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9 Death-worlds and Necropolitics of Abjection in Emma Donoghue's 'Counting the Days'

ABSTRACT
Reading Emma Donoghue's short story 'Counting the Days' as a text that inscribes the Irish passage in TransCanadian literature,[1] this chapter will focus on the cross-border transit from Ireland to Canada depicted in the story as responding to forces operating in the long history of globalization. Mobility forced by financial debt and the risk of starvation in the mid-nineteenth-century Irish context is a form of necropolitics: the bodies crossing the pathogeographic space of the Atlantic face physical and emotional risks, and economic refugees remain perilously marginalized upon arrival in their new society.[2]

With recourse to affect theories, this chapter will examine how Donoghue brings to the forefront the necropolitics of both old and current biocapitalism,[3] how abjection produces anger and how this anger materializes in cholera and ultimately in death.

Emma Donoghue's short story 'Counting the Days' is included in her collection *Astray* (2012) which, as its title suggests, gives predominance to routes and to divergence from 'the correct path'.[4] The author describes her stories on her website as 'fourteen fact-inspired fictions about travel' with protagonists who 'cross borders of race, law, sex and sanity'.[5] This story in particular focuses on the cross-border transit from

1 Libe García Zarranz, *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics* (Montreal, Kingston, London and Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).
2 Feel Tank Chicago (2007), *Pathogeographies*, <http://www.pathogeographies.net/>, accessed 9 December 2020.
3 Susanne Lettow, 'Biocapitalism', *Krisis. Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 2 / Marx from the Margins: A Collective Project, from A to Z (2018), <https://archive.krisis.eu/biocapitalism/>, accessed 9 December 2020.
4 Emma Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', *Astray* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), pp. 77–89.
5 Emma Donoghue, author's website, <https://www.emmadonoghue.com>, accessed 14 December 2020.

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Northern Ireland to Canada, depicted in the narrative as responding to forces operating during the modern period (1750s–1980s)[6] of the long history of globalization, which has been described as a period when

> enormous waves of migration intensified existing cultural exchanges and transformed traditional social patterns. Popular immigration countries like the United States of America, Canada and Australia took advantage of this boost in productivity. By the early twentieth century, these countries entered the world stage as forces to be reckoned with. At the same time, however, they made significant efforts to control these large migratory flows, in the process inventing novel forms of bureaucratic control and developing new surveillance techniques designed to accumulate more information about nationals *while keeping 'undesirables' out*.[7]

In this chapter, I will focus on the material and symbolic processes of abjection of 'undesirable' Irish bodies explored in Donoghue's 'Counting the Days' and on the mechanisms of colonial necropolitics (both in Northern Ireland and in Canada) that regulate their expulsion.

Donoghue's intricate narrative interweaves alternate sections focalized through the voice of Jane McConnell Johnson, who is travelling with her two young children through the Atlantic in the month of July of 1849, and her husband's, Henry Johnson, who had made the same trip thirteen months earlier and is now alone in Montreal waiting for their reunion, that happy moment when he will regain his patriarchal role and 'be a family man once more'.[8] With recourse to the letters exchanged during the year of separation (collected and published by their great-granddaughter Louise Wyatt in 1948) and their respective fictionalized memories, reflections and desires, we get glimpses, in a disrupted back and forth chronology that interlaces the different moments, of their dire situation back home in

6 Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 32.

7 Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 34–5; emphasis added.

8 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 78. In order to contextualize, in 1849 Quebec was part of the British colony 'United Province of Canada' (1841–67). The Dominion of Canada, the new country, was officially born on 1 July 1867, a date that is commemorated every year as 'Canada Day' (disregarding the presence of Indigenous inhabitants in the territory for millennia).

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Northern Ireland[9]; of the moment of transit on the 'little floating world' of the boat[10]; and of the struggle for survival of the impoverished and lonely migrant upon arrival to the New World. Structured around those three locations/steps in the migration narrative, my analysis will foreground the diverse mechanisms of necropolitics described in the story and the, in García Zarranz's words, 'assemblage of negative feelings' they generate, in agreement with her view that Donoghue 'resists the imperative of the happy ending'[11] to expose and contest the fallacy of 'the promise of happiness'[12] (in Sara Ahmed's words) inherent to biocapitalist discourses regimenting the migratory flows of labour.

While the critique of biocapitalism is concerned with 'the transformation of social relations that rely on the appropriation of foreign labour power'[13] and with the extraction of capitalist benefit from bio materials (including the bodies of migrants), I will be focusing here on the necropolitics that sustains unrestrained capitalism, that is, on 'the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations' that are the deadly effects of such exploitation.[14] In what follows, I will examine the continuum of necropolitics operating on each of those three spaces depicted in the story – Ireland, the boat and Canada – as 'death worlds', which Mbembe defines as 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*'.[15] It is not hard to establish parallelisms between the penuries of this migrant family and the abjection/expulsion from affluent nations of so called economic migrants and refugees in the twenty-first century; such are the conditions of the impoverished, then and now.

9 Louise Wyatt, 'The Johnson Letters', *Ontario History* 40 (1948), 7–52. 'An Introduction to the Henry Johnson Letters', <http://www.dippam.ac.uk/ied/records/49618>, accessed 3 December 2020.
10 Emma Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', 77.
11 García Zarranz, *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions*, p. 123.
12 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
13 Lettow, 'Biocapitalism', p. 14.
14 Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15/1 (2003), 11–40, p. 14.
15 Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p. 40; italics in the original.

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The Death World of Ireland: Colonial Necropolitics of the Great Famine

Although the story opens with Jane on the ship *the Riverdale* 'five weeks since she boarded at Belfast, and the city of Québec is only one more day west',[16] that is, on the verge of arrival but not yet there, my analysis starts with the point of their departure, their home in Antrim, Northern Ireland, to discuss the reasons that have impelled them to abandon their home and cross the ocean to the promised land of Canada.

Their mobility is forced by financial debt and the high risk of starvation in the context of the Irish Great Famine (1845–52) that saw 'the necropolitical mass production of dead bodies through poverty, starvation and disease'.[17] Ireland was during that period indeed a 'death world',[18] with over a million dead and over two million displaced refugees.[19] The fall of 1848 marked one of the most terrible peaks in those numbers, and Jane embarks 'at the warm end of May [1849]'[20]; on board 'the air is fetid, but anything is better than Antrim'.[21] Donoghue addresses openly the national trauma of the famine in Jane's description of their life circumstances in Antrim, which have suffered a drastic collapse from a more prosperous time when Henry was a 'brash grocer'[22] to his imprisonment 'in Carrickfergus gaol'[23] due to debts and his subsequent fleeing via migration to Canada. Jane and their two children are left behind to close the door on creditors.

16 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 77.
17 Danijela Petković, '"That Name Is a Wealth to You": The Necropolitics of the Great Famine, and the Politics of Visibility, Naming and (Christian) Compassion in Joseph O'Connor's Star of the Sea', *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* 7 (2017), 321–41, p. 339.
18 Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p. 40.
19 David P. Nally, *Human Encumbrances. Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), p. 2.
20 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.
21 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.
22 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.
23 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 81.

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She describes the situation in Ireland in the following terms: 'In such a famine year it is better not to think about home. *The town of Antrim has lidded its eyes*. Most of those who are not dead have been evicted; the rest count farthings or starve in private.'[24] The personification of the town with its 'lidded eyes' underlines in a subtle but effective way the indifference towards the pain and suffering of the designated disposable bodies that is characteristic of necropolitical power. In her analysis of the necropolitics of the Great Famine as represented in Joseph O'Connor's novel *Star of the Sea*, Danijela Petković argues, as I am sustaining here in reference to Donoghue's story, that one of the reasons

> why Mbembe's necropolitics is a much better analytic choice than Foucault's biopolitics is precisely Mbembe's insight that necropolitics is mass murder disguised as war – we only need to recognize poverty as a too often unacknowledged weapon of mass destruction, directed at the 'surplus population' [Mbembe 2003]. It is a well-known fact that only the poorest Irish died of starvation; another well-known fact is that Ireland never stopped exporting food during the Famine.[25]

Also David P. Nally has studied the biopolitics and necropolitics of the Great Famine, which he understands as standing in a dialectical tension because 'the right of death is always already inscribed in the power over life'.[26] He considers the necropolitics of the Great Famine as an early example of what Naomi Klein has coined 'disaster capitalism',[27] which, as Nally explains, 'used catastrophes to engage in radical social and

24 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79; emphasis added.

25 Petković, '"That Name Is a Wealth to You" …', p. 325.

26 David P. Nally, 'The Administration of Hunger: Colonialism, Biopolitics and the Irish Great Famine, 1845–1852', PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia (2006), p. 125. In his study *Human Encumbrances. Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine*, Nally offers an extensive analysis of the colonial character of what, following David Marcus, he denominates 'famineogenic behavior – behavior that aids and abets famine' (p. 20), distinguishing between 'the effects of political indifference (a policy of 'letting die') and reckless conduct (including utopian plans to radically reconstitute Irish society), whilst acknowledging that both kinds of behaviour can produce extraordinary levels of violence' (p. 20).

27 Nally references here Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007).

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economic engineering'.[28] The massive deaths and the exodus of those two million Irish conveniently facilitated the reform envisioned by the British statemen and their entrance into Modernity.[29] Death and misery were and continue to be in fact very profitable for business.

The exodus, the forced displacement of the sick and the poor abjected from the modern nation in the making, constitutes in itself another lucrative business, considering the cost of transoceanic transportation and the remittances sent by migrants to their families back home. Jane describes how she has begged all their relatives to gather the price of twenty pounds for a cabin on the *Riverdale*,[30] even though she is not at all convinced that this is a wise move and transmits hesitance in her letters to Henry: 'Jane reports that his mother hopes he will come back to the old country; that her parents advise her not to make the crossing yet; that she only wishes he had found a permanent job and could send money.'[31] It is only out of her sense of marital duty that she finally accepts to cross the ocean, ashamed to think '[w]hat kind of woman would be more loath to go than to part, more afraid of the crossing than the separation?'[32] In her reluctance we can appreciate a counter-narrative to the xenophobic discourses that depict most migrants as excited to leave their home for 'a brighter future'; instead, Jane voices a more frequent affective response: that migrants are *unwilling* to leave their homes and families but they are forced to do so by terrible circumstances, in this case, poverty, epidemic diseases (in the story, dysentery and cholera) and starvation. Moreover, she dismantles the neoliberal discourse of migration as personal choice: 'It is not a matter of choice. What choice have any of them made, when all they know is what they are running from, when Henry with his exasperating enthusiasm is leading them into the dark?'[33] Donoghue has Jane explicitly expressing her distrust in the (neo)liberal capitalist promise of final happiness in return for endurance: 'What overwhelms Jane, when she lets herself dwell on it,

28 Nally, *Human Encumbrances*, p. 160.
29 Petković, '"That Name Is a Wealth to You" …', p. 327.
30 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.
31 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 82.
32 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 80.
33 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 85.

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is the sense of anticlimax: the Johnsons held themselves together through four years of blight, but where is their happy-ever-after?'[34]

Jane is thus clearly discontent with her situation, and she seems to resignedly accept migration as a sort of national fate for the Irish, the path marked for her people: 'What right has she to make a fuss about leaving for a faraway country when her uncle did it years before her, and her nephew, and her brother, and her two sisters? And her husband. Against her better judgement she let Henry go on ahead.'[35] She resents Henry's departure and his agency: 'For the past year he has been an adventurer; she has been paralyzed, a wife without a husband. Sometimes she hates Henry for going on ahead, for being able and willing to do without her in a strange land.'[36] Thus, against her own wishes and forced by the colonial necropolitics of the Great Famine and gender mores, Jane embarks to cross the ocean and fulfil her duty as an Irish wife as she conceives it, summarized in her phrase, 'What is she bringing Henry, if not a capacity for endurance?'[37]

The Death World of the Passage: The Atlantic as a Pathogeographic Space

In her analysis of 'Counting the Days' Libe García Zarranz borrows the concept 'pathogeography' from the Chicago Feel Tank, who use it to emphasize 'the emotional investments, temperatures, traumas, pleasures, and ephemeral experiences circulating throughout the political and cultural landscape' of the ocean,[38] in this case, the Atlantic. Donoghue describes

34 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79. I will engage with Henry's 'cruel optimism' in the third section of the chapter following Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

35 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.

36 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 82.

37 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 82.

38 García Zarranz, *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions*, p. 107.

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the ocean, from Jane's perspective, as a liminal space in-between two worlds:

> The real, landlocked world, now split in two for them like an apple, where on one side people weep for them and stare into the horizon that has swallowed them, and on the other side, others stare back, waiting for the first glimpse of them. Or so these passengers must believe. Unless they are longed for, why are they here, cribbed in the rancid belly of this wooden whale?[39]

In its slow trajectory between the point of departure and destination, the *Riverdale* is another death world that replicates the 'lethal class divisions' of colonial Ireland.[40] As commented above, Jane has 'begged from anyone who shared any of her names to make up the twenty pounds for this cabin. She and the children are sharing it with two aged clergymen',[41] which situates her in a better position than those who could not afford such comfort, since '[a]t least they have some bedding, not like some of the passengers, who sleep in the spare sails'.[42] Despite this minor luxury, hunger does not recede, and towards the end of the journey Jane admits the three of them are on the limit:

> The children are clamoring for some biscuit, despite the weevils. She has none, but she tells herself it will not kill them to wait just one more day. Jane squats down and holds them tightly round their waists, as if to squeeze the hunger pangs away. Alex and Mary both have her pale red hair; their three heads like a litter of foxes.[43]

The seemly out of place allusion to their physical description at this point emphasizes their Irishness – metonymically represented by their red hair and the reference to the red foxes – and with it, the continuity in their experience of colonial necropolitics of poverty and starvation. The death world character of the ship is thus repeatedly brought to the forefront, as in this other passage: 'What has appalled her the most is not the squalor,

39 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 78.
40 Petković, '"That Name Is a Wealth to You" …', p. 321.
41 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.
42 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.
43 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 83.

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nor the hunger, but the dearth of news. No one has left their company, except for that old man who died of dysentery last week. No one has arrived, unless you count a stillbirth down in steerage.'[44] Poverty, hunger, disease and death are not left behind, but accompany the migrant along her voyage, so that the lethal effects of the Great Famine are extended far beyond the territory of the colony of Ireland.

Despite the historical legacy of the representation of the Atlantic as a space where the bodies of slaves and migrants were disposed of, Donoghue is making a distinction in her narrative between the death world of the boat, a human-made machine described as a 'wooden whale'[45] and a prison,[46] and the ocean, represented as a live entity. The sea is recurrently personified, from its very first appearance in the opening line of the story, where Jane is 'watching the estuary water heave and sink below her',[47] to the very end, where Henry 'is sinking down below all human things. He is sliding into the ocean; he will not wait till her ship meets the land. He will sport around it like a dolphin, he will make her laugh louder than the gulls.'[48] While the animalization of the Irish was a common strategy to reduce the colonized to a less-than-human category which would facilitate their elimination, I would argue that Henry's comparison to a dolphin and his fusion with the sea in this final scene are presented by Donoghue from a post-anthropocentric perspective wherein the animal nature of humans does not place the human in a position of inferiority but, quite differently, conceives the human and the non-human as symbiotic parts of a shared ecosystem. Donoghue thus takes part in the 'post-anthropocentric shift in the current socio-cultural perception of the human'[49]; in Donoghue's narrative the ocean is 'humanized' in the opening, the human is animalized and 'waterized' in the final paragraphs, where Henry totally fuses with

44 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 77.
45 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 77.
46 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 87.
47 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 77.
48 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 88.
49 Francesca Ferrando, 'The Party of the Anthropocene. Post-humanisms, Environmentalism and the Post-anthropocentric Paradigm Shift', *Relations* 4/2 (2016), 159–73, p. 160.

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the ocean at the moment of his death: 'He shuts his eyes and swims down into the darkness'[50]; the interaction of the human being and the oceanic waters that Donoghue describes is intimate and relational, conforming a post-anthropocentric assemblage.

The Death World of Canada: Abjection from the New Nation

Upon arrival to their destination, the first step is to dispose of the sick on Grosse Isle,[51] who are left on the liminal space of the quarantine station/frontier until the diseased immigrant body is inspected and cleansed[52]; only then may they be allowed to enter the allegedly safe space of the New World.[53] Jane observes the fellow passengers left behind at Grosse Isle 'with as much relief as compassion',[54] though one suspects there is more of relief than of compassion given her enthusiasm in thinking that '[t]he fiction on which she has lived for a year is about to come true'.[55]

50 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 88.
51 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 86.
52 Christopher Rutty and Sue C. Sullivan, *This Is Public Health: A Canadian History* (Ottawa: The Canadian Public Health Association, 2010), p. viii.
53 According to the Canadian Government's Library and Archives official website 'around 1830, an average of 30,000 immigrants arrived annually in the City of Québec, the main port of entry to Canada. Approximately two-thirds of these newcomers were from Ireland. This unprecedented immigration on the St. Lawrence River took place at a time when major cholera and smallpox epidemics were sweeping through Europe. In order to help control the spread of the diseases, the quarantine station at Grosse Île, located in the St. Lawrence River downstream from the City of Québec, was established in 1832 and operated until its closure in 1937' ('Immigrants at Grosse Île Quarantine Station, 1832–1937', Library and Archives Canada, Government of Canada, last modified 9 September 2020; <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/immigration-records/immigrants-grosse-ile-1832-1937/Pages/immigrants-grosse-ile.aspx>, accessed 1 December 2020).
54 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 86.
55 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 86.

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However, what she first sees of her new home is not a welcoming view, but '[t]he walled city of Québec on the promontory, pushing into the river like a sentry's gun',[56] a menacing image of a fortified space that actively guards its borders from foreigners and that evokes the classic 'garrison mentality' theorized by Northrop Frye (1971) and his former student Margaret Atwood (1972) as characteristic of Canadian culture[57]; a fear that is exacerbated in pandemic times, as those depicted in the story. The promised land, the new world, is and will remain a fiction: 'All [Jane] knows of this new world is words scattered on a page'[58]; 'every letter is a promise, signed and sealed'.[59] But the promise is never fulfilled; in fact, we never see in the narrative Jane's actual disembarking; we only have Henry's uncertain suppositions of what will happen when she realizes he has not come to meet her and his fears: 'Which will win out, her panic or her anger? There is no letter he can write to her to tell her the end of the story. She will have to deduce it from his absence, interpret the suspicion in the faces of the French on the quay, *read death in the yellow flags* that mark the medicine stations.'[60] The city of Québec is, literally, a death world, in the midst of a cholera pandemic that reached their shores again on 4 July 1849,[61] month of the arrival of Jane and her children.

The first bout of cholera in Quebec erupted in 1832 and it has been historically blamed on the passengers of the *Carrick*, arriving from Dublin, though as Geoffrey Bilson contends it is unclear that they were the original source: 'The doctors were confused, no ship with a known cholera case had reached Quebec, the first case of the illness which resembled cholera was in a resident of the city, not an immigrant.'[62] Bilson associates the anti-Irish

56 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 86.

57 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971); Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972).

58 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 81.

59 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 88.

60 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 87; emphasis added.

61 Sylvio LeBlond, 'Cholera in Quebec in 1849/Le Cholera à Quebec en 1849', *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 71/3 (1954), 288–96, p. 289.

62 Geoffrey Bilson, 'The First Epidemic of Asiatic Cholera in Lower Canada, 1832', *Medical History* 21 (1977), 411–33, p. 418.

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sentiment (rising then in relation to the epidemic) to the dispute between British and French Canadians over the control of English-speaking migration to what was then the province of Lower Canada,[63] considering the discourse on Irish immigration dominant in the Francophone society of the time; for instance, 'The Quebec Emigrant Society, a private charitable group, claimed that the province could not support the level of emigration that was occurring, and that emigrants would find themselves unwelcome, unemployed, and destitute in a "Country, where their language is not understood, and exposed to the severities of a Canadian climate"'.[64]

Henry experiences all these forms of abjection from the first moment of his arrival to Canada to the last moment of his death. Far from offering the classic pioneer narrative of immigrant success in the multicultural haven of Canada, 'Counting the Days' catalogues the hardships, exploitation, debilitation and death of the migrant undesirable body. In his letters to Jane, Henry hides the grimmest aspects – 'He wanted to wait till he had good news to tell, *something encouraging*'[65]– and employs an 'obstinately cheerful' and misleading tone in his communication,[66] although in fact he resents his wife's ignorance about his situation, which only reinforces his sense of isolation and loneliness: 'Can she imagine what it is like to be here so many thousands miles from home, with no one to offer him a cup of tea or a word of sympathy?'[67] Contrary to the optimistic façade in his letters, his inner thoughts reveal the anguish and anxiety he has been living with while alone in Canada: 'His nerves are spiders' webs beneath his skin. Have the months of vagabonding and working hand to mouth taken such a toll?'[68]; interspersed with the excitement about the newness of

63 Bilson, 'The First Epidemic of Asiatic Cholera in Lower Canada, 1832', p. 413.

64 Bilson, 'The First Epidemic of Asiatic Cholera in Lower Canada, 1832', p. 413. Bilson is quoting from 'Petition, Quebec Emigrant Society, 5 December 1831, C.O. 42/236'.

65 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 78; emphasis in the original. Donoghue explains in her final note that she has incorporated in italics fragments of the letters exchanged by Henry and Jane, reproduced in Wyatt, 'The Johnson Letters', pp. 7–52.

66 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 80.

67 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 83.

68 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 79.

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the place 'other times the strangeness of the place shows through his lines. He speaks of vast waterfalls, Indians, juice leaking from trees. He assures her they need bow to no one in this country: *The Servant eats at the Same table with his master*. But on the outside of one envelope he scrawls, *Bring the gun*.'[69] Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism' comes to mind, in relation to Henry's above-mentioned 'exasperating enthusiasm … leading them to the dark'[70]; his ambivalent feelings keep him torn between gratitude for this new chance to start anew – 'The way he sees it, it is only civil to Providence to seem grateful'[71] – and the anger that is literally consuming him:

> He is eaten up with anger […]. [A]nger serves Henry, devours whatever stands in his way: tiredness, inertia, despair, and loneliness. Plowing through [sic] six-foot snowdrifts, anger has burned in his gut and kept him warm, or warm enough to keep walking anyway.
>
> Henry credits Providence for bringing him so far, but it could be that it was anger that did it, *anger that dragged him away from Antrim in the first place. Anger has carried him halfway across the world*; he hopes to seed a little patch of the soil of this vast country with it.[72]

69 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 81; italics in the original. The juice leaking from trees refers to the popular maple syrup that metonymically stands for Canadian national identity, being the maple leaf the symbolic iconography in the national flag. Donoghue's allusions to Canadian nationalism in the narrative are subtle, but legible to anyone familiarized with Canadian nationalist imagery. The inclusion of 'Indians' here points, in my reading, to the colonial basis of the new nation in the making.

70 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 85. Berlant opens her study *Cruel Optimism* with the following definition: 'A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (p. 1); these relations of attachment to something (a desire, a goal, or 'a fantasy of the good life') are not inherently cruel, she explains, 'They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially' (p. 1). As commented above, in Donoghue's story there is no fulfilment of a happy ending, Henry's failed optimistic view that 'he will be a family man again' (p. 78) and that 'bad times are over; he is going to be the husband Jane has always deserved' (p. 79) sharply contrasts with the cruel conditions of his life and death.

71 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 80.

72 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', pp. 80–1; emphasis added.

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His view of the affect of anger as a main cause for migration reinforces Donoghue's critique of the idealized version of migration as choice commented above. Henry's emotional disease is accompanied by a physical expulsion of both emotions and fluids: '[H]e bends and retches onto the dusty ground as if voiding himself of thirteen months of self-pity […]. [He] throws up again, though there is little left but bitter air. If he purges himself of all his past errors, maybe there will be space for happiness to come flooding in.'[73] In this passage, anger and cholera are the emotional and physical sides of the affect that he is experiencing, as the following lines further evidence:

> Cholera, that's what the woman said. Henry nods slightly. He is folded into a hospital bed like a leaf pressed in a book. The diarrhea is finished, and so is the vomiting: he has nothing left to offer up. He has given every drop in his body to this alien soil.
>
> Cholera, anger made flesh, the dull burning fuse in the guts, the bile spewing through the bodies of those who stay and those who go. A disease familiar to those who are herded from country to country, from city to city.[74]

Donoghue's description does not spare graphic details of the embodied experience of anger/cholera, and it does not spare either a sharp political sense of injustice towards the destitute. Henry's suffering is met with total indifference by those surrounding him, immersed as they are in the frenzy of their capitalist rhythm: 'When shit sprays into his breeches and he doubles over, he is ashamed. But no one is paying him any attention; those who rush by are on business of their own.'[75] For Coast Salish author Lee Maracle, this is a common attitude of Canadians; in reference to what she calls their fort ideology[76] she critiques how

73 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', pp. 83–4.

74 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 85. I find significant the use of the verb 'herded' in its passive voice in this image that alludes to the aforementioned animalization of the Irish in colonial discourse, while also insisting on the idea of lack of choice for the Irish migrants escaping the Great Famine, which could well be made extensive to contemporary refugees, exiles, and so-called 'economic migrants'. The reference to the leaf may further reinforce the identification with the Canadian flag/national identity.

75 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 84.

76 Lee Maracle, *Memory Serves. Oratories* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2015), p. 111.

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> every wave of immigrants faces exclusion and vicious exploitation by those born here. So each new wave is forced to busy themselves with survival. As such this country was built by people whose natural curiosity about others, whose natural concern for others, whose natural sense of social responsibility towards others are diminished by the absence of time – time for reflection, time for consideration, and time to be curious, to explore their new homeland.[77]

Henry's lonely decay (his 'falling beyond the limit') echoes quite closely Kristeva's reflections on abjection in her influential *Powers of Horror*:

> These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver.[78]

Abjection, according to Kristeva, does not reside in the outpouring of bodily fluids in itself, but on our realization of the fluids' *refusal* to remain contained – despite Henry's efforts for control when he 'fastens up his trousers for decency, for some kind of containment'[79] – so that, Kristeva argues, '[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'[80]; in this case, the immigrant/colonized Irish body, defiled in the racist media of the time as the filthy carrier of diseases, not due to the miserable conditions of life they were forced to live in, but to their 'abject' (out of order) behaviour, as Sylvio LeBlond records:

> It was generally believed that the disease [cholera] was in the atmosphere and that it developed only in the presence of certain favouring factors in the individual, in his behaviour or in his atmospheric environment. Dirtiness, mephitic and nauseating

77 Maracle, *Memory Serves. Oratories*, pp. 123–4.
78 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
79 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 84.
80 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

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> odours, fatigue, anxiety, fear, lack of food, and the use of alcohol were certain to lead to the appearance of the disease.[81]

The 'miasmatic theory' predominant at the time thus defended that 'disease was more prevalent among the lower classes because they stank more, and because the supposed *moral corruption of poor people weakened their constitutions* and made them more vulnerable to disease'.[82] One does not need to be an expert in medicine to realize that the stress underlined by LeBlond ('fatigue, anxiety, fear, lack of food') suffered by poor migrants and refugees may in itself trigger off a good number of health problems; but the recourse to the trite strategy of blaming the victim cannot obscure the necropolitical intentions in maintaining such deadly conditions in their environment, both physical and emotional.

Towards the end of his influential essay 'Necropolitics', Mbembe discusses the concept of death, and resorting to Georges Bataille he explains:

> For Bataille, death reveals the human subject's animal side, which he refers to moreover as the subject's 'natural being'. 'For man to reveal himself in the end, he has to die, but he will have to do so while alive – by looking at himself ceasing to exist,' he adds. In other words, the human subject has to be fully alive at the very moment of dying, to be aware of his or her death, to live with the impression of actually dying. Death itself must become awareness of the self at the very time that it does away with the conscious being.[83]

This is indeed the case of Henry, who lying in bed in the hospice is remembering the promises in their letters that 'Our best Days are before us',[84] to have this hopeful thought suddenly interrupted: 'It occurs to him

81 LeBlond, 'Cholera in Quebec in 1849/Le Cholera à Quebec en 1849', p. 290. It was not until 1883 that Robert Koch demonstrated that the bacterium 'Vibrio cholerae' was responsible for the disease, basing his research on Filipo Pacini's discovery of the vibrion in 1854. Please see Donatella Lippi and Eduardo Gotuzzo, 'The Greatest Steps towards the Discovery of Vibrio cholerae', *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* 20/3 (2014), pp. 191–5.

82 Lippi and Gotuzzo, 'The Greatest Steps towards the Discovery of Vibrio cholerae', p. 192; emphasis added.

83 Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p. 38. Mbembe is quoting from Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes XII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 336.

84 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 86.

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for the first time that he may be dying.'[85] As commented above, his awareness of his imminent death is presented in the narrative as his dissolution and merging into the immensity of the ocean, but there he is not isolated and lonely anymore; he recognizes his face in the face of the others (the sick, the dying, the destitute), and 'Henry can tell, by looking at the cadaverous faces around him, that his cheeks are concave, his eyeballs are sinking in their sockets, and he too has taken on a blue tinge, *as if they are all part of the same boiling sea*'.[86]

Conclusions

In her analysis of Donoghue's short story collection, Libe García Zarranz concludes that the 'stories in *Astray* illustrate how vulnerable populations have historically been subjected to biopolitical structures of power that have systematically instrumentalized their bodies as products of exchange. Within these circuits of biopower, affect plays a crucial role.'[87] I argue that 'Counting the Days' more specifically brings to the forefront the necropolitics in both old and current biocapitalism[88] and explores how abjection produces anger, and how this anger materializes in cholera and ultimately in death.

In Ireland, the Great Famine and the subsequent massive migration were seen by British colonialists like Charles Trevelyan and Thomas Carlyle as 'providential' means towards the British 'civilizing project', most especially to facilitate the transition from subsistence farming to agrarian capitalism and to get rid of what they considered 'redundant labor'.[89] Providentialism was the nineteenth-century term for what in our neoliberal twenty-first century we call disaster capitalism, the underlying logic for both being

85 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 86.
86 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 85; emphasis added.
87 García Zarranz, *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions*, p. 124.
88 Lettow, 'Biocapitalism', p. 2.
89 Nally, *Human Encumbrances*, p. 14; see also pp. 179, 209–11 and 216.

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that the death of the surplus multitude is beneficial to capitalist accumulation. The Johnsons are forced to leave Antrim accosted by debts, disease and hunger, they do not *choose* to leave their home, and they express their doubts and discontent with the situation.

The passage across the Atlantic constitutes in itself a source of capital, with monetary profit extracted from the transportation of human cargo, exposed in the costly price of the boat tickets and in the hierarchical disposition of the space within according to economic status. The ship is another death world that fulfils the function of first 'triage' of the migrant bodies, disposing of the dead and the sick prior to entrance into the port of arrival; only the fittest survive the journey, though that is no guarantee of a good life in the new destination, as Henry's appalling experiences demonstrate.

The cholera pandemic of the mid-nineteenth century travelled across the world, propelled by the higher levels of human mobility. And then, as with the current Covid-19 pandemic, the socially vulnerable were also the most exposed to the dis-ease. In the Quebec and Montreal of 1849, cholera massively devastated the already debilitated bodies of the poor,[90] being further instrumentalized by the Francophone and Anglophone colonial powers in their dispute for the control over the population in the colonial territories that were at that moment gestating the emerging new nations, and in the process of wilful forgetting of their own origins; as Lee Maracle reminds us, 'This country was peopled by Europeans who were evicted from their homeland or forced out by economic recession. Today we call such people refugees.'[91]

It is the dream of the good life in the new country that finally and irrevocably separates Henry and Jane, and this is most clearly evidenced in the cruelly optimistic closing line of the story, when Jane is looking at the crowd awaiting on the peer, trying to distinguish Henry, and wonders full of hope, 'What distances cannot be travelled by the gaze of love?'[92]

90 I am thinking of debilitated bodies in Margrit Shildrick's terms; she conceives debility 'as pertaining not just to those weakened by illness, over-exertion or disability, as dictionary definitions still insist, but to a broad swathe of humanity whose ordinary lives simply persist without ever getting better'. Please see Shildrick, 'Living on; not Getting Better', *Feminist Review* 111 (2015), 10–24, p. 11.

91 Maracle, *Memory Serves. Oratories*, p. 193.

92 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 88.

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No happy ending is granted to Donoghue's characters Henry and Jane, though in her final note Donoghue informs us that Jane went to her sister's in London (Ontario) and '[w]ithin a year, Jane married a local farmer of fifty-three, William Neetleton from Belfast; they had seven more children'.[93] Donoghue thus denounces the extreme colonial necropolitics operating at the core of the Irish Great Famine, but also at the foundations of the Canadian multicultural settler nation. The parallelisms with the current situation of neoliberal necropolitics of debilitated bodies, the cruel optimism inherent to migration discourses, and the disease of our own pandemic days that put at higher risk the more vulnerable and debilitated bodies speak for themselves.

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93 Donoghue, 'Counting the Days', p. 89. While from a conventional, patriarchal, perspective this may seem like the reward for Jane's endurance, in the story Donoghue has Henry offering a less complacent version that takes into consideration the gender restrictions of the time: 'Will she and her sisters go into trade together? Or will she find some slow-moving neighbor to take her and the children, some Irishman her age who will be husband and father both?' (p. 88); the options for Jane were indeed quite limited.

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Taking Liberties. Scottish Literature and Expressions of Freedom (2016), in collaboration with Ian Brown and David Clark; *The Cultural Politics of Harry Potter: Life, Death and Transition* (2019) and *The Humanities Still Matter: Identity, Gender and Space in Twenty-First-Century Europe* (2020), along with José Igor Prieto-Arranz.

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