suggest that there is always more than one in the demarcation of ‘the one’: there is always a relationship to a reader, who is not inside or outside the text, in the determination of the text as such.”

Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 7

Cultural and Literary Dimensions and Representations



“Guess Who’s
Coming for the
Dinner”
“57 % Irish”
“New Boy”

Ryan, short fiction
“Long Puck”
“Eveline”
novel *From a Low and Quiet Sea*

hybrid short fiction
transnational literature
‘Counting the Days’

Life Writing

“a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed. These writings include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings, . . . marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms”

Leader, *On Life-Writing* 1

Philomena Mullen

Black baby box[ed]

My sense of reality has always been informed by my outstanding racial characteristic – my coffee-coloured skin, my Africanness, my Blackness. It has led me to be viewed differently. I have rarely lived a day in my skin without it being pointed out that I'm black. It has to be said that I don't mind being black or even being called black. But I don't want to be too *busy* being black.

I lived my life as the Schrödinger cat of being Irish. I was simultaneously Irish and not Irish, visible and not visible, in and out of the pale – no pun intended – depending on the observer. Almost like

“It should be noted that the categorization “migrant writers,” can lead, as Mulhall points out, to racialization, dehumanization, and ghettoization of authors. Indeed, the categorization can minimize the crucial role such authors play in modern Irish literature and misleadingly suggest that migrant writers are somehow peripheral to the Irish canon.”

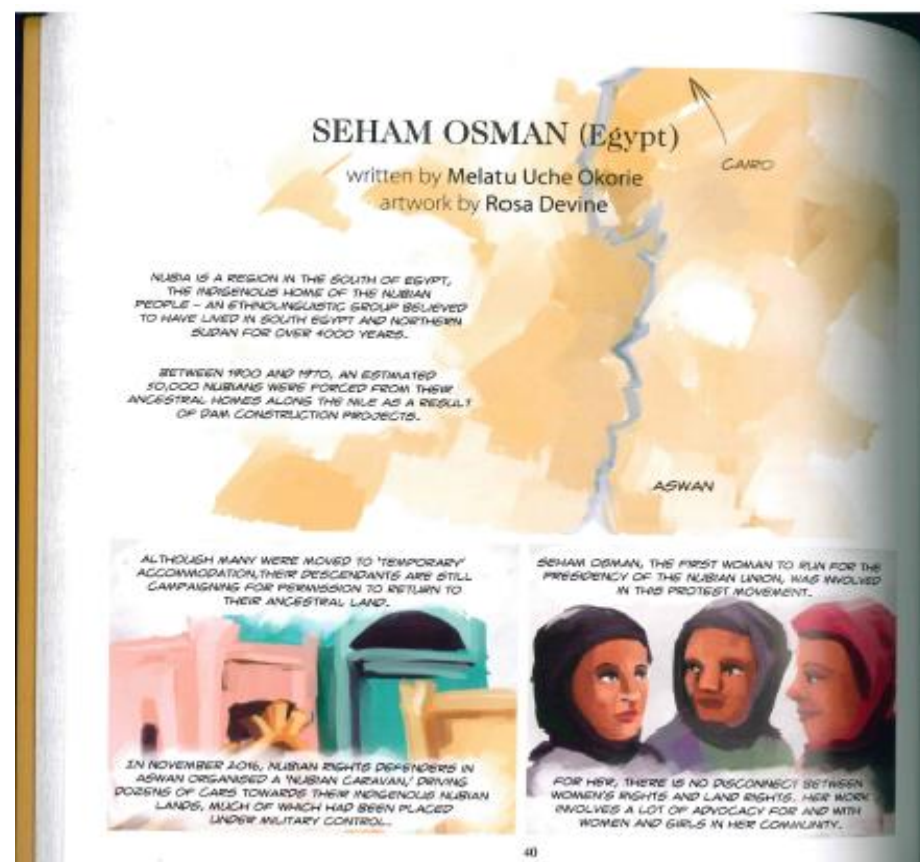
Chattopadhyay, “Immigration and Contemporary Irish literature in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland”, 2021

Yes, We Still Drink Coffee!

Stories Of Women Human Rights Defenders

Fighting with Words & Front Line
Defenders Publishing

<https://www.fightingwords.ie/publications/yes-we-still-drink-coffee>



"It is like a horror movie."

"I am afraid to contact anyone because the last time we reported the many cases of abuse at the Direct Provision Centre, we were transferred to a centre many miles away. I have been here for two weeks with my baby. The first night, a woman was crying and coughing for so long, we contacted the security guard to call an ambulance. He shouted at us to get in our rooms or he would call the Justice Department to have us deported. This poor lady tested positive and was transferred somewhere else. Last night, we received a message from a support group that ten other people tested positive and were moved to another city. We never heard from these poor souls again, just seeing the space where a sticker (isolation area) had been removed from their door. I have not slept well for weeks, and my body is adapting badly to the food, which is eggs every day for breakfast and fish and chips for lunch. To make matters worse, this place provides an kids' food. Please send this to your local Councilor or TD before a massive outbreak occurs."

^a"I am 69 years old. Since 2014, I have shared a room with three other women."

"We have to buy our cleaning products from the owners of this centre at high prices and don't have enough points left to buy food on a weekly basis. Please help us."

Dear Minister of Justice, now you are becoming a mother yourself, please think about our children. Now they have received death sentences since two years. Children deserve to be spared because they are angels and not on gents.
Praying for all!

[illegible]

19

VOICES FROM DIRECT PROVISION

"I don't want to lose this baby."

"I am pregnant and living in a hotel with my family. We are not allowed to cook, receiving the same food every day, and if we ask for more, or vegetables or salad, the manager gets upset and is rude to us. They say it will affect our case if we complain too much, or IPAS will transfer us to worse centres. I am very stressed and not sure what to do. Please do something to help us here."

"These centres are inhumane."

"I am living in Direct Provision Centre. The Minister for Justice asked to transfer all vulnerable and elderly people from this hotel because of Covid-19. The morning, the manager selected myself (89 years old) and other young girls who are studying in Dublin to be transferred elsewhere. We were handed to go and processed for eight hours, until the manager called the Gardaí and IPAS on us. The IPAS official said they would cut our meals, medical cards, and lock us out if we failed to comply. The old women are still there, with 4 of them sharing a room, and they have to buy toilet rolls, cleaning products, and even a toothbrushes, which I am sure is in the manager's contract to provide to asylum seekers. I have been moved now, totally devastated by this abuse of power and feeling hopeless as I deal with the trauma. But please help those old women still there, as they have very little English. The Minister for Justice paid €130 million to contractors for dozens of Direct Provision Centres in 2019. These centres exist only to create profit for a handful of greedy contractors. The centre I am living in had 26 cases of Covid-19 within 30 days of opening, and the Minister is still not concerned about the warehousing of asylum seekers to other countries in the middle of a pandemic."

"The most hurtful part is that my kids have been locked in a room for the past seven weeks."

"I have been living in a Direct Provision Centre for the past seven years but the last month was very traumatic for me and my two kids. The management charge us very high prices for food and toilet in English chicken. The kids can't use the playground at the centre. The manager says it is closed under HSE guidelines, but the kitchen and laundry areas are used by 200 people. If we ask the manager questions, they say it will affect our case and ability to stay in Ireland. Please let us know if the HSE closed this playground."

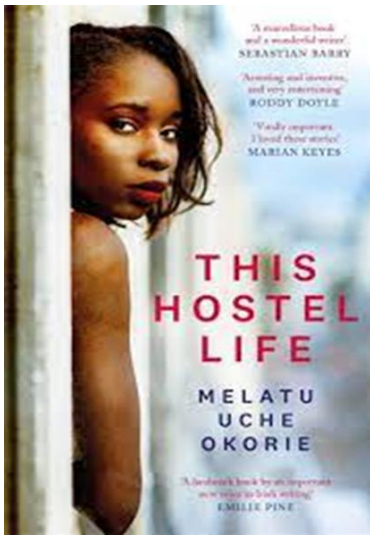
"I am devastated to see my three children sleeping to a bed every day with nothing to do."

"Direct Provision Centres have the highest infection rate of Covid-19 for at-risk groups and the Minister Justice is refusing to conduct inspections at these for-profit camps. I was at one Direct Provision Centre before the outbreak of Covid-19. My four kids and I were tested and then moved

VOICES FROM DIRECT PROVISION

19



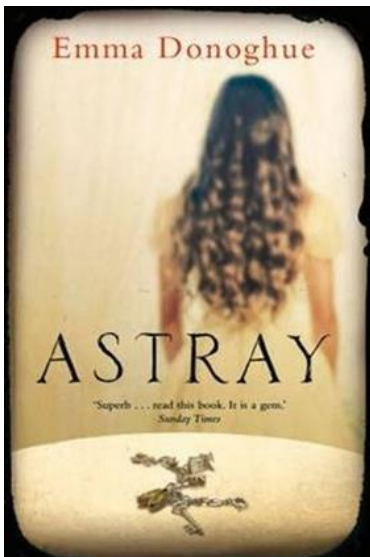


FOOD FOR THOUGHT

How can “strange encounters” through short fiction and forms of life writing can give rise to

.... subjectivization, recognition and new communities based on shared experience, without concealing differences between forms of displacement?

... to politics as emancipation and to recognition? How do the personal essays contribute to such effects?



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Amplification, Encounter, Dialogue

“It is my wish, then, that the ongoing acceptance and inclusion of these stories into the canon of Irish literature will open up and contribute to the debate of what it means to be Irish, and that the challenge of such restrictive, monolithic, and exclusionary notions of Irishness in the cultural arena will bring forward a social and political reconsideration on matters such as the Direct Provision or the 27th Amendment to the Constitution.” – Melatu Uche Okorie

Martín-Ruíz, “Melatu Uche Okorie: An Introduction to her Work and a Conversation with the Author”, 174

