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## **Composite Selves and Nonhuman Others in Caitriona Lally's *Eggshells* (2015)**

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**Abstract:** Alert to the pulsating materialities of the manifold sites of memory reactivated throughout her Dublin perambulations, the protagonist of Caitriona Lally's *Eggshells* (2015) experiences an identity crisis and seeks to extricate herself from an insubstantial network of human relations, turned all the more alienating since the passing of her closer or more distant relatives. Taking heed of the novel's insistence on Vivian Lawlor's impossibility to grieve as a symptom of self-willed amnesia, this paper explores how tapping the recollective potential of objects steers the human self towards an ultimately volatile grasp of memory, which opens a space of reconnection with one's fellow human beings and also activates a firmer sense of selfhood as distributed across the network of animate and inanimate others.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Irish Novel; Caitriona Lally; Self; Other; Human vs. Nonhuman; Memory of Objects.

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2019.37.11

Caitriona Lally's debut novel *Eggshells* (2015) is, in the words of Declan Kiberd, "an edgy and visionary book" that supplements Dublin's palimpsestic memory with an alternate topography rooted in fabulism and fairylore<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the novel's protagonist makes relentless attempts to enliven the urban sites of memory whose "historicized" meanings are already congealed or ossified, touched by the brush of oblivion, into actual milieus or environs of a memory that is "living," still secreted and produced through intra-collective ritual and practice<sup>2</sup>. Sieving through competing narratives that encapsulate the myriad cultural encryptions of the city's memorial sites<sup>3</sup>, Vivian Lawlor – the orphaned young woman whose life project revolves around an inherited notion that she is a changeling, a foreigner among humans – saunters through Dublin, seeking not so much the material pleasures of immersion in cafes, shops and markets (which she occasionally enjoys) or the thrill of conversing with strangers (whom she most often vexes with eerie scenarios, addressing them as wizards, hobbits or leprechauns). What she presumably looks for are secret passageways

into an otherworld that she imagines to be her home, "my thin places," as she calls them, "places in which *non-humans* might live, potential gateways to the world I came from"<sup>4</sup>. In other words, deprived of a sense of communion with the other Dubliners and with humans, in general, she misrepresents her identity as belonging to a surreal, imaginary dimension, in an effort to eschew the labor of mourning for her recently departed great-aunt and to postpone building a sense of autonomous selfhood. However, as this paper tries to prove, by participating in what Richard Grusin calls the "nonhuman turn"<sup>5</sup>, Vivian opens a space of reconnection with her fellow human beings and also activates a firmer sense of selfhood as distributed across the spectrum of animate and inanimate others.

The epigraph from Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) clarifies Vivian's drive to find portals where she hopes to ritualistically enact her dis-placement from this world: "Sometimes the fairies fancy mortals, and carry them away into their own country, leaving instead some sickly fairy child... Most commonly they steal children. If you 'over look a child,' that is look on it with envy, the fairies have it in their power"<sup>6</sup>. Hence, her flimsy, insecure identity and her volatile sense that another inhabits her self, that she *is* another who does not belong here and needs to be released from her earthen shackles, restoring, at the same time, the comforting sameness and purity of the humans around her. "Many things can be done to find out if a child's a changeling," the Yeatsian epigraph continues, "but there is one infallible thing – lay it on the fire... Then if it be a changeling it will rush up the chimney with a cry"<sup>7</sup>. The test of

alterity would entail voiding the shell of the human self of the inhuman other that has parasitically laid hold of it, as the metaphor of the title – the "eggshells" that Vivian breaks and boils, in one of the novel's last scenes of attempted self-destruction – suggests. However, the sinister truth, condensing the trauma of her rejection by her parents, who made multiple attempts at her life, by scalding or trying to drown her, and who also named their other daughter Vivian, as if to cancel out her precarious life, lingers, insufficiently processed in the narrator's memory. It is left indeterminate by the end of a rather dynamic, yet almost plotless narrative<sup>8</sup> and it is literalized in her ceaseless quest for those points of exit from a world that, she assumes, denies her very humanity. In fact, the very first nonhuman she aspires to become interconnected with is the city itself, for, as the author points out,

Dublin features in my novel, *Eggshells*, almost as a character in itself, a sometimes magical but occasionally sinister character. For Vivian, the protagonist, Dublin is the place she hopes will show her how to live, where to go, how to be. [...] Because she walks alone and spends so much time inside her head, Dublin becomes as alive to Vivian as a human.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in Broadstone Park, Vivian closes her eyes and gropes for an invisible opening in the wall, which reminds her of "the magic door of a red-haired puppet that I used to watch as a child"<sup>10</sup>. On Nassau Street, she aims for the "hidden pagan well" under the entrance to Trinity College, where she might be shrunk and be given

wings. Zara, on Grafton Street, is also on her list of thin places, as its doors may conceal a “candy-laden paradise, a combination of the Hansel and Gretel house made of sweets, the mountain the Pied Piper led the children into and the chocolate factory Charlie visited”<sup>11</sup>. In Thundercut Alley, she is dispirited by her failure to magically rouse a thunderstorm that will sweep her away by flashing her telephone light and in the Middle Third in Killester she is dismayed at her inability to find the entrance to a hobbit hole, despite wearing a green coat that might help her blend in among the middle earthians. She swings in magic wishing chairs, climbs up trees, looking, as she says, for the “Land of Spells and the Land of Dreams and the Land of Topsy-Turvy”<sup>12</sup>. At another time, having put on her green-tinted glasses and oversized Dorothy shoes, she looks for the Emerald Palace from the Wizard of Oz, but ends up at Dublin Airport, a nonplace that distances her even further from her homebound destination. What retains attention is her reliance on inanimate matter, on objects, gadgets, and all manner of paraphernalia – nonhuman others, one might say – that are invested with the magical function of sublimating her fallible human essence and enabling her to teleport herself among the other misfits of the otherworld.

Still, the flashbulb memory of her father pushing her head under water while allegedly teaching her how to swim remains an acutely painful, albeit misrepresented image. It is, indeed, a remainder of the vicious family relations that allowed for the inhuman treatment she received as a child, causing her to distance herself from her own humanity and to misapprehend herself as also inhuman, less-than or

beside-the-human. Because of its linguistic irrepresentability, as Cathy Caruth shows<sup>13</sup>, trauma pushes the victim towards a relentless re-enactment of that life imperiling experience, so much so that Vivian fantasizes about self-immolation on Pearse Street and even digs a grave that may accommodate her bodily remains in the desired event of her death. On one of her lengthier strolls through the city, she even persuades a taxi driver to impersonate the Charon of Greek myth and take her across the River Liffey, starting from the Ferryman’s Crossing and zigzagging back and forth the modern-day Styx across all of Dublin’s fair bridges, coin in mouth, of course:

I put a pouch of chocolate buttons in my bag, a big pouch to share, along with a Greek drachma coin from my coin collection in the hoardroom, and leave the house. [...] I put the drachma in my mouth: it tastes thinly metallic, like blood when I bite my tongue. I look out over the railings at the tall grey office buildings and wonder if they are in Hades. A man walks by with a dog.

“Are you looking for something, love?”

“I’m looking for Charon.”

My words come out thick and spitty with the coin in my mouth.

“Sharon Larkin or Sharon Eliot?”

“A different Charon,” I say.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage marking the willed transition into the netherworld, the symbolic descent into Hades nonetheless remains arrested at the limit between life and death, since the subject manages neither to entirely disengage herself from her fellow

humans, nor to turn roughly inanimate, like the drachma she positions on her tongue. Chocolate, metal, and language merge together, in Vivian's mouth, as entangled lacerations that commingle physical sensation with mental perception, solid matter with fluid speech, inert texture with bodily fluid, as the human becomes a participant in the material formations that Jane Bennett sees as innervated by a composite vitality:

The vitality of (nonhuman) bodies? By "vitality" I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans.<sup>15</sup>

Language itself ("My words come out thick and spitty with the coin in my mouth") is heavy with the traces of a materiality whose stickiness and viscous inertia indicate how inescapably the abstract faculty of linguistic representation is submerged within webs of materiality. Speaking about the "ecological" focus of the vital materialism she advocates, Jane Bennett touches upon the inherently nonhegemonic stance involved in abandoning the centrality of human agency in a world that is no longer seen as furnished with passive nonhuman entities:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of

conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even "respect."<sup>16</sup>

Lally's sensitive apprehension of these ecologies of life in which humans, as well as animate or inanimate nonhumans, are coparticipants of confederative materialities<sup>17</sup> is rather intensely conveyed in Vivian's compartmentalization of the universe around her not by an assumed hierarchy of the orders of living and nonliving or brute matter, but, at most, by colors and their gradients in the light spectrum. For instance, an epiphanic moment occurs for her when she spots the "arch of a rainbow outside the window," with "the edges of the colours barely blurring into each other" and being distributed in the "right order: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo violet"<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the food colorings she buys at a supermarket by the western Irish coast allow her to redesign the marine landscape and the sandy dunes in nuances of red and blue. The pet fish she buys is chosen for its chromatic similarity with the lemons she has already purchased, which is why for her it makes complete sense to place Lemonfish and yellow citrus fruit within the same bowl, which functions as a miniature trope that epitomizes Vivian's outlook on *being* ecologically responsible in the world. Lemonfish Lazarus (named thus for its willed yet unmaterialized resurrection from death) also serves as an

identity shortcut for Vivian, as she herself feels hurled into a soupy bowl populated by both human beings and nonhuman animals, plants and objects from which the only escape that she can possibly entertain, for a while, is through death. This explains both the elaborate funeral she throws for the departed pet<sup>19</sup>, and the cultural resonances that lemony things, creatures and places awaken in her:

I [...] walk down Merrion Street, past the bookshop on Lincoln Place that used to be a chemist and that sells lemon soap regardless of what else it sells. Either James Joyce or Leopold Bloom or Stephen Daedalus (or maybe all three) bought soap there, so it attracts citrus-seeking literary tourists.<sup>20</sup>

To discover other volatile loci of a vibrant cultural memory steeped in myth, folklore and fairy-tale, Vivian must first expose the porosities, the seeping interstices and in the fabric of Dublin's memorial sites, those monuments, sanctuaries and statues where, Nora reminds us, "there is no spontaneous memory" and where the congealed "memorial consciousness" of contemporaneity can only be fleetingly activated in the process of building archives of material traces or of performing commemorative gestures<sup>21</sup>. In other words, she must tone up her attentiveness to the vibrancy of matter, which, in Jane Bennett's terms, can ultimately enable her to process the dissolution of onto-epistemological binaries and accept her partaking of the world's "material vitality"<sup>22</sup>.

First, she begins to notice how some street signs are blued or blacked out, rendering their names undecipherable. This

signals the unreliability of language to preserve the past mnemonically and forges pockets of uncanny disorientation in an otherwise familiar cityscape:

Some of the white letters on the street signs have been colored blue to match the blue background: Manor Street reads "MAI\_O\_ STR\_ \_T." "Maio-strrt" sounds like a combination of mustard and mayonnaise that would taste good on ham sandwiches. I pass boarded-up houses with small trees growing out of their chimneys, and a supermarket that sells used cars. At "Prussia Street," the "P" on the street sign has been blue-ed out to read "\_RUSSIA STREET." I picture a band of Smurfs combing the city in the black of night with tins of blue paint, daubing over the street letters that offend them.<sup>23</sup>

Losing her bearings could easily come about in a city where the colors of official inscriptions are progressively blurred and where Hume Street looks like a "dotless 'i STREET'," Pembroke Streets reads as E\_BROKE STREET, King's Inn Court appears as "K\_N\_\_RT."<sup>24</sup> When entire street signs are erased, she feels as if she had "walked off-map onto a street that doesn't exist, not in this world, at least"<sup>25</sup>. To further de-realize the world and make visible the portals to the realm beyond, she creates myriad mental maps of her aleatory navigational routes through Dublin and traces them down on parchment, hoping that by stacking the sheets of greaseproof paper one on top of the other, she can detect the nodal points in a network of criss-crossing pathways:

I unfurl the Dublin map onto the kitchen table, and draw black blobs with a marker along the route that I walked today. Then I take out a roll of greaseproof paper, tear off a piece, place it over the map and trace my route with a pencil. I hold the paper up to the world map on the wall: today I covered the shape of an upside-down and back-to-front Chad.<sup>26</sup>

The prosthetic technology of drawing is used to build a memory of place on a near daily basis:

When I get home, I trace my route. Today I walked the shape of a head with a hollow scooped out of the back, and a quiff of hair blown flat to the front. I place it on the kitchen table, next to yesterday's route.<sup>27</sup>

Other squiggly graphs feature "a slice of batch loaf with an aerial poking out," "a fishing rod that has caught another fishing rod," "a slightly misshapen floor lamp minus the bulb," "half a teacup" or "the squinting profile of a cat with an upturned collar and a stalk on its head"<sup>28</sup>. Still, despite the profusion of these schematic mind routes that Vivian translates onto paper, what she ends up with is nothing more than a collection of sketchy visual representations of her random trajectories. On the one hand, they may buttress her retrospective view of her perambulated pathways, enabling her to feel more safely ensconced in the physical fabric of the world. On the other hand, they undermine a so-called prospective memory, her capacity to imagine a "connection between the shapes"<sup>29</sup> and find the optimal way out of the grid.

Vivian's utterly irreverent stance on the surfeit of a hypertrophied museal memory comes to the fore every now and again, for instance, when she pictures toppling James Joyce's statue "with his legs crossed" if anyone forced her to read *Finnegans Wake*, or when she imagines going berserk if she had to remorph the historical identity of Ivar the Berserker, ostensibly represented on the Steine, the pillar celebrating Dublin's Viking past<sup>30</sup>. She visits libraries and museums, those "other spaces" that Foucault described as heterochronies linked to the accretion and archiving of "time outside time"<sup>31</sup>, and she is strangely comforted in the proximity of artefacts, institutionalized objects of memory that are meant to structure, partition, and taxonomize knowledge of the past, even though, as Steven Conn admits, they generate a plethora of alternative explanatory stories that oftentimes jar understanding and confuse visitors<sup>32</sup>. Pondering on the "ability of objects to communicate meaning easily and transparently"<sup>33</sup>, Vivian interacts with the items exhibited at the Museum of Decorative Arts and History in Collins Barracks by ignoring the labels and captions which ascribe a particular function to every object on display, so that "it knows what it's supposed to hold; its task has been assigned"<sup>34</sup>. Instead, she imagines an economy of haptic, olfactory and aural interactivity with things that would grant her a heightened sense of how she can situate herself in the world and acquire a more intimate grasp of who she is. She compiles random lists and inventories of the artefacts' names in her notebook as a heterotopian alternative to the rigidly planned museal archive. The way she experiences the museal site reveals her alertness to the asymmetrical,

subaltern position that objects, as radical others of the human subject, are relegated to, through their instrumentalization as repositories of memory:

I take out my notebook and walk through the museum, collecting names: "Posset Bowl, Mether, Pitcher, Tankard, Water Bottle, Sweetmeat Box, Chalice, Salt Cellar, Monstrance, Sugar Bowl, Goblet, Vase, Trinket Box, Ewer, Jug, Inkstand, Flagon, Hot Water Urn, Decanter, Snuff Box, Patch Box, Cruet Stand & Bottles, Finger Bowl, Carafe, Pickle Jar, Sweetmeat Cup, Chocolate Pot, Coffee Pot, Teapot, Kettle, Cream Ewer, Strawberry Dish, Sugar Basket, Egg Cup, Butter Dish, Tea Caddy, Salver, Cigar Box, Needlework Box, Correspondence Box, Bridal Coffin, Blanket Chest, Calling-Card Box, Travelling Box, Writing Cabinet, Log Carrier, Coal Scuttle, Double-Compartmented Meal Bin."<sup>35</sup>

Such lists of not only objects, but also insects, animals, and plants abound in Vivian's notebook and it is quite significant that the writing pad she deliberately chooses for recording her life experience is not the diary, which would narrativize the arch of memory by impressing a semblance of sequential order in the fluid architecture of self-construction<sup>36</sup>. The notebook, with its hoard of artefactual object names inscribed in paratactic juxtaposition, is the very opposite of the archive, with its authoritative storage function as a stable container for the past. It is, at most, a leaky archive, with porous limits that connect, rather than separate its constitutive items,

shaping a potentially endlessly proliferating site of memory where objects whet the subject's appetite for intersubjective communication, molding the human not as an insulated or self-contained entity, but as one that exists in relation to the world and partakes of the otherness otherwise assigned to the indiscriminate, bulk category of the nonhuman. Here is a passage that describes the hoardroom, the only genuine place-holder of her memories in the house she has inherited from Maud, her deceased great-aunt:

No dragon guards my hoard because there isn't a nugget of gold within it. I collect: stationery, sweet wrappers (only the jewel-colored ones), old milk bottle tops, newspaper photographs of animals, bows, ribbons, wrapping paper, stamps, bus tickets with symmetrical dates on them, maps, old Irish punt currency, jigsaws, dolls, teddy bears, toys, games, knick-knacks and everything anyone has ever given me. [...] My hoard is made up of things from my childhood and early teens, with a big gap from my adulthood that I am trying to fill. I don't like to separate it into containers, so it piles up in two large mounds with a Vivian-wide path running through the middle.<sup>37</sup>

Vivian's "natural" emplacement is in the midst of things, from which she is not to be separated and with whose vivid materiality she actually feels coextensive. To be precise, she is not averse to sharing her hoardroom with the house mice that have a penchant for gnawing the very notebooks she so painstakingly fills out: "At least the

house mice appreciate quality notepaper. I quite like the idea of sharing my home with small creatures that come alive at night, like toys in a children's story"<sup>38</sup>. Another example concerns the numerous chairs bequeathed to her by Maud. Indexing the simultaneous presence and absence of the human, Maud's chairs impart to Vivian a recollective sense of the previous occupant's bodily shape, smell and weight, almost indelibly, if imperceptibly, impressed into their fabric:

My great-aunt kept chairs the way some people keep cats. There are chairs in every room, in the hall, on the wide step at the bottom of the stairs and on the landing. The four chairs on the landing are lined up like chairs in a waiting room. I sometimes sit on one and imagine that I'm waiting for an appointment with the doctor, or confession with the priest. Then I nod to the chair beside me and say, "He's in there a long time, must have an awful lot of diseases or sins, hah." Some of the chairs are tatty and crusty, with springs poking through the fabric. Others are amputees. There are chairs in every colour and pattern and style and fabric.<sup>39</sup>

Anthropomorphized or not, these chairs keep her company when her loneliness threatens to engulf her. They are stand-ins for humans or material reminders of the particular human who once "inhabited" them, one by one. They could also be seen as harbingers of a promised renewal of Vivian's interaction with the surviving members of her estranged family, with the odd acquaintances she makes or even with

the friends with palindromic names she is looking for as she imagines a symmetrical rapport with them. Her identity project – "I need to be in symmetry"<sup>40</sup> – is reiterated in everything she does. It is echoed in the way she positions herself in connection with people, by refusing to take the subordinate stance and to be obliterated by her domineering sister, within the family. It also applies to her being in relation with objects, as she acknowledges her marginal, rather than central or dominating role in the demesne of the materiality, which lies outside rather than under her purview, even when those objects happen to be gathered or collected together in provisional places, such as the notebook or the hoardroom.

Thus, if Vivian may be said to be a collector, she is not the kind described by Baudrillard in "The Systems of Collecting," where the objects' profound yet predetermined relation to subjectivity formation is described in terms of the ancillary role that these "resistant material bodies" play in confirming the sovereignty of the human over the realm of inanimate matter<sup>41</sup>. Rather than a collector, Vivian is a hoarder, not the kind that strives to possess, to govern and command the object-world from an anthropocentric, hegemonic position, but one that refuses, in Jane Bennett's words, to parse "the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)"<sup>42</sup>. Opting instead for immersion within what Bruno Latour describes as hybrid assemblages that catalyze the emergence of a distributive form of agency shared equally, symmetrically by human and nonhuman actants<sup>43</sup>. Speaking about an alternative to the artificial subject-object dichotomy, Latour defends the notion of a composite agency, arising at the interface between



humans and nonhumans, living selves and material others. The “conceptual scenography for the pair human and non-human” predicated on reciprocal foldings into “constantly changing collectives”<sup>44</sup> is an apt description of Vivian’s networked construction of selfhood by interference and interdependence with the things and beings around her. In Latour’s terms, Vivian renounces the project of insulated individualism and becomes networked across transindividual aggregates of objects and subjects, participating alongside the non-human in processes of composite agency.

To give an example, the episode of her admiring a bridal coffer “decorated with mother-of-pearl and gilt inlays, brass escutcheons and lacquer”<sup>45</sup> counts as one of the first instances where her pull towards self-extinction is curbed by the ethical imperative of life-preservation raised by the things she exists in relation with. Pressing for the memory of an anticipated future, a future that might easily have occurred had she not become enmeshed with the “vibrant materialities” of the world<sup>46</sup>, she pictures herself having already crossed the point of no return. Contemplating her epitaph, she accesses an imaginary capsule of composite, human and nonhuman memory: “My gravestone could read: ‘Here lies Vivian Lawlor: She wasn’t Quite the Thing, but She was Decorated with Escutcheons’.”<sup>47</sup> For a recluse who shuns human contact and is seriously considering immuring herself within the mausoleum-like mansion inherited from Maud, the bridal coffer’s suggestion of a happy marital union may intensify her awareness of her own isolation, but what is also apparent is Vivian’s humble reconceptualization of selfhood outside the binary dichotomies that would

generally push for a hierarchical position of subjects above objects. The phrase “She wasn’t Quite the Thing” taps a certain nostalgia for sharing the inanimate regime of objects, yet also ponders the radical otherness that objects stand for, making her all the more alert to the pulsating urges that matter may impart her in the direction of relinquishing her death wish and embracing life.

I think Bill Brown’s distinction between objects and things would work well in this context. While objects are defined by their uninterrupted functionality, which makes them more or less invisible or transparent as they work for us or as we exploit their cultural, historical or social meanings, things – that is, objects that cease to function and end up hurling their thingness in our face – summon or arrest our attention as they “index a certain limit or liminality, [hovering] over the threshold between the nameable and unnamable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and the unidentifiable”<sup>48</sup>. As Brown puts it,

The story of objects asserting themselves as things is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. [...] On the one hand, the, the thing baldly encountered. On the other, some thing not quite apprehended. Could you clarify this matter of things by starting again and imagining them, first, as the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject, the anterior physicality of the physical world emerging, perhaps, as an aftereffect of

the mutual constitution of subject and object, a retroprojection?<sup>49</sup>

Deprived of pragmatic purpose for a woman that would not even dream of marriage, the bridal coffer becomes a thing that jams Vivian's predetermined life script, impelling her to seek companionship outside the stultifying bounds of family kinship. She opens up to social interaction through Penelope, not a wife of sorts for a homesteading Odysseus, but a friend she advertises for and actually finds on the internet. This, coupled with many other episodes in which Vivian starts establishing connections to other humans by engaging, first and foremost, with the material texture of the world, speaks to the entangled agency of things that can foster in humans a yearning to activate a living memory of genuine intersubjective relations.

The model of composite identity the novel endorses echoes Latour's notion of an entwinement of humans and nonhumans in networks of distributed agency. Latour states that "[n]ow by traversing these networks, we do not come to rest in anything particularly homogeneous. We remain, rather, within an infra-physics" of heterogeneity<sup>50</sup>. In Lally's novel, "my mind" – the protagonist confesses, almost literalizing Latour's definition of the non-modern, with its twofold impulses of separation and translation, of division and hybridization – "is in bogland sludge."<sup>51</sup> Bog, the Irish topos that Seamus Heaney famously turned into a trope of memory as the reservoir of poetic imagination, is envisaged in Lally's novel as a seeping, leaking archive that comingles the agency of subjects and objects in acts of remembrance and ever fresher interconnectivity. This composting

of humans and nonhumans makes possible an ethical distribution of agential weight among selves that coexist responsibly with others in the multi-textured materiality of the world. This sense of Latourian compositeness or Harawayan compostism<sup>52</sup> is also sensed by Seamus Heaney in his essay on "The Sense of the Past," where he shows that "the ghost-life that hovers over the furniture of our lives significantly amplifies our consciousness. [...] The more we are surrounded by such objects and are attentive to them, the more richly and connectedly we dwell in our own lives"<sup>53</sup>.

This Heaneyan conceptualization of objects as foundational for subjective and intersubjective thought, affect and memory is reminiscent of a phrase Vivian uses just as she is preparing to relieve herself of the burden of mourning individually, in separation and isolation, for the departure of her sole caring kin: "Death in a wooden box is more real than death in a jar"<sup>54</sup>. This pithy, sentential phrase speaks to Vivian's rather early intimation of the recollective and re-connective potential of objects. It occurs at the beginning of the narrative, when Vivian is bereft of the only human who showed her any form of affection. Deeming herself incapable of properly mourning and overcoming her loss, she decides to have her great-aunt's corpse incinerated, rather than interred, and to send some of the ashes in sealed envelopes to unknown addressees. Burial would entail irreversible separation, whereas sharing Maud's ashes with others would shape a grieving community that could properly pay the departed the symbolic debt of remembrance.

Alert to the pulsating materialities of the manifold sites of memory reactivated throughout her Dublin perambulations,

the protagonist of Caitriona Lally's *Eggshells* experiences an identity crisis and seeks to extricate herself from an insubstantial network of human relations, turned all the more alienating since the passing of her closer or more distant relatives. Taking heed of the novel's insistence on Vivian

Lawlor's impossibility to grieve as a symptom of self-willed amnesia, this paper has shown how tapping the recollective potential of objects can steer the human self towards a re-emplacement within complex networks of composite identity and compositist hybridity.

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## NOTES

1. Declan Kiberd, "An Edgy and Visionary Book", *The Irish Times*, 11 November 2015. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/declan-kiberd-on-eggshells-an-edgy-and-visionary-book-1.2426012> Accessed 15 October 2019.
2. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*", *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 7, 12.

3. Interestingly, one of the narratives that have mapped definitively Dublin for twentieth and twenty-first century readers and which surely flickers as an undertext in Lally's narrative did not immediately influence Vivian's strange trajectories, although there is an undeniable sense that her paths through the city are always-already intersecting the paths of another, of others in fact. As Lally states, "I read James Joyce's *Ulysses* a year after finishing *Eggshells*. I was relieved that I hadn't read it before writing my book. I wouldn't have had the nerve to send a character trekking about the city if I had read Leopold Bloom's more complex wanderings. While I was reading, I itched to map Leopold's routes around the city onto greaseproof paper and see what shapes he walked," in Caitriona Lally, "Dublin, what a character," in *The Irish Times*, 9 November 2015. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/dublin-what-a-character-1.2422921> Accessed 15 October 2019.
4. Caitriona Lally, *Eggshells*, London, Harper Collins, 2018, p. 31.
5. Richard Grusin (ed.), *The Non-Human Turn*, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, pp. x-xi.
6. Quoted in Lally, *Eggshells*, front matter.
7. Lally, *Eggshells*, front matter.
8. Asked why much of "Vivian's backstory remains shrouded in mystery" in a novel that clearly hinges on the image of a world that goes out of kilter for the protagonist because of the trauma she experienced as an infant and young girl, Caitriona Lally confessed that the plotlessness of her text was less a matter of formal experimentalism as a necessity generated by the text's pull for an openness to the alterity of the world and of readers, in particular: "that just came about with how the book was written, with me going on those walks. But you do write the book you want to read, and I love reading books that aren't perfectly plotted and aren't all wrapped up tidily at the end," in Michael Mullooly, interview with Caitriona Lally, in *The Irish Times*, 18 November 2015. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/a-lot-of-eggshells-is-from-conversations-i-overheard-people-just-have-no-filter-1.2435224> Accessed 15 October 2019.
9. Lally, "Dublin, what a character," accessed 15 October 2019.
10. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 31.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 33.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 38.
13. Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore & London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. viii.
14. Lally, *Eggshells*, pp. 109, 111.
15. Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2010, p. viii.
16. *Ibidem*, p. ix.
17. "A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations," *Ibidem*, p. 99.
18. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 25.
19. "Lemonfish ruled a kingdom no bigger than a fruit, but he deserves to be treated like an ancient Egyptian king and buried with his treasures," in *Ibidem*, p. 184.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 60.
21. Nora, "Between Memory and History", p. 13.
22. Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. x.
23. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 9.
24. *Ibidem*, pp. 102, 18.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 187.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 10.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 21.
28. *Ibidem*, pp. 36, 45, 94, 171.

29. *Ibidem*, p. 94.
30. *Ibidem*, pp. 19, 61.
31. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz, in *Diacritics* 16/1 (1986), pp. 22-27.
32. Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, pp. 24-25.
33. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, pp. 25-26.
34. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 8.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 8.
36. Answering Penelope's question about diary-keeping, Vivian points out the inefficiency of a memoirist type of narrative in structuring past experience so as to make it accessible in the present: "There are boxes of my old diaries in the attic, but they're so tiring to read. It's like reliving a whole part of my old life while living in my current life. And I've forgotten most of what's written, so what's the point of living these details in the first place if I'm not going to remember them?," in *Ibidem*, p. 64.
37. *Ibidem*, p. 24.
38. *Ibidem*, p. 77.
39. *Ibidem*, p. 3.
40. *Ibidem*, p. 203.
41. Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," in John Elsner & Roger Cardinal (eds.), *The Cultures of Collecting*, London, Reaktion Books, 1994, pp. 7-8.
42. Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. vii.
43. See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge MA, and London, Harvard University Press, 1999, p.
44. *Ibidem*, viii, 16.
45. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 8.
46. Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 96.
47. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 9.
48. Bill Brown, "Thing Theory", in *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (1): 2001, pp. 4-5.
49. Brown, "Thing Theory", p. 4.
50. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 128.
51. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 128.
52. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 51.
53. Seamus Heaney, "The Sense of the Past", in *History Ireland*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Winter, 1993), pp. 33-37.
54. Lally, *Eggshells*, p. 4.