

rigged from the beginning

THE AFTERLIFE OF
CONFLICT IN WENDY
ERSKINE'S *THE
BENEFACTORS*

KAROLINA ULLOA, MA



the troubles



1960s - 1998

good friday agreement



1998

“[C]ontinued British sovereignty over the territory, but allowed Irish nationalists to keep alive their hopes of Irish unity in the future” (Mitchell 91)

→ consent

CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN IRELAND

post-troubles & post- brexit ireland?



2016 - 2020

An “EU frontier”: “a hard border that would disrupt the free movement of people and goods—and redraw a dividing line in the minds of the people of the island” (93)



the benefactors

The purpose of this lecture is to trace the afterlife of the two most important conflicts in contemporary Northern Irish history—The Troubles and Brexit—throughout Wendy Erskine's *The Benefactors*. Set in today's Belfast, this novel does not depict either the paramilitary struggle or parliamentary discussions on leaving the European Union. Nevertheless, residues of systemic differentiation among social classes are still very much palpable in quotidian, domestic settings. For this reason, the sexual assault of a young woman, Misty Johnston, reveals itself as a symptom of a nation that has not yet achieved peace, however much it is advertised as such.

(2025)



today's cartography



1

MORE TROUBLES

Post-Brexit Northern Ireland

2

UNSPOKEN REALITIES

Intergenerational trauma

3

ONLINE PLATFORMS 4 SEX WORK

Politics of OnlyFans Bennyz

4

BOURGEOIS & CHAV CULTURES

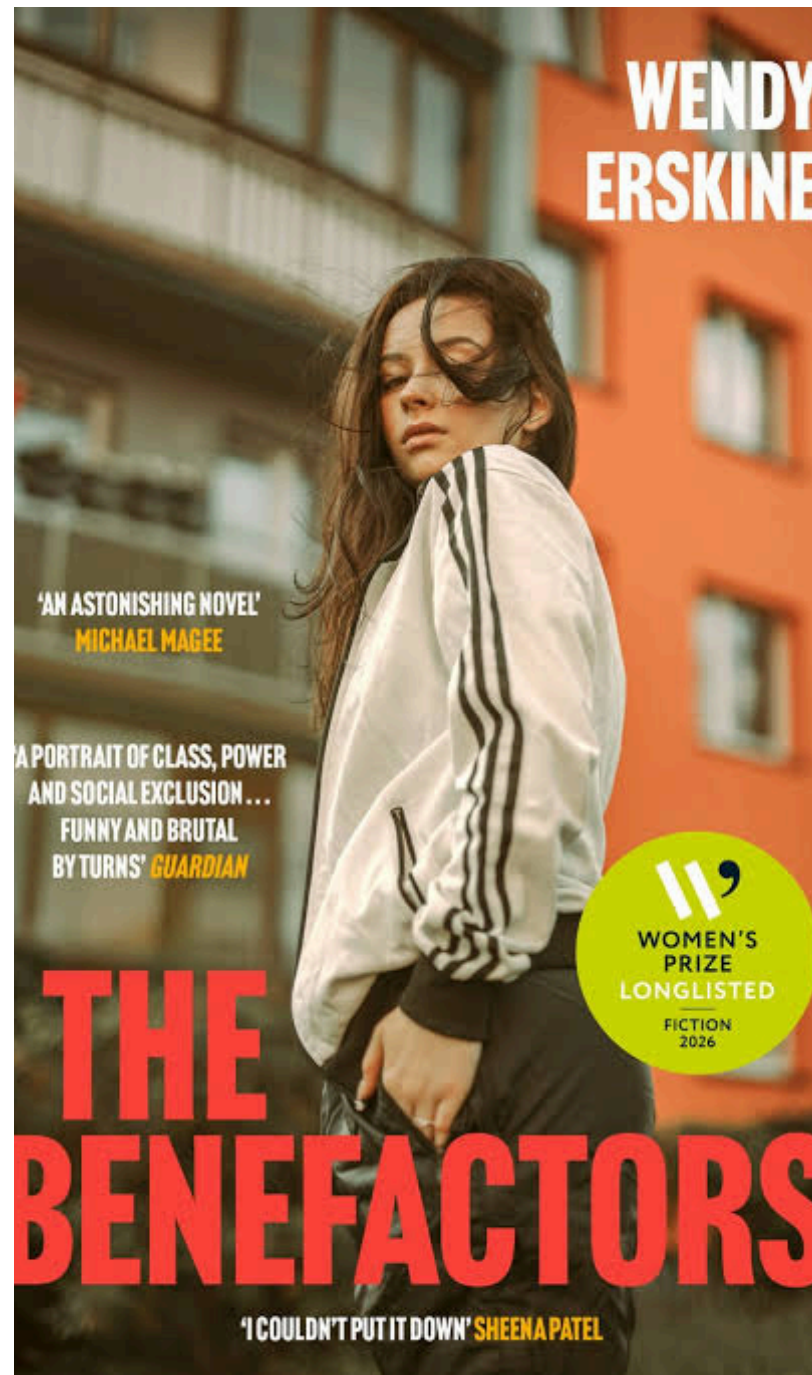
Class struggle and impunity

5

WHO BENEFITS FROM THIS?

The Benefactors

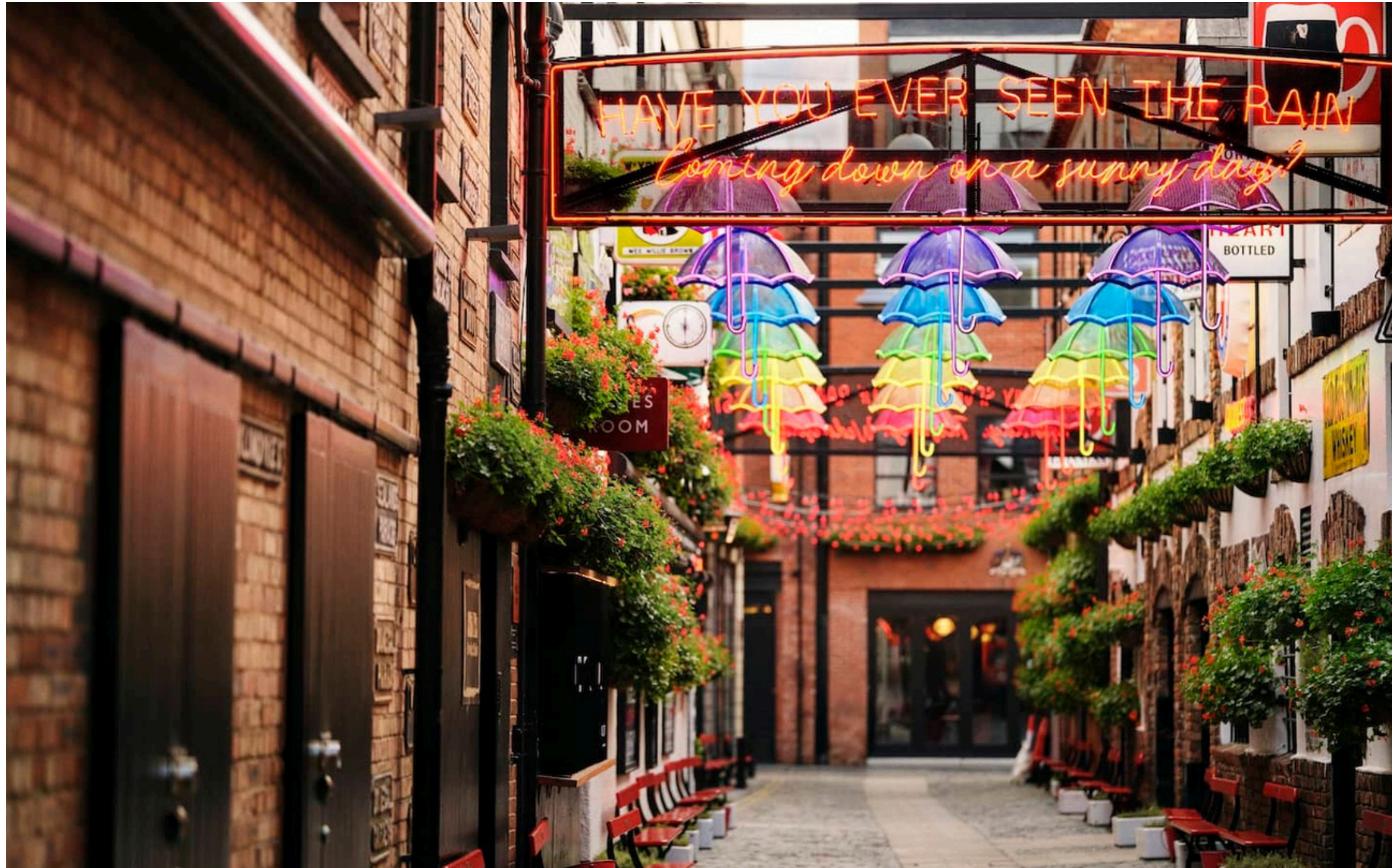
about the novel



Through a polyphony of voices, *The Benefactors* paints contemporary Belfast as it follows four families of different social strata and their domestic structures. The event that serves as a trigger for the plot is Misty's sexual assault by three male characters she thought were her friends, which in turn uncovers multiple systemic failures and the not-so-superficial violence that still permeates the city's "peace." Among the elements that contribute to discredit Misty's character are her complex family history, her housing situation, and the means by which she makes money: occasionally selling drugs and working on the online sex work platform The Benefactors.



(Belfast, 1968)



(1) more troubles

(MITCHELL 89)

“Northern Ireland, so long synonymous with urban violence and political unrest, was rebranded as a **paragon of peacemaking.**”



(1) more troubles

7

AFTER THE TROUBLES, BREXIT ↘

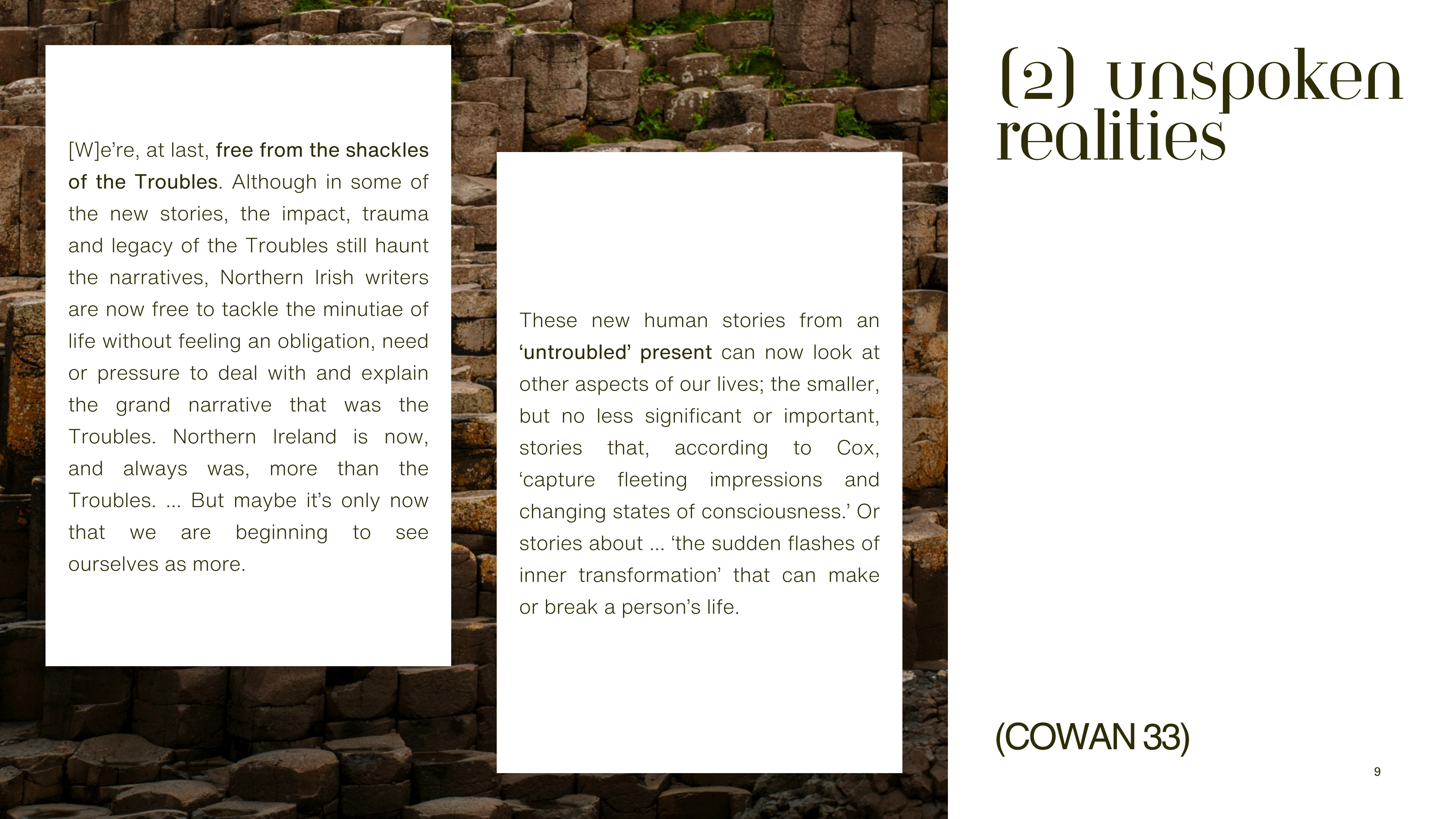
- Brexit as “the challenge in our generation” (Wright 113)
- EU’s role for Ireland: to “depoliticise a range of complex issues including justice and policing, identity, equality and human rights by enabling cooperation between national governments and local communities” (108)
 - Principle of **equality**
- **Hard border**: “immediate and significant economic consequences” in trade and accessibility (Wright 111-2); potential return of paramilitary violence (Browne 228)
- An **abrogation** of the 1998 Agreement: “a stark reversal in a political process that has gone a long way to detoxify complex questions surrounding British and Irish sovereignty and identity” (Wright 112).

First, it underpinned the high level of support given to the Irish government and to the provisions of the [Good Friday Agreement] by the EU as an institution, and by EU member states, manifested in the refusal of the EU to negotiate a land border on the island of Ireland. For the UK this was an unforeseen outcome as its negotiation strategy was based on the EU prioritising the importance of accessing the UK economy over Irish claims under the GFA. Second, the undermining of the political stability and relative consensus created by the GFA has led to a new discourse on Irish unity across the island of Ireland, including on the potential shape of a new Ireland. This is visible in the mainstream media, on social media and in the findings of opinion polls. Whether or not these changes will lead to a united Ireland in the short term is uncertain, but the manner in which the sovereignty of the UK over Northern Ireland is recognised has already undergone a fundamental shift, internationally and within Ireland.



(CONNOLLY AND
DOYLE 217)

unanticipated consequences



[W]e're, at last, **free from the shackles of the Troubles**. Although in some of the new stories, the impact, trauma and legacy of the Troubles still haunt the narratives, Northern Irish writers are now free to tackle the minutiae of life without feeling an obligation, need or pressure to deal with and explain the grand narrative that was the Troubles. Northern Ireland is now, and always was, more than the Troubles. ... But maybe it's only now that we are beginning to see ourselves as more.

These new human stories from an **'untroubled' present** can now look at other aspects of our lives; the smaller, but no less significant or important, stories that, according to Cox, 'capture fleeting impressions and changing states of consciousness.' Or stories about ... 'the sudden flashes of inner transformation' that can make or break a person's life.

(2) Unspoken realities

(COWAN 33)



(2) unspoken realities

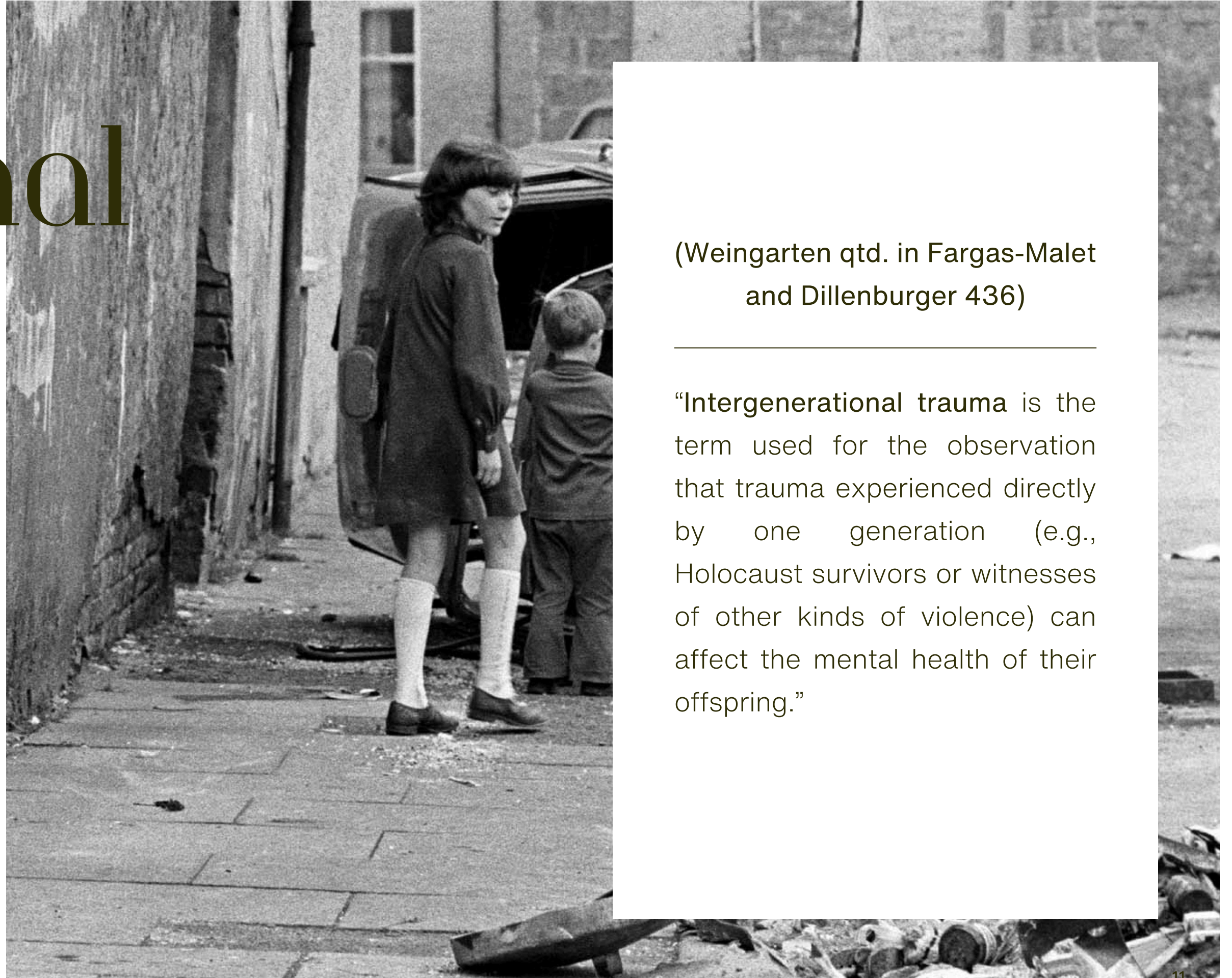


(ALEXANDER 272-3)

Colin Graham has recently argued that the language and practice of the peace process is structured in such a way as to preclude engagement with the issues of identity and cultural difference that have always been at the basis of the conflict. Indeed, he goes on to warn of the dangers of ‘constructing a political process which forgets rather than remembers, which detaches itself for survival, which regards identity, in its widest sense, as a danger rather than as the very substance of the matter’, because **without an acknowledgment of this sort Northern Irish society will remain mired in ‘patterns of repression and recurrence.’**”

inter- generational trauma

“Between 1969 and 1998, among a population of 1.5 million, **3,627** people were killed and **tens of thousands** were wounded, traumatized, and displaced” (Mitchell 90).



(Weingarten qtd. in Fargas-Malet
and Dillenburg 436)

“Intergenerational trauma is the term used for the observation that trauma experienced directly by one generation (e.g., Holocaust survivors or witnesses of other kinds of violence) can affect the mental health of their offspring.”



inter- generational trauma

The Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experience in Northern Ireland (2025)

“The legacy of the Troubles, marked by 4,000 deaths and 50,000 injuries over 30 years, continues to shape Northern Ireland’s ACE landscape. Conflict-related adversities, such as paramilitary threats and witnessing violence, remain prevalent. ... Some of the best estimates quantify exposure to bereavement and injury at 30% (NISRA, 2010), with several high-quality reports documenting the elevated rates of stress-related symptoms. ...” (20)

(Downes et al. 586)

“One study conducted with family members of those who were killed on Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972, found high levels of PTSD symptomatology among the immediate family, the children of the immediate family, the cousins of the immediate family, and a lower rate among second cousins of the immediate family. There is “tentative evidence for the possibility that trauma related to the Northern Ireland conflict could affect family members, who themselves have not been directly exposed.”



cliona hensey

(168)

In Derrida's hauntological interpretation, the work of mourning is not tied to curative discourses of closure in which the past is confronted in order to be (re)buried, enabling the grieving subject to 'move on', but rather resembles the ongoing process of working through, in which the perceived absence of justice produces an ethical injunction to conjure these 'ghosts' and provide a space in which their memory is honoured:

To exercise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as revenants who would no longer be revenants, but as other arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome – without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. (1994, 175)

The haunting presence of the past therefore assumes an ethical function, in that it 'responds to the injunction of a justice which, beyond right or law, rises up in the very respect owed to whoever is not, no longer or not yet, living, presently living' (Derrida, 1994, 97).



(3) online platforms for sex work

01



“Prostitution, the exchange of sexual favours for monetary return, has conventionally been identified as a female occupation. Women who were engaged in prostitution were drawn from across class divides and thus their experiences could be very different. **Great Britain has never made prostitution illegal**, rather it is solicitation or brothel keeping – matters of public order and decency – which are the criminal offences.”

(McCormick 13)



(3) online platforms for sex work

- OnlyFans's transformation of sex work into a "gig": greater control over content, pricing, and working conditions
- Built upon a precarious autonomy: platforms, banks, and their policies determine whether creators can access their audiences and earn income



02



“SEX WORK IS (GIG) WORK: ASSESSING THE ONLYFANS EFFECT”

Benjamin Weil

(3) online platforms for sex work

- Broadened representation and economic opportunities for traditionally marginalized bodies and identities (in the porn industry)
- Reproduction of existing inequalities: algorithms that disproportionately benefit conventionally attractive and already-visible creators.



02



“SEX WORK IS (GIG) WORK: ASSESSING THE ONLYFANS EFFECT”

Benjamin Weil

(3) online platforms for sex work

- Extremely unequal earnings: the top 1% receive 33% of earnings
- Other threats to livelihood: ban on sexually explicit content in 2021



02



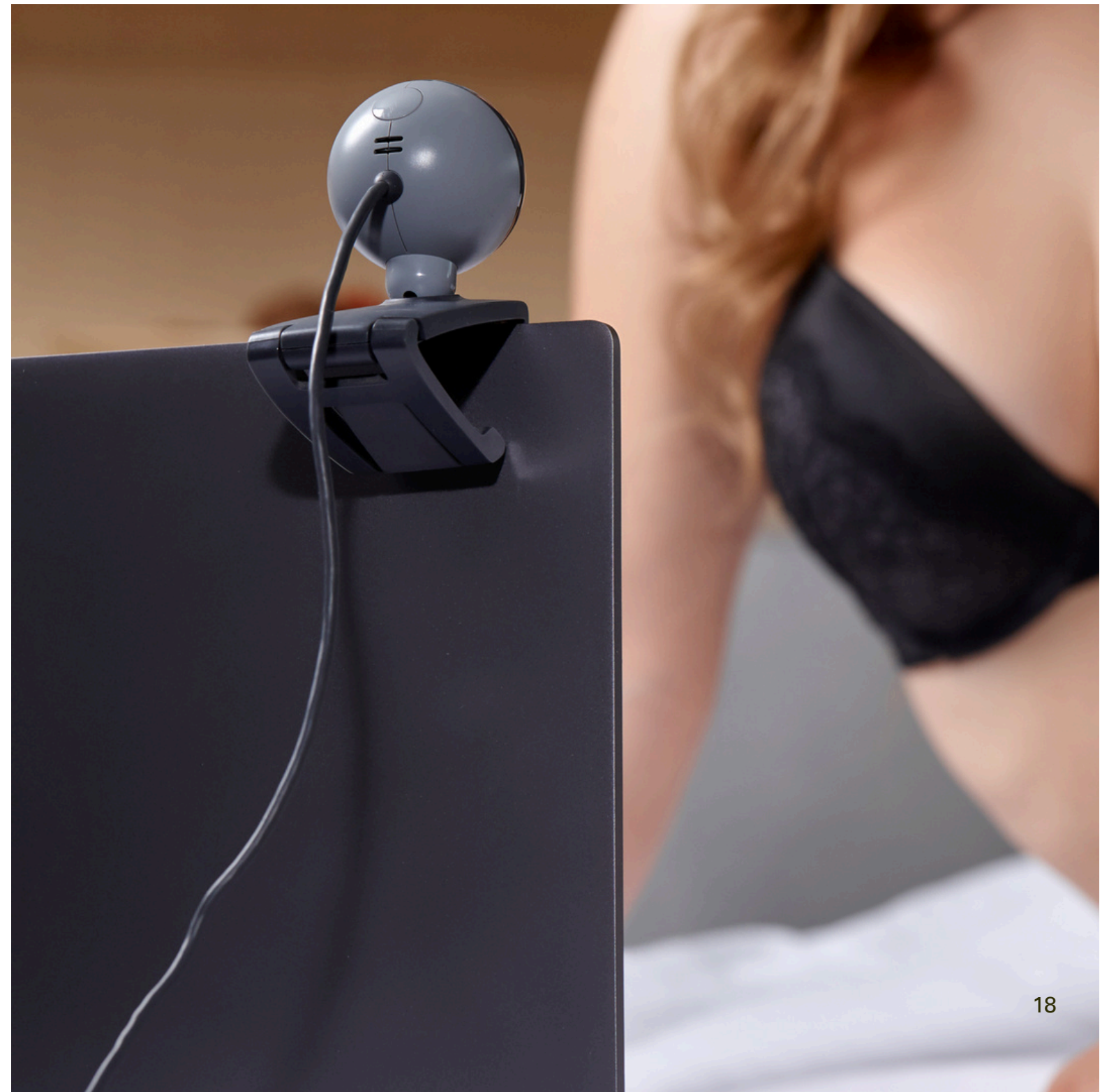
“SEX WORK IS (GIG) WORK: ASSESSING THE ONLYFANS EFFECT”

Benjamin Weil

(3) online platforms for sex work

Sex work is excluded from digital labor politics in the UK:

“In [sex work] literature, there is what could be considered a more optimistic approach that recognises the improvements that technologies have had on the well-being of sex workers. For example, there is a celebration of sex workers operating independently without third-party involvement (Bernstein, 2007; Bleakley, 2014) and with minimal involvement by the criminal justice system (Sanders, 2005a). Sex workers, contrary to the concerns of digital labour scholars, have been able to use social media platforms to collectively organise (Feldman, 2014). This process of professionalisation has attracted ‘new faces’ to commercial sex (Bernstein, 2007), particularly in the UK (Vanwesenbeeck, 2013). However, concerns have surfaced regarding **new digital vulnerabilities for sex workers**, such as **lack of control of digital identities** (Jones, 2015b), **systematic and normalised online harassment**, and a **reluctance to report crimes to the police** because of the quasi-criminal context of digital sex work in the UK (Campbell et al., 2018).”





bourgeois morality vs chav culture

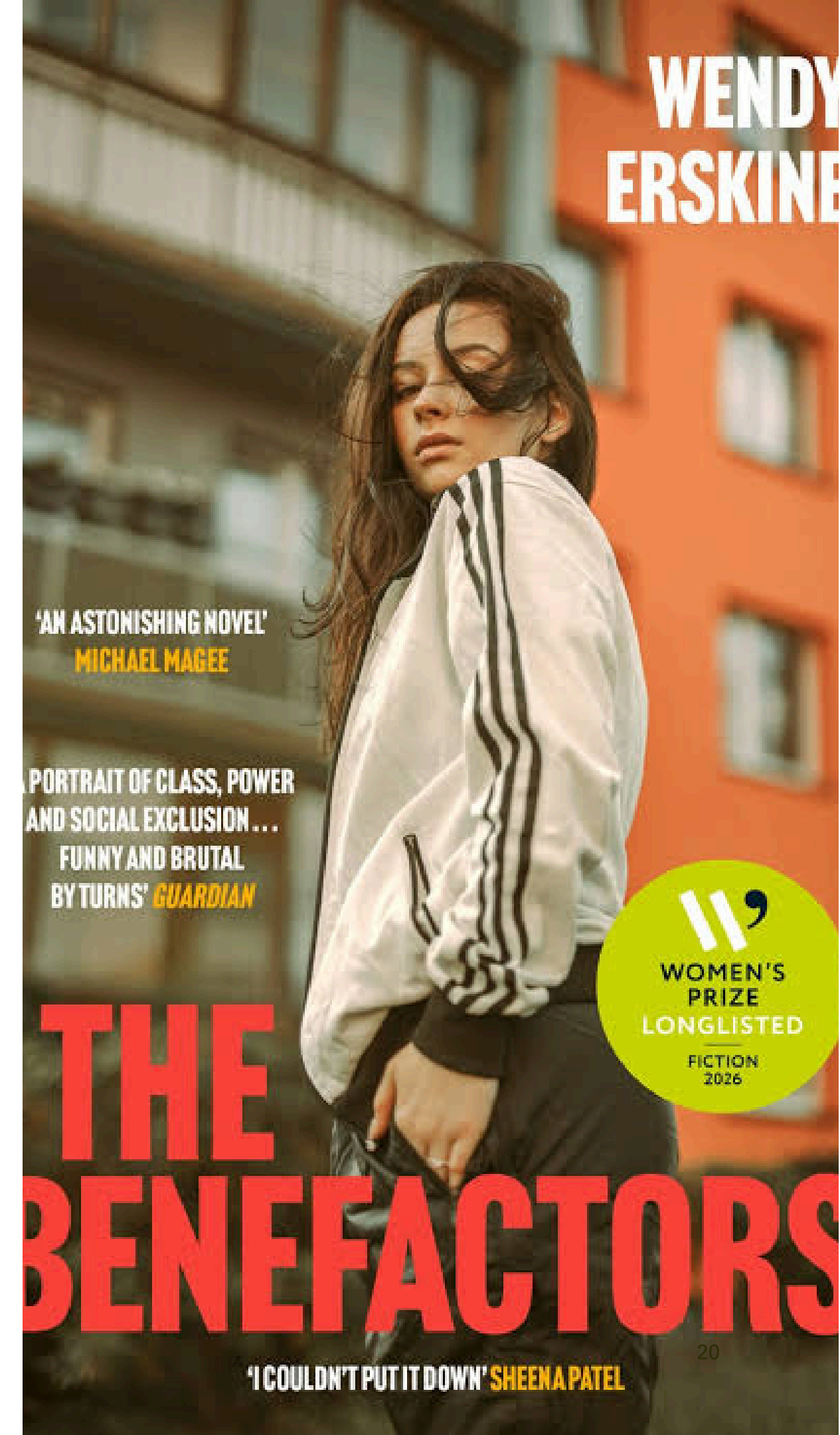
(4)





bourgeois morality VS chav culture

(4)



Nan D

Michael “Boogie” Downes

Leigh Johnston + Unknown father

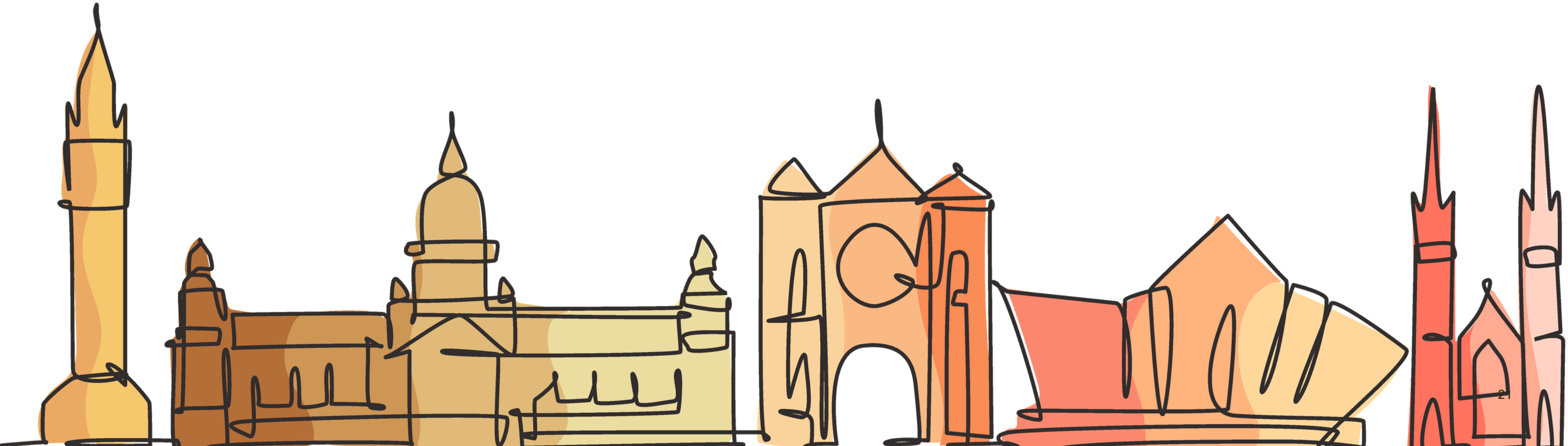
Unknown father

Geneve “Gen” Johnston

Ewan

misty johnston

“Elizabeth Barret Browning“



THE LEVINE FAMILY

Neil Levine

Barbara Levine †

Frances “Frankie” Levine

Christopher “Chris” Levine

Nina Levine

THE ABDEL SALAM FAMILY

Kahlil Abdel Salam

Miriam Abdel Salam

Rami Abdel Salam

Haady Abdel Salam

THE FARRELL FAMILY

Donal Farrell

Bronagh Farrell

Lyness “Line-up” Farrell

misty johnston



PICKERING ET AL. (948)

‘[T]erritoriality is a spatial strategy to affect, influence and control resources (including people) within a particular geographical area. ... Suttles argues that “The central theme which is shared by many studies of territoriality is its connection with aggression” (Suttles, 1972, p. 140). Hence, insiders are trustworthy, but outsiders are either superfluous or threatening and may be resisted by physical means.’

GOSLING (221)

“At present Northern Ireland is held back by its high rate of economic inactivity, which reflects problems with its healthcare system and childcare provision and, especially, the high school drop-out rate for teenagers, which creates an enduring challenge of inadequate skills and qualifications across a significant part of the population.”

FARGAS-MALET AND DILLENBURGER (451)

“Children learn about the trauma of the past from their parents, but also from their school, neighbors, and peers, as well as the media and other sources that were not explored here. Gender expectations also play a part in the expression of awareness of traumatic experiences of the past generation.”



“chav”

smicks

‘UK public policy [New Labour 1997] ... viewed the failure of lower social groups as a consequence of moral indifference and of a work avoidance ethos (Haylett 2001). However, this approach ignored a substantial body of evidence that points to changing structures of employment as the primary determinant of poverty and inequality ... Low pay and structural unemployment and underemployment, not cultural attitudes or uncivil conduct, are the root causes of class dispossession and social suffering.

In this climate, the label “working class” no longer functions in Britain as a marker of authenticity, solidity, and respectability, but rather signifies something base, backward, and shameful: **the working class has turned from the mythical “salt of the earth” into the reviled “scum of the earth”** (Jones 2011).’



(LAW AND MOONEY 108-9)



DEFINITION

In neoliberal imagination, it is “an insulting word exclusively directed against people who are working class” (Jones 2).

→ belligerent youth, benefit claimants, council tenants, or public sector trade unions

→ violence, laziness, teenage pregnancies, racism, drunkenness (Jones 8)

→ “prole” or “poor, and therefore worthless” (8)



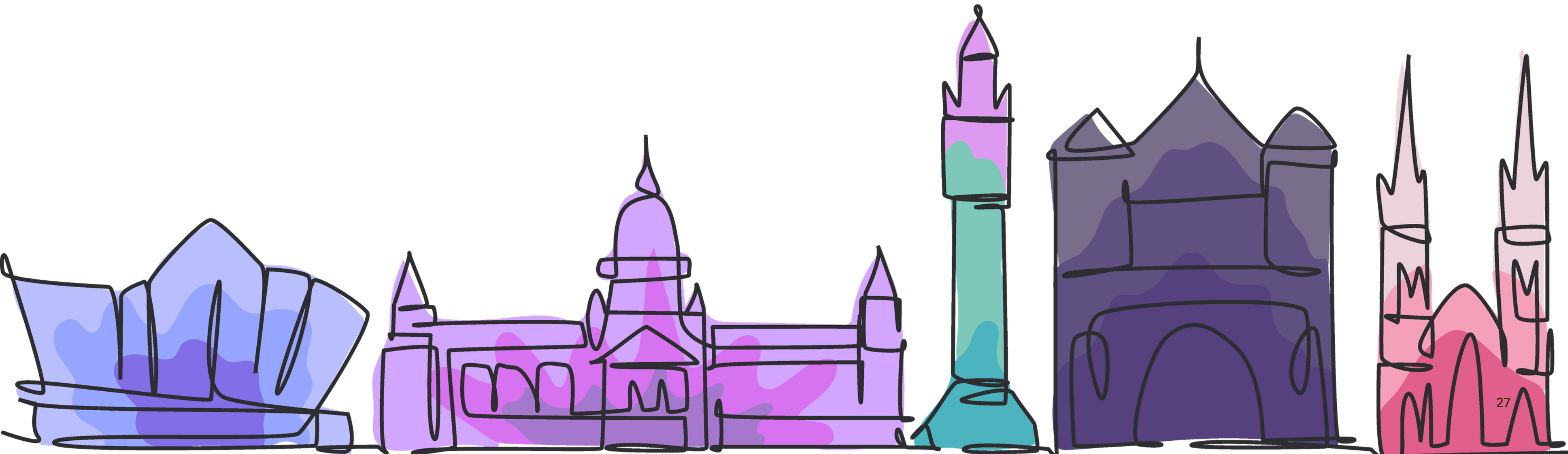
(4) bourgeois & chav
cultures

(JONES 3)

“It is no surprise that, when asked if so-called chavs were getting a hard time in Britain, [the] response was blunt: ‘No, **they deserve it.** ... This form of class hatred has become an integral, respectable part of modern British culture.’”

misty johnston

“consequences of personal behaviour, individual defects and even choice” (Jones 10)



TRANSGENERATIONAL DESTITUTION

- Misty
- Leigh
- Nan D
- Frankie
- The Benefactors (and their “beneficence,” as depicted by Mickey)
- Short-term leases (Airbnb)

AWARENESS AS PERFORMANCE

- A.D.J. Shelley
- Bronagh, “champion of the proletariat”, “social justice crusader”

INTERPERSONAL BORDER CROSSINGS

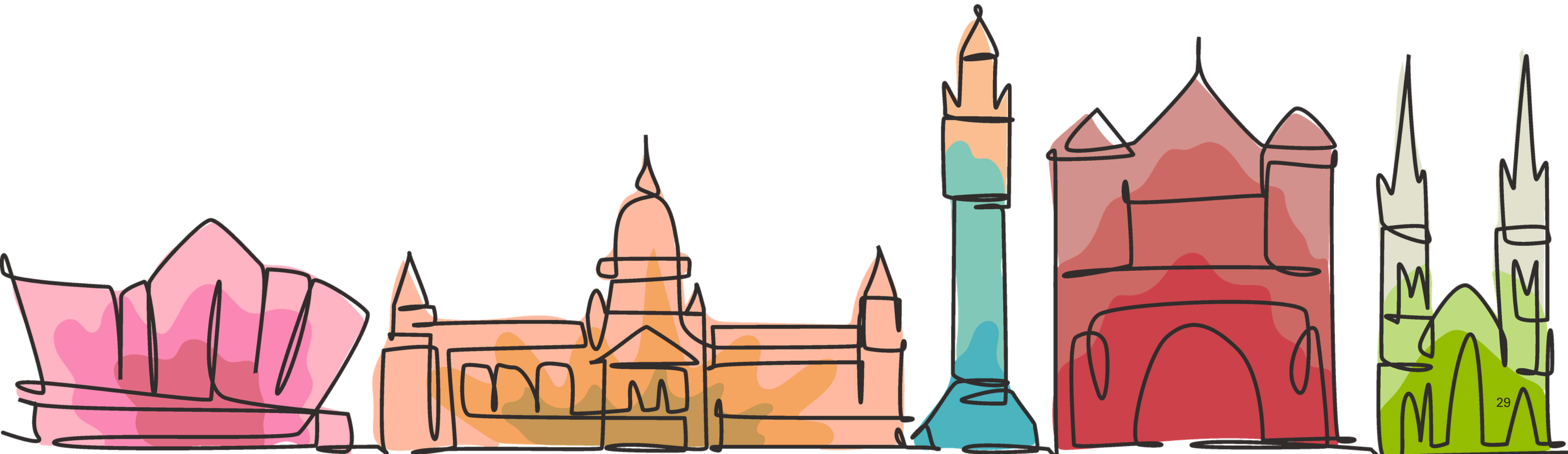
- Boogie + Misty
 - Magennis’s “the troubled body”
- Miriam + Holly
- Frankie + Nina
- Bronagh - Donal - Lyness
- Miriam - Rami

(5) who
benefits from
this?

misty johnston

(WARD AND MCGIVERN 71-2)

“[W]ays in which women in the north are commonly depicted: **passive victims of the troubles, viragos of the barricades, advocates of a messianic peace**. Our contention is that none of these stereotypes reveal the true situation of women living in a socially deprived, war torn, rigidly patriarchal society. The reality is in fact more bleak than the image, nevertheless, many women are struggling to break free from the constricting influences which surround them. ... There is no easy or immediate way out of this impasse, which is an assessment feminists must come to terms with, if they are not to give up in despair.”



on (political) despair

(DAVIS 31)

“What has kept me going has been the development of **new modes of community**. I don’t know whether I would have survived had not movements survived, had not communities of resistance, communities of struggle. So whatever I’m doing I always feel myself directly connected to those communities and I think that this is an era where we have to encourage that sense of community particularly at a time when neoliberalism attempts to force people to think of themselves only in individual terms and not in collective terms.”





Misty, out of the bath, is in her pyjamas and the dressing gown that Boogie brought back from the supermarket. She's wondering, as she sits on her bed, about who she might meet tomorrow – maybe some sad person, dreading, right this minute, opening the door of the funeral place. But, know what, she'll be sitting there, wearing that blouse and her voice, when she speaks, will be calm. They'll know to trust her. Misty sets the alarm for half past seven, but then changes it to twenty minutes earlier. She doesn't want to be late for Mrs McCullough.



(ERSKINE 316)



(DAVIS)

“hopelessness is not an option.”

thank you!

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