

Immigrant Experience and Irish Literature: Melatu Uche Okorie's *This Hostel Life*

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Introduction: A Black Irish Literature?

Melatu Uche Okorie has come to be regarded as one of the most important new voices on the Irish literary scene; yet, her writing is commonly discussed under the heading of migrant literature and its implied marginality. Literature chronicling the experience of Black Irish writers does not readily fit into the discourses of Irish literature, where 'the co-extensive constitution of the literary tradition and an ethnically focused national identity is perhaps particularly tightly articulated'.¹ In contrast, Black British literature, although still charting a contested terrain, is by now a firmly established category closely linked to accounts of post-war Britain. Here, the arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury Docks in 1948 marks the starting point of a literary tradition spanning, at the time of writing, seven decades of prolific Black British writing (as well as extending back to earlier decades and centuries). According to Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm's *Companion to the British and Irish Short Story* (2008), 'aspects of British history since 1945 that can be seen to be relevant to the development of the short story' include 'a withdrawal from empire, and a consequent loss of status and independence' as well as 'immigration'. By comparison, '[f]eatures of Irish history that find echoes in short fiction are: the conflict in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s' and, in the Republic, 'poverty, stifling conservatism, [...] and immigration from it [i.e., emigration], for over half the post-war period; and the economic and social transformation of the Irish Republic since the 1970s'.² Whereas emigration, a prevailing theme of earlier decades, thus continued to be a formative experience in post-war Ireland and its literature, immigration only became a significant factor shaping Irish society in the Celtic Tiger years. It is here that the narrative of a multicultural Irish literature begins,³ based on the idea that with now largescale immigration to Ireland, literary representations adjust to the new reality.⁴

This observation of an increasingly diverse society in recent years frames discussions of the Nigerian-Irish writer Okorie and unwittingly reproduces the tenets of a dominant discourse of the Irish nation which struggles to accommodate perceived difference. While the transformation of society is undeniable, this is still a new development, and one which does

¹ Alice Feldman and Anne Mulhall, 'Towing the Line: Migrant Women Writers and the Space of Irish Writing', *Éire-Ireland* 47.1/2 (2012): 214.

² Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm, 'The British and Irish Short Story: 1945–Present', *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, eds. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 249.

³ See, e.g., Greg Winston, 'New Identities: The Irish Short Story since 1945', *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, eds. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 273, 275, 276.

⁴ See, e.g., Anne Mulhall, 'Arrivals: Inward Migration and Irish Literature', *Irish Literature in Transition: 1980-2020*, eds. Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 182.

not necessarily impact on an established national identity. Although Sara Martín-Ruiz, for instance, appears to be wary of the notion of a once homogeneous Irish body politic, she begins her discussion of Melatu Okorie and Ifedinma Dimbo's short stories by noting that '[f]rom the mid-1990s up until the early 2000s, during the period known as the Celtic Tiger, Irish society changed substantially. [...] Ireland, traditionally a country of emigrants, became a host country [...] for immigrants from all over the world'.⁵ In a chapter on 'New Identities: The Irish Short Story since 1945', published in 2008, Greg Winston accordingly predicts that 'one will expect to see more short fiction that seeks to document the first generation immigrant experience as well as the hyphenated identities that follow'.⁶ Discussions like these re-perform the marginalisation of Black or other Irish immigrant authors, whose place within Irish literature becomes unstable at the same time as it is seemingly affirmed. While the writing of Okorie and other Nigerian-Irish authors such as Ifedinma Dimbo, Ebum Joseph Akpoveta, Dagogo Hart and Chiamaka Enyi-Amadi⁷ might be seen as evidence of Winston's prognosis, Okorie's stories also tackle the marginalising rhetoric that underwrites discourses of Irish migrant literature.

The setting of the short story 'This Hostel Life', published in Okorie's acclaimed collection of the same title in 2018, provides an apt image of such marginalisation: the story's events take place in a Direct Provision Centre, a type of accommodation housing asylum seekers in Ireland. Direct Provision Centres are often located in former hostels or holiday caravans that are kept spatially separate from the Irish population, 'on the periphery of society'.⁸ This spatial isolation mirrors a wider social and political disacknowledgement of individuals seeking asylum as well as of the adverse conditions they endure under Direct Provision. Ronit Lentin argues that the system of Direct Provision manifests a state logic of systematic disavowal which 'continues' the twentieth century's 'disavowal by Irish state and society of the coercive confinement of unwed mothers and poor children in church-run institutions'.⁹ 'This Hostel Life' forms part of what Okorie herself has termed her 'Asylum Series', a sequence of stories that, in the face of such disavowal, centre on the lives of asylum seekers.¹⁰ Indeed, Okorie has been labelled a 'real-life storyteller' and been praised as a timely literary voice for providing insight into the system of Direct Provision.¹¹ Martín-Ruiz, for instance, notes that 'the importance of Okorie's work is not only due to its literary quality, but also because of her representations of the harsh realities for asylum seekers – realities which are often made silent or invisible'.¹² *This Hostel Life* contains an author's note which fulfils precisely this function of focussing on what is usually rendered invisible, addressing the author's experience in an unnamed Direct Provision hostel and its 'rules that are almost

⁵ Sara Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence under Direct Provision: Melatu Okorie and Ifedinma Dimbo', *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities*, ed. Pilar Villar-Argáiz (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 263.

⁶ Winston, 277.

⁷ For a more comprehensive overview, see Mulhall.

⁸ Ronit Lentin, 'Spaces of Racialization: Ireland's Direct Provision Asylum Centres as Sites of Racialized State Violence', *State Crime Journal* 11.1 (2022): 52; see also Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 264.

⁹ Lentin, 52.

¹⁰ Melatu Uche Okorie, *This Hostel Life* (London: Virago, 2019), 8.

¹¹ Juliana da Penha, 'Melatu Uche Okorie: A Conversation with a Real-life Storyteller', *Migrant Women Press*. <https://migrantwomenpress.com/melatu-uche-okorie/>. Accessed 16 June 2023.

¹² Sara Martín-Ruiz, 'Melatu Okorie: An Introduction to Her Work and a Conversation with the Author', *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 28.2 (2017): 173.

Machiavellian, inane in nature'.¹³ It also includes an afterword by legal scholar Liam Thornton on the rights of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland. Together, these paratexts introduce readers to the legal, social and psychological ramifications of Direct Provision. The short story 'This Hostel Life', however, is not primarily invested in documentary realism or critique, although these concerns are contained in the text. Rather, it engages in a project of alternative representation which challenges dominant discursive constructions of the 'asylum seeker' and lends its characters agency in a context that thwarts individual autonomy and subjectivity.

The second story in the collection, 'Under the Awning', is set outside of Direct Provision and in an unnamed Irish city. Where 'This Hostel Life' addresses how the asylum process contains individuals on the edge of Irish society, 'Under the Awning' reflects on the marginality of Black Irish writing itself. In the story, a young writer presents her work to a writing group. She reads a story, told in a second person voice, which chronicles the unnamed protagonist's manifold experiences of racist prejudice in Irish society. Upon finishing the story, the extradiegetic narrator receives the group's feedback, consisting of suggestions which question the choice of narrative techniques and the narrative authority of the story. Thus, 'Under the Awning' becomes a meta-commentary on processes in the Irish publishing industry and a literary field that will not acknowledge the voice of a writer like Okorie's character. At the same time, 'Under the Awning' itself does not bend to the expectations and regulations of this literary system: it still manages to tell its story-within-the-story in unaltered form, while making readers reflect on the demands and exclusionary mechanisms of literary institutions and the fact that '[n]ational literatures can also be places where the border appears'.¹⁴

The following discussion focusses on the stories 'This Hostel Life' and 'Under the Awning' from *This Hostel Life*, both of which reflect on the marginalised status of (racialised) immigrants in Irish society. It will be argued that in doing so, Okorie's writing simultaneously carves out a space for authorising experiences that are usually invalidated by the majority society, for dismantling dominant discourses and for imaginatively breaking free from regulatory regimes. In particular, the article aims to foreground how Okorie's stories mobilise the resistant means of literary narration rather than their representational function alone. This expands the focus in the existing scholarship on *This Hostel Life*¹⁵ and builds on those approaches to the stories which take into account the levels of literary communication employed in Okorie's writing.¹⁶ The article thus follows up on the work of scholars like James Little, Radvan Markus, and Katherine M. Huber, who have commented on how the structure of Okorie's small book creates – and disrupts – implied positions of reader and author in a set-up where the reader is given 'access' to the immigrant experience in Ireland.¹⁷ Arguably, this formula has proved successful for Okorie: given her discursive positioning on the margins

¹³ Okorie, 2.

¹⁴ Mulhall, 191.

¹⁵ E.g., in the contributions by Martín-Ruiz and Mulhall.

¹⁶ E.g., Claire Bracken, 'The Feminist Contemporary: The Contradictions of Critique', *The New Irish Studies*, ed. Paige Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 144–160; Katherine M. Huber, 'Decolonizing Irishness: Assertions of Afro-Irish Self-Determination in Nicky Gogan and Paul Rowley's *Seaview* and Melatu Uche Okorie's *This Hostel Life*', *Interventions* 25.6 (2023): 775–804.

¹⁷ James Little and Radvan Markus, 'Coercive Confinement and Irish Languages: Ó Cadhain, Behan, Heaney, Okorie', *Review of Irish Studies in Europe* 5.2 (2022): 31; Huber, 778.

of Irish literature, it is no small irony that her writing has, in fact, received wide acclaim and scholarly attention. In the light of these comparatively disproportional responses to Okorie's work, this article suggests that her writing itself is occupied precisely with the space of writing and its reception, and that it develops a commentary on practices of reading and writing within and beyond ingrained notions of *Irish* literature.

Representations of Direct Provision

The hostile conditions of Direct Provision that Okorie's collection captures in its title, suggestive of a hostile state that has similarities with the British 'hostile environment' immigration policy of the 2010s, have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Okorie's concerns are shared by the author Ifedinma Dimbo, whose short story 'Grafton Street of Dublin' features a protagonist living in a Direct Provision hostel,¹⁸ as well as by the television crime drama *Taken Down* (2018), set alternately in a Direct Provision Centre and the criminal underworld of Dublin. Vukašin Nedeljković's *Asylum Archive* chronicles Direct Provision Centres across the country in series of photographic images.¹⁹ Termed a 'human rights scandal' by Amnesty International,²⁰ the system of Direct Provision has continuously called forth the criticism of residents, researchers and campaigners. In 2021, the Irish government announced plans to end it by 2024.²¹ Direct Provision Centres were introduced in 1999 and provide accommodation, food and a small weekly allowance for asylum seekers while their cases are being decided. While implemented as a temporary solution for a stay of about six months in buildings designed for short-term accommodation, Direct Provision for many inhabitants turns into a virtually permanent condition.²² Okorie herself spent eight and a half years in the system before she was granted the right to stay in Ireland.²³ Inhabitants of Direct Provision thus routinely live in a state of extended temporariness. The sense of a social existence on hold is enhanced by the living conditions imposed by Direct Provision. Aside from experiencing uncertainty over the results of their asylum application, residents may be arbitrarily transferred between centres.²⁴ They often experience a lack of privacy, have to share rooms and facilities,²⁵ and are forced into dependence on Direct Provision. As Liam Thornton argues, Direct Provision creates 'enforced poverty': inhabitants were not permitted to work until 2018 and still can only do so under specific restrictions.²⁶ They are dependent on small weekly payments, provisions and the often whimsical rules of distribution attached to these.

¹⁸ See Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence'.

¹⁹ Vukašin Nedeljković, 'Direct Provision Centres, 2007-2022', *Asylum Archive*. <https://www.asylumarchive.com>. Accessed 17 June 2023.

²⁰ 'End Direct Provision', *Amnesty International*. <https://www.amnesty.ie/end-direct-provision/>. Accessed 17 June 2023.

²¹ Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Minister O'Gorman Publishes the White Paper on Ending Direct Provision', *Gov.ie*, 27 February 2021. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/affd6-minister-ogorman-publishes-the-white-paper-on-ending-direct-provision/>. Accessed 17 June 2023.

²² Lentin, 52.

²³ Okorie, 4.

²⁴ Lentin, 53.

²⁵ Lentin, 55.

²⁶ Liam Thornton, 'Ireland: Asylum Seekers and Refugees', *This Hostel Life*, by Melatu Uche Okorie (London: Virago, 2019), 93–94; Lentin, 55.

All in all, as writers and scholars have noted, Direct Provision denies its inhabitants agency, reducing their social existence to the bare minimum. Okorie, for instance, describes the apparently arbitrary rules maintained by Direct Provision Centres as degrading forms of control that are adverse to an individual's sense of autonomy as well as social life. One example from her author's note is the management's control over mealtimes, which may be changed and shortened on a whim. Okorie goes on to record that

*[a]part from the arbitrary changes to our daily routine, the security men also try to intimidate residents like myself who they know will complain about the food options. I would usually find two of them standing directly behind me whenever I'm in the queue for food. It became obvious to me that it was a way of breaking my spirit more than anything else. There are tons of cameras in *****, but I would find these security men trailing after me [...]. I tried hiding away in my own room and buying my own food [...], but with a child and €28.70 as weekly money, I could not sustain that.²⁷*

Okorie's text not only highlights the high degree of surveillance through CCTV and staff which inhabitants of Direct Provision are subjected to;²⁸ it also suggests that the system structurally engenders abuses of power with few options of resistance on the part of the residents. As the passage shows, besides limiting the autonomy and sovereignty of inhabitants, Direct Provision Centres institute biopolitical techniques of control which are reminiscent of a penal institution. Sara Martín-Ruiz theorises the ongoing 'state of exception' maintained by Direct Provision through Giorgio Agamben's concept of the 'camp' and emphasises how this system curtails the subjectivity and agency of individuals, reducing them to 'bare life'.²⁹ In a similar vein, sociologist Ronit Lentin draws on Frantz Fanon's conception of 'zones of non-being' in her discussion of Direct Provision. She argues that 'assigning people applying for international protection the category "asylum seekers", dehumanizing them and segregating them in remote DP [Direct Provision] sites of carceral deportability define them at best as "not-quite human"'.³⁰ The fact that what is at stake in the above example are essential necessities of human life – food and the possibility to have adequate meals – further illustrates the precarious positioning of individuals in Direct Provision on the frontier of full humanity.

However, while Direct Provision thus can be seen as an apparatus of dehumanisation set in the empty time of social non-existence, it is equally important, as Martín-Ruiz stresses, to acknowledge the 'political agency of asylum seekers, irregular migrants and other non-citizens'.³¹ In fact, Martín-Ruiz suggests, artistic representations of Direct Provision such as Okorie's literary portrayal can be seen as 'resistance art'.³² Writing, in the context of Direct Provision, gains particular importance as an act of self-assertion and free expression. In the following reading of Okorie's 'This Hostel Life', I follow Martín-Ruiz' idea of writing as resistance. However, whereas Martín-Ruiz' analysis of 'Shackles', an earlier short story by Okorie, mainly focuses on narrative as a space for characters' acts of resistance, I argue that

²⁷ Okorie, 2–3. Emphasis in the original.

²⁸ See also Lentin, 55.

²⁹ Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 264.

³⁰ Lentin, 58.

³¹ Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 264.

³² Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 265.

writing itself is an underlying concern of Okorie's stories, and that it is in the act of writing that these stories locate a potential for resistance.

'This Hostel Life': Writing as Resistance Against Direct Provision

In the format of fiction, 'This Hostel Life' offers an insight into life under Direct Provision taking up and expanding the issues addressed in Okorie's author's note. The text chronicles the dull and forced routines of hostel life, divisive treatment on the part of staff as well as a general sense of suspended existence. Importantly, though, Okorie's story transcends Direct Provision's regime of *bare life* as well as the dominant discourses of Irish society which enable such a regime. In the story, the first-person narrator Beverlée joins several other African women, friends and acquaintances, who are waiting for weekly provisions in the dining room of an unidentified Direct Provision hostel. Set against this backdrop of a process which reduces those waiting to numbers in the monotonous rhythm of life in the hostel, the story centres on the interactions between the women, their friendships, conflicts, banter and gossip, the mannerisms of each and their linguistic idiosyncrasies. This depiction forcefully defies the limitations of individual subjectivity instituted by Direct Provision, and Okorie further underscores the resistant agency of her characters in a plotline around the narrator's friend Ngozi. After learning that another resident was given the honey she had asked for and was denied, Ngozi confronts the staff and insists on her equal treatment – with the result that the provision office closes for the day. Although ineffective on the level of plot, Ngozi's act holds a symbolic significance, marking the space of resistance opened up by the act of writing in itself. The potential of writing suggested here gains further weight given the whole scene's intertextual resonances with Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and the eponymous hero's – albeit less vehement – pleading for 'more'. Not only does the intertextual relationship establish parallels between Direct Provision as depicted by Okorie and Dickens' poorhouse; it also evokes Dickens' use of literature as a transformative medium of social criticism.

In contrast to Dickens, however, Okorie's critique is articulated not through the male individual, but through a female and collective focus. One prominent concern in the counter-discursive project of 'This Hostel Life' is domesticity, understood as a private as well as public national matter. Liam Thornton fittingly starts his consideration of Direct Provision, in the remarks at the end of *This Hostel Life*, with the theme of 'home.' He highlights the absurd use of the term in the Reception and Integration Agency's *House Rules* given to everyone who enters Direct Provision. These rules state that the Direct Provision centre is the residents' 'home' while they are waiting for a decision on their case.³³ However, the conditions in Direct Provision are ill-suited to family life, with limited space and oftentimes no facilities for preparing food.³⁴ Okorie's 'This Hostel Life' shows this 'home' to be a perversion of the idea – but at the same time depicts its cast of female characters defiantly building domesticity in spite of hostile conditions. Okorie expresses the non-home represented by Direct Provision in the image of empty buggies:

I use my back to push open the door because I hol buggy for my hand and the door is too heavy to open with my hand and hol the buggy at the same time. I am still try for turn around and face everybody when I hear my neighbour, Franca, shout, 'Yee! Look, who is here.'

³³ Thornton, 88.

³⁴ See also Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 267, 271.

[...]. I start to pass all the people and all the buggy, holing my own buggy. [...]
 The first time my husband see me carry buggy like dis, he say: 'Dis woman, why you carry
 buggy and you don have baby inside?'
 'Dat is what everybody do here!' me I tell him.³⁵

While Beverlée's response to her husband – using a buggy to carry provisions is what everyone does in the hostel – illustrates the shared, systemic nature of the inhabitants' predicament, her husband's reaction draws attention to the conspicuous absence signalled by the buggy ('you don have baby inside'). The repurposed buggy, then, is a fitting symbol for an environment that does not allow people to build a home.³⁶

At the same time, while being deprived of a domestic environment, Okorie's group of women foregrounds domestic concerns. Their conversation, for instance, mentions the American TV show *The Real Housewives*, one of several references to reality TV formats in the story.³⁷ The fact that programmes such as *The Real Housewives* are often scripted might point to the institutionally determined identities and lack of agency residents of Direct Provision are confronted with. Beyond that, *The Real Housewives* provides an important intertext to 'This Hostel Life' in other ways. Usually centred on a group of wealthy and connected women and their domestic activities, it provides a sharp contrast to the realities of the women in Okorie's short story and the freedoms they lack. Nevertheless, there are distinct parallels in the way these groups of women compete for status and recognition but also share worries and form bonds. Both Okorie's women and the 'real housewives' navigate issues such as the demands towards the ageing female body in gendered societies. 'This Hostel Life', for instance, begins with the alleged sighting of a grey hair by the character Mercy, and, in compliance with the dramaturgical conventions of *The Real Housewives*, continues to revolve around this group of women and their conversation. While the husbands of Okorie's characters, the story suggests, spend their days watching TV, the women, their domestic chores and, especially, their social interaction take centre stage in the story. *The Real Housewives*, then, functions as a deliberate intertext of the story which attributes Okorie's characters with signifiers of a female domesticity they are otherwise denied. This staging of a female sphere is especially important in the context of debates around Irish nationality and motherhood as they surfaced in the context of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum, the outcome of which saw the removal of citizenship for children of non-citizens born on Irish soil.³⁸ Centred on "'illegal" crossings via the birth canal',³⁹ the debate turned motherhood, central to cultural imaginations of Ireland, into a site of national significance, drawing a clear distinction between *legitimate/Irish* and *illegitimate/non-Irish* reproduction.

If the reproductive activities of its characters, the story suggests, are thus firmly policed by state and nation, it is the characters' experience of time which the story shows most strikingly to be under the control of Direct Provision. Time is heavily regulated by Direct

³⁵ Okorie, 13–14.

³⁶ In line with this symbolism, a lack of fertility is a wider theme in the story: the female characters discuss whether 'eating yam helps with fertility', and readers learn that Beverlée, while in the hostel, has been unsuccessfully trying for another child with her husband (Okorie, 24, 25).

³⁷ The show *Big Brother* makes for another reference; the parallels are evident given the show's concept of confining and monitoring participants in a house.

³⁸ Thornton, 80.

³⁹ Thornton, 80.

Provision, as the example of mealtimes from the author's note in *This Hostel Life* makes clear: 'The lunch, which was usually served between 12-2 p.m., was changed to 12-1.30 p.m. while dinner, which was usually served between 5-7 p.m., was moved to 4.30-5.30 p.m.'⁴⁰ Once more, however, 'This Hostel Life' revolts against the imposed regime, countering the centre's constricting control over clock time by means of narration. The story is framed by two captions which state the time – first 10:26 a.m. and then 12:01 p.m., the time passing between Beverlée entering the dining room and the provisions office closing because of Ngozi's protest. Time is a recurring concern in Okorie's writing. In an analysis of her short story 'Shackles', Martín-Ruiz considers the motif in line with the 'chronic waiting' endured in Direct Provision, creating a sense of perpetual stagnation.⁴¹ This sense of stagnation is, in a way, only enhanced in 'This Hostel Life', whose whole narrated time consists of the characters waiting for weekly provisions in a sheer endless succession of ticket numbers being called out. The process is followed, from 12 p.m. onwards, by more waiting, this time in the queue for lunch. Yet, in the story, the time is filled by much else: the characters' interactions, the narrator's interior reflections and, eventually, Ngozi's conflict with hostel management, which makes the story *eventful* in a narrower narratological sense.

Okorie's narrative, then, counteracts Direct Provision's empty time, while the primary function of Ngozi's stifled protest is to showcase the arbitrary and divisive treatment of the asylum seekers by Direct Provision management, its 'Machiavellian' rules:

'Listen Ngozi, we are not allowed to give honey to anyone', the manager tell Ngozi like she not in the mood for too much talk.

'Then why did she give that man honey just now when I ask for it first? This is what you people do all the time! You always pick people you want to give this or that. Why?' Ngozi voice is loud now as she is talk. [...]

'Well, that is the last honey we have and we've just given it out', the manager answer Ngozi in a way everybody can tell she is lying but there is nothing Ngozi can do about it.⁴²

As Martín-Ruiz puts it, in this 'representation of life in a Direct Provision centre, [...] a literal and metaphorical taste of honey is systematically denied to asylum seekers'.⁴³ The scene furthermore highlights the Direct Provision Centre's similarity with other disciplining institutions: the narrator describes the manager as 'wearing white coat, like the type the nurses wear for hospital', with keys jingling in her pocket.⁴⁴ The centre's biopolitical control over family life and over time here coalesces into an image of it as hospital and as prison, underscoring the pathologising and penalising logic of Direct Provision,⁴⁵ which critics have compared to the Madgalene laundries of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ Against this backdrop, it is all the more significant that the narrative gives room to Ngozi's active resistance, comparable to the smashing of a window by a character in 'Shackles', which Martín-Ruiz considers as an 'important symbolic act'.⁴⁷ Much like *Oliver Twist's* protest sets in motion the events of the

⁴⁰ Okorie, 2.

⁴¹ Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 268.

⁴² Okorie, 32–33.

⁴³ Martín-Ruiz, 'Conversation with the Author', 175.

⁴⁴ Okorie, 21.

⁴⁵ See also Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 270.

⁴⁶ Lentin, 56; Thornton, 95.

⁴⁷ Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 273.

plot, Ngozi's act breaks through the empty time of Direct Provision to create an event. The honey that is at the centre of this event might thus stand for more than the good life; it also represents poetic creation and the literary, creative voice which the story here both shows to be withheld in the asylum process and claims for itself.

It is through writing, too, that 'This Hostel Life' subverts dominant representations of the figure of the asylum seeker as an always pre-defined, homogeneous Other. *Vis-à-vis* a 'mainstream rendering of all asylum seekers as a homogeneous mass of passive and powerless beings',⁴⁸ the characters encountered in the story are diverse in terms of their age, educational background, attitudes and temper, and African country of origin. This plurality is also suggested by the Congolese narrator's English, a composite of West African pidgin English, US vernacular, Standard English and Congolese pronunciations which Okorie crafted for the story.⁴⁹ What is more, Okorie's characters also display the same prejudices as the Irish host society. Especially the Nigerian Mummy Dayo harbours stereotypes, some of which are imported – such as a particular hatred reserved for people from Benin – and some of which she seems to have picked up in Ireland, such as her contention that Eastern Europeans are 'fake *oyinbo* [Europeans]'.⁵⁰ At the same time, the narrator feels pity for one of the security personnel who is unexperienced and intimidated by the manager, and she tries to help him in calling out ticket numbers:

'Number eighteen? Number eighteen?'

I no know why, but me I just start to feel sorry for the security man. I can see he no shout very well for the people to hear him, so me I start to help him to shout.

'Number aaeeteen! Number aaeeteen!' I shout loud and loud because the noise for the dining room is too much and many people are talking for small small group. Soon, other people start to join me to shout the number.

'Number aaeeteeeen! Number aaeeteeeen!'⁵¹

The story here offers a brief glimpse of a system rooted in a logic of numbers and profit overcome in the name of empathy and solidarity. Hence, the story encounters individuals involved in Direct Provision through the frame of a shared humanity, in a marked contrast to the dehumanisation produced by a state apparatus which encompasses the legal, political and social sphere. This is all the more notable because Okorie's story holds no illusions as to the limitations the system places upon solidarity and collective resistance. That, in the scene analysed previously, Ngozi's agential resistance cannot be conducted in solidarity under Direct Provision's schemes – the other characters leave Ngozi so that they do not miss out on lunch – is another commentary contained in 'This Hostel Life'. Finally, it is in the act of writing that the story locates the greatest source of resistance: the honey that is denied to Ngozi lends the story its narrative force all the same. What emerges, as Anne Mulhall suggests, is a portrayal of community in the 'multicultural reality' of Direct Provision that has little to do with idealised visions of a multicultural Ireland.⁵²

⁴⁸ Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 280; see also Martín-Ruiz, 'Conversation with the Author', 180.

⁴⁹ Okorie, 8; Martín-Ruiz, 'Conversation with the Author', 181.

⁵⁰ Okorie, 20.

⁵¹ Okorie, 22.

⁵² Mulhall, 190.

If writing here serves a purpose of alternative, and more nuanced representation, Okorie also cautions against ready-made frameworks of *good* versus *bad* representation with the overall composition of *This Hostel Life*. The following story's self-reflexivity as to the frames within which writing is received produces a meta-commentary on critics and scholars' assessments of *migrant* literature, subjected to a set of expectations that do not apply in the same way to *Irish* literature. José Manuel Estévez-Saá's article on humour in transcultural migration narratives offers an example of such categories brought to bear on writers like Okorie in arguing that 'Okorie projects a transcultural view of contemporary migrations that tries to account for the full complexity of current culturally diverse societies'.⁵³ Importantly, Okorie's stories also invite us to reflect on the discursive and institutional frames through which we read in the first place, as the following analysis of 'Under the Awning' will demonstrate.

'Under the Awning': Irish Literature as a Mechanism of Exclusion

If the Direct Provision Centre occupies a marginal space in Irish society that is signified in its isolated spatial location, such a sense of marginality also extends beyond Direct Provision. Thus, the title of the second short story in Okorie's collection, 'Under the Awning', refers to another spatial liminality. The phrase is taken from the story which Okorie's protagonist shares with the writing group in the frame narrative. The layered structure of 'Under the Awning', in turn, establishes a structural in-betweenness which resonates with the wider themes of the story. The story-within-the-story begins as follows: '*You stood under the awning outside the Spar shop, staring straight ahead, barely moving, a pink plastic folder tucked under your arm, waiting for the drizzle to stop.*'⁵⁴ Almost paralysed, the protagonist of this story stands under the awning of a supermarket, a space neither fully inside nor outside and not meant for dwelling. As Deirdre Flynn writes, Okorie's character (both the protagonist of the story-within-the-story and her fictional creator) is 'outside, unnamed and impeded by the liminality of her existence within the Irish state. She is locked out of being Irish'.⁵⁵ Overall, the story addresses an overarching marginality which takes the concerns of 'This Hostel Life' further and connects it to the challenge of literary writing within a narrow discourse of Irish literature. As a case in point, Martín-Ruiz observes that '[t]he confinement of asylum seekers in centres isolated from general Irish society is also reflected in the difficulty these authors have in accessing the mainstream Irish publishing sphere'.⁵⁶ Okorie's metaphorical honey – and the fact that it is denied to her character – gains further significance in this context. Okorie, in 'Under the Awning', opposes the exclusionary mechanisms of the Irish literary system by at once exposing them and claiming a position within the space of Irish literature.

While Okorie's story-within-the-story fulfils the function of critically assessing Irish society's racist and nationalist undercurrents, the frame narrative allows Okorie to reflect on

⁵³ José Manuel Estévez-Saá, 'The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour in Contemporary Transcultural Migration Narratives: Melatu Uche Okorie's "This Hostel Life", and Fadia Faqir's "Under the Cypress Tree"', *University of Bucharest Review* 13.2 (2023): 98.

⁵⁴ Okorie, 40.

⁵⁵ Deirdre Flynn, "'Where are you from originally': The Cruel Optimism of the Precarious Irish Public Sphere in Melatu Uche Okorie's "Under the Awning"', *Alluvium* 9.1 (2021). <https://alluvium.bacls.org/2021/03/08/cruel-optimism-precarious-irish-public-sphere-melatu-okorie/>. Accessed 17 June 2023.

⁵⁶ Martín-Ruiz, 'Literature and Dissidence', 279.

the difficulty of making voices attesting to such conditions heard, and, in particular, to comment on the obstacles posed by narrow understandings of what constitutes experiences adequate to literary depiction. The story presented to the writing group in 'Under the Awning' details the attempts of the story's protagonist, a teenaged girl from Nigeria who joined her mother and siblings in Ireland not so long ago, at fitting into Irish society. For instance, she is standing under the cover of the awning so as to avoid the rain as other people in Ireland do; '*back home*', she knows, '*life would not stop over "this small rain"*'.⁵⁷ This attempt of fitting in, however, leaves her, '*desperate not to stand out*',⁵⁸ in a liminal sphere of non-belonging represented by the awning. The character is at the same time invisible and hyper-visible as a racialised Other, 'hyper-visible as "the migrant other" and yet utterly invisible as a person in her own right', as Mulhall writes regarding a character in Oona Frawley's novel *Flight*.⁵⁹ Thus, the protagonist is confronted with racist behaviour and attitudes which the story shows to systemically inform Irish society. A plethora of incidents attests to this: no one sits next to the girl on the bus, children in the neighbourhood call her '*Blackie*', and the girl's classmates make sure to guard their purses when she is around. Resorting to colonial, pseudo-scientific views of race and climate, they ask '*if it were true Africans lived in trees*' and ponder that '*they could never live in a hot country because they would melt*'.⁶⁰ The family friend Aunty Muna points out the institutionalised nature of exclusionary notions of belonging and national identity, recalling

*how once in her daughter's school, all the children's pictures were put up on the wall with their countries of origin written above it and how the children with non-national parents had their parents' countries of origin. She said weren't children of any parentage born in Britain, British or those born in Australia, Australians. You asked her what children born here were called and she said, "migrant children or children of non-nationals, depending on who their parents were." She told your mother that she asked her daughter's teacher to change her daughter's country of origin, but the next day, all the pictures were taken down.*⁶¹

The story here nods to the change of citizenship law after the Citizenship Referendum of 2004 and its basis in an ethnically absolutist ideology of the nation space, according to which Irishness is determined by 'native' blood.

'Under the Awning' furthermore points out that even those initiatives ostensibly targeted towards a more plural society are undergirded by a narrow idea of Irishness, advocating assimilation rather than living with difference. It suggests that hidden beneath rhetorical endorsements of a modern multicultural society are engrained categories of a racialised nation. Through the character of Dermot, a white Irish charity worker, the story dismantles the token gestures which initiatives for integration and ideals of multiculturalism often boil down to.⁶² Dermot runs 'integration football', which causes the girl's mother to question '*if one could be taught to integrate*'. Their conversation suggests that the real obstacle to integration lies with Irish society: '[he] said he didn't think there were enough

⁵⁷ Okorie, 40. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁸ Okorie, 41. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁹ Mulhall, 186.

⁶⁰ Okorie, 46. Emphasis in the original.

⁶¹ Okorie, 43. Emphasis in the original.

⁶² See also Mulhall, 187, 190; Huber, 797.

opportunities for people to integrate, to which your mother replied that the church, the school, the road, the shops and the playground should provide enough opportunities for people to integrate if they wanted to.⁶³ Indeed, when integration football happens, the same patterns of separation which prevail in Irish society are replicated: *'There were little groups formed around the pitch; the black group, two white couples that spoke to each other in a foreign language and a large Irish group. Each group mostly ignored the other'*.⁶⁴ Through the example of failed integration football, a sport with a particularly central function in constructions of national identity, the story sheds a light on such collective identity construction as inherently exclusionary rather than unificatory. The story's characterisation of Dermot throws further doubt on his efforts. Introduced to the girl by her mother as *'the nicest Irishman she had ever met'*, Dermot quickly gains the protagonist's confidence and becomes a person she *'could tell [...] things [she] could not bring [her]self to tell [her] mother'*.⁶⁵ However, when the protagonist relates instances of being discriminated against to Dermot, he diminishes her experience:

*You told him then about the little children down the street, of perhaps the ages of five and six, who persistently shouted 'Blackie' at you whenever they saw you walking alone and how their parents talked amongst themselves like they could not hear. He told you not to bother about them. You also told him about the girls in your college who told each other to mind their bags or made so much about their purses being in their bags whenever they wanted to use the toilet. He told you he didn't think the girls meant anything by it.*⁶⁶

Dermot's commitment to integration, then, is only progressive on the surface, in fact concealing the deep structures of racism in Irish society. His reaction, which invalidates the girl's authority of interpretation, is in turn mirrored in the frame narrative, in which, mediated by a heterodiegetic narrator, Okorie's author-character shares her writing.⁶⁷

In the writing group context, too, the experience of the girl in the story is dismissed. The voice of the story dissolves in the group's pre-constructed notions of Otherness.⁶⁸ Commentator B *'think[s] the story should have a bit of light and shade to it, so that it's not all bleak and negative'*.⁶⁹ The members of the group, functioning as *'gatekeepers of nation'*,⁷⁰ are especially sceptical of the story's use of a second-person narrative voice, which according to commentator C *'prevents [one] from caring about the character'*.⁷¹ *'Confirm[ing] the pervasive racism that the narrative described'*,⁷² the workshop participants classify the girl's perception of her environment as *'paranoia'* and reduce the effects of systemic conditions to the character's unexplained *'self-loathing and self-hatred'*.⁷³ In response, the writer incorporates some of the suggested changes (she gives the girl a name, Didi, and takes into

⁶³ Okorie, 47. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁴ Okorie, 49. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁵ Okorie, 47–48. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁶ Okorie, 49–50. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁷ See also Flynn.

⁶⁸ See also Flynn.

⁶⁹ Okorie, 51.

⁷⁰ Flynn.

⁷¹ Okorie, 51.

⁷² Mulhall, 190.

⁷³ Okorie, 52, 53.

consideration Dermot's point of view) and sends around a revised version, with similar points of criticism made in return. The story shows the writer's dependence on validation by those she tells the story to – a dependence especially acute in the context of the asylum process, as, in Flynn's words, '[m]uch like those seeking international protection in Ireland, her story must be believable to them, deemed worthy'.⁷⁴ The character in 'Under the Awning', then, *has to* adapt her story. As a whole, however, 'Under the Awning' does not necessarily suggest that 'it is impossible to escape the precarious public sphere, even through writing', and that '[i]n every realm, [the protagonist] remains liminal and outside, and must twist herself into the social constructs and accept her position of precarity within the nation', as Flynn puts it.⁷⁵ Rather, the short story outmanoeuvres the mechanics of such censorship by prompting its reader to take seriously the experience described in the story-within-the-story. After all, the reader is presented with the original story before 'Under the Awning' introduces comments and revisions which one is then encouraged to reflect on. When the revised story concedes that '[y]our classmates who asked their friends to mind their bags were actually not doing anything wrong; the bus driver who dropped you two stops away from your bus stop could have done so be [sic] due to road works', and so on, the reader is likely to recognise what the revised edition suggestively identifies as Dermot's '*point of view*': a denial of racist structures in line with views held by the white majority society.⁷⁶

The intricate structure of 'Under the Awning' thus establishes a level of meta-commentary, cautioning readers to engage critically with the readings offered in the frame narrative. The story crucially achieves this by mobilising two types of reader: the fictional group of readers in the frame narrative, who stand in for the 'white Irish citizen',⁷⁷ and an implied reader who shares the critical meta-perspective and understands the story's 'loaded irony'.⁷⁸ Okorie's story, then, delivers more than a critical examination of 'the racial and cultural barriers that produce a voyeuristic bifurcation between an implied white Irish citizen and a racialized other'.⁷⁹ It also opens up a literary space that 'brings narrator and reader together in shared critique and solidarity'.⁸⁰ Okorie's use of the second person narrative voice in the embedded story is instructive in this regard. The second voice has emerged in recent years as a device used by different Black writers to signal a character's 'self-estrangement',⁸¹ as in Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* (2021) or Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018). In her analysis of Dangarembga's you-narration, Denise Wong argues that alongside this rendering of a character's psychological state, the second-person perspective also works against universalised Western norms of sympathetic affect, commentator C's inability to care. At stake here is, as Wong puts it with reference to Xine Yao, an 'unsympathetic Blackness' which refuses to become objectified.⁸² 'Unsympathetic Blackness' does not denote an absence of feeling but what remains illegible within a Western affective regime.⁸³ That

⁷⁴ Flynn.

⁷⁵ Flynn.

⁷⁶ Okorie, 54. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁷ Huber, 777.

⁷⁸ Bracken, 153.

⁷⁹ Huber, 777.

⁸⁰ Bracken, 153.

⁸¹ Denise Wong, 'Disaffection and You-Narration in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Tambudzai Trilogy (1988–2018)', *Diegesis* 13.1 (2024): 103.

⁸² Wong, 103.

⁸³ Wong, 112–113.

Okorie's embedded story deviates from '[o]stensibly good writing' means that it resists its perpetuation of 'voyeuristic hierarchies in which a reader has access through first-person identification or third-person omniscience to the experiences about which they read'.⁸⁴ The frame narrative not only makes such mechanisms visible;⁸⁵ it also projects an alternative readership that might enter into a more dialogic relation with the text. The overall story, then, is not dominated by the interpretive frames imposed upon the writer in the frame narrative. Rather, here, too, Okorie carves out an, albeit subtle, space of resistance, contained in the unnamed-ness of the author-character. Where the character is urged to change this aspect of her story, which previously allowed her to negotiate the lack of recognition of the character as a person and to forgo the objectifying impulse of identification, the heterodiegetic frame narrative stubbornly repeats the device: the writer, too, remains unnamed. Writing, once more, is endowed with a potential of resistance. The story-within-the-story ends with the protagonist purchasing a diary in order to find a medium in which her voice is acknowledged. The act of writing, in 'Under the Awning', is both a site of struggles for recognition, and an answer to exclusion and disavowal.

Conclusion

Okorie's writing stakes out a claim to what Alice Feldman and Anne Mulhall have termed the 'space of Irish writing'.⁸⁶ It does so, as this article has shown, by addressing the marginality of Black Irishness, its precarious position in the literary system and in society at large. The Nigerian setting of the third story in *This Hostel Life*, 'The Egg Broke', further rethinks the nation space as a container of literary writing, placing Okorie's work in a zone of transcultural connections, global economic inequalities and postcolonial legacies. Nigeria, in her work, is marked by such connections from the start. The protagonist in 'Under the Awning', for instance, reminisces about writing to her pen pals from 'Canada, Australia, England and America' while a schoolgirl in Nigeria, countries linked by a shared Anglophone heritage and yet economically divided into the Global North and South. Fittingly, the character recalls writing about listening to the music of global US superstars such as Eminem and Beyoncé,⁸⁷ emblems of a North American branch of cultural imperialism dictating pop-cultural tastes around the globe (fittingly, too, the Nigerian girl is the only one listening to them; her pen pals have other – and, to the girl, unimaginable – tastes). The characters in 'This Hostel Life' have internalised Eurocentric hierarchies based on Western cultural knowledge, using their professedly superior knowledge to diminish others, including white Irish and British "chavs" they watch on TV ("'[w]hat of that boy in *Big Brother*, what's his name again? He has never heard of Shakespeare!").⁸⁸ Ireland, perhaps, holds a peculiar position in this global postcolonial dynamic given that 'Irish society, just a few generations removed from life under British rule, is [now] being forced to consider questions of economic and cultural subordination from the other side of the coin'.⁸⁹ Okorie's work forcefully shows that the discourse of Irishness performs its own exclusions and disavowals and that Ireland, in the

⁸⁴ Huber, 793.

⁸⁵ See also Huber, 794.

⁸⁶ Feldman and Mulhall.

⁸⁷ Okorie, 44.

⁸⁸ Okorie, 28.

⁸⁹ Winston, 276.

twenty-first century, is implicated in a global power dynamic where it finds itself on the side of neoliberal states of the Global North.

The challenge of representing this vision of Ireland, as Okorie's writing and that of other contemporary *migrant* writers shows, amounts to a challenge of the Irish literary tradition. Okorie's counter-discursive project becomes all the more significant given that the genre of the short story has been at the heart of ideas of Irish literature.⁹⁰ It seems pertinent that the short story has emerged as a form particularly suited to immigration narratives.⁹¹ Okorie's stories, then, perform both an inscription into the tradition and a revision of its parameters. While this is an important undertaking in itself, it should be noted that Okorie is one of the few writers who have received wide attention and acclaim for such a project. This was illustrated when, in 2019, she was invited to join Sebastian Barry in a conversation on the art of writing, part of a series hosted by the then Laureate for Irish Fiction.⁹² Okorie's work, in conclusion, can only be seen as a starting point for reconsidering the guarded borders of Irish literature.

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⁹⁰ Malcolm and Malcolm, 254.

⁹¹ Paul Delaney, "'I Wanted Them Not to Be Lost": Immigration and Irish Short Fiction', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 42 (2019): 83.

⁹² 'Watch: Sebastian Barry and Melatu Uche Okorie in Conversation', *RTE*, 4 February 2019. <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2019/0204/1027389-watch-sebastian-barry-and-melatu-uche-okorie-in-conversation/>. Accessed 17 June 2023.

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