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"There's nobody else here:" Recessionary Ireland and the Impossibility of Community in Conor O'Callaghan's *Nothing on Earth* (2016)

Abstract: *This article examines Conor O'Callaghan's debut novel* Nothing on Earth (2016)*, which tells the story of a family of returned Irish migrants after the financial crisis of 2008. Lacking any viable social network, they move into a show house in a newly-built estate where they experience both geographical isolation as well as psychological stress through eerie noises and, later, the unexplained disappearance of one family member after the other. The setting of the novel, a so-called ghost estate, can be read not only as a reminder of the crash but also as a space in which feelings of rootlessness and placelessness prevail, and the desire for belonging and community remains unmet. The novel shows how both traditional and alternative models of community fail on every level – the local level of the home, the village, and the family proves to be as flawed as the transnational or the virtual level. Ultimately, even the communal unit of the family dissolves, its members quite literally vanishing. The communicative processes Gerard Delanty sees as the basis of every form of community are thwarted either by language or technological barriers or by the lack of communal spaces to encounter other people. Feelings of community are no longer upheld by shared religious beliefs, and the representatives of the Catholic Church are no longer able to work as integrating forces. Overall, the novel paints a bleak picture of recessionary Ireland and illustrates the broken promises of the Celtic Tiger boom, a period in which Ireland became one of the world's most globalised countries.*

Keywords: *Celtic Tiger – community – Conor O'Callaghan – ghost estates – returned migrants*

1. Introduction

In their introduction to the special issue on "The Shifting Imaginaries of Community in British and Irish Cultural Production," Stella Butter and Sarah Heinz point out that "notions of national community were fundamentally reshaped during the Celtic Tiger years and in the wake of the financial crisis" (2015, 7) in Ireland. The economic boom and processes of globalisation since the mid-1990s fundamentally altered the country, and with it, perceptions of community changed. One central alteration concerned the issue of migration – while Ireland had historically been marked by emigration, during the Celtic Tiger years, "[e]migration became immigration, as Poles and others rushed to share the Irish dream of a confident Euro-Atlantic nation," as Patrick Barkham (2010) puts it in a pointed *Guardian* article. Irish society became more heterogeneous, fuelled by the growing demand for skilled workers especially in the construction sector, many of whom came from Eastern European countries. Likewise, "exceptional levels of return [migration] during the Celtic Tiger distinguish this period from the previous

150 years of emigration" (O'Leary and Negra 2016, 129). This development slowed down significantly after the financial crisis of 2008, with the beginning of an economic recession and ensuing austerity politics in Ireland (Zaiceva and Zimmermann 2016, 404).

2. Austerity Fiction – Conor O'Callaghan's *Nothing on Earth* (2016)

A novel that is set in the aftermath of the financial crisis and which explores not only the shifting nature of community but rather portrays the impossibility of community building in recessionary Ireland is Conor O'Callaghan's *Nothing on Earth* (2016). The novel is set on the "prototypical *locus* of austerity fiction" (Rennhak 2023, 57), the ghost estate. While some novels centring on ghost estates, such as Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012), have gained much critical acclaim and attracted academic interest in recent years (e.g., Buchanan 2017; Persson 2021; Rennhak 2023), O'Callaghan's novel has so far been given only marginal scholarly attention. *Nothing on Earth* is O'Callaghan's debut novel, following the publication of several acclaimed poetry collections, such as *Seatown* in 1999 and *The Sun King* in 2013. O'Callaghan, who was born in Ireland but has since lived mainly in the United States and England, has pointed out in an interview that many of his poems are characterised by a form of "placelessness and rootlessness" (qtd. in Wortley 2020, 15). And yet, as Alexander Wortley observes in an article on what he terms O'Callaghan's "diasporic aesthetic" (2020, 1), they also "reveal a more familiar desire for belonging and community" (7). That same tension – between a sense of rootlessness on the one hand and a desire for belonging and community on the other is also expressed in *Nothing on Earth*. The novel reflects the "lack of social cohesion" (Guðmundsdóttir 2022, 48) in Ireland after the financial crisis, which was amplified through the creation of anti-communal suburban spaces (Buchanan 2017). It speaks of a disjointed society and portrays recessionary Ireland as a place where feelings of rootlessness and placelessness prevail, and the desire for belonging and community remains unmet.

The novel begins with a twelve-year-old girl knocking on the door of a priest's house to ask for help after both her parents and her aunt have disappeared. Over the course of the novel, it is revealed that the girl, who remains nameless throughout, her mother Helen, her aunt Martina, and her father Paul have recently moved back to Ireland after having spent a decade abroad, in Germany.[1] They have moved into a so-called show house on a newly built estate, open for viewings by potential buyers and frequently visited by the property developer, a man called Flood. Isolated through the remote location of the estate and even further after their only neighbour, Sheila, moves away, the family is plagued by inexplicable phenomena both within their new home and the

1 Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir gives the girl's name as "Sophie" (2022, 37), yet she is never addressed by this name in the novel. While the name is mentioned in an email conversation between Martina and Helen's former employers in Germany, it refers not to the girl but to the daughter of Helen's employers (O'Callaghan 2016, 51). The girl's namelessness can be interpreted as an indication of her conflicted national identity – while being of Irish origin, she has grown up in Germany and speaks German better than English (39) – as well as her uprootedness.

rest of the estate. Doors open and close at random, they hear hammering at their front door at night, but find no one there when they go to check, and voices can be heard from empty rooms. Then, one after the other, members of the family begin to disappear: first Helen, then her sister Martina, and, lastly, Helen's husband Paul. The priest, from whose perspective the novel is told, seems both unwilling and unable to help the only remaining family member, the young girl, who ultimately disappears without a trace as well.

Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir points out that *Nothing on Earth* is characterised by a high degree of "narrative uncertainty" (2022, 48). This uncertainty is created through the unique narrative perspective: the priest becomes "increasingly unreliable" (Workman 2021, 285) as he mostly re-narrates the events as they were told to him by the young girl. Moreover, at many points throughout his account, he includes insights into thoughts and feelings of characters which neither he nor the girl were likely privy to, and it remains unclear whether these are products of his imagination or speculations by the girl. As he admits at the end of the novel, "[i]t is possible […] that I heard more than she said: or that my memory has added to her telling those details that I wanted to hear but which the girl could not have witnessed or imparted" (O'Callaghan 2016, 138). Guðmundsdóttir pointedly notes that reading the novel thus "can feel like standing in quicksand, where there is no solid ground beneath you, much as the wealth of the boom years proved to be without foundation" (2022, 37). The narrative mirrors a feeling of uncertainty prevalent in Ireland after the end of the Celtic Tiger boom, as many long-held beliefs were revealed to be false and "so much in Ireland was insecure" (Kincaid 2010, 44).

O'Callaghan's novel overall reflects the cultural climate in the aftermath of the financial crisis, with its "undercurrents of melancholy, alienation, grievance" (Kincaid 2010, 45), yet it paints a particularly bleak picture of the situation of return migrants, who are prominent figures throughout Irish literary history.[2] The family at the centre of *Nothing on Earth* is a family of returned migrants – while of Irish origin, they have spent the previous years in Germany and the girl has grown up bilingual and is often puzzled by colloquial English expressions (O'Callaghan 2016, 39). Emilie Pine points out that returned migrants in Irish plays of the Celtic Tiger period are often portrayed as returning to their country of origin due to a "deep-rooted longing for community, tradition" (2008, 311) – a longing which, however, is almost never fulfilled. Instead, the returned migrants often disrupt the communities to which they return and the "fantasy of home," according to Pine, is revealed to be "a destructive illusion" (320). She notes that "[w]hat these plays diagnose is an anxiety about the interrelated ideas of belonging, home, and family in Ireland" (322). Instead of reconnecting with their national community, the returned migrants are often shown as unable to reintegrate into Irish society and remain isolated – which is precisely what can be observed in *Nothing on Earth*.

Although published in the post-Celtic Tiger period, *Nothing on Earth* interrogates similar anxieties about the concepts of belonging, family, and home as the plays on

2 Here, in particular, the trope of the 'Returned Yank' springs to mind. For an extensive analysis of this figure, see Sinéad Moynihan (2019).

which Pine bases her analysis. A case in point is the communal unit of the family, which ultimately disappears – it seemingly vanishes into thin air. As Caroline Lusin and Ralf Haekel remark, the "family, which […] functions as a micro-unit of society, give[s] revealing insights into contemporary conceptions of community" (2019, 19). Butter and Heinz, referencing Ferdinand Tönnies, point out that the 'traditional' family can be seen as "the prototype of community understood as a natural and organic entity devoid of contractual relations" (2015, 8). The disappearance of the family in *Nothing on Earth* can therefore be read as a bleak sign in the context of recessionary Ireland, hinting at an increasingly fragmented society. Even before the ultimate disappearance, the novel suggests that familial ties are loosening, pointing to the feeling of rootlessness that marks the narrative. When the girl inquires where Helen's and Martina's parents, her grandparents, are buried, Helen vaguely retorts: "Somewhere near here all right" (O'Callaghan 2016, 39). A conversation between Helen and Martina, in which Helen asks her sister whether she ever wonders where their parents might be, seems to suggest that they are potentially still alive yet at an unknown place (34). Likewise, Helen's bond with Paul's parents does not appear to have been particularly close. When they come to visit once after Helen's disappearance, they seem to be anxious to leave as soon as possible and Martina notes that they "weren't grieving in any way that was visible […]. Helen wasn't their daughter. They didn't really care that much" (62). She herself admits, on the other hand, that she does not know the names of Paul's parents but realises "[s]he couldn't ask after all those years being effectively family" (61). While Martina here speaks of Paul's parents as her family, it becomes evident that this is in name only, neither actual fondness, nor meaningful communicative processes existing in their relationships.

Moreover, the 'show house' the family lives in on the estate proves to be a mere illusion of a home rather than an actual dwelling place for the family. Guðmundsdóttir notes that the show house is "not real," a "make-believe house that never was" (2022, 45). The generic character of the house, furnished with some display pieces chosen by Flood, gives it a characterless atmosphere. While Helen at first believes that the display furniture comes "with a history" and states that she prefers "the second-hand noise to the silence of the new" (O'Callaghan 2016, 26), she later realises that "it wasn't true. The things of a show house belonged to lives that should have happened but never did. They gave off no noise at all, and that was more deafening than anything" (33). Not only the furniture, but the whole estate – seemingly constructed overnight – is at first sight devoid of any form of history or past, any sense of place, exhibiting the same feeling of placelessness that O'Callaghan expresses in his poetry.

The feeling of placelessness that becomes evident here may be traced back to processes of globalisation that shaped and changed Ireland during the years of the Celtic Tiger boom.[3] As Robert Livingston remarks, globalisation "may be understood as transforming the sense of place" (2001, 147), creating more and more interchangeable, generic spaces such as shopping malls, chain stores, or generic suburban estates like the one portrayed in *Nothing on Earth*. This process is shown to go hand in hand with

3 On the topic of globalisation in Ireland, see e.g., *Cultural Perspectives on Globalisation and Ireland* edited by Eamon Maher (2009).

an erasure of the local history of the place – while Simon Workman argues that the estate in *Nothing on Earth* is built on a former Anglo-Irish holding (2021, 286), this is only hinted at in the novel and never openly addressed or acknowledged. The novel highlights what Pilar Villar-Argáiz has called one of the "perils that a globalised world may have upon cultural identities," namely that "local tales […] are in danger of disappearing or being forgotten" (2011, 101). The estate in *Nothing on Earth* hence illustrates the effects of glocalisation, "the entanglement of local and global levels" (Boller 2023, 6), and can be aptly described as what Elif Toprak Sakiz terms a glocal space, "where the very locality of the space is always intervened by the global" (2023, 77).

3. Rootedness and Community – Ghost Estates

The glocal spaces of both the estate and the nearby village further amplify the impossibility of rootedness and community in *Nothing on Earth*. In her monograph *Post-Celtic Tiger Landscapes in Irish Fiction* (2016), Marie Mianowski points out that "[i]n the context of the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, with Irish society so deeply shaken, landscape, space and place are fundamental concepts to understand the ways in which Irish fiction reflects the rapid changes of society and Irishness" (2). Within the genre of Irish post-recession literature, few spaces are as emblematic for and reflective of the state of the country as the so-called ghost estates. Eogan Smith and Simon Workman explain that the term,

> coined by the (remarkably prescient) economist David McWilliams, has become a mainstay of the post-Celtic Tiger cultural lexicon and signifies housing developments left abandoned and unfinished in the wake of the crash. More precisely, a 'ghost estate' can be defined as a development of ten or more houses, built post-2005, where more of 50% of units are either vacant or under construction. (2018, 88)

Ghost estates have become a powerful symbol for Ireland after the financial crisis in 2008 – according to Anthony Haughey, they act as "places of collective mourning […]. They are a constant and painful reminder of economic failure and future indebtedness" (2018, 302) and express a feeling of trauma and loss prevalent after the end of the Celtic Tiger boom. Yet, the space of the ghost estate is not only a reminder of the global crash on a local level but also the space where the lack of community in Ireland during the recessionary period becomes most evident.

Ghost estates feature prominently in the literary and cultural production of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland in a wide range of genres: Tana French's *Broken Harbour* (2012) and Liza Costello's *The Estate* (2021) take the form of crime novels and focus on murder and child abduction cases, while William Wall explores the feeling of loss in his poetry collection *Ghost Estate* (2011). Another striking example can be found in the realm of audio media: an episode of the popular Irish horror podcast *Petrified* titled "Ghost Estate" (2022), written and directed by Peter Dunne, tells the story of a group of landlords who sacrifice people living on a ghost estate as part of a satanic ritual. The most critically acclaimed literary example, however, is Donal Ryan's aforementioned novel *The Spinning Heart*, which is primarily set on a ghost estate and gives voice to many different perspectives on the events that hit the village community in the

aftermath of the financial crisis. A common denominator of all these texts is that they express a feeling of grief and loss, in line with Haughey's observation of ghost estates as places of collective mourning, and many of them are written in the Gothic mode, presenting desolate spaces haunted by (potentially) supernatural occurrences. Tracy Fahey observes: "Contemporary writers, such as Tana French, Donal Ryan, and William Wall use evocative language to describe the Gothic scenes of decay, and the palpable aura of a suspended half-life that emanates from the ghost estates" (2018, 219).

A similar aura seems to emanate from the estate in the centre of *Nothing on Earth*. Here, the space of the estate which the family lives on is presented as an unwelcoming, even toxic space. It is under-occupied and used to dump litter: "no tar laid, rubble everywhere, windows with holes in them, doors gaping, scraps of plastic and wiring and chalkboard, the skeleton of a car ploughed into a hill of muck" (O'Callaghan 2016, 114). Except for the family's house, all others "were bare breeze blocks, black cavities where there should have been double-glazing. A handful didn't even have slates on the roof" (23). The only other people living on the estate is an elderly couple, Sheila and Harry, but Harry dies soon after the family has moved in and Sheila moves away to live with her daughter, thus making the four members of the family the sole occupants of the estate. At one point, Helen refers to the close their house is on as a "morgue" (47), highlighting the estate's deathlike atmosphere of emptiness and silence, and evoking feelings of death and decay. When the priest visits the family's home later in the novel, he, too, remarks on the "eerie soundlessness […]. I scarcely heard a peep from the town or the ring road or its Saturday evening traffic" (114). Even the uncanny incidents the family experiences at night, when a loud hammering at their front door can be heard, are characterised by absences rather than presences. When searching for a potential intruder around the house, Paul admits to his wife: "'I wanted to find something. Someone.' 'I know what you mean,' she said. What did he mean? Did he mean that nothing there, and nothing there repeatedly, was the biggest fear of all?" (45) It is arguably the *absence* of any people, of even an actual intruder, that makes the estate such a frightening space and that further illustrates the impossibility of any form of community building within the abandoned estate.

One of the few people who regularly visit the estate is the property developer Flood. His name alludes to an ecological disaster, and one could argue that through creating the space of the ghost estate, Flood's actions have indeed had disastrous consequences. As a property developer, Flood can be regarded as the embodiment of the Celtic Tiger period, which was characterised by an "overreliance upon the construction […] sector" (Workman 2021, 268) and a "building boom" (Hanna 2020, 121). Eamon Maher deems this boom one of the "manifestations of the efforts of globalisation in Ireland" (2009, 2) and, according to Jason Buchanan, it "divided the landscape of Ireland into incommensurate and anticommunal spaces, unfit to maintain anything but the ruins of the future" (2017, 68). The estate in *Nothing on Earth* can be read as the epitome of such an anticommunal space.

Flood has "erected barriers across the entrance to the close" (O'Callaghan 2016, 114), a clear line of division between the family within the estate and the people in the nearby village. This conveys the impression that the space of the ghost estate is a severed space, cut off both symbolically through the barrier and geographically through

a distance of over a mile from the local community of the village. While Flood promises that another family from the Midlands might move into the estate "[a]ny day now" (85) and thus suggests that the possibility of a neighbourly community might become a reality very soon, Paul realises at some point that "[t]here was no family from the Midlands. The family from the Midlands was a mirage, a dim collective ruse shimmering out there on the horizon" (85). Until the end of the novel, the ghost estate remains an anticommunal and empty space, ultimately bulldozed by the local council (172). While Flood is responsible for the creation of this anticommunal space, in line with the catastrophic nature implied by his name, he disappears halfway through the novel, leaving the family alone to grapple with the fallout of his actions.

Another person the family encounters on the estate is Flood's nephew Marcus, who is employed as the estate's security guard and with whom Martina, Helen's sister, begins a short-lived love affair. However, when the family suspect that a stranger is lurking in their garden and asks him for help, they discover that Marcus spends all his time in his caravan watching the TV series *Lost* (2004-2010) and has no intention of helping them (O'Callaghan 2016, 44). The choice of a TV series which deals with a group of people stranded on an uninhabited island after a plane crash seems highly suggestive here – like the characters in the series, the family is isolated, cut off from the rest of the world, and 'lost.' The referencing of the series also foreshadows the lack of narrative closure of the novel; like *Lost*, it remains unresolved why or where the members of the family have disappeared to. Marcus, like Flood, stops working on or visiting the estate after a while – supposedly to go to university in England – and a few weeks later, his caravan inexplicably burns down, an event once again characterised by a strange absence of both light and sound: "It must have blazed hard, but they heard and saw nothing. One morning it was walls melted inwards, innards still smoking" (O'Callaghan 2016, 92). Both Flood and Marcus seem to exemplify what Buchanan calls the "Celtic Tiger's empty promises" (2017, 63) – the promise of a home, the promise of safety and security prove to be false, leaving the family with only burned-out ruins.

4. Social Cohesion – Faith

The local community in the village, the namelessness of which again highlights the feeling of placelessness, is marked by a lack of social cohesion similar to the estate. It consists of only "[t]wo streets, five pubs, a Chinese takeaway, a filling station with a minimart, a hardware shop" (O'Callaghan 2016, 30) and a little cinema in the courthouse. In its scarce description, the village appears highly generic and, like the estate, it is marked by the absence of any local history. Moreover, although the family visit the village frequently to buy groceries or to go to the cinema, they almost never encounter any of the village people. When Helen and Martina watch a film in the cinema, they are the only people in the audience except for the sole employee. Likewise, the supermarket, while at first sight the most obvious meeting place, becomes increasingly desolate: first, the produce is no longer shelved (57), later, the supermarket is almost completely empty, and even at the check-out there is no one to be found (82). Paul observes that going into the village feels like "a coach-tour of the Balkans, where you take a pit-stop in one of those dying hamlets" (82), linking the Irish village with

other glocal spaces defined by abandoned homes, other local spaces affected by processes of globalisation and urbanisation.[4] He further comments that he and his daughter feel "like aliens" when entering the village (82), evoking the same impression of isolation they experience within the estate. In her discussion of *Nothing on Earth,* Guðmundsdóttir argues that the "dystopian atmosphere also starts permeating other places, not only the estate but the village as well […]. It is as if the ghost estate is infiltrating and infecting the larger community" (2022, 46), turning it into the same kind of anticommunal space.

However, as the local priest's account suggests, the people in the village, while failing to initiate contact with the family, regard them as an interesting object of speculation. The priest states that he knew the girl immediately when she knocked on his door: "I knew all about that family. Everyone knew all about them: young people just returned after years out of the country and surviving out there in something resembling wilderness" (O'Callaghan 2016, 16). At the same time, the family is seen as outsiders, they are "out there" (16), not part of the village. They are also left out of any form of conversation, as the villagers never speak to them, only about them. In his seminal monograph *Community*, Gerard Delanty observes that "[c]ommunity is essentially social; it is expressed in communicative contexts and is the basis of social recognition of the Other" (2018, 6). Communicative processes can thus be seen as the basis for any form of community – yet the family remains unable to participate in the communicative processes of the village. As in the plays analysed by Pine, the returned migrants in *Nothing on Earth* remain isolated and seem unable to reintegrate into Irish society.

Moreover, the priest, the narrator of the story, who is potentially an integrating figure, instead exemplifies that the Catholic Church is no longer a unifying force in recessionary Ireland. In her reading of *The Spinning Heart*, Mianowski observes that the novel portrays a "community from which any trace of religious fervour or sense of religious belonging has gone" (2016, 69). The same holds true for *Nothing on Earth*. Fuelled by the many scandals that came to light during the 1990s and early 2000s – many of them chronicled in the report composed by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse published in 2009, the so-called Ryan Report (Roche-Tiengo 2017, 218) – there has been an erosion of trust in the institution, with church membership in steady decline.[5] This has also affected the representation of priests in Irish literature and culture since the 1990s: Virginie Roche-Tiengo observes that in contemporary Irish drama, the priest is often shown to "abuse his authority and the confidence of powerless victims" (216). In *Nothing on Earth,* the priest himself no longer believes in the unifying or consoling power of his words or the words of the Bible, having lost faith in the institution he represents. Despite being asked multiple times by the elderly Sheila to visit the family, he admits that he was not particularly motivated to do so. He argues that "[t]hey [the family] were tomorrow's youth, with their worldwide webs and their

4 On the topic of depopulation of rural areas in the Balkan region, see Živanović et al. (2022).

5 A recent article in the news outlet *Catholic Review* points out that the percentage of the Irish population defining themselves as Catholic in the national census has fallen from over 90 percent in 2006 to 84,2 percent in 2011 to 79 percent in 2016 (Kelly 2023).

several languages. The last thing they wanted was yesterday's man on their doorstep, preaching ancient, hollow words" (O'Callaghan 2016, 122). As Guðmundsdóttir observes, the "priest is no longer a figure of trust and authority" (2022, 50) and consequently is not able to foster any form of community, also reflecting the loss of influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

The priest in *Nothing on Earth* not only epitomises a loss of faith or the decline of religious communities in Ireland but also personifies the very reasons for the lack of trust in the Catholic Church. The priest seems at first acutely aware of what kind of accusations might be made if he spends even a short time alone with the girl, immediately calling his cleaner to keep them both company and seemingly concerned about doing everything correctly (O'Callaghan 2016, 13). Constantly scared of what he might be accused of, aware that "[t]here was always going to be a reckoning somewhere down the line" (140), he pleads with the reader to believe him that he never had the least intention of harming or abusing the girl. Yet, when he recalls his first encounter with her, which occurred when he finally attempted to visit the family, he admits that he spied on her and Martina sunbathing topless in the garden, stating that he "could hardly draw […] [his] eyes from them" (123). While it remains unclear whether he in fact abused the girl while she was staying at his house and his cleaner left them alone for the night, he concedes that he fantasised about it: "I did think about her. […] I'm guilty of thinking about the girl in bed in the room across from my own. I am a man as well, after all" (141). Either way, the priest is guilty of negligence and ultimately responsible for her disappearance, ignoring her cries for help at night:

> She kept calling my name. […] I just lay there. If I'm guilty of one last thing, I'm guilty of just lying there, saying nothing and doing nothing. […] The screams were muted by the walls and wood between us, but they were clear enough and they were clearly hers. (142)

The priest, who can be read as cowardly at best and abusive at worst, clearly represents both the failure of the Catholic Church in fostering any form of community and the reasons for the erosion of trust in this institution.

5. Transnational Communities – Interconnectedness

In the context of failing communities in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, the concept of transnational community[6] also needs to be considered, coming back to Butter's and Heinz's claim that "notions of national community were fundamentally reshaped during the Celtic Tiger years and in the wake of the financial crisis" (2015, 7). Bryan Fanning deems "the transformation of Ireland into a multi-ethnic society with a large permanent immigrant population" to be "[o]ne of the legacies of the Celtic Tiger period" (2016, 9). This is in line with an observation by Delanty, who points out that in general "[c]ommunity today is widely seen as irreversibly pluralized" (2018, 111) and speaks

6 This article uses the umbrella term of 'transnational community' rather than 'glocal community,' i.e. a global community realized on the local level. In my understanding, transnational community encompasses both glocal communities as well as despatialised, virtual communities.

of transnational communities as "variously migratory, diasporic and hybrid" (193). While this article outlined how the family in *Nothing on Earth* as a family of returned migrants is unable to reconnect with the local Irish community, another episode in the novel seems to hold the potential for a transnational community, even though it is revealed that here, again, no form of community can ultimately be realised. Shortly after Flood's and Marcus's disappearances, two men, who "worked in construction, judging by the cut of them" (O'Callaghan 2016, 91) and are supposedly brothers, move into one of the abandoned houses. Paul observes that "[t]hey certainly didn't appear to have a word of English, and they never waved or acknowledged the presence of their neighbours" (91). Paul's attempt to get to know them fails – when he knocks on their door to introduce himself, the man who opens the door replies "'No, thank you,' like those words were his only learned phrase and served as an answer to anything" (83). Communication, which Delanty sees as the heart of any form of community building, yet again fails to be established.

The novel raises awareness of the fact that a transnational society, or in this case a transnational neighbourhood, does not necessarily entail the possibility for transnational communities due to prevailing racist stereotypes. While the men are consistently called "the Poles," (91 and passim) it is revealed at some point that it is unclear what their country of origin is and that "they could have been from anywhere" (91). Later on, we learn that

> [t]he Poles seemed to multiply and disappear at will. You never saw the same head twice. Neither of the original brothers […] was anywhere in sight. There were times he [Paul] thought there was nobody in number three, nor ever had been. Other times […] you would glimpse half a dozen of them, all men, walking in a pack on the hard shoulder of the ring road. (93)

The supposedly Polish neighbours in *Nothing on Earth* appear interchangeable and faceless – not as individuals but as "a pack" (93), a term that likens them to animals. It is also important to note that the immigrants are – like the family of returned migrants – stuck in a place cut off from the rest of the local community; they, too, remain on the outside, "out there" (16). This is in line with an observation by Villar-Argáiz, who, in her analysis of the representation of immigrants in contemporary Irish literature, remarks that these texts often portray "a society where everything that distances itself from the white Irish majority is secluded to the margins, particularly immigrants and Travellers" (2013, 5).

The potential for a transnational community is reduced to absurdity when the priest, after the girl has told him about the 'Poles,' raises the possibility that the neighbours never existed to begin with. He asserts that he "knew for a fact number three had remained vacant since Sheila had moved in with her daughter" (O'Callaghan 2016, 138), and he later states that "[t]here were never any Poles except for those in Paul's head" (172). Ultimately, it remains unclear whether the men were in fact products of Paul's imagination or actually squatting in the abandoned house. The uncertain existence of the 'Polish' workers is a striking parallel to the perception of the character of Vasya in *The Spinning Heart*, a construction worker from Sibiria. Buchanan remarks that Vasya "moves to Ireland because of the promise of the Celtic Tiger," yet when the

construction work stops during the recession and Vasya tries to claim unemployment benefits, the "officials assert he doesn't 'exist'" (2017, 65). Buchanan notes that Vasya appears ghostlike, "haunting the village" (65), similar to the potentially imaginary 'Poles' in *Nothing on Earth*. The migrant construction workers in both texts remain marginalised and liminal characters, their very existence called into question. Ultimately, the failure of communication and neighbourly community reflects the situation of many immigrants who came to Ireland during the years of the boom and for whom community building within Irish society proved to be extremely difficult. Many of them found themselves relegated to the margins of society, faced language barriers and were confronted with racial stereotypes as are the 'Polish' men in *Nothing on Earth*. The promise of the Celtic Tiger, of a "more global identity based on the paradigm of modernity" (Boller 2023, 5) remains unfulfilled in the fictional world of the novel.

Another aspect of transnational community can be found in the way the girl communicates with her friends back in Germany. This form of community is, however, limited to the virtual space of chatrooms and online videocalls. As Delanty remarks, "[i]nformation and communication technologies have created powerful new expressions of community that go far beyond all hitherto known forms of community" (2018, 200). While these new expressions of community may be "de-spatialized," he notes that they are "no less real than traditional or other kinds of community" (201). He further argues that "their distinctive nature consists in their ability to make communication the essential feature of belonging" (201). Communication is also at the heart of the virtual community the girl shares with her friends abroad: at the beginning of the novel, she is in frequent contact with them, constantly wearing her headphones and chatting and talking to them (O'Callaghan 2016, 46; 63). However, after a while, a virtual connection is no longer possible as the family is no longer able to pay their bills and consequently their power line is cut: "the phone line went dead and with it the modem. Even the electricity stopped pumping into their walls" (105). Any form of communication seems to have become impossible, as Paul describes how

> his daughter kept trying to video-call old schoolfriends via a weak unencrypted signal she occasionally picked up […] The girl's calls kept dropping or, worse, being scrambled by a high-pitched whistle or a monotonous backbeat. […] It was too much, lying there, eyes shut, hearing his daughter asking, '*Kannst du mich hören?*' or '*Hallo, ist da jemand?*' of a mute screen.
> 'They can't hear you,' he said. 'There's nobody there, pet.' (106)

Ultimately, even the virtual space of the internet can no longer be used to uphold the transnational community of the girl and her friends abroad as the communicative processes fail, thus cutting the last ties between the family – at this point, only Paul and his daughter are left – and the outside world.

Interconnectedness, one of the central promises of globalisation, cannot be realised on the local level here. The fact that Paul is no longer able to pay the bills as he has lost his job – Paul and Martina have been working for a nameless "software plant" (29), which is "moving East" in an effort to cut down costs (81) – points again to processes of glocalisation that destroy efforts of community building in the novel. As Workman

remarks, "[t]his sudden and unexplained transfer of capital and jobs [in *Nothing on Earth*] underlines how the nation's economy and its property sector were perilously exposed to the whims and currents of the international marketplace" (2021, 286). Yet, it is not only the level of the economy and the property sector that is affected by global events but also the level of the individual and the community. The border-crossing phenomenon of the financial crisis becomes tangible on the local level in the novel, affecting the lives of Paul and the girl, and undermining their attempts to establish new forms of community.

6. Conclusion – Broken Promises

In many ways, *Nothing on Earth* can be read as a counterexample to Butter's and Heinz's claim that

> [c]ontemporary British and Irish cultural production not only expresses these shifting communal identities, but actively contributes to forging alternative models of community, situated on various scales. These scales range from the local level, such as the home or family, to the national or cosmopolitical level. (2015, 7)

The novel shows how both traditional and alternative models of community fail on every level – the local level of the home, the village, and the family proves to be as flawed as the transnational or the virtual level. *Nothing on Earth* presents the reader with a range of spaces where community becomes impossible – no form of community can be found or upheld within the ghost estate, in the local village or even in virtual space. At the heart of it all, the communal unit of the family dissolves, its members quite literally vanishing. The communicative processes Delanty sees as the basis of every form of community are thwarted either by language or technological barriers or by the lack of communal spaces for encountering other people. Feelings of community are no longer upheld by shared religious beliefs, and the representatives of the Catholic Church are no longer able to work as integrating forces.

Overall, the novel paints a bleak picture of recessionary Ireland and illustrates the broken promises of the Celtic Tiger boom, a period in which Ireland became one of the world's most globalised countries. As Alessandra Boller observes, the financial crisis "question[ed] the paradigms of modernity […] and globalisation" (2023, 3) in Ireland, such as the paradigm of diverse, transnational communities or of global interconnectedness. *Nothing on Earth* interrogates the failure of these paradigms on a local level through the portrayal of a family of returned emigrants, isolated in the glocal space of a generic estate and surrounded by both metaphorical and actual ruins. The novel reflects a feeling of deep uncertainty, of being lost, which marked the cultural climate in Ireland after the end of the Celtic Tiger and speaks of the futility of all efforts to work towards a more communal future. In the country portrayed in *Nothing on Earth*, every door is shut in the face of those seeking contact, and if it is opened, as in the case of the priest, it is not opened in good faith.

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