Between Here and There

Liminality and the Tolerance of Oppositions in Sinéad Morrissey's Japanese Sequence

Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh

Abstract:

Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey spent two years living and teaching English in Japan, during which time she wrote the Japanese sequence of poems included in *Between Here and There* (2002). This essay analyses Morrissey's poetic engagement with Japanese culture, arguing that throughout her poems she maintains an openness to the often indecipherable cultural texts and practices she encounters, without ever trying to impose her own reading on them. She does so by allowing herself to occupy a liminal space, both deeply absorbed in but crucially disconnected from Japanese culture. She adopts what Suhr-Sytsma characterizes as "the ethical stance of unknowingness", opening herself up to encounters with the other, receptive to new insights and actively renegotiating the set meanings contained within cultural practices, thus liberating the potentially myriad underlying resonances they may contain.

Keywords: Sinéad Morrissey, Japan, Northern Ireland, liminality, tourist gaze

Otherness: Essays and Studies
Volume 8 · Number 3 · December 2021
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Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey spent two years living and teaching English in Japan, during which time she wrote the Japanese sequence of poems included in *Between Here and There* (2002). The collection also contains poems written after her return to Belfast. She prefaces the text with an unnamed poem in which she assesses the impact her years in Japan have had on her poetic imagination, suggesting that the dislocation caused by her immersion in such an alien culture, with its alarming juxtaposition of nature and industry, caused her voice to: "slip […] overboard [….] the day I fished on the Sea of Japan/ within sight of a nuclear reactor" (Morrissey 2002, 9). The second stanza of the poem reflects on the complexities of learning to see through the lens of another culture:

> At first I didn't notice,
> My flexible throat full of a foreign language
> And my attention on the poison of the puffer fish (9).

It is worth pondering the contradictory reactions captured in these lines, as they are indicative of Morrissey's nuanced engagement with Japanese culture. They suggest a willingness to embrace a different voice, "my flexible throat", but immediately introduce a barrier, predicated on the linguistic difficulties encountered by a

Otherness: Essays and Studies
Volume 8 · Number 3 · December 2021
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language that is so evidently "foreign". Her focus on the "poison of the puffer fish" suggests both a fear of unknown elements of Japanese culture and a fascination with what, to western eyes, is surely a risky culinary experience. Perhaps most significant is her admission that her initial distraction by these conventionally touristic elements of Japanese culture prevented her from paying closer attention to the subtle ways in which her immersion is beginning to change her perspective, her admission that "at first I didn't notice" suggesting perhaps that she later succeeded in engaging with Japanese culture on a deeper level.

This essay argues that tolerance of and empathy for the other are central to Morrissey's reflections on her years in Japan. It assesses her determination to resist the impulse to interpret her experience through the lens of her western gaze, choosing instead to welcome the sense of otherness created by the profound cultural disorientation and embracing the expansion of her poetic voice that results from her "experience of total strangeness" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 266). Irene De Angelis suggests that Morrissey's engagement with Japan is best expressed through the Japanese concept of *ma*, which she explains is: "Linked to Zen Buddhism, it expresses a moment in space or time in which the human mind is enlightened. It is a pause between two stages of life, which is constant change. Ma is inbetweenness, being neither 'Here' nor 'There'. It is an evocation of things which cannot be expressed" (De Angelis 2012, 151). This essays that Morrissey attempts to locate herself in this liminal space of inbetweeness and exchange, in which sensation is more eloquent than speech and the other is embraced for its enriching "total strangeness". The essay will also assess whether Morrissey succeeds in using the additional insights gained during her years living in Japan to challenge hegemonic perspectives on social and political roles when she returns to Northern Ireland after her travels.

In his book *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education and Democracy* (2004), James Conroy argues that Capitalism has eroded the

interrelationships that are crucial to the successful functioning of a democratic society, replacing them with the narrowest conception of individualism based on self-centeredness and a withdrawal from community. This conflation of individualism with isolation has resulted in a significantly diminished social discourse predicated on the silencing of alternative perspectives and consequent limiting of what is permissible for a society to discuss: "The tendency to occlude the voice of the other is particularly apparent with respect to the increasingly hegemonic claims of a globalized economy" (Conroy 2004, 24). Conroy advocates for liminality as a means of challenging the "discursive closure that hovers over liberal democracy" (Conroy 2004, 57). Based on the work of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, liminality is defined as an ambiguous, unstructured space, where traditional certainties are suspended and new models of human interaction can thus be developed: "An interstitial condition, it is to be found between categories, on the margins, neither at the centre nor on the outside" (Conroy 2004, 7). The key attribute of liminality is that the consensus it facilitates is based on the accommodation of differences between individuals, not on their erasure: "Communitas does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms" (Turner 1974, 274). In a society predicated on the fear of the outsider and consequent "reduction of the self to sameness and from there to consumer", liminality acknowledges otherness both within and outside the self: "Communitas is built not on extinguishing otherness but precisely in recognising strangeness as an inherent condition of all. What the transitional figures in the liminal period or space have in common is their explicit estrangement from the normatively structured environment of everyday life" (Conroy 2004, 57). In the light of hegemonic mechanisms operating in contemporary society to close down what is permitted to say, the embrace of linguistic openness is a key means of resistance.

Travelling to different cultures has long been acknowledged as a means for the individual to expand their horizons. Michel Foucault's insistence that space rather than time is central to the construction of identity in the contemporary world (Foucault 1986, 22) suggests an ideal global citizen for whom access to different cultures through travel and the interconnectivity facilitated by social media have resulted in liberation from restrictive traditional models of identity, allowing for the development of: "new, dynamic ways of thinking about identity which go beyond older static models, such as national identity and the notion of 'rootedness'" (McLeod 2000, 216). A global identity thus becomes synonymous with the embrace of fluidity and the easy transcendence of traditional boundaries and borders. Wolfgang Welsch argues that transculturality, which he defines as the inherent hybridization of all cultures because of increased mobility and communication technologies, is the most significant model of social interaction today. An interesting consequence of transculturality, he suggests, is that no culture today is "absolutely foreign any longer" (Welsch 1999, 199).

Although Welsch's intention with this phrase is to suggest a vibrant interconnectedness, it could also be interpreted in view of Conroy's warning about the erasure of cultural differences due to hegemonic mechanisms operating to impose homogeneity. Moreover, Welsch cautions against conflating an ability to travel to and admire another culture with the open-mindedness and perseverance needed to fully embrace and adapt new cultural practices, explaining that "multiculturalism", whereby a number of different – but not necessarily interacting – cultural groups coexist, continues to be a more accurate reflection of many societies. Multiculturalism, in other words, does little to challenge conceptions of culture as a monolithic, homogenous construct and can indicate the presence in society of cohabiting but crucially *distinct* cultural groups, thus perpetuating rather than transcending the divisions that exist between them (Berg and Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 10). This is perhaps particularly apparent when the interaction is between a

perceived dominant culture and a more marginal one, resulting in the unequal transfer of influence noted by Edward Said in his analysis of the hegemony of the western gaze: "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [….] a discourse [….] by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" (Said 1978, 11). This deliberate exoticization of other cultures as a means of solidifying one's own place at the centre is exactly why a liminal stance is so essential, ensuring that traditional hierarchies are destabilized and all individuals, cultures and values are invited to participate in: "undifferentiated, egalitarian [….] relationships" which tend to "ignore, reverse, cut across or occur outside of structural relationships" (Turner 1974, 274).

Irish and Japanese literary engagement can be traced to the writer and translator Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (born 1850), who was raised in Ireland and settled in Japan in 1890, eventually becoming a Japanese citizen. Hearn was particularly interested in Irish folklore, and his translations inspired significant Japanese interest in Ireland and its traditions. The late 19th century also witnessed huge interest across Europe and America in Japanese art, particularly prints by Hiroshige and Hokusai, which was then filtered back into Irish culture through the work of poets like W.B. Yeats (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 247-250). The success of Hearn's introduction of Irish and Japanese culture is evident in *Our Shared Japan* (2007), an anthology of eighty-five twentieth-century Irish poets who cite Japan as a significant influence on their work, which was published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Japan (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 245). This tradition of Irish poets interacting with Japan was based in part on the perceived parallels between two island nations, somewhat isolated from centres of cultural dominance.

In 2002, Mitsuko Ohno interviewed a number of prominent Irish poets with the aim of exploring: "the possible creative interaction among poets in Ireland and Japan" (Ohno 2002, 15). Their responses reveal a number of prominent themes, which relate to Welsch's concerns over the conflation of multicultural and transcultural exchanges. What most of the respondents to Ohno's questions have in common is a profound admiration for Japanese culture but a deep-rooted sense of its otherness, which they employ a number of tactics to address. Many of the poets depend on a series of intermediaries to negotiate their engagement with Japanese texts. Séamus Heaney notes that he came to Japanese culture indirectly through the Imagist movement, and suggests that it is the underlying sense of structure that most attracts him: "A general anti-slovenliness. A sense of inner rule. A reticence and a precision" (Ohno 2002, 20-21). Several of the poets cite Japanese print culture as the lens through which features of the Japanese aesthetic are most easily accessible to them. Ciarán Carson, for example, pondering on a Hokusai print, notes its: "clarity, its movement, its sense of humour" (Ohno 2002, 19). Another approach is to seek common ground with the Japanese literary tradition, with many of the writers focusing on perceived similarities between poetic forms like the haiku and early Irish syllabic verse: "I tried to write a poetry that had the clarity of Early Irish syllabic verse: a style which had some kinship with the haiku" (Carson in Ohno 2002, 19), an approach that resonates uncomfortably with Conroy's indictment of the drive for sameness in contemporary capitalist culture. Eavan Boland expresses her interaction with Japanese culture in terms of opposition: "so different and yet so recognizable – as if it was an alter ego of our western pastoral" (Ohno 2002, 18), a phrase that is reminiscent of Said's critique of western culture for seeking in the Orient a foil to its own practice. Although it is unfair to accuse the writers of consciously expressing western dominance in their reactions to Japanese culture, it is undeniable that they look to Japanese poetry as a foil, something that is different, apart from themselves, that they can use to transcend the limitations of the western

gaze. Suhr-Sytsma suggests that many of the poets based their literary engagement with Japan on the prepackaged forms and traditions produced with western eyes in mind: "throughout the twentieth century established Irish poets have persisted in associating Japan with a particular aesthetic derived from woodblock prints and translations of haiku" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 246). What distinguishes Sinéad Morrissey from this tradition was that she lived in Japan for two years, thus transcending this limited insight into Japanese culture and taking the time to develop her own perception on her surroundings.

At first glance, the title of Morrissey's second volume of poetry *Between Here and There* (2001), which contains poems written during and after an extended period of travel, appears to maintain a sense of binary opposition between those written at home ("Here") and abroad ("There"). The collection is arranged achronologically, with the poems written in Belfast on Morrissey's return from her travels in the first section, and the Japanese poems in the second, an arrangement which could suggest that Morrissey is adopting the common trope of the traveller returning home from her sojourn, enriched by the experiences encountered overseas. However, Morrissey's title is not meant to suggest a linear progression between two spaces. Rather she invites the reader to join her in an indeterminate liminal space "between" two known entities, crucially changing the focus of her poetic engagement with Japan. Asked in an interview what exactly lies "Between Here and There", Morrissey responded: "Nothing. It's being inbetween that counts. It's tolerance of transitions" (De Angelis 2005, 47). This essay traces her success in maintaining this "tolerance" in her poetic engagement with Japanese culture, arguing that throughout her poems she maintains an openness to the often indecipherable cultural texts and practices she encounters. She does so by allowing herself to occupy a liminal space, both deeply absorbed in but crucially disconnected from Japanese culture. She adopts what Suhr-Sytsma characterizes as "the ethical stance of unknowingness" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 267), opening herself

up to encounters with the other, receptive to new insights and willing not to be able to fully rationalize or understand what she experiences.

Like many Irish writers, Morrissey's first encounter with Japan was a literary one. In an interview she explains that when she first arrived in Japan and was grappling with the almost overwhelming cultural dislocation, she turned to the Japanese-inspired poetry of Michael Longley for guidance, before realizing that his texts would block rather than open up her access to Japan: "Longley's voice was a false beginning for me, because it wasn't my voice and [….] because my experience was so different to that Haiku aesthetic" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 266). The essence of a haiku for many of its Irish admirers is to distil experience down to what Cathal Ó Searcaigh defines as "small luminous moments of insight" (Ohno 2002, 27), a process which suggests a detachment of individual moments from their context. Morrissey's reaction to Japan took the opposite form, her verse: "became freer [….] There's more energy in the Japanese poems" (Meade 2002-3). Unlike Ó Searcaigh, she does not attempt to isolate moments of insight, rather she revels in the continuum of everyday activities and sensations she encounters. Her long, expansive lines suggest an eagerness to dive in and experience as much as she can, without mediating it or restricting her insights to single moments. Her success comes in part from what she calls her "sustained existence" in Japan (Meade 2002-3), an experience made possible by her participation in the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, an initiative founded by the Japanese government in 1987 to improve the standard of English language teaching in Japan. Living in Japan allowed Morrissey to learn Japanese (De Angelis 2012, 150), meaning that her engagement with the local people and their cultural practices were not filtered through the gaze of others.

For many Irish writers, the Chinese characters (*kanji*) in which Japanese is written create an additional barrier to their reading of texts. Heaney expresses admiration for the intricate composition of the characters, but the script constitutes

an aesthetic rather than an emotive experience for him: "Visiting Japan helped me to appreciate the 'material culture' aspect of Japanese poetry, its link with calligraphy, its tendency to mark paper uniquely as well as to mark time" (Ohno 2002, 20). Unlike most of the Irish poets interviewed by Ohno, Morrissey studied Japanese for two years, so she is able to embark on her own process of translation, an engagement with another culture that Paul de Man suggests: "canonizes, freezes an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice" (quoted in Venuti 1992, 8). This means that she is able to appreciate the nuances embedded in the *kanji* in the manner suggested by Conroy, as an additional metaphorical layer that complements the meanings inherent in the words themselves. What excites Morrissey most about the *kanji* is that they unify sound, vision and meaning, so that: "meaning comes in flashes, rather than being linear. It's so much more intricate and beautiful and multidimensional than English" (De Angelis 2012, 150). She dedicates a number of poems to the symbiosis she perceives between the *kanji* and the objects they represent. In "To Imagine an Alphabet", she visualizes the objects brought to life through the careful placing of the strokes of ink: "There are stories in skeletons/ And after the three fluid/ Lines that are Mountain, the four/ That are Fire" (Morrissey 2002, 54). She is, however, struck by the permanence of the characters, noting that there is something repressive in the fixed meanings enshrined within the fusion of signifier and signified: "The spokes of the world went down/ In a language that/ Went everywhere, stayed put" (Morrissey 2002, 54). Moreover, she is aware that as a non-native speaker, she will never be fully admitted into the etymological secrets legible only to those who have inherited them, reflecting in "To Encourage the Study of Kanji" that: "some other mind made them and still since then/ they've shrunk to a hint at a fairytale" (Morrissey 2002, 53). Although she admitted in an interview that she had chosen to spend her JET years in Japan precisely because it would be "a bit more culturally remote" than other cultures (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 261), it appears as though this

acceptance of impenetrability is not, after all, sufficient for her and she begins to explore ways of imposing herself into the language. She realizes that in order to inhabit the language, she needs to enter it as a metaphor, expanding its limited significance by inserting her own sensibility and voice: "I hear moaning and see constriction in a picture the colour is cinnamon the taste is chalk" (Morrissey 2002, 54). This active intervention, she explains, is the only way in which anyone can express their individuality through language: "they become ideological, and their connectedness to the objects in the world which they are trying to describe becomes infused with all of these extra significances" (De Angelis 2005, 49).

Morrissey begins to deconstruct the meticulously arranged *kanji*, allowing her imagination to infuse them with life: "I get lost in a landscape of noisy ideas that cross and flare in fireworks of strokes" (Morrissey 2002, 54). She also begins to embellish the characters with extra notations that will help her to remember what they are supposed to symbolize: "Like a child who paints a smile/ Over signatures [….] I draw windows leaking/ On the kanji for Rain" (Morrissey 2002, 55). This will render the *kanji* meaningless for any other reader, but will allow Morrissey to stretch the characters beyond their preconceived limits, thus liberating the potentially myriad underlying resonances they may contain. Her poetic language thus becomes collaborative, acting as an intermediary between the individual and the collective, its role to: "stand at the interstices of the world and the word, the personal and the public, and the local and the universal, and in so doing has a crucial role to play in maintaining discursive openness" (Conroy 2004, 143).

Conroy insists that poetic language derives its transformative power through its use of metaphor, a device he defines as: "perennially straining at the edges of meaning in its attempt to exact a little more truth" (Conroy 2004, 150). Certainly a determination to resist the tourist gaze and seek out hidden resonances is a theme in several of Morrissey's Japanese poems. "Goldfish", the first poem she wrote in Japan (Meade 2002-3), begins with a typical outsider's mistake: "The black fish

under the bridge was so long I mistook it/ for a goldfish in a Japanese garden" ((Morrissey 2002, 43). Morrissey is initially conditioned by the tourist gaze to impose her reading on the fish, rather than respectfully waiting to learn its true identity. She reiterates her mistake towards the end of the poem: "I mistook the black fish for an oriental goldfish", the pointed addition of "oriental" specifically indicting the arrogant western gaze for exoticizing and thus misinterpreting what it is seeing. Observing the movement of the fish in the water, she has an inkling that its swimming in deepening circles serves as a metaphor for the enlightenment Japanese philosophers seek through meditation: "they wanted to go/ to the place where closing eyes is to see" (Morrissey 2002, 43); and yet as an outsider, she acknowledges that her understanding of Japanese culture can only ever be partial: "the flash of gold/ on its belly meant it carried its message for the element below it/ always one story down Zen masters attaining one story down" (Morrissey 2002, 43). This is an interesting choice of poem with which to start the Japanese sequence as it suggests a certain tension between Morrissey's desire to attain a deeper insight into Japanese culture and her struggle to disentangle the myriad stream of sensations and information that crowd through her imagination:

> I understood the day I closed my eyes in Gifu City I saw Japan
> for the first time saw what I had seen the gate to the Nangu
> Shrine by the Shinkansen stood straddled before my head and I
> held out my hands to touch it and felt changed air it wasn't
> there but I walked into it continually [….] (Morrissey 2002, 43).

These lines evoke a sequence of impressions so numerous and so rapid they can only be sensed, not narrated. The confused temporal references, "saw what I had seen", convey the dislocation felt by a tourist in an alien culture and the repeated use of the personal pronoun suggests a certain retreat from the overload of new sensations. However, the poet is willing to grant herself the space to absorb the atmosphere and traditions surrounding her, the pause in her actions, "I /held out my hands to touch it", offering a chance to occupy an interstitial moment before reality

imposes itself on anticipation. The final lines suggest a similar willingness to occupy a liminal space in which the poet can both acknowledge the unknowability of the surrounding culture, but nevertheless be profoundly moved by it. The poet feels "changed" by her experience, although she knows that she has not achieved any revelation – she never does find out what the correct name for the "goldfish" is, after all. It is perhaps enough that she is willing to embrace the position of cultural outsider, "I walked into it continually", keeping her mind open and her senses primed for new insights.

It is not, of course, always easy to assume the role of detached observer. In "February", which Suhr-Sytsma notes is one of the few poems written during Morrissey's second year in Japan: "after the cultural honeymoon had ended, embodies her struggle to control more negative perceptions" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 271). She expresses her frustration at environmental policies which facilitate the destruction of the natural world by the rapacious growth in consumerism: "Each field is marked/ for the administering of cement [….] Factories chew through a mountain beyond my window/ and each time I look it's less" (Morrissey 2002, 56). Her despair at the decimation of the landscape causes her briefly to revert to a tone of western superiority, her impulse to denigrate the lack of enlightenment evident in such decisions: "There is no kindness in me here. I ache to be kind, but the weather/ makes me worse. I burrow and sneer" (Morrissey 2002, 56). She explains in an interview that this disrespect of the environment was one of the things she found most difficult to reconcile, particularly as it seemed to contradict the veneration of the cherry blossom as iconic symbol of Japan: "There was a tension there, not wanting to be continually judging a foreign culture based on my idea of what is right and wrong, and still feeling outraged and annoyed" (Meade 2002-3). Morrissey is not alone in her dismay that the glorification of the Japanese landscape in the widely disseminated prints by Hokusai and Hiroshige is not the reality. Joseph Woods, co-editor of *Our Shared Japan*, who like Morrissey spent two years

in Japan on the JET programme, also describes the necessity of divesting oneself of the tourist gaze and learning instead to appreciate the beauty one can find in the most unexpected of places:

> Over time I learned that countryside means a very different thing in Japan; you can walk down a congested street and see a tiny garden, maybe five feet square and that is where the peace is [….] It was one of my most valuable learning experiences in the early days, to perceive nature in the smallest of things and ways. (Ohno 2002, 29)

The long, unencumbered lines of the poem allow Morrissey the space to confront her mixed emotions, eventually realizing that although the season of the cherry blossom is brief, it is glorious and may perhaps be sufficient after all to mitigate against the greying industrialization of the landscape: "There will be days when fruit trees, like veterans/ left standing here and there in pools of shade, will forget about use and bloom" (Morrissey 2002, 56). In her acceptance of the transience of beauty, Morrissey resists what Suhr-Sytsma calls the temptation to conclude the poem with: "an angry Yeatsian lament for the premodern past" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 272). Instead she constructs a patient empathy through her poetic voice, a willingness to embrace what Sharon Todd calls the "small, transformative moments […] of delicate care" central to the process of learning (Todd 2014, 232).

Morrissey's determination to resist predetermined readings of Japanese culture and willingness to inhabit a liminal space on the edges of comprehension can perhaps be attributed in part to her upbringing in Troubles-era Northern Ireland, a society in which deep-rooted hostilities and strictly obeyed tribal loyalties continue to result in clearly-delineated divisions at every level of social interaction.[1] Morrissey's parents were unusual in eschewing the traditional ethno-historical binary, immersing themselves instead in a series of non-partisan causes as members

[1] For a detailed analysis of Morrissey's critique of the deep-rooted sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland and their impact on the development of her poetic voice, see Ní Éigeartaigh 2017, 127-150.

of a local Communist Party, a break from the norm Morrissey cites as contributing to her "sense of dislocation, of belonging to neither community", although as De Angelis notes it also left her with enormous freedom (De Angelis 2012, 148). Images of entrapment and coercion are common in Morrissey's poems about Belfast, as is her distrust of language, predicated on the ability of those in positions of dominance to manipulate and distort the truth. Her cynicism can be seen in "Tourism", a poem written after her return from Japan, that exposes the hypocrisy of attempts being made to package the Northern Ireland Troubles as a tourist experience. Morrissey describes the tours that have been organised to bring tourists to streets synonymous with the violence: "We take them to those streets/ they want to see most, at first,/ as though it's all over and safe behind bus glass/ like a staked African wasp" (Morrissey 2002, 14). These lines indict both the tourists for their voyeuristic interest in a conflict they could never hope to understand, and the organizers of such tours for their objectification of those whose lives were marred by the sectarian violence and their pretence that the divisions of the past have been resolved. They also suggest that we should read the Japanese poems, which are significantly placed in the second section of the collection, with an awareness that tourists will inevitably be guided towards those elements of a culture considered most appropriate for their consumption. She is equally dismissive of the tourist industry that has been created around the shipyards where the Titanic was built, noting the irony that a disaster like the Titanic is as uncontentious a symbol as the Northern Ireland tourist board can manufacture. This determination to paper over the unresolved conflict without addressing the ongoing binary divisions which characterize the relationships between the communities is at the heart of the hypocrisy revealed in the poem: "Our talent for holes that are bigger/ than the things themselves/ resurfaces at Stormont, our weak-kneed parliament" (Morrissey 2002, 14). In an interview, Morrissey explains the poem was driven by her anger that politicians were allowing their personal histories to overshadow their

responsibilities to pull Northern Ireland out of its divided past: "anger because there wasn't a combined effort by anyone involved to take the fabulous chance for peace and just implement it - for everyone to compromise and come into the middle ground" Meade 2002-3). Her clear message is that the binaries must be deconstructed and the other accommodated if Northern Irish society is going to move away from the divisions of the past. Achieving this is dependent on the construction of a liminal space in which the past can be interrogated in an honest, non-contentious way and new, flexible narratives of identity embraced.

In her rejection of fixed political and linguistic positions, Morrissey is representative of a younger generation of Northern Irish writers no longer willing to adhere to the limits imposed on their autonomy by the conflict. Maureen Ruprecht Fadem notes that "spectrality" is a common feature of contemporary Northern Irish writing, with writers deliberately eschewing definite words and recognizable locations in order to undermine the power of the dominant discourse in determining what can and cannot be said:

> recent work coming out of the North is defined by a peculiarly ghostly disposition of metaphor, figure, and image [….] Works convey not just a critical borderedness, of location, genre, voice, narrative, perspective, and language, but a spectrality in the crafting and textures of the text. (Fadem 2015, 19)

The determination to adapt this flexibility in both voice and perspective is evident in a number of the poems included in *Between Here and There*, written after Morrissey's return to Belfast. The weight and stultification of Northern Ireland's history is captured in "In Belfast", in the description of its public buildings "ballast of copper and gravitas", the houses that seem to be fighting "the weight of the sky", and the river "simmering at low tide and sheeted with silt" (Morrissey 2002, 13). Morrissey suggests that her travels have disengaged her somewhat from the stranglehold of this obdurate history, allowing her to imagine her own identity and

path: “what I have been given/ is a delicate unravelling of wishes/ that leaves the future unspoken and the past/ unencountered and unaccounted for” (Morrissey 2002, 13). This is a beautiful summation of the gift her years as a tourist have granted her, suggesting that what she has learned is not how to see more clearly, but rather to embrace the freedom that a lack of certainty can confer. Extricating herself from the preconceived narratives will not be easy: “The city weaves itself so intimately/ it is hard to see” (13), but Morrissey’s determination to resist the fixed certainties the conflict has imposed on its inhabitants is evident in the closing line of the poem: “in its downpour and its vapour I am/ as much at home as I will ever be” (13). As in the Japanese poems, Morrissey suggests that her stance will be a liminal one, embracing uncertainty and ambiguity as the portal to more nuanced and fulfilling insights.

Morrissey is aware that language has been tainted by the conflict and that words are thus no longer able to accommodate alternative perspectives. The only option is to reject the restrictive binary logic of accepted terminology, seeking instead the liminal, metaphorical language espoused by Conroy, which tolerates – even welcomes – ambiguity and opposition. This respect for difference can be seen in a sequence of poems about Japanese festivals, mass events for commemoration and celebration which are known as *matsuri* (De Angelis 2012, 148). Many of the festivals merge spiritual and secular themes, most intriguingly in the very sexually explicit imagery employed to celebrate seasonal demarcations. “Summer Festival”, for example, describes a ritualized sexual encounter which features in a procession through the community: “What do you think when you see a mâché vagina/ being rammed with a penis as broad as a battering ram/ so that children disguised as elements shriek with joy?” (Morrissey 2002, 50). Morrissey’s question challenges her own – and indeed her readers’ – reactions to the display, suggesting an initial shock that such graphic sexual imagery would be considered appropriate in a parade attended by children. However, she realizes that the discomfort she feels is due to

learned ideas, specifically the prevalence of taken-for-granted binaries that structure and divide natural human experiences in the western world: "I was shocked and puzzled, initially, but very interested in it too. It had none of the prurience of Western eroticism, at least the old-fashioned eroticism didn't. It didn't seem to be a sexually guilty culture in the same way as the West is" (De Angelis 2012, 149). There is an honesty to the Japanese performance of sexuality that encourages Morrissey to challenge her reactions to it, noting in "Spring Festival" that: "the vaginas on shrines reduces me to the facts of life" (Morrissey 2002, 49). Being forced to confront her own discomfort by this unembarrassed celebration of sex allows her to recognize the limitations her cultural upbringing has imposed on her world view.

She undergoes a similar process of self-evaluation in "Between Here and There", the title poem in the collection, in which she ponders on Japanese attitudes to death and commemoration. The poem begins in a graveyard reserved for unborn babies, whose monuments are indecipherable to Morrissey: "No one seems sure of the reason why aprons/ are tied to the necks of stone babies in temples" (Morrissey 2002, 46). Her tone here is factual and she seems content with the lack of an authoritative explanation for the practice. De Angelis notes that although Morrissey feels uncomfortable with the austerity of the cemetery, she knows that she cannot access the Japanese understanding of death and that the only role she can play is that of respectful observer: "suffering is culturally encoded, and cannot be re-encoded in a different cultural system" (De Angelis 2012, 147). Here again we see Morrissey content to accept that there are elements of Japanese culture she will never, as an outsider, have access to, although it is possible to read a hint of judgement in her reaction to the lack of personal tributes marking the burial plots: "There's a graveyard for miscarriages under Ikeda Mountain/ as stark as a bone field. No flowers, tangerines, sake or aprons" (Morrissey 2002, 46). Significantly, she returns to the devastating personal toll of miscarriage in "Stitches", one of the

poems written after her return to Belfast, reflecting specifically on the linguistic rupture that results from the unexpected end of a pregnancy. The excitement sparked by the idea of a new baby, she suggests, requires an expansive vocabulary to capture the sense that one's world is about to grow in previously unexperienced ways: "There has been extravagance in speech/ and every spilled, exploded word has been a stitch/ in a blanket made for an imaginary baby" (Morrissey 2002, 28). The loss of this dream of a new life and the future that will now remain forever unachieved reminds the poet of the ephemerality of words: "Later the screen said darkness – no spine, no heart./ And the stitches came apart" (Morrissey 2002, 28). Although she does not explicitly relate this to her earlier reactions in the Japanese graveyard, Morrissey's inability to find the language to express the loss of a pregnancy mirrors the impenetrability of the monuments and the unexpressed grief they embody. Her comment that: "No one seems quite sure…." can perhaps be read as indicative not so much of a cultural misunderstanding but rather of a universal human experience so personal and yet so devastating that it can never be captured through language, but hovers instead in the liminal spaces beneath.

What is interesting about the resonances between these meditations on grief is that they suggest empathy as a crucial means of transcending one's own cultural gaze in order to understand the other. In spite of her willingness to open her mind during her years in Japan, there were many elements of Japanese culture and language that remained impenetrable. She is more successful when she allows herself the space to personalize her encounters with Japanese culture, diving below the often unreadable surface meanings of words and monuments and immersing herself in the universal flux of emotions that lie beneath. Her expansion of the metaphorical meanings of the *kanji* by incorporating her own sensations into the interpretative process, for example, may not add much to the authentic meanings of the texts, but it does allow her to claim their significance for herself, thus expanding her poetic encounters with the language. It is also significant that she attributes

much of this expansiveness to her ability as a woman to transcend the specifics of her own cultural position and empathize with others. Her deconstruction of the complex form of the *kanji* is reminiscent of Helene Cixous' exhortation to the feminist writer to choose a voice that will allow them to be unmediated, unembarrassed and free:

> *Voice!* That, too, is launching forth and effusion without return [….] And this is how she writes, as one throws a voice – forward, into the void. She goes away, she goes forward, doesn't turn back to look at her tracks. Pays no attention to herself. Running breakneck. Contrary to the self-absorbed, masculine narcissism, making sure of its image, of being seen, of seeing itself, of assembling its glories, of pocketing itself again. The reductive look, the always divided look returning, the mirror economy; he needs to lose himself. But she launches forth; she seeks to love (Cixous 1997, 153-4).

Cixous' argument that women writers are particularly adept at undermining language as they have long experience of inhabiting the margins of official discourse is a common theme in the writings of Northern Irish women (Ní Éigeartaigh 2017, 134-7). Many of the poems in Morrissey's third collection *The State of the Prisons* (2005) draw a contrast between the limitations of learned language and the infinite flexibility that can be found beyond its margins, liminal spaces occupied most commonly by women. What is also significant in Cixous' exhortation is the suggestion that women's voices gain in strength and power through their embrace of the other, rather than losing their individuality in this transaction. Embracing the perspective of the other thus results in growth rather than dilution. In "On Omitting the Word 'Just' from my Vocabulary", Morrissey reflects on pregnancy as a means for women to occupy several planes of subjectivity simultaneously. She notes that the limited meanings conveyed by words could never contain the myriad insights of women who are witnessing their bodies expand

and accommodate in ways that defy description: "And here I am in a room I don't recognize [….] I must be somewhere Scandinavian./Where weather is decisively one way/or the other, and summer [....] or winter, will not brook contradiction" (Morrissey 2005, 33). Women are more likely to inhabit the "fissures" between these binaries and to seek out unexplored spaces where they can expand and embrace the other: "My own audacity in coming here/ astounds me. Yet I step purposefully./ I swell uncontrollably" (Morrissey 2005, 33). Morrissey's image in this poem is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's powerful evocation of pregnancy as the ultimate symbol of tolerance and accommodation of the other, the female body nurturing both sexes equally: "(T)there has to be a recognition of the other, of the non-self, by the mother [….] The difference between the 'self' and the other is, so to speak, continuously negotiated" (Irigaray, 1993, 40-1). Although not directly applicable to the Japanese poetry which was written before her marriage, Morrissey had in fact just met her future husband, an American living temporarily in Japan like herself, and her poems reflect on the process of falling in love and learning to think of herself as a subjectivity that is now, as a consequence of an additional identity as part of a happy couple, in the process of expanding beyond the limits of her own consciousness. Many of her poems link the expansion of her poetic gaze through her immersion in Japanese culture with the parallel development of her romantic relationship, the success of which Todd notes is predicated on "respecting the otherness of the other": "our becoming is in a sensible, material relationship with an other which simultaneously enables us to exceed ourselves, to engage with the mystery of the unknowability of the other" (Todd 2014, 241).

Returning to "Goldfish", the poem in which Morrissey first introduces us to her attempts to engage with the intricacies of Japanese culture in a respectful, nuanced way, what is most striking about her account of her growing understanding of what the fish may represent is her professed willingness to balance her own impressions with what she learns from others. Although she references zen

philosophy as one potential source of enlightenment, it is crucially the insights shared by her boyfriend, who has been living in Japan for longer, that open her eyes to the underlying resonances: "And when you talked me through/ Gifu one end to the other eyes closed I saw what I would never/ have seen (Morrissey 2002, 43). Her boyfriend's knowledge does not limit or structure her perceptions, on the contrary Morrissey welcomes the additional perspectives that she can now integrate with her own. This image of expansion through communion with another person is noted by Emmanuel Levinas, who emphasizes that it enhances rather than diminishing one's individuality: "The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is [….] an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching" (Levinas 1991, 50-1). This perception of learning as a liminal space where knowledge is communicated through exchange rather than as a directive from teacher to student is at the heart of what Todd argues is its transformative power. Expanding on Conroy's argument that liminality is crucial in facilitating the coexistence of different but respectfully balanced perspectives, Todd defines education as constituting: "small, transformative moments [….] of 'delicate care' that disrupt the commonplace. It is nothing overt or explicit, nothing that can be articulated fully through words, but a subtlety of presence that allows a bit of birth in all its messiness to enter" (Todd 2014, 232). Through these encounters, she suggests, we can "shift the borders of our self-understanding", but only if we are willing to take risks, to move outside our comfort zone and exceed the limitations our experience so far imposes on our understanding. Todd draws on Irigaray's image of maternal expansion to depict education as fundamentally based on "respecting the otherness of the other", so that the teacher-student relationship becomes one of "mediation and exchange" (Todd 2014, 241). Crucially, allowing one's thoughts to be modified by the insights of another is not indicative of the homogeneity Conroy argues is encouraged by formal education in capitalist societies. On the contrary, Todd argues: "Such porosity is not about becoming fused

or unified, but only works from a respect for the other's becoming" (Todd 2014, 241). Morrissey concludes her poem with a beautiful image of her growing communion with her boyfriend, suggesting that like the Zen masters, their accommodation of each other's insights will open up a world of infinite possibilities: "I/ falling into you, story by story, coming to rest in the place where closing eyes is to see!" (Morrissey 2002, 43).

This retreat from the absolutes of knowledge and signification, and privileging of the sensed rather than seen, is reminiscent of the pre-linguistic "semiotic" stage to which Julia Kristeva suggests the feminist writer should return in search of her unmediated, flexible voice (Kristeva 1997). This essay has argued that Morrissey's willingness to invite encounters with the other and her receptiveness to new insights gained during her years in Japan are predicated on her willing adoption of such a liminal perspective, her poetic voice expanding as she embraces the myriad resonances, some indecipherable, that she senses in the texts and practices she reflects upon in her poems. Although some elements of Japanese culture and language remain impenetrable to the outsider, Morrissey's empathy and openness to the strangeness of the texts and practices she encounters enables her to develop a nuanced and flexible poetic voice that also has the potential to transform her engagement with the divided, restricted society of her native Northern Ireland.

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