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Beyond Erotica: Sapphic Desire and the Politics of Irish Modernity in Maura Richards' *Interlude* (1982)[1]

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Abstract. This article reexamines *Interlude* (1982) by Maura Richards, moving beyond critiques of its sexually explicit content to explore its political significance, a previously overlooked aspect. I argue that the novel serves as a portrayal of 1980s Ireland, capturing the cultural, sexual, and political tensions of the era. The character of Martha, a representation of neoliberal bourgeois sexual politics, and the novel's depiction of the closet as a site of consumerism and desire, underscore its engagement with neoliberal modernity and its failures. The novel's topography of Dublin reflects the impact of boosterist neoliberal urbanism and homophobic violence, offering a counterhistory of the city. In contrast, the depiction of the West of Ireland, featuring Terry Castle's 'apparitional lesbian', employs queer folk horror aesthetics to subvert traditionalist, romanticized visions of rural Ireland as a heterosexual, harmonious space. Furthermore, Sheila's revelation that she is a nun and the lovers' final conversation challenge neoliberal assumptions about religiosity and women, questioning secularization as inherently liberating and engaging with contemporary debates on religion, feminism, and social change. By analyzing these dimensions, this article reveals new subjectivities within the novel, challenging its reduction to 'mere erotica' and offering a politically charged reinterpretation.

Key Words. Lesbianism, sapphic desire, homonormativity, neoliberalism, modernization, urbanism, queer folk horror, Catholicism.

Resumen. Este artículo reexamina *Interlude* (1982) de Maura Richards yendo más allá de las críticas a su contenido sexual explícito para explorar su significado político, un aspecto previamente pasado por alto. La novela retrata la Irlanda de los años 80 y sus tensiones culturales, sexuales y políticas. El personaje de Martha, una representación de la política sexual

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neoliberal burguesa, y la representación del armario como espacio de consumismo y deseo, reflejan la modernidad neoliberal y sus fallos. La topografía de Dublín en la novela muestra el el impulso del urbanismo neoliberal y la violencia homófoba, ofreciendo una contrahistoria de la ciudad. En contraste, la representación del oeste de Irlanda, con la "lesbiana aparicional" de Terry Castle, emplea el terror rural *queer* para subvertir visiones tradicionalistas y romantizadas de la Irlanda rural como espacio heterosexual y armónico. La revelación de Sheila como monja y la conversación final entre las amantes desafían suposiciones neoliberales sobre religiosidad y mujeres, cuestionando la secularización como inherentemente liberadora y reflejando debates contemporáneos sobre religión, feminismo y cambio social. Este análisis revela nuevas subjetividades dentro de la novela, desafiando su reducción a lo meramente erótico y ofreciendo una reinterpretación política de esta.

Palabras clave. Lesbianismo, deseo sáfico, homonormatividad, neoliberalismo, modernización, urbanismo, terror rural *queer*, catolicismo.

Introduction

Published by Ward River Press in 1982, Maura Richards' *Interlude* followed her bestselling novel, *Two to Tango* (1981). While *Two to Tango* addressed the complexities of single motherhood, *Interlude* delved into a torrid love affair between two women in Ireland. The novel, published as popular fiction, was a commercial failure, never saw a second edition, and has remained out of print for decades, with only limited scholarship addressing its content. It follows Sheila, a mysterious shop assistant, and Martha, a married woman, who meet in a Dublin department store and embark on a passionate affair. After several days in the city, they venture on an escapade to rural Co. Galway, where their relationship ultimately dissolves after Sheila reveals she is a nun.

Contemporary reactions to *Interlude* largely focused on its erotic nature. Feminist critic Rosita Sweetman sharply dismissed it as "distasteful" and "soft porn" (1983: 14). Years later, Rebecca Pelan also reinforced the idea that the novel was merely erotic, disregarding it as "something of a 'bodice-ripper'" (1999: 137). Despite such critiques, more recent scholars, though few in number – Emma Donoghue, José Carregal, Amy Finlay Jeffrey, and Moira Eileen Casey – have begun to examine the novel beyond its sexual content.[2] Carregal, in particular, acknowledges the novel's political potential (2021: 20), yet important elements such as the neoliberal politics embedded in the narrative, remain unaddressed.

While overlooked by audiences and critics alike, the novel was rediscovered by Emma Donoghue in the 1990s, who expressed delight in finding sapphic Irish literature: "Foreign savours stimulated my appetite, but I hungered for the local" (1995: 159). Interestingly, the book's author's note claims the novel contains "no violence, bad language, politics, religion or sex and can therefore hardly be of interest to anyone" (Richards 1982: 6). This ironic disclaimer is immediately followed by the publisher's equally tongue-in-cheek assertion: "There is no such place as Dublin" (Richards 1982: 7). Contrary to these statements, the novel is in fact filled with violence, bad language, politics, religion, and sex, offering a vivid reflection of the sociopolitical climate of 1980s Ireland.

This article aims to explore the very themes the author's note denies, positioning *Interlude* as a significant text that challenges genre conventions by pushing the boundaries of literary representation and mirrors the cultural, sexual, and political tensions of 1980s Ireland. By examining its portrayal of bourgeois Martha, neoliberal urbanism in Dublin,

[2] While these works contribute to establishing the novel as a worthy subject of study, they are primarily anthological in nature and therefore offer only an overview analysis of the text.

queer folk horror in the West of Ireland, and the figure of Sheila, the lesbian nun, this article examines the way the novel depicts modernity and its attendant neoliberal values, revealing previously unexplored subjectivities in the novel.

"Modernizing" Ireland

Set in 1980s Ireland, *Interlude* is specifically concerned with what is commonly understood through a developmentalist lens as the "modernization" of Ireland – a series of social, economic, and cultural changes influenced by global neoliberalism. Historically considered stagnant and deprived throughout the 20th century until the mid-1990s, the Irish economy experienced a dramatic surge during the Celtic Tiger period, the apex of Irish neoliberalization, when Ireland became one of the wealthiest countries in the West between the recessions of the 1980s and the 2000s. The modernization of Ireland is therefore in direct correlation with its assimilation into the sphere of global neoliberal economies.

Neoliberalism achieved mainstream status as a balanced ideology given its "nonpolitics" rhetoric (Duggan 2002: 177), emphasizing its neutrality while promoting measures such as economic liberalization and deregulation, privatization, and globalization. At the core of the ideology are seductive ideals of individual freedom and human dignity, understood, as Harvey puts it, "as 'the central values of civilization'" (2007: 5). This has had a considerable impact in modern Ireland and its sexual politics, which Michael G. Cronin discusses as elements in a dialectical process rather than as "the inevitable unfolding of an abstract modernization" (2018: 234). He warns against linear historical readings of sexuality and modernity in Ireland, which can lead to an oversimplified view of history and an overly optimistic outlook on current politics (Cronin 2012: 5).

Coined by Lisa Duggan, "homonormativity" refers to a politics that upholds heteronormative institutions and promotes a privatized, depoliticized gay culture aligned with neoliberal values of domesticity and consumerism (2002: 179). Duggan defines this as the sexual politics of neoliberalism, describing it as "a contradictory and contested sexual politics not unlike the equally contradictory and contested economic and trade politics that have defined the location 'neoliberal' since the 1980s of Reagan and Thatcher" (2002: 177). Although crucial for certain sectors of the LGBTQIA+ community, legislative milestones such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 and the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 have often been absorbed into linear progress narratives shaped by assimilationist, homonormative politics. These narratives obscure the complexities of the pursuit of State legitimacy, which, as Butler and Gamson caution, create a hierarchy of queer lives.[3]

Interlude offers a subversive portrayal of 1980s Ireland by challenging both the notion of a "modernizing" Ireland pre-Celtic Tiger and developmentalist linear readings of Irish history in the context of sexual politics. This critique is twofold: first, through the setting of the novel's beginning in a department store changing room, and second, through Martha, the protagonist, who embodies bourgeois, neoliberal Ireland.

The novel's opening scene, likely the first target of Sweetman's severe critique because of its shockingly explicit nature, foreshadows its politically incisive portrait of 1980s Ireland. It starts with a bra-fitting in a Grafton Street department store changing room. In it, Martha, the customer, is seduced by Sheila, the shopping assistant. Interestingly, their abrupt sexual interaction is remarkably seamless, blending into the shopping environment without disruption.

[3] This is not to suggest that radical activism was absent in Ireland during this period, but rather that leftist and gay liberationist movements of the 1970s and 1980s were marginalized. As Michael G. Cronin observes, "their apparitional presence in the archive attests to the infertile territory on which they were optimistically formed" (2020: 571). For further discussion on assimilationism and its impact on queer politics, see Butler (2002: 68; 2022: 40) and Gamson (1995: 396).

In fact, their liaison concludes with Sheila's deferential remark: "That will be all? I will parcel up the goods for Madam, they will be ready at the counter" (Richards 1982: 16), drawing a clear parallel between desire and consumption.

Amy Finlay Jeffrey claims that this erotic passage reconceptualizes the space of the closet: "Arguably, such readaptations of the liminal space of the closet queer its normative understanding as a site of repression, therefore establishing it, I argue, as a space of queer liminality" (2020: 28). While this is a compelling perspective, it may inadvertently overlook the context of the changing room as a site of consumption, deeply embedded in bourgeois consumer culture. Alternatively, Cronin has noted that

> In Ireland, as elsewhere, gradual liberation from patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality has proceeded simultaneously with a deepening penetration of consumerism into ever more facets of our emotional and sexual lives, along with its attendant oppressions and anxieties. (2012: 219)

This phenomenon, a manifestation of homonormativity, is represented in the form of the conflation of romance and consumption, which comes alive in this passage. Interestingly, the description of the fitting room also refers to the rapid acceleration of capitalism in the city: "Luckily, Grafton Street's old established stores still had decent fitting rooms, solidly made, with full length mirrored doors" (Richards 1982: 14). The narrator appears acutely aware of the changes occurring in the city's commercial culture, nostalgically using the adverb "solidly", which inevitably echoes Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity". According to Bauman, the "melting of solids" is the "defining feature of modernity" (2006: 6). This alludes to "the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today – not the durability and lasting reliability of the product" (2006: 14). Bauman further dissects the way modern life revolves around consumption, which he says is "guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes – no longer by normative regulation" (2006: 76). Hence, this passage reflects the neoliberal erotics of consumerism that Bauman refers to, depicting an act of seduction, volatility, and desire within the space of a department store. Bauman refers to such spaces as "temples of consumption":

> The temple of consumption (in sharp distinction from the "corner grocery shop" of yore) may be in the city (if not erected, symbolically, outside the city limits, off a motorway), but is not a part of it; not the ordinary world temporarily transmogrified, but a "completely other" world. (2006: 99)

This description aligns with Finlay Jeffrey's idea of the closet as a space of queer liminality. Accordingly, the department store, ironically "one of Dublin's most respectable stores" (Richards 1982: 18) functions as a neoliberal queer escape, highlighting how the consumer existence inflects personal relationships – in this case, a sapphic one. Desire is intense yet fleeting, and ultimately, rather desolate.

Another element of *Interlude*'s critique of "modern" Ireland is Martha, the personification of neoliberal bourgeois Ireland. Despite being portrayed as an unsympathetic character through a somewhat caricatured representation, she is explored far more extensively than Sheila, who remains largely enigmatic throughout the narrative. An Irish emigrant now living in England, Martha is on holiday in Ireland with her husband Richard, an English teacher in London. She is a writer, and together they lead a stereotypically bourgeois life, which she illustrates through the image of commuters:

> I often drive Richard to our local station, and there they are – all those men. Pin-striped suits, bowler hats, rolled umbrellas, shined shoes, rolled paper under arm and those frightful briefcases. […] In the evening they all return, get in their cars and disappear, to re-emerge next morning, unchanged, expressions exactly the same. They do this five days a week; at weekends they clean their cars. (Richards 1982: 52)

Implicitly cis, heterosexual, and somewhat unstimulating, this lifestyle is founded on marriage, defined by Cronin as "an essential indicator of Irish economy, development, and modernization in post-independence Ireland" (2012: 118). The cisheteronormative nature of their marriage, interestingly described as "unsuited" (Richards 1982: 20), is highlighted when, after her affair with Sheila has begun – an affair she does not consider an expression of unfaithfulness – Martha reflects: "Neither of us thought of our own sex. How righteous we can all be, how smug and sure that we know what we are talking about, how arrogantly we can make rules for other people to keep, certain that we will never feel like breaking them!" (Richards 1982: 52). Thus, the couple's monogamy does not extend to relations with other genders, reflecting a concept of marriage delimited by bourgeois, cisheterosexist values. Notably, Martha's realization about heteronormativity conveniently arises only after she herself breaks these conventions. Her middle-class neoliberal values are reiterated in a rather caricaturized manner throughout the novel. That is, her "normality" is emphasized almost obsessively:

> "Normal" was Martha's great expression. She knew she was one of the most normal people. Liberated of course, not extremist mind you, no time for anything but the middle courses. Always on the fringes of the women's movement, never too involved, but understanding in her liberated way the extremes. (Richards 1982: 23)

By contrast, Sheila's firm beliefs are revealed in a sudden and passionate speech on colonialism. Unsurprisingly, given her adherence to the "nonpolitics" of neoliberalism (Duggan 2002: 177), Martha laughs at this, finding political conviction excessive, in light of her own illusory neutrality. Regarding sexual politics, Martha reproduces the model of the psychiatrization of homosexuality promoted by Kraft-Ebbing, with her obsessive preoccupation with ab/normality. Early in the novel, she expresses her discomfort with lesbian equality activism:

> She understood all the different categories of feminists, and *of course* she understood the lesbian feminists: after all, some of her best friends were lesbian. She got slight twinges now and again when they seemed to suggest that their sexuality was also normal; that was perhaps going a bit too far. […] After all, if lesbians were normal what would happen the [*sic*] population, what would happen marriage [*sic*], homes, children? (Richards 1982: 23, original emphasis)

This once again underscores the bourgeois nature of her thinking, which, after all, responds to homonormativity, the sexual politics of neoliberalism. This resonates with Lisa Duggan's observation: "By invoking a phantom mainstream public of 'conventional' gays who represent the responsible center, these writers have worked to position 'liberationists' and leftists as irresponsible 'extremists' or as simply anachronistic" (2002: 179). These convictions, however, ultimately betray Martha as a queer person: "But then what had happened to her? Had she suddenly become abnormal? A shiver of fear went through her. What had she unleashed in herself? Had she always really been a lesbian and covered it up?" (Richards 1982: 24). This situation thus anticipates the complex dynamics of public debates surrounding gay rights campaigns, highlighting the struggle between assimilationist approaches, that sought broader

societal acceptance, and more radical movements that risked marginalization in the pursuit of structural change.

Queer *Flâneuses* in Dublin: Violence and Neoliberal Urbanism in the City

Dublin underwent significant urban renewal in the 1980s as Dublin Corporation – now Dublin City Council – pursued a £10 million gentrification project aimed at making the city more attractive to middle-class residents (RTÉ 2021). Central to this transformation were the Urban Renewal Act of 1986 and the Finance Act of 1987, which sought to elevate Dublin to the status of major world capitals (RTÉ 2016). Inspired by neoliberal policies seen in the UK and North America, these developments focused on privatization and deregulation, leading to the displacement of around 650 working-class families in the inner city (RTÉ 2021). Despite this, public discourse at the time largely praised these measures, framing them as necessary for revitalizing Dublin's economy and image (Dempsey 1992: 77).

The depiction of Martha and Sheila's urban strolling reveals the effects of neoliberal boosterist urbanism on 1980s Dublin, much like the figure of the *flâneur* reflects the social, cultural, and economic trends of its time. Traditionally embodied by a man, the *flâneur*, originating in 19th-century literature, serves as an observer of the changing city, exploring its social, economic, and cultural transformations. Nesci argues that the *flâneur* constitutes "an art of inhabiting the city like an 'interior', to furnish it and leave traces" (2007: 46, my translation). This subversive potential is amplified when embodied by two sapphic lovers – two *flâneuses*. Boscagli and Duffy discuss the entrapment and lack of agency of women in canonical *flâneur* narratives such as Benjamin's or Joyce's (2011: 20). Similarly, Elkin and Iglesia explore the subversive potential of disrupting the historical masculinization of the figure. Iglesia defines the *flâneuse* as a dissident figure that questions urban practices and, in turn, the system, offering a counter-narrative and challenging dominant discourses (2019: 151). As the two lovers navigate Dublin, they draw a subversive map that challenges an apparent tradition of sapphic seclusion, which Preciado characterizes as "topophobic", unlike the spatial visibility of male gay identities. He claims:

> The topophobic nature of lesbian identity, as it has been represented in most studies, makes the notion of lesbian cartography a curious oxymoron: lesbian identity would be defined precisely by this absence of spatial location, presenting itself as a radically anti-cartographic element. (2013: 343, my translation)

However, as Elkin contends, "walking is mapping with your feet" (2017: 21), their movements chart a radical, queer geography of the city: "They wandered through the Green, remembering not to hold hands or gaze at each other, down Grafton Street, past Captain America's, past Jonathan's (did Swift turn in his grave?), past a new pizza parlour, past McDonalds […]" (Richards 1982: 60). This path underscores the globalization of Dublin's commercial landscape, which had started around the mid-seventies. The narrative clearly laments this neoliberal transformation:

> Along O'Connell Street was Clery's department store, one of the few old buildings left that hadn't been changed drastically. Clery's, the General Post Office, and further up, the Gresham Hotel. The rest was a hotch-potch of new buildings trying to look old and old buildings all jazzed up into swinging amusement arcades, bingo parlours and sleazy-looking pubs. Dublin was a disaster, a mish-mash of the get-rich-quick-to-hell-with-the-environment, anyone-who-has-the-money-can-do-what-they-like-mentality. (Richards 1982: 61)

This depiction of Dublin thus highlights contemporary issues such as mindless neoliberal development in the city. In fact, at the time, Dublin Corporation had plans to redesignate the use of buildings in O'Connell Street that did not fit with the new image of the city as a cultured world capital, such as amusement arcades, fast-food restaurants or gaudy shops (RTÉ, 2016). This notion of Dublin as a city of culture arises again later on in Martha's lonely walk in the city, recounting leisurely aspirations distinctive of the kind of leisure and business that Dublin Corporation was keen to promote at the time: "Oh, she knew there were lots of things she could do, shops, museums, art galleries, *yakiti-yakiti-yak* […]" (Richards 1982: 69). These activities fall in line with the intended regeneration and gentrification of Dublin, although many cultural developments never materialized in favour of commercial ones. Martha and Sheila's movements expose these tensions, inscribing the displacement resulting from these developments in this cartography of Dublin:

> They walked hard until they came to the bridge below Christ Church, and there they stopped. Dublin Corporation, demolishing the centre of the city and destroying whole communities, had cleared away all the old buildings around Christ Church (Richards 1982: 63).

The journey through Dublin reveals the city's shifting landscape, shaped by corporate gentrification and the erasure of working-class communities.

In the 1980s homophobic violence entered Irish public discourse with the murder of Declan Flynn in 1982 Dublin. This case not only sparked new conversations surrounding homophobia but also acted as a catalyst for the queer movement in Ireland. In *Interlude*, the city is conceptualized as a potentially violent space where Martha experiences homophobic violence for the first time in her life. Given her former status as a middle-class, white, married, cisheterosexual woman, this kind of violence not only comes as a shock to her, but she also does not have the tools to protect herself or deal with it. Didier Eribon notes that "it all begins with an insult. The insult that any gay man or lesbian can hear at any moment of his or her life, the sign of his or her social and psychological vulnerability" (2004: 15). Even as a recipient of considerable queer migration, the city, a place that enables the existence of gay culture, is an ambivalent space when it comes to queer safety, as it is also one of homophobic social surveillance (Eribon 2004: 41). The novel's subtle portrayal of a homophobic act of violence – a disapproving look from a young couple with children – profoundly affects Martha's public self-expression. This moment shapes Martha's development equivocally, exemplifying Eribon's analysis of the queer urban experience: "One finds a perpetual give and take between secrecy and visibility, between silence and public openness, between fear and daring" (2004: 22). Hence, Martha struggles with internalized lesbophobia, feeling deep shame and trying to escape slurs she ascribes herself such as "lavatory lesbian" (Richards 1982: 79). At the same time, she also rebels against heterosexism, as when she blows a raspberry at a man's inappropriate gaze, or when she allows herself to share an emotional connection with Sheila in front of the Children of Lir sculpture in the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin:

> […] the sculptor had caught a great cry in the bronze, a cry against their exile; a cry for the return of their human form; a cry to be united again with their own kind. The wild lonely cry of the swans, she could hear it down through the ages in all the lands; the cry of the peoples cut off, shut out. The tears were standing in Martha's eyes, she forced them not to fall. Forgetting her earlier fear, she reached out and caught Sheila's hand and they stood there for a long time, gazing, feeling their togetherness, knowing their

> alienation, sharing with the crying swans their separateness from their own kind. (Richards 1982: 62)

The city is therefore inextricably linked to queer and displaced peoples in *Interlude*'s sapphic cartography of Dublin. The novel draws a line of solidarity between sexual dissidents like Martha and Sheila and those who have been displaced by the city's relentless growth, no longer fitting into its urban landscape. In this way, the text portrays queer people's estrangement from mainstream Irish culture while offering a counter-history in which they are inscribed. This counter-history transcends homonormative possibilities within neoliberal urbanism, foregrounding the impact of irresponsible urban development.

The West of Ireland: Queer Folklore, Horror and Dissent

After the start of their affair in Dublin, Martha and Sheila spend a few days in a cottage owned by a friend of Martha in Co. Galway, in the West of Ireland. The novel's shift from urban Dublin to rural Galway introduces an atmosphere steeped in queer folk horror, a stark contrast to traditional idyllic portrayals of the West of Ireland. This tension challenges the romanticized rural idealism famously espoused in de Valera's Saint Patrick's Day speech:

> […] the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be the forums for the wisdom of serene old age. (1943)

While de Valera's romanticized vision celebrates a vibrant and harmonious rural life, the rural reality portrayed in the novel is far bleaker. Here, the countryside becomes a site of isolation and hostility but also of dissent. In a quintessential folk horror fashion, the novel subverts this heterosexual pastoral ideal.

Folk horror, defined by Adam Scovell as comprising four key elements: landscape, isolation, skewed belief systems and morality, and a summoning/happening (2017: 17-18), permeates the narrative. It does so through the eerie, deserted landscape, the character of Máire as a tragic "Mother Ireland", the violent encounter with Séan Óg, and the sighting of the spectral sapphic woman by the river. Similarly, Bernice M. Murphy points out that folk horror often features "a rural setting, an emphasis on the eerie power of the natural landscape and a preoccupation with the sinister possibilities of the agrarian way of life" (2019). In *Interlude*, these elements work together to challenge both the heteronormative assumptions and the romanticized view of the Irish countryside.

The cottage where Martha and Sheila stay is dilapidated, a far cry from the prosperous, vibrant rural life de Valera described. Sheila and Martha are introduced as foreigners in a desolate, aged Gaeilge-speaking community enclosed by a landscape described as powerful yet somewhat haunted. Additionally, Máire, the old woman who gives them the cottage keys, personifies a tragic version of "Mother Ireland", criticizing the romanticized abnegation of rural Irishwomen. Máire's conversations with Sheila reveal a sense of futility in her life, devoted entirely to caring for men – husband and sons – who have abandoned her. Just as Máire's tragic presence undermines the pastoral ideal, the encounter with Séan Óg further emphasizes the rural community's deep-rooted hostility towards queerness, transforming the idyllic landscape into a site of exclusion and violence. In a conversation with Sheila and Martha in Irish, Séan Óg shares that his only friend – and lover – is his dog, underlining his intense loneliness, for which

they pity him. However, as soon as he learns that Sheila is a lesbian, he is horrified and curses them in English, exiling them, as Donoghue notes (1995: 166). After this, Martha feels "as if a hostile force were gathering outside the house" (Richards 1982: 116), highlighting the constant sense of terror and eeriness.

The sighting of the spectral/lesbian woman by the river coincides narratively in the text with what Scovell defines as "the happening" in the folk horror subgenre, one of its key elements. In it, Martha and Sheila are having an intimate encounter naked in the water when they notice an old woman watching them:

> Neither could believe her eyes: on the bank, staring intently at them, was an old woman. She was stooping under a tree, holding the branch above her head with one hand, the other placed on her bent knee, supporting the weight of her body […]. (Richards 1982: 95).

However, the woman's gaze, far from homophobic, is sapphic: "Her mouth was partly open and the look on her face was one of satisfaction. They each distinctly heard her say '*go maith, go maith'*, in the short sharp accent of approval" (Richards 1982: 95). Then, after approving of the lovers' sexual encounter – *go maith* means "well" or "good" – "she wave[s] at them, giving the traditional salutation '*Beannacht Mháthair Dé oraibh*' […]" (Richards 1982: 95), meaning "the blessing of the Mother of God be upon you", blesses them again, and leaves. Immediately, Martha is terrified, convinced that the woman is a ghost, and is so distressed that she is paralyzed. When she is able to speak again, she cannot believe what she has just seen: "There isn't a sign of life in this valley, there are no houses, no trails. Where was she going with a milking bucket? And if she passed along here, how come there are no traces of her?" (Richards 1982: 96). Sheila, on the other hand, is curious about the woman and thinks she is a feminist, which Martha mocks and denies: "Sheila, you are now saying that we've just seen: an old, Gaelic-speaking feminist, and in a minute you're going to add 'lesbian', carrying a milking bucket, in the middle of an uninhabited valley" (Richards 1982: 98). The old woman by the river is thus, as Casey claims, a ghosted lesbian figure recalling Terry Castle's "apparitional lesbian", yet she is deployed in a subversive way, not limited to the interruption of a heterosexual plot (2003: 273). Rather, she is an expression of an alternative sapphic rural Irish tradition as well as an exploration of terror and disgust as caused by heterosexist thought. Terry Castle's "apparitional lesbian" confronts and questions the spectral tradition of lesbian representation, rooted in the suppression of lesbian culture:

> The spectral figure is a perfect vehicle for conveying what must be called – though without a doubt paradoxically – that "recognition through negation" which has taken place with regard to female homosexuality in Western culture since the Enlightenment. Over the past three hundred years, I would like to suggest, the metaphor has functioned as the necessary psychological and rhetorical means for objectifying – and ultimately embracing – that which otherwise could not be acknowledged. (1995: 60)

So, Castle asks: "Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian – even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been 'ghosted' – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself" (1995: 4). It is in the same way that Martha's mind resorts to the horror of the spectral, because she, unlike Sheila, lacks the sapphic referential knowledge to go beyond the spectral and see the old woman not as a ghost but as someone like herself. Interestingly, Martha half-jokingly includes herself and Sheila in her vision of the spectral lesbian: "Maybe she thought we were ghosts too… Maybe there's a legend of ghosts of lesbian feminists making love in the river…" (Richards 1982: 99), only to deny it afterwards by suggesting it might have been the

shade of the trees making them think someone was there. The erasure of the rural Irish sapphic is so deep that she makes the lesbian a "nonperson" (Castle 1995: 5).

Hence, as queer folk horror, this passage unearths societal fears surrounding the least marketable – and thus credible – forms of sapphic desire, "demonis[ing] those whom we do not understand because they challenge the basic assumptions that we hold about how we should exist in the world" (Kattleman 2024: 132). The rural chapters in *Interlude* therefore play into deep-seated fears surrounding sexual dissent, unsettling traditional notions of Irish identity and rural life. By weaving together queer desire, folk horror, and the apparitional lesbian, the novel reveals a subversive portrayal of the west of Ireland that asserts above all that sapphic desire is everywhere, unsettling and disrupting the order of things.

The Lesbian Nun: Women, Catholicism, and Secular Neoliberalism

At the heart of *Interlude* lies an exploration of religion and secularization in relation to gender and sexuality undertaken from Martha's perspective on Catholicism and Sheila's climactic revelation as a nun. This focus on religion mirrors broader debates from the 1980s, when feminism, religious authority, and the Catholic Church began to be contested. Therefore, by employing the lesbian nun trope, the novel illuminates the process of secularization/modernization in Ireland and articulates debates on feminism and religion.

Cronin argues that the Catholic regulation of sexuality in post-independence Ireland went beyond purity concerns but instead was part of the establishment of a bourgeois morality in a democratic, Catholic, and capitalist national project (2012: 6). He highlights the relevance of the agony aunt figures Angela MacNamara and Bríd Mahon, whose advice columns intertwined traditional Catholic dogma with emerging neoliberal ideals, portraying marriage as an ongoing project for success rather than a static, ideal state (2012: 16). This *bricolage* or syncretism reflects the secularization and neoliberalization of Irish Catholic culture, made possible thanks to the increasingly liquid nature of religion in modernity. Less restricted to tradition, religion in modernity is allowed to form new relationships with secular notions, (Guest 2022: 18), which has enabled a Catholic culture that embraces neoliberal aspects such as consumerism and individualism. Accordingly, the early 1970s saw the Irish middle classes' shift towards new materialism, leading to a decline in traditional religious values (Beale 1987: 181).

Parallel to the rise of the women's movement in the 1980s, a new branch of feminism emerged among Catholic laywomen and nuns, Christian feminism. Following the dramatic changes in rules, dress, and ministries brought by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, some nuns began to challenge the patriarchal nature of the Church (Beale 1987: 165). Sister Anne notes:

> I had studied theology in the 1960s. We questioned the hierarchical structure of the Church and found that the structure does not assure God's Will. Then we began redefining all three vows. I worked through my sexuality and felt I had a theological basis for entering into relationships. (1985: 309)

Her testimony appears in the ground-breaking *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* by Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan, published in 1985, just three years after *Interlude*. Collecting the experiences of lesbian and bisexual nuns and ex-nuns and discussing issues of spirituality, gender, and sexual identity, the book is representative of this rebellious shift happening in Catholic circles in the 1980s.

An iconic figure through which spiritual, sexual, and gender dissent are often articulated, the lesbian nun is part of a tradition in Western sapphic literature. In Irish literature,

the lesbian nun and the profoundly devout lesbian are recurring characters in various texts such as Edna O'Brien's "Sister Imelda" (1981) or Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* (1936), among others. *Interlude* fits in this tradition with the character of Sheila, a politically involved lesbian nun. Historically, the nun has been thought of as androgynous and asexual: "As the saying went, there were three sexes – men, women, and nuns" (Beale 1987: 174). The liberatory potential of life as a nun – offering independence, education, respectability without the expectations and constraints of heterosexual marriage and motherhood, and the experience of living in a community of women – drew many lesbians and bisexual women to religious life, a theme often explored in Irish sapphic literature.

Martha and Sheila's final conversation before they part ways, putting an end to their affair, is central to the novel's comment on gender, sexuality, and Catholicism. Before that, however, the reader has already come to know Martha's perspective on religion. Upon their arrival at the cottage, Martha sees a bog-oak cross hanging on the chimney breast, which elicits her disdain for Catholicism:

> It would be too much to expect the Catholic Irish to hang something cheerful on the wall – they had to carry their cross everywhere. Martha actually knew that the person who had found and hung that piece of wood was an American self-confessed atheist, but she was never one to let knowledge interfere with prejudice. Her prejudice against any religion was total, but against Irish Catholicism it bordered on the obsessional. (Richards 1982: 89)

The text emphasizes the prejudiced nature of Martha's abhorrence for religion, hence challenging it comically. Paradoxically, traditional Catholic ideals inflect Martha's life and values, as she is concerned with the potential eradication of marriage, homes, and children (Richards 1982: 23) caused by the normalization of lesbianism, yet she rejects the Church as she believes it limits her freedom as a woman. Martha is thus blindly both pro-capitalist and anti-Catholic, ignoring the syncretism between the two. Further, Martha's status as an Irish immigrant to England is key in this regard. Secularization was relatively established in 1980s England, while it was not in Ireland for various reasons, one of them being the Troubles, which emphasized an ethno-religious division that prevented it (Cragun 2017: 22). In Martha's neoliberal mind that operates in terms of progress as growth, she finds Irish Catholicism as expressive of a kind of backwardness, while she deems England's secularization more "balanced" and modern.

Differently, Sheila's religious beliefs, conflating religion and sexuality in a revolutionary manner, directly threaten homonormative politics as they are non-marketable and prioritize community over individualism. Her experiences as a nun resonate with those of many in Curb and Manahan's book, exemplifying the changes brought by the Second Vatican. From being in an enclosed teaching order in the 1960s, Sheila's life changed eight years before when she was freed. She then got a sociology degree in London and worked in New York for a year, getting involved with women until she asked to be freed for a year, when she was working in the store and met Martha. Sheila, who exhibits typically "nunnish" characteristics such as authoritativeness, strength, focus, and militancy, defines herself as part of "a group of women with a Christian commitment who want to work in the community" (Richards 1982: 128). Nevertheless, it is fair to note that Sheila's portrayal is marked by ambivalence. While she embodies a subversive figure, her character is not without contradictions as she ultimately discards Martha, attacks lesbian feminism and undermines her lover's sexual identity by insisting, through essentialist arguments, that she is not a "real" lesbian (Richards 1982: 131). In doing so, Sheila resorts to narrow, exclusionary notions of identity that conflict with the more radical aspects of her character.

Before Sheila confesses that she is a nun, Martha begins to see her in an uncanny light, making her appear almost unrecognizable. Almost as if she had been able to see that she was a nun before she had said it, Martha inadvertently feels haunted by the idea of Sheila as a nun. Her reaction to the revelation is intense, recalling a horror film scene: "screams of pain and betrayal, covering her face with her hands as if trying to deny the sight of her eyes" (Richards 1982: 122). Again, the novel employs horror to channel social uneasiness around that which is non-normative. But horror at Sheila's religious life gives way to rage, and Martha, deeply upset, disrespects her chastity vows by mocking them. During their argument, Martha reproves Sheila for her supposed adherence to the Catholic Church, which she defines as "the most patriarchal, woman-destroying institution […] where you give up your very soul to the male hierarchy" (Richards 1982: 125). Ironically, Martha's own adherence to a patriarchal institution – marriage – is similarly flawed. Sheila calmly responds:

> I know you find all this hard to reconcile with my lesbian feminism, but there is no real conflict. The convents and the religion you are thinking about, Martha, are the ones of your childhood. Things have changed a great deal since then. I don't know many nuns nowadays who think of themselves as 'Brides of Christ' if any of us ever really did. That's just another trick to try to keep us in our place. No, the modern communes which I know are thriving groups of strong-minded independent women, who basically have a greater loyalty to Mary than anything the Patriarchy wants to foist on us. (Richards 1982: 128)

Sheila's perspective highlights the subversive potential of feminist religious communities, challenging Martha's simplistic view of Catholicism as inherently oppressive. While Martha naïvely views Catholicism as limiting and secularization as necessary for women's freedom, Sheila offers a more complex view, as she presents religious vocation as a vehicle for social change beyond heterosexist patriarchy. Her commitment to her religious community challenges Martha's prejudice and conflicts with neoliberal ideals of womanhood – heterosexually married for success, devoted to her job and nuclear family. Her character, although marked by contradiction, embodies a form of lesbian leftist political engagement intertwined with religious belief, disrupting both Catholic tradition and neoliberal modernity. Martha, on the other hand, constrained by homonormative and liberal feminist ideologies, is unable to engage with Sheila's marginal perspective. Their argument thus reflects the broader tensions between liberal feminism and Christian lesbian feminism, revealing the complexities of faith, sexuality, and community.

Conclusion

Returning to the common view of *Interlude* as "merely" an erotic novel, I contend that this perspective overlooks key dimensions of the text. *Interlude* engages with significant political issues in 1980s Ireland: neoliberal modernization, urban gentrification and displacement, the romanticization and isolation of rural life, and the intersection of religion, sexuality, and feminism. The novel's controversial opening, beyond its sexually explicit content, frames the closet as a dual space of consumerism and desire, reflecting Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. Martha's character further embodies neoliberal tensions, representing bourgeois morality and centrist politics. *Interlude*'s topography of Dublin, shaped by the *flâneuses*' movements through the city, highlights the consequences of boosterist urban development, globalization, and gentrification. The depiction of homophobic violence within the urban space reveals the city as both a site of contested safety and displacement, creating a counterhistory of the urban landscape. Similarly, the novel disrupts traditional romanticized visions of the rural

West of Ireland by employing queer folk horror aesthetics. The desolate landscape, Máire's tragic feminine abnegation, and Séan Óg's isolated homophobia subvert the myth of rural purity. The spectral appearance of the sapphic woman by the river, coupled with Martha's reaction, embodies societal anxieties about the breakdown of heteronormative structures in rural spaces. The novel's ending, particularly the final conversation between the lovers, challenges neoliberal assumptions about religiosity and women. It questions the idea of secularization as inherently liberating for women while engaging with contemporary debates on religion, feminism, and social change. Through horror, Richards exposes the social unease at the fissures of neoliberal modernity, particularly around sexual and religious dissent and collapsing rural ideals. *Interlude* thus invites reflection on the consequences of modernization for those left behind: individuals whose lifestyles defy bourgeois morality, working-class families displaced by greedy urban development, women in rural areas, and religious women challenging both the Church and neoliberalism.

By examining *Interlude* through a political lens, we challenge the reductionistic notion of modernization as inherently good and reclaim diverse genres, like popular fiction, as legitimate subjects of literary research. Failing to do so risks perpetuating biases that devalue literature by women and minorities, particularly texts containing explicit sexual content. Research into such areas opens up new avenues for understanding marginalized voices, expanding the literary landscape, and resisting the narrowness of traditional, hegemonic literary criticism.

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