"It Was Our Great Generational Decision": Capitalism, the Internet and Depersonalization in Some Millennial Irish Women's Writing

Orlaith Darling

Published online: 24 Oct 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

"It Was Our Great Generational Decision": Capitalism, the Internet and Depersonalization in Some Millennial Irish Women's Writing

Orlaith Darling

School of English, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT
A defining feature of the current "golden age" of Irish literature is its attention to capitalism, online culture and precarity in contemporary society. This article brings together four "millennial" Irish women writers – popular novelists Sally Rooney and Naoise Dolan, and critically acclaimed but lesser-known short fiction writers Nicole Flattery and Lucy Sweeney Byrne – and examines their engagement with global capitalism and the internet in *Conversations with Friends, Exciting Times, Show Them A Good Time* and *Paris Syndrome*, respectively. In this work, capitalism is an oppressive system which actively inhibits the protagonists. While Rooney and Dolan depict sexual relationships with a subtext of economic exchange, Flattery sees capitalism as an absurdist charade and Sweeney Byrne's narrator is detached from her surroundings due to surveillance capitalism. In all four texts, the "real" world is mirrored by a virtual one which holds increasing sway. In the context of economic precarity for the "millennial" generation, social media is presented as a means of fostering an illusion of control. However, the hypersaturation of a media-rich world fosters deracination and depersonalization in the characters. Ultimately, these texts are deeply critical of both capitalism and social media, which are presented as conjoined forces of dehumanization.

Writing about the impact of the 1993–2007 economic boom on Irish literature, James Patterson suggests that Sally Rooney might be "the literary voice of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland". Other commentators have been quick to identify Rooney's interest in the machinations of global capitalism and internet culture, highlighting Rooney's own Marxist politics and their manifestation in her work. Like Rooney, Naoise Dolan has been touted as a voice for "millennials". If *Conversations with Friends*'s (2017) "distinctly modern voice" (Thomas-Carr) is derived from its internet literacy and scintillating commentary on "class and its millennial sister: privilege" (Schwartz), *Exciting Times* (2020) is similarly a tale of "love and late-capitalism, sex and the internet" (Wang). In this, both Rooney and Dolan are part of a broader Irish literary trend, largely but not entirely comprised of millennial writers intent on interrogating the social, economic, and political circumstances brought about by global capitalism. Indeed, in a 2018 interview, Rooney explicitly linked the flourishing literary scene among young Irish writers to the financial crisis of 2008 (Clark). Certainly, the broad appeal of "millennial" novelists like Rooney and Dolan is inextricable from a thriving Irish canon – what Patterson calls a "radicalized" generation of writers – with both the recession and capitalism echoing through the work of contemporary authors such as Niamh Campbell, Rob Doyle, E.M. Reapy, Colin Barrett, Caoilinn Hughes (and more besides).

Writing in the *Dublin Review of Books*, Dawn Miranda Sherrat-Bado notes that "we are currently witnessing an explosion of impressive writing by women from Ireland", echoing Patterson's conclusion that "so much of the austerity era's best work has been written by young women." Accordingly,

---

my intention in this article is parse the specifically gendered exploration of capitalism in Dolan and Rooney, but also to contextualize these widely reviewed, best-selling novelists within a more general orientation among female Irish writers. Both Nicole Flattery and Lucy Sweeney Byrne released debut short story collections in 2019 with indigenous Irish presses (*The Stinging Fly Press* and *Banshee Press*). Both, moreover, have received enormous critical accolade on Irish as well as international prize circuits – Flattery was shortlisted for the Sunday Independent Newcomer of the Year 2019, won 2019's Writing.ie short story of the year and the 2017 *White Review* short story prize, while Sweeney Byrne was short listed for the Emerging Writer Award at the Dalkey Book Festival, the 2020 Butler Literary Award, and the John McGahern Annual Book Prize. *Show Them A Good Time* and *Paris Syndrome*, respectively, were also longlisted for the 2020 Edge Hill Prize. In the *Irish Times*, Sarah Gilmartin highlights the similarities between Flattery and Sweeney Byrne, emphasizing how both writers draw on "the frequently absurd relations and situations of modern life" for subject matter. In *Paris Syndrome*, Sweeney Byrne's narrator is "always seeking, and never finding", traveling the world in pursuit of meaning only to find that each new city merely confirms her underlying sense of futility and hollowness (Grenham). In *Show Them A Good Time*, Flattery writes about "young women searching for meaning they might never find", whereby female narrators flail around an absurdist capitalist wasteland of exploitation and depersonalization (Flattery, "I write about young women").

In *Conversations with Friends, Exciting Times, Show Them A Good Time* and *Paris Syndrome*, the theme of capitalism is inextricable from that of the internet. If Dolan explores the ways in which social media and capitalism converge to create fraught power dynamics in contemporary relationships, Rooney presents capitalism as a moral battleground and sees the internet as a vehicle of confusion. While, for Flattery, capitalism is a meaningless void where the only option for survival is depersonalization, Sweeney Byrne narrates the deracination brought about by contemporary globalization. This article brings these four texts together under three sections – capitalism, the internet, and depersonalization – on the premise that each depicts the "millennial experience" of existing under conditions of late, surveillance capitalism.

Capitalism

In the Acknowledgments for *Exciting Times*, Dolan states that writing – and, more broadly, narrative – should be an opportunity afforded to all, but that "this will never be possible in a world where billionaires exist" (277). Similarly, Rooney is vocally critical of what she calls "predatory capitalism" (Nolan). Capitalism is an overt theme in both *Exciting Times* and *Conversations with Friends*. In the former, Dolan's 22-year-old protagonist Ava moves from Dublin to Hong Kong to teach English, and believes that "there should be a one hundred per cent inheritance tax. And universal basic income [...] And eventually communism" (119). Rooney's narrator, Frances, is a university student and spoken word poet who sees the capitalist system as a threat to ethical selfhood:

> I had no plans as to my future financial sustainability: I never wanted to earn money for doing anything [...] I certainly never fantasised about a radiant future where I was paid to perform an economic role. Sometimes this felt like a failure to take an interest in my own life, which depressed me. On the other hand, I felt that my disinterest in wealth was ideologically healthy (22).

In both novels, the personal is political. Dolan and Rooney portray capitalism as a vampiric system that breeds disconnect, aggravates historic (gender and racial) inequalities, and forces individuals into moral hypocrisy in order to survive.

Dolan's is a multi-layered critique of capitalism and a nuanced portrait of its ill-effects. The first page of *Exciting Times* introduces Ava's "banker friend Julian" (3), whose wealthy, Oxford-educated financier compatriots alienate Ava by dint of her lower socio-economic background. When Ava and Julian begin sleeping together, Dolan uses their contrasting class backgrounds to demonstrate the impossibility of separating money from the personal, or the working of international, unseen financial processes from relationships. Although their relationship is not an explicit transaction – money for

sex – this is certainly the subtext, especially seeing as Julian acknowledges that many of his banking counterparts simply "pay for it" (12). Certainly, Ava's relationship with Julian is presented as a means of attaining capital – both social and economic: "I felt spending time with him would make me smarter, or would at least prepare me to talk about currencies and indices … I enjoyed his money and how easily I was impressed by it" (5). In another exchange, Ava packs Julian's suitcase for a trip and jokes that she has earned herself an iPhone; Julian responds that he will bring her back an array of Veblen goods. Here, economic categories for consumer goods become a metaphor for their relationship, which is parsed in "repurposed financial language" (Waldman). The more cost the relationship extolls on Ava, the more Julian wants it; the following reference to "Giffen goods" allegorizes Ava's fear that, because she is so available, she is worthless and unlovable (34). When Julian tells her, at the end of the novel, that his bank is moving him from Hong Kong to Frankfurt, Ava's immediate reaction is to drop her purse, "coins clang[ing] against the floor" (254). She begins to think obsessively about how much money she has – "I started stacking the Hong Kong dollars into piles of fifty. That probably wasn't five euro anymore" (254) – and how its real value depends on vague fluctuations in international markets and currency exchanges.

As well as the feeling that her Quotidien is mediated by this nexus of complex financial transactions, Ava exists in a web of contradictions and moral vacillation. She knows that Julian fetishizes her class identity, finding her "thicker Dublin accent than I actually have" sexy and consuming her biography, repeatedly asking her to tell him about:

> the brown terraced house in one of Dublin's drearier suburbs, that I'd taken a year out after school to save up for college. That after 2008 I had shared a room with my brother Tom so that we could rent the other one out to a student. That none of this made us poor and was in fact pretty much what happened to Ireland as a whole, due in no small part to the actions of banks like his (10).

And yet, despite this lived experience of the neoliberal economic governance epitomized by Hong Kong's deregulated financial sector, Ava uses Julian's credit card and spends his money; despite seeing Julian as part of a "vampire class" (35), she lives in his apartment for free, all the while saving her own wages for some unspecified event. Even as she does this, Ava is aware of her hypocrisy, but notes that "our wealth disparity was too wide to make me uncomfortable" (22).

In doing this, there is the sense that Ava has rejected wholesale the neoliberal myth of individual agency; that, recognizing the entrenched systems of power and privilege underlying contemporary society and also her inferiority to these systems, she arrives at the conclusion that she may as well benefit where she can. Her own fiscal caution might even be read in the context of her upbringing. That is, the generation who came of age during the 2008 economic crash are comparatively and statistically thrifty, impressed with the need to shore up against future disaster. If, in this context, moral purity is a luxury good, contingent on a level of financial security that Ava does not have, leeching off Julian is recast as resistance: "Staying in his flat was possibly a rupture from the capitalist notion that I was only worth something if I paid my own way economically" (22–3). And yet, any subversive potential of this notion is mitigated by the fact that, whatever money Ava saves from living rent-free, she fritters away on "buying coffees back to back" (70). This cycle of work and meaningless consumption drives home both the pointlessness and atemporality engendered by the contemporary economy – while buying still more "sickly synthetic" clothes, Ava sardonically muses that "[t]his was apparently the future I'd been saving for" (70).

Ava's second love interest, Edith Zhang, represents a reprieve from this dilemma. She and Ava decry British imperialism and share socialist politics. However, Edith also attended English private schools and Oxbridge, speaks with an upper-class British accent, works for a multinational law firm, and lives at home with her financier parents. As a post-recessionary, female Hong Konger, Edith, like Ava, has neither social nor financial independence short of constant shopping and consumption. Their lesbian relationship is presented as more egalitarian than Ava and Julian's – but it is nonetheless characterized by money. As well as allowing herself to be commodified, Ava buys Edith gifts with Julian's money, thereby drawing her into this transaction (for her part, Edith doesn't mind that Ava

pays for bar tabs with Julian's "Amex", despite commenting that it is strange that Ava's "flatmate" should bankroll her). With Edith, Ava is a consumer and the worth of their relationship is monetarily transferrable – for instance, she spends 400 HK dollars on a "Jo Malone candle because it was something I could imagine lighting with [Edith] in the flat", noting that "for her, I'd burn a candle worth four hours" pay to me' (109).

Although Edith tells her "[i]t's twisted as fuck that you're an actual kept woman" (197), her proposed solution is that Ava leave her dubious dependence on Julian to live with Edith's family. In so doing, Ava would merely substitute one form of morally murky patronage for another. For instance, Ava meets Edith's family and encounters their servant, one of the sole representations of Hong Kong's enormous wealth disparity in the novel. Ava is uncomfortable with how "the maid" is treated but detaches from this feeling: "Edith and Mrs Zhang acted like this was normal, so I did, too. That's good to know about me, I thought. It's good to know how I behave in this situation" (166). At the end of the novel, these issues remain unresolved; it seems that, for Dolan, there is no way to live ethically under capitalism, which makes willful hypocrites of us all.

Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* depict a similarly economically skewed power dynamic in a heterosexual relationship. While he is not a corporate financier like Julian, Nick is from a well-off background and leads a culturally bourgeois lifestyle with his wife, Melissa. When he begins an affair with Frances, Nick notes that she talks about money in a "sexual way", adding that he has money that he does not "urgently need". In theory, he says, he would "rather [Frances] had it" but "the transaction of giving it to [her] would bother [him]" (191). Frances, like Ava, ultimately relies on men for money. When she is broke, "every morning and evening I called my father" (230), and it is Nick who eventually intervenes with funds, first bringing her groceries and then insisting on giving her cash. Echoing Edith, Frances notes "this made me feel like a kept woman", but, unlike Ava, she finds it unsettling to "watch [Nick] handle money like that", casually counting out "fifty-euro notes" (238–40). However, with the help of Nick's money, she swaps dependence from her (unreliable) father to dependence on a sexual partner, noting "it was like I'd finally escaped my childhood" (241).

It is significant that this latter observation takes place in a café with her friends, just as their "conversation turned to monogamy". In evoking the traditional shifting of female dependency from father to husband, Rooney demonstrates that Frances exists in the same furrow as women before her, albeit in a more aggressive market economy (241). As Bobbi rants that monogamy "allow[s men] to pass property to their genetic offspring, traditionally facilitated by sexual entitlement to a wife" (242), the reader is reminded how Melissa warns Frances that Nick is "not going to divorce me & if he did he would never marry you" (224). In short, Frances remains at the mercy of entrenched social and economic systems, of which she is on the fringes. Indeed, attempting to defuse the row that breaks out over Bobbi's analysis, Frances asks Phillip about his "Bartleby essay", an intertextual reference which underlines the melding of living conditions and economics in Frances's life, her passivity in the face of a cannibalistic system, and her dependence on men – while Bartleby starves, Frances goes hungry when her father fails to pay her allowance before Nick brings her food (243).

Like Dolan, Rooney does not shy away from the contradictions of subjects who are left-wing but exist under both patriarchy and capitalism and function by its norms. For instance, Frances's friend comments that "there was an accommodation crisis" which she knows because "she heard it on the news" but is personally insulated (183); Bobbi does not "apply her otherwise rigorous anti-establishment principles to her relationship with [her father]" (30); Frances is judgmental of others – thinking of Melissa's house, "This is a whole house. A family could live here" (4) – but occupies a city center apartment, rent-free. For Frances, money is essential to survival but also antithetical to personhood and morality; there is a sense that, with every social issue she rhetoricises, she is "more comfortable with critique than endorsement" (231). Thus, Rooney and Dolan share their reservation about how ethical personhood can be reconciled with the daily realities of capitalist systems.

This characteristic has split critical opinion. While Katy Waldman criticizes Dolan's "superficial" engagement with politics, Becca Rothfield excoriates the "watered-down Marxism" of Rooney's "affluent millennial" characters, reading the "impotence and hypocrisy" of *Conversations with*

Friends's "leftist communities" as an inherent personality trait rather than a reaction to external circumstance. On the other hand, commentators like; Cody Delistraty see Rooney's characters' vocal criticism but practical passivity as "the truest expression of what it feels like to live in the modern, post-capitalist political sphere" where the dominant feeling is an "oppressive" "lack of agency". For Delistraty, Rooney responds to the "millennial 'condition'" wherein capitalism is experienced as "an unalterable set of circumstances" propelled by "a current of politics and power dynamics that are out of our control". Rooney herself has responded to the idea that her characters are hypocrites for being vocally disaffected with capitalism while participating in it. For Rooney, the defining characteristic of the millennial generation is precarity and expendability:

[it's] interesting that this is the generation that came of age just as the financial crisishit [. . .] it seems to me that the essential definitional fact about millennials is that theyare in an economically precarious position (Nolan).

In her article for *The New Yorker*, Waldman reads Rooney and Dolan as advocating "lip service" over "resistance". And yet, neither Ava nor Frances are meant as exemplars of ethical living or as revolutionary trailblazers; rather, through these characters, Rooney and Dolan depict the paralysis of capitalism, in which millennial experiences and choices are pre-determined by crippling capitalist norms. If, as Waldman notes, the "world of [*Exciting Times*] feels rigged", that is perhaps because, for Dolan, capitalism makes it so.

As a whole, Flattery's collection, *Show Them A Good Time*, reflects a similar narrative of generational disaffection, focusing in particular on economic precarity and job instability. In "Parrot", for instance, the narrator treats "temp jobs like cocktail parties, draping her sparkling self across surfaces, trying to dazzle in a limited amount of time" (179). In "Hump", she describes how her boss, who is also her boyfriend, "had a way of looking me up and down like I was a CV full of errors and misspellings" (55). The title story, "Show Them a Good Time", is based on the JobBridge Scheme which ran in Ireland from 2011 to 2016 in a bid to reduce youth unemployment. The scheme was a source of "frustration" for Flattery personally (Armstrong), who notes that "much low-paid work, and internships that are often not real jobs, can be pretty disenchanting" (McCarthy). In the story, the unnamed narrator moves from an unspecified American city back to an obscure Irish town to pursue made up employment in a fake garage. Flattery's story flits through the various moral and ethical failings of capitalism, from the intense emotional labor required of women when the narrator admits that she "worried about people desperately. It took up a huge amount of my daily hours"; to the empty insistence on profit when Kevin screams "We must be profitable" despite lacking real stock; to the environmental impact indicated by the post-apocalyptic feel, bleak motorways and empty petrol drums (13–4).

Throughout, Flattery's seemingly casual but highly specific use of language conveys the thinness of the distinction between reality and illusion under capitalism. Danny Denton notes that Flattery deploys the "register of human resources" and "interview words", with her use of the passive tense keeping emotion "at a remove". Similarly, Gilmartin comments that the story's "deadpan tone satirises business speak", coming perilously close to revealing the hollowness of both the capitalist everyday and its hegemonic structures. The décor of the garage where the narrator "works", for instance, involves three cans and a "a postcard of a skyscraper" (11). Here, the skyscraper serves as a decontextualized image both of a city and *the* American city that the narrator left having failed to achieve the American Dream. Just as Fredric Jameson famously read the skyscraper as the ultimate monument to postmodern late capitalism, Flattery has, in interview, reflected on the capitalist homogeneity of place in western society: "A lot of cities are becoming very alike – Dublin, London, and New York. They're becoming so capitalist that they start to become homogenous" (Grenham). In *Exciting Times*, when Julian says he worked in The City after university, Ava jokes "which city?" (4). If Xuan Julianna Wang accuses Dolan of "superficial evocation" of Hong Kong, which "absent[s] the textures of a real city", this superficiality is surely the point. That is, Dolan deploys Hong Kong as a center of globalization, free-market economics and international banking, just as, for Flattery, the skyscraper is a decontextualized, empty image of nowhere.

Like the skyscraper, the soup cans in "Show Them a Good Time" are totally derailed from any use-value. The narrator's "coworker" Kevin complains that "[t]hey could have given us more than three cans of godforsaken soup". The narrator's reply, "We don't know if they are soup" (12), alludes to Andy Warhol's iconic Campbell's Soup series, thus foregrounding ideas of mass production, simulation and what Jameson calls the "commodity fetishism" of capitalism (9). At one point in the story, Kevin rages that "they are not putting in a bit of effort. In the training offices in town they have two working computers" and asks exasperatedly: What do we have?' In response, the narrator "double-tap [s] the postcard" (12). This seemingly simply gesture has myriad symbolic resonances. Firstly, the "double-tap" echoes the computers of the main office, where double-click is a select function implying a level of executive power. This alludes to the capitalist structure under which both power (the executive double tap) and resources (the computers) are hoarded by the few.

Similarly, in the story, Kevin and the narrator are alienated from the means and the ends of production and surrounded by capitalist simulation. In double-tapping the postcard, the narrator asserts that, while the executive class have computers and resources, Kevin and the narrator "have" the baseless capitalist ideal represented by a decontextualized building. Similarly, Flattery connects Management's promises of promotion – which send Kevin "sky-high" – to the "skyscraper" and its representation of a baseless ideal: "I said it was tacky to want to succeed at an imaginary job" (12). Instead, the narrator knows that their "function was to be near the till, maintain the appearance of the garage and, most importantly, *believe*" (2). Here, the terms "near" and "appearance" underline the literal unreality of the marketplace and, through noting how workers are called to "*believe*" in the system, Flattery highlights the requirement to suspend disbelief.

The narrator embodies this suspension of belief. That is, her former occupation as a "fantasy girl" is equally fitting for her unpaid employment in a fake garage. Management attempts to gloss over the "fantasy" element in both her current and former employment, bluntly calling the latter "pornography" and "prostitution" (22). However, Flattery draws parallels between the simulation of sex and the simulation of participation in economy and society offered by capitalism. Management speaks with a tone of "animal bloodlust" which evokes the lust of the narrator's former punters; similarly, the forced agreement with Management's insistence that "we all enjoy ourselves" mirrors the performance of fellatio, "Our heads bobbing, bobbing, bobbing" (23). In this story, there can be no doubt as to who is being pimped out by whom, reflecting the simulation of pleasure and consent in capitalism in the language of sexual degradation:

> Management was not above demeaning us. She had lofty, liberal ideals but she was as base as anyone I have ever encountered. She disguised it as fun and games – playtime – but it was tyranny. Pure, intentional terror (23).

Management seeks to juxtapose the narrator's former prostitution with the garage job, showing the narrator demonstration videos of "sexless" workers. Nonetheless, the narrator re-asserts the parallels between capitalism and prostitution, feeling like a voyeur: "[a]s I watched I felt giddy and ashamed, as if I was witnessing a particular type of vicious pornography" (2).

The Internet

The sense of voyeurism, alienation, and detachment described by Flattery nods to social media and surveillance capitalism. In "Media Life", Mark Deuze describes contemporary society as a "mediapolis", arguing that increasing chunks of daily life are mediated by unseen processes and that, through interaction with media, the self becomes an object/data set. Throughout; Sweeney Byrne's collection *Paris Syndrome*, the consistent narrator, Lucy, is pinballed around her environs by unseen forces, with her travels, overall experience of life and view of herself refracted through social media and the internet. In "Montparnasse" in particular; Sweeney Byrne portrays what Deuze calls the "*undirected*" anxiety arising from "invisible" media proliferation (140). In the story, social media is treated as a mere observational detail, thus underlining its ubiquity and the enmeshment of media in the fabric of the everyday. Social media, however, is also presented as a medium which monetizes the

self, with Sweeney Byrne sketching a "generation … whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened" (Fischer np).

In "Montparnasse", Lucy travels to Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, hoping to be "moved" by viewing the graves of Simone De Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre (107). However, instead of gaining the insight she craves, she is assailed by the dispersed chaos of information technology and consumerism. What Deuze calls the "blind" process of mediation is conveyed through the hazy feel of the story (141). The sense that "everything blurs a little, the whole day vignetting in memory even as we lived it" (107) alludes directly to the social media form, and Lucy's inability to concentrate nods to the constant flow of media, information and images on social media feeds:

> My mind that day, in that humming city heat, was like a watercolour painting splattered with constant fine rain, any hope of discernible images blurring in circles and streaming off in soft swirls of mixed and fading colours … (109)

Social media also informs the ways in which Lucy interacts with Père Lachaise and the people around her. Though her mind is hyper-saturated and therefore unfocussed, she is intensely performative, constantly curating herself. While Flattery notes the proximity of capitalist systems to a perverse form of pornography and Dolan illuminates the connections between interpersonal desire and capitalism, Sweeney Byrne links specifically gendered codes of performance to surveillance capitalism.

The cemetery itself is seen as an opportunity for self-marketing and self-promotion as Lucy takes on the "rôle" of presenting herself "as someone with depth" (107). What Finola Kerrigan and Andrew Hart call the "construction of the self as content" (1707) is, for instance, clear when she repeats her observations about De Beauvoir and Sartre for a nearby "man to hear" (110). Lucy herself stares at the man, weighing up his behavior as a means of estimating his thoughts on her, with the nexus of observation detracting attention from the supposed object of focus, the grave: "I watched him from the corner of my eye and, perhaps sensing my scrutiny, he glanced at me. I quickly shifted my focus to the grave" (108). Moreover, though she does not take photographs herself, she is secretly delighted when her friend cajoles her into posing for them, admitting that "[e]very time I went to the toilet, I found myself compulsively checking her Facebook page to count the likes" (112).

This compulsion speaks to Charles Soukup's argument that the "everyday navigation *between* media screens is increasingly demonstrative of a new form of cultural performance" (237). For instance, De Beauvoir and Sartre's graves are covered in notes left by other visitors. While the ostensible purpose for leaving such messages is intense personal affinity with the philosophers, it also suggests the same performativity displayed by Lucy. Her observation that the notes signify the people's "own special connections" alludes to the idea of an internet connection, while the notes themselves function as public performances of private feelings, a feed of emotions, thoughts and messages (109). As Lucy reads these messages, she can feel her friend watching her (110). In turn, this friend comprises another link in the network of surveillance capitalism, always "texting" (110). Indeed, the unnamed friend becomes simply "the hand holding her phone" (111), her very namelessness connoting the real aim of social media – not to give vent to personal expression, but to strip all individuality from users and treat them instead as collections of profitable data.

Commenting on instant messaging, Ori Schwarz outlines the process by which social media "*objectifies* interactions, turns them into data-objects, fixed in time, subject to search-queries, copying, sharing, quoting and re-use" (72). In turn, these interactions are monetized by social media companies, who "solicit massive quantities of individualized expressions and transform those expressions into digital pattern from which money can be extracted" (Turner 57–61). Lucy's friend, for instance, updates her boyfriend "on every activity and vice versa" (110). In this way, the friend becomes the sum of all her online interactions and social media posts. Moreover, her boyfriend replies to her pictures with "stats" regarding his progress in the gym, foregrounding the ways in which, within a "mediapolis", subjects are increasingly transformed into "stats" for multinational companies. Indeed, the boyfriend is "an accountant for PwC in the city", a detail pointing to cultural

homogenization (110). As in both "Show Them a Good Time" and *Exciting Times*, the lack of specificity surrounding "the city" in question foregrounds the ways in which such details are irrelevant – the very presence of firms such as PwC, chock full of number crunchers, serves only to sanitize any city of culture, turning both cities and their subjects into pieces of data to be mined for profit. This is further emphasized in the boyfriend's tasteless Instagram posts about "a work-sponsored charity bungee jump for orphaned Syrian children". The inclusion of "the hashtags #charity #goodcause #dotherightthing #orphansinsyria #nomorewar #savethechildren #peace #bungeejump #pwc" under his post again evince that nothing is beyond the reach of profit – while PwC profits from these publicity stunts, Instagram profits from the hashtags in user traffic, and the boyfriend profits from social capital derived from "#doingtherightthing" regardless of his (unspecified) motives.

In line with Sweeney Byrne's attention to the performativity of surveillance capitalism, Rooney and Dolan depict social media as a means by which Frances and Ava foster a sense of control over social interactions. Both protagonists avail of the ability to gain insights into people's lives from social media profiles, and both curate a self through social media's epistolary form. Reviewing *Conversations with Friends*, Alex Clark highlights "Rooney's talent for interiority, for the precise, perceptive portrayal of mental and emotional landscapes". If close psychological analysis is one side of Rooney's coin, the other is her attention to the intense social performance demanded of people living on the internet. Public and private identities blur under these conditions, with the self becoming at once more porous to interpolation by outside influences and more hermeneutically sealed as a static piece of data. Indeed, there is a sense in *Conversations with Friends* that social media and messaging comes to comprise a large part of both individual identity and interpersonal relationships. As; Michael Nolan points out, "the characters talk to one another over email and messenger as much as they do in person", and their self-designation as "bisexual[s]", "communist[s]", "communitarian anarchist[s]", "'basically' a Marxist[s]" or "insurrectionist[s]" reflects the pithy slogan culture of the internet, the need to distil complex webs of intersectional identity into easily advertised sound-bites (37; 45; 73; 231).

Lauren Oyler notes that Rooney's electronic-savvy writing style fosters "a qualified, almost defensive irony" in her characters, and, certainly, Frances fosters an aloof persona, but is nonetheless fixated on how she is viewed by others. The internet allows Frances to observe both herself and others in a privately forensic but publicly detached manner. In one instance, she recalls:

> Melissa wanted to write a profile about us. She sent us an e-mail asking if we were interested, and attached some of the photographs she had taken outside the bar. Alone in my room, I downloaded one of the files and opened it up to full-screen. Bobbi looked back at me, mischievous, holding a cigarette in her right hand and pulling on her fur stole with the other. Beside her, I looked bored and interesting. I tried to imagine my name appearing in a profile piece, in a serif font with thick stems [...] I held my phone in one hand and zoomed in on Bobbi's face with the other. It was a high-quality image but I zoomed in until I could see the pixilation [...] I zoomed back out and tried to look at my own face as if I were a stranger on the Internet seeing it for the first time (9).

Frances's early focus on photos, profiles, and social media means that later, in-person descriptions echo this photographic element, as well as the implied comparison of social media: "She was wearing a red wrap dress, low-cut, and gathered with a ribbon at her waist. She had large breasts, a generous figure, not at all like mine" (94). For her part, Frances has already "come across [Melissa] on the internet" before meeting her and has "looked at shirtless photographs of [Nick] on the Internet" (15). With perception, performance and self-presentation increasingly snared up in the kaleidoscope of social media profiles and messaging apps, the internet becomes, in many ways, the "rich inner life" she jokes about (14).

Throughout *Conversations with Friends*, the internet is used to maintain, create, and challenge power dynamics within relationships. For instance, Frances notes that, because Melissa is behind the camera, the dinner party she photographs has an entirely different feel: "The relationships of the people who appeared in the photographs, without Melissa, became unclear" (19). In one interesting scene, shortly after Frances realizes that she is attracted to Nick, he promises to come and see her perform her spoken word poetry. She is intensely nervous about how she will appear to him, looking in the mirror and noting that "the features of my face seemed to come apart from one another or at least

lose their ordinary relationships to each other" (35). However, Nick is late to the event, arriving only as Frances and Bobbi finish and the audience is applauding. Instead of being disappointed, Frances muses how she prefers that Nick "can only assume good things" based on the "wild applause" when, in reality, Frances knows that "sometimes I was good, sometimes I was just okay" (35–7).

In both this and Frances's description of how she looked, the influence of the internet is clear. In the mirror, the relational nexus between her a face and its constituent parts breaks down, with each feature becoming static and frozen. This loss of relationship recalls Frances zooming in on Melissa's photograph "until I could see pixilation". Moreover, Frances reflects how she prefers "having [Nick] witness how much others approved of me, without taking any of the risks necessary to earn [their] approval". She gains confidence from mass, semi-anonymous affirmation rather than having to appear vulnerable in front of him, again harkening back to internet culture in which social/cultural capital is acquired through "the aggregation and circulation of image content ('self-branding')" (Photographer's Gallery). What Nick is left with is an *image* of Frances's success, a post-fact still of a finished process. However, Frances also notes that this group affirmation is "part of the performance itself" – in "mak[ing] [herself] into this kind of person", Frances signals how she curates an image of herself (39–40).

At one point in the novel, Frances downloads all of her instant messages exchanged with Bobbi and searches the file for certain terms. A search for "love" when Frances is feeling low returns the following:

Bobbi: if you look at love as something other than an interpersonal phenomenon

Bobbi: and try to understand it as a social value system

Bobbi: it's both antithetical to capitalism, in that it challenges the axiom of selfishness

Bobbi: which dictates the whole logic of inequality

Bobbi: and yet also it's subservient and facilitatory

Bobbi: i.e. mothers selflessly raising children without any profit motive

Bobbi: which seems to contradict the demands of the market on one level

Bobbi: and yet actually just functions to provide workers for free (174).

Oyler's comment that Rooney's characters often observe rather than feel emotion is perceptible here. While Frances finds these archived internet conversations "exciting", she is clearly seeking evidence that "love" exists between her and Bobbi but is unable to admit to this need. In a similar search for the term "feelings", Frances comes across a discussion she and Bobbi had regarding their "feelings about authority figures" (187). With retrospect, Frances rereads her emotional abstraction in the messages – pondering how she "formulate[d] [her] feelings into beliefs" – as an inability to tell Bobbi "that I missed her" (187). This inability to be vulnerable with Bobbi and her need to impose order on the friendship recalls Frances's ticks when she later receives an angry e-mail from Bobbi – "delete[ing] it briefly", Frances demonstrates a need to exercise control over the feelings that Bobbi expresses in the e-mail. Her retrieving it from the "trash" and "[marking] it as unread and [opening] it to read again as if for the first time" (80) continues this tussle and, even then, Frances cannot say what she feels – simply apologizing takes "several drafts" (80).

As such, Frances's need to confirm that her friendship with Bobbi "wasn't confined to memory alone" and that "textual evidence" existed merely reflects the level of miscommunication between them, which is largely bound up in networks of mediation. The network of surveillance capitalism that is social media distorts Frances's search for meaning and atomizes her interactions with Bobbi into exchanged soundbites. Moreover, in grounding Frances's "search" (in both the metaphorical and functional sense of the word) for "love" in a conversation about exploitation and capitalism, Rooney suggests that all communication and, thus, a large part of Bobbi and Frances's friendship is cannibalized by capitalism. Through these conversations, Rooney signals the danger of mediation and the

communicative and affective shortcomings of online forms; as Frances concludes, there is no "coherent narrative form" to be gleaned from the message file (173).

The most notable instance of Frances attempting to apply order to Bobbi is, of course, her writing a short story about their friendship. When the story first surfaces in the novel, there is no indication as to what it is about, save the small hint that Frances saves the word file as "b". Through this omission of detail, Frances relinquishes responsibility for her action almost *because* her (what turns out to be) hurtful depiction of Bobbi is mediated by her computer. That is, she narrates her writing the story as though it was some sort of automatic writing, arising from her keyboard:

> I didn't plan to write a story, I just noticed after some time that I wasn't hitting the return key and that lines were forming full sentences and attaching to each other … I lifted my hands from the keyboard and in the light from the window they looked emaciated (202).

In the story, she depicts Bobbi "as a mystery so total I couldn't endure her, a force I couldn't subjugate with my will" (215). In writing the story, of course, this is precisely what Frances *is* doing. Despite her claims to the contrary, she subjugates Bobbi to her will through the means by which she exercises her power most regularly – mediation, editing, narrative. The propensity for social media to foster "misunderstanding" (187) is overcome only when Frances's story – emailed to Valerie, Melissa and then Bobbi – takes the form of a "printout" (253). It is as though the narrative's tangibility and physical realness drives home to Frances how the virtual has real, affective repercussions. Thus, Bobbi "[tearing] the pages in half" marks a repudiation of the virtual and a stinging reminder to Frances that she cannot act as an unseen, unimpeachable mediator, controlling and narrativising her relationships through the internet.

Like Frances, Ava "finds it easier to express [herself] behind a screen" (94). In *Exciting Times*, however, the majority of instant messages do not get sent. Instead, Ava uses social media as a means, not to communicate with others, but to privately vent her own fears surrounding her precarity and lack of control. The term "curation" we have come to associate with social media was traditionally – and, in the art world, still typically – seen as a collaborative process (Tokumitsu). In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances draws on this context through her message interchanges with Bobbi, and in her delight that her online relationship with Nick feels "like a Word document that we were writing and editing together" (178). However, Ava's experience is, at best, a deeply individualized exercise in self-curation and self-optimization befitting of the corporate finance circles in which she moves and, at worst, an overtly antagonistic game of battleship. Her communication with Julian is far from collaborative: "We chose what to share. Through composition I reduced my life, burned fat, filed edges. The editing process let me veto post-hoc the painful, boring or irrelevant moments I lived through" (163). Though it is understood to be more genuine, her relationship with Edith is nevertheless very similar. Before they begin to date, Ava Instagrams when she is in a nightclub knowing that Edith will respond; when they break up, Ava develops ways of viewing Edith's story without the app (and, therefore, Edith) registering that she has done so. Generally, Edith uses social media intensively so as to give "reality a glaze" (107). As Edith begins to post photos of the two of them, Ava is "excited to feature on her feed" but is aware that "her caption" is specially calibrated to "remind the people [Edith] was out to that I was her girlfriend" without "giv[ing] it away to anyone else" (206).

Writing about the politics of what she calls "the curation craze", Miya Tokumitsu links the sharp increase in social media "curation" to the decline in economic and social certainties. "Amid flat wages and dwindling public services", she posits, "curation gives us the illusion of control" (Tokumitsu). The intensive culture of corporatization, wealth inequality and economic precarity in Hong Kong means that the self becomes an object which must, at all times, be reactive and streamlined. Edith reflects this culture of self-optimization when she describes her decision-making process to Ava. Edith finds, she explains, a PMI system the most effective – pluses, minuses, implications. On a napkin, she draws a weighted table where important positives or negatives are given a numerical value and any potential knock-on effects are accounted for. As a way to live, this is strikingly corporate; the "pluses", "minuses" and "columns" recall an accountancy ledger. When Ava herself must decide whether to stay in

Hong Kong or go to Frankfurt with Julian, she literally *invests* in this decision-making process by spending "thirty Hong Kong dollars" on a notebook for her PMI table (263).

It is hard not to link Tokumitsu's argument about declining certainties – and both Ava and Edith's freighted way of making decisions – to their approaches to social media throughout the novel. The rigid categorization of the PMI method is reflected in Ava's emotionally compartmentalized approach to life. While Edith draws tables, Ava uses messaging apps to type an internal monologue, thrashing out the pros and cons of situations through conversation with a self she has outsourced to social media. This process is also fraught with the language of money and corporate finance – for instance, Ava composes a fake message before "delet[ing] the draft with an air of now having real business to attend to" (185). When Julian leaves for London, his only communication with Ava is via text. Ava's anxiety before opening his messages – fearful that they might contain requests that she leave his apartment – underlines the extent to which Ava, as Tokumitsu puts it, *needs* social media as an illusion of control in a world in which she is powerless. Like Sweeney Byrne in "Montparnasse", Dolan evokes the processes and language of the corporate world, describing Ava's approach to Julian's messages as "a stress test": I'd list the worst things he could say ... Once I'd modeled out every possible way the message could hurt me, I went somewhere quiet and opened it' (94). One level more of mediation online means nothing to Ava, as her very means and mode of existence – where she lives, how she eats – is mediated through economic dependence on a banker who mediates digital finances. If the power dynamic between Ava and Julian is "suboptimal" (94), she uses the curatorial ability lent to her by the internet to take back part of this power: "I highlighted the text and pressed the back key, then navigated out and back into my drafts three times to make sure the deletion had saved" (127–8).

As the novel progresses, Ava's "increasingly vulnerable" draft messages form a "digital counterbalance" to her aloof persona (Wang). This cycle is broken when she drafts a "fake" message to Julian telling him that she is "fucking Edith". As before, she acknowledges that "it would not be ideal for me if you kicked me out of your apartment over this" (191). However, she accidentally sends rather than erasing the message. Ava finishes this "fake" message by pontificating: "you say you don't have feelings, but if you do, i'm sorry" (191). Indeed, just as a PMI treats the self not as a person, but as a piece of human capital to be optimized, Ava's use of social media has a profoundly depersonalizing effect. In one instance, her mother sends her a message asking how she is. Ava's reply, and the process of constructing and deleting it, demonstrates the elision of the self as a specific being experiencing specific affect in a specific place at a specific time. That is, when Ava "type[s]: i am very unhappy", "Autofill offer[s] three different negative emojis." She then "tap[s] one and replace[s] the word 'unhappy' with a sad face" (70). If Autofill signifies the constant information stream instructing media users how they should act and feel, the emoji is a generic signifier, a stand-in for something otherwise unspeakable in an optimized economy wherein fluctuation in feeling itself is bracketed (literally in scare quotes). Indeed, Ava is disconnected from her feelings enough to "delet[e] the draft and sen[d] one saying I was grand" (70).

Depersonalization

Thus, in *Exciting Times*, the overall effect of social media is to both provide a platform to Ava's ironic detachment from her own life and also to compound the depersonalization brought about by the conditions of late stage capitalism. When she accidentally sends the "fake" message about "fucking Edith" to Julian, Ava "laugh[s]". At this stage, she is so detached from her own needs (both emotionally and materially) that she genuinely does not care what happens – whether that mean eviction or heartbreak – *or* she is glad that the internet has taken action on her behalf. However, Dolan also uses social media as a mode to display Ava's movement away from heavily weighted decision-making to pursuing a non-risk-assessed course of action. From the beginning of her relationship with Edith, Ava "write[s] in the notepad app to stop her from seeing me type, count[s] the seconds, then cut[s], paste[s] and sen[ds]" (142). Although her reunion with Edith is mediated by the internet, Ava has relinquished

her need for artful detachment, typing a final message to Edith straight into the chat window and seeing that Edith is also typing.

The end of *Exciting Times* is not dissimilar to that of *Conversations with Friends*. The latter is also ambivalent in many ways, one of which is the treatment of the internet and mediation. That is, the potential for Nick and Frances reuniting and continuing the relationship in some undefined vein is sparked due to a misdial, as though the internet has brought them back together. Rooney mentions the phone – describing the feeling of it on Frances's face and so on – throughout their conversation, anchoring the medium in their exchange. However, the closing line – "Come and get me" (307) – asserts the real over the virtual. Frances is aware of the constant mediation of her life, noting:

> Things and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I didn't know about and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them. You can't always take the analytical position (307).

If Frances once relished curating and editing her life and relationships, she now takes a risk, committing to a lack of power in defiance of mediation.

This optimism is not matched by Sweeney Byrne. By the end of "Montparnasse", what Martin Hand calls "global information culture's" "irrevocable disembedding and deterritorialization" of relation to people, time and place has led Lucy to detach (4). Far from being enriched by Père Lachaise, her trip becomes a bland repetition of the same empty symbols:

> That morning, it had taken me at least eleven minutes to choose what jeans to wear, and I'd only brought two pairs. I'd sat on the bed while my friend showered, and stared at them. One pair of blue denim, one pair of black denim, both Topshop (109).

Lucy abandons the pursuit of meaning, instead "empt[ying] [her] already seeping mind" and thinking about material objects like the lipstick and "slinky black dress" she will wear at dinner (111). Overcome by "mediapolis" and the brands of capitalist homogeneity, Lucy succumbs to the "familiar easy nothing" of instant gratification and consumerism (114).

In a 2015 essay, "Dance, Sing, Earn Your Keep", Flattery posits depersonalization, "ghosting in and out of my own life", as a necessary precondition for existing in contemporary society (101). Working a low-paid publishing internship, Flattery describes her boss dictating an e-mail for her to type which included an insult aimed at her:

> Typing those words, colluding in this divorce from myself, was confusing but oddly cheering. I maintained a jolly distance from myself throughout the whole thing – there were days, whole weeks when I was barely there at all ('Dance, Sing, Earn Your Keep' 98).

"Show Them a Good Time" describes similar scenes. The narrator knows, for instance, that the "all-nighter" job interview is "designed to break my spirit." Accordingly, she emerges "not completely sure of anything except my own name and my age, which I knew was somewhere in my late twenties" (1). Like Flattery, the narrator counters the dehumanizing effects of routine capitalist practises with disassociation. She "dream[s] up inventive ways of leaving my own body" (5) and describes how porn allowed her to be "anyone at all", implying a preference for disassociation over accepting her debased place in this world order (30). The only affinity she feels are for Kevin, who is fired, and a plant, which she rips apart. Thus, it seems as though, as Mark Fischer states:

> [t]he most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labour is ours, and the zombies it makes are us (np).

Conclusion

Irrespective of the outcomes in these texts, capitalism and the connected infrastructure of social media are forces of dehumanization and depersonalization. An early scene in *Exciting Times* summarizes the

mediation explored in these texts: describing investment banking, Julian explains that "[t]he degree of abstraction is what separates me from the nice man you talk to about getting a credit card. And the level of risk." The question in these texts is who carries the risk of "abstraction" or mediation and who really has power in global capitalism, regardless of illusions of control through curated social media. If Rooney and Dolan arrive at a cautiously optimistic, albeit not fully disclosed, conclusion, Sweeney Byrne and Flattery are more ambivalent. Flattery's narrator remains in her fake job, depersonalized and "oddly delighted in [her] misery" (34). In *Paris Syndrome*, Lucy will continue around the globe in search of meaning, ultimately failing to decode the "complex questions about recognition, originality, truth, history, and knowledge, in relation to the character of digital information culture" (Hand 2). The difference in endings might, perhaps, be attributed to divergence between the short form and the novel – if the latter shows the "belle époque" of late capitalism as a whole, the former shows only its fragmentary effects. In "Show Them a Good Time" the narrator describes passivity and disassociation as "our great generational decision" (8). Rooney, Dolan, Sweeney Byrne and Flattery, however, are part of an active, critical, politically informed literary generation questioning the viability of current systems of power.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Orlaith Darling is a PhD candidate in The School of English, Trinity College Dublin, where she researches contemporary Irish women's short fiction. Her research is funded by the Irish Research Council.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Maggie. "Like so Many Irish Authors, the Dole Allowed Me to Write." *Independent.ie*, 23 Feb. 2019.
Clark, Alex. "Interview with Sally Rooney." *Guardian*, 25 Aug. 2018.
Delistraty, Cody. "Sally Rooney's Politics of Millennial Resignation." *Vulture*, 11 Apr. 2019.
Denton, Danny. "Danny Denton Reads Nicole Flattery." *The Stinging Fly* Podcast, 27 Feb. 2019.
Deuze, Mark. "Media Life." *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2011, pp. 137–48. doi:10.1177/0163443710386518.
Dolan, Naoise. *Exciting Times*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020.
Fischer, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009.
Flattery, Nicole. "Essay: Dance, Sing, Earn Your Keep." *The Stinging Fly*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2015, pp. 93–104.
Flattery, Nicole. *Show Them A Good Time*. Stinging Fly, 2019.
Flattery, Nicole. "I Write about Young Women Searching for Meaning They Might Never Find." *Irish Times*, 23 Feb. 2019.
Gilmartin, Sarah. "Show Them A Good Time by Nicole Flattery: A Bright New Irish Voice." *Irish Times*, 2 Mar. 2019.
Grenham, Sophie. "In Conversation with Nicole Flattery, 'Get to Know the Debut Irish Author Who Acquired a Six-figure Publishing Deal'." *The Gloss*, Jun. 2019.
Hand, Mark. *Making Digital Cultures*. Ashgate, 2008.
Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991.
Kerrigan, Finola, and Andrew Hart. "Theorising Digital Personhood: A Dramaturgical Approach." *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 32, no. 17–18, 2016, pp. 1701–21. doi:10.1080/0267257X.2016.1260630.
McCarthy, Mary. "Nicole Flattery (29): This Literary Life." *Books Ireland Magazine*, 8 Sept. 2019.
Nolan, Michael. "Interview with Sally Rooney." *The Tangerine Magazine*, Issue 3, 2017.
Oyler, Lauren. "The Socialism Network." *Book Forum*, Apr./May 2019.
Patterson, James. "Fail & Fail Again: How the Celtic Tiger Changed Irish Writing." *RTÉ*, 17 Mar. 2020.
The Photographer's Gallery. "Curating Social Media." 12-13 Sept. 2019.
Rooney, Sally. *Conversations with Friends*. Hogarth, 2017.
Rothfield, Becca. "Normal Novels." *The Point Mag*, Issue 21. 28 Jan. 2019.
Schwartz, Madeleine. "How Should A Millennial Be?" *New York Review of Books*, 18 Apr. 2019.
Schwarz, Ori. "Who Moved My Conversation? Instant Messaging, Intertextuality and New Regimes of Intimacy and Truth." *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2011, pp. 71–87. doi:10.1177/0163443710385501.
Sherratt-Bado, Dawn Miranda. "Likeability." *Dublin Review of Books*, Issue 124. Jul. 2020.

Soukup, Charles. "The Postmodern Ethnographic Flaneur and the Study of Hyper-Mediated Everyday Life." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2012, pp. 226–54. doi:10.1177/0891241612461278.

Sweeney Byrne, Lucy. *Paris Syndrome*. Banshee P, 2019.

Thomas Carr, Johanna. "Review: *Conversations with Friends*." *Evening Standard*, 1 Jun. 2017.

Tokumitsu, Miya. "The Politics of the Curation Craze." *The New Republic*, 25 Aug. 2015.

Turner, Fred. "The Arts at Facebook: An Aesthetic Infrastructure for Surveillance Capitalism." *Poetics*, vol. 67, 2018, pp. 53–62. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2018.03.003.

Waldman, Katy. "Has Self-awareness Gone Too Far in Fiction?" *The New Yorker*, 19 Aug. 2020.

Wang, Xuan Julianna. "Review: *Exciting Times*." *New York Times*, 2 Jun. 2020.