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EILE'S FICTION ECOLOGIES: EXPLORING A PRAXIS TOWARDS THE DISRUPTION OF BORDER-IMPERIALISM

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ABSTRACT

Eile (meaning Other in Irish) is a long-term, transdisciplinary art and spatial practice that critically intervenes in the political, spatial, subjective and ecological spaces of the UK state border on the island of Ireland. It centres on the titular figure Eile, who is imagined as an otherworldly creature of the border. Eile is a transmuter; a shapeshifter; a lobster, a banshee, a flow of water, a gush of wind, who moves in and across the border(lands)through time and space. Through practices of performance, film, sculpture, sound and writing, Eile generates and explores alternative alliances of creatures, flora, fauna and folklore, through a distinct form of *fictioning/s*, which we call *border fictioning/s*. In so doing, the aim of Eile is to generate and elucidate alternative imaginaries, epistemes and ontologies of the border in Ireland challenge the inevitability of nation-state borders.

This paper offers reflection and analysis of an exhibition of this work, Eile {Border Fictioning} that we (a place of their own) held at Bloc Projects in Sheffield, UK, in 2022. It does so, to reflect on a new emergent aspect of thispraxis, which is concerned with how this historical, experiential and speculative work holds multiplicity and difference together in various ways to evoke multiple *ecologies*, and subsequently how an important aspect of the anti-colonial praxis of border fictioning is the production of multiple *fiction ecologies* in the work.



Figure 1 a place of their own, Eile / Bog, still from HD Film with audio

INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, through our collaborative art and spatial research practice ‘a place of their own’, we have engaged in research on the border in Ireland. As part of the ongoing dominance of British colonialism in Ireland (which started over 800 years ago), Britain partitioned Ireland in the 1920s, and in doing so created Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland. This article focuses on our art and spatial practice research, entitled *Eile* (meaning “other” in Irish), which began in 2016 as an investigation into the aesthetics, subjectivities, folklore and politics of the border in Ireland, produced through site-responsive performances, films and sound works, texts, installations and assemblages. More specifically, this article functions as a reflection and analysis of an exhibition of this work – Eile {Border-Fictioning} that we held at Bloc Projects in Sheffield, UK, in 2022.

The aim of the Eile research is to create a range of ‘fictions’ (that we explore below), which critically intervene in the political, spatial, subjective and ecological spaces of the sovereign border in Ireland. The linchpin of Eile is the creation of the titular figure Eile, whom we have imagined as an otherworldly creature of the border, capable of transforming into different forms. The character of Eile is performed by Paula McCloskey (who is from the border in Ireland) and is imagined as a transmuter, a shapeshifter, who moves in and across the border(lands) through time and space. The fictions we create start with Paula’s performances as Eile, which initially take place on various sites along the border itself. From these performances, which are recorded, we make films, sound work, installations and texts. In so doing, as practice research, Eile generates and explores alternative alliances of creatures, flora, fauna and folklore, through a distinct form of fictioning/s, which we call *border fictioning/s*.

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Figure 2 Exhibition room 1, references and story, Eile (Border Fictioning) at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, June 2022.



Figure 3 a place of their own, early border fictioning 'experiment', Irish/UK border, 2017



Figure 4 Paula preparing for on-site performance at Grandmothers house, Enniskillen, 2016.



Figure 5 Installation view 1, at exhibition Eile (Border Fictioning) at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, June 2022.

BORDER FICTIONINGS

Our Eile research is ongoing; it has been thirteen years since our first border field trip which would help us develop the idea for the project.¹ Since then, we developed the character of Eile as performed by Paula, and the different fictions articulated through various embodied performances and in the films, sound work, writings, sculptures and installation we have made over the years. We decided early on that Eile would mostly appear as humanoid, but would be ‘otherworldly’, with an alien-like aesthetic. In the performances and films discussed below, Eile is often seen dressed in silver, with flowing white hair (see fig 1). We imagine that Eile can also change into other forms, such as a lobster, a gust of wind, a flow of water, which is suggested in films. The initial site-specific performances take place on different border sites, for example on a bog on Slieve Rushen (a mountain which straddles the border in County Cavan); at an abandoned Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) border barracks in Belleek; and on the coast (at Ballyshannon and near Omeath).² Paula, in the character of Eile, performs ritualistic acts on the border using diverse materials such as earth and other organic matter, seaweed, wires, string and purple glitter. These ritualistic performances include acts such as weaving neon string around a tree, sprinkling glittery dust on the decaying concrete at the former barracks, and creating sculptural forms on a peatbog. The performances are filmed and made into short digital films (*The Territories of Eile* [2017]; *Eile / Lobster* [2019]; and *Eile / Bog* [2022]).

The films use a ‘cut-up’ approach in which footage of the performances is ‘cut’ with other footage (including for example archive footage of British soldiers stationed on the border shortly after partition in 1922, and found footage such as that exploring the fishing industry off the Irish coast) and collected sonic field recordings from the border (e.g river sounds, wind, bird song) and found audio recordings (e.g. sounds

from NASA of Saturn’s radio waves, and underwater sound recordings of lobsters). These audiovisual films, individually and collectively, alongside various poetry, prose, sculptures and images, serve to collectively create what we call border fictions.

Through the fictionings (process of making the fictions) of Eile we propose a re-imagining of the border in Ireland.³ The importance of the imagination, as Lola Olufemi suggests, is that it ‘not only creates liberatory drives; it sustains, justifies and legitimises them. It undoes entire epistemes and clears space for us to create something new.’⁴ The Eile research is thus an exploration of the potential of fictionings specifically in the re-imagining of the border in Ireland, and more generally it is proposed as a way to disrupt or challenge the global hegemony of sovereign borders. Harsha Walia’s investigation meticulously sets out how the establishment and ongoing maintenance of sovereign borders around the world thrives on the suffering of people on the move or displaced peoples.⁵ In her analysis of nation-state borders, Walia proposes the term border imperialism to shift our focus away from the comprehension of borders as lines demarcating territory, to the constantly shifting ‘regime of practices, institutions, discourse, and systems’ that is structurally caught in anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism and deeply enmeshed in relations to capitalism – and that these, in fact, define this regime.⁶

1 This experiment took place in May 2011, and involved five members of a place of their own (two adults and three children) driving and walking along an 80km stretch of the border from Muff to Pettigo in County Donegal.

2 From 2005, the once ‘hard border’ in Ireland with its watch towers, army checkpoints and barracks became, for the most part invisible, with little or no physical infrastructure. The state border still exists, but the physical security whether that be buildings, walls, barbed wires, boulders, or other paraphernalia such cameras, have been removed, dismantled or abandoned (such as the barracks to which we gained entry) due to processes put in place by the Good Friday Agreement (or Belfast Agreement) 1998.

3 We make the distinction between fiction (noun) and fictioning (verb) following the lead of David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan (2019) work on fictions in visual culture. They explore the critical function of fictioning in creative practice and philosophy as a mode of making, writing and thinking.

4 Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (Maidstone: Hajar Press, 2021), p. 34.

5 Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Oakland, CA : Washington, D.C: AK Press, 2013) and Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

6 Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, p. 38.

The emergence of the notion of border fictions and border fictionings took some time. Our research is practice-led so we were guided by (and responsive to) the various performances and films etc. that we have made over the years – a protracted process and an experimental, iterative praxis. Settling (more or less) on the term border fiction as a phenomenon and border fictioning as method was always tentative. We are also mindful of the problematics of 'naming' or 'coining' concepts and phenomena since 'language has always been the consort of empire, and forever shall remain its mate.'⁷ We are also mindful of the potential challenges and dangers of 'fictioning' in this context. We therefore approach the concept, phenomenon and method with caution, care and criticality and in the hope, as it has proved useful to our thinking, that by sharing it, we might tentatively open up discussion, debate and collective sense-making around the challenges and generative potential. In this sharing we have moved from fiction/ing (singular) to border fictions/ings (plural) to intentionally indicate and invite other practices and thinking of border fictions/ing/s.

The notion of border fictionings, critically approached, is proposed as a way to explore existent hegemonic border imaginaries, and an invitation to create new or alternate ones. We propose this critical functioning or the potential of fictionings in Eile, and beyond, as a tactic in the ongoing work to disrupt and undo the border imperialist imaginary.

Having introduced and explored the complex antecedents and genealogy of border fictionings elsewhere, it is not our intention to elaborate on it further here.⁸ We hope instead, through a reflection and analysis of an exhibition of this work (Eile {Border-Fictioning} that we held at Bloc Projects in Sheffield, UK, in 2022) to reflect on a new emergent aspect of the praxis. This is concerned with how this historical, experiential and speculative

work holds multiplicity and difference together in various ways to evoke *ecologies*, through what we develop in this analysis as *fiction ecologies*.

FICTION ECOLOGIES

Through Eile as research, we associate an ecologies framework with fictioning to create various fiction ecologies across the work. By working in this way, Eile has become a way to pay attention to the entanglements of border imperialism as well as to capitalism and the environmental crisis. It highlights how the creations of fictions prop up and reify the world we know, as well as holding the potential to undo and disrupt this world in the pursuit of creating worlds to become.

The concept of ecologies (plural) has been critically expanded across a number of different theoretical, political, as well as environmental discourses. When considering ecologies in the context of border fictionings, we include the accepted notion of ecology (singular) as the complex interrelations and interdependencies of the systems of the earth which include animals, insects, plants, aquatic creatures, humans, bogs, soil, trees and birds, and the multiple crises that these ecosystems face through biodiversity loss, environmental poverty, inequality and climate change. We then draw inspiration from Felix Guattari's call in *The Three Ecologies* for both subjective and social ecologies.⁹ These provide avenues to resist the erosion of social relations and the withering of our subjectivities by capitalism. We also draw upon queer ecologies which offer a counterpoint to the imperialist ecologies that centre on the 'Man'.¹⁰ Finally, we turn to decolonial ecologies, as explored by Malcolm Ferdinand.¹¹

7 Antonio de Nebrija in 1492, cited by Robert Phillipson, 'Linguistic Imperialism', *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbealo718.pub2>>.

8 See forthcoming (2024) special issue of *Architecture and Culture* journal, on the theme of 'Border Fictions', which we are editing with Dr Mohamad Hafeda.

9 Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, New Edition (London: Continuum, 2008), itself indebted to Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Considering the notion of ecologies through a specifically Caribbean geography – his birthplace – Ferdinand highlights the impossibility of separating the ecological and climate crisis from the crisis of racialised inequality. He posits that the social and political dimensions are central to invoking ecologies as critique, framework and strategy.¹²

Border imperialism has its own ecological impact. A hostile irony of the global border regime is that many of the countries most affecting climate change, and thus creating displacement of people, are building the most walls.¹³ These material, spatial and technological borders exert violence on the people who attempt to cross them and on the ecosystems that they cut through; killing animals, blocking migration routes and preventing access to habitat and resources. Furthermore, the prioritisation of nation-state interests that sovereign borders require and encourage make international agreements to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss difficult, as we see regularly in the lack of any significant outcomes of the annual COP summits.¹⁴ Finally, though land dispossession is intensified by the effects of climate change (which displaces an average of 25.3 million people annually with up to 1 billion people to be displaced globally by 2050), those fleeing from climate

change disasters cannot find refuge as the UN refugee convention does not recognise climate displacement.¹⁵ This illustrates that ‘our era’s migration crisis is not marked by human mobility but rather the reality of mass displacement and immobility, produced by the multifarious and interwoven systems of globalised capitalism, imperialism, and climate catastrophe.’¹⁶

Ferdinand frames these impacts on the earth, humans and non-human life through the notion of the ‘inhabitation’, which is fundamentally relational, describing the relations of peoples to the land, water, and to others. Border imperialism, augmented by racialised capitalism, enacts a specific mode of such, a ‘colonial inhabitation of the earth.’¹⁷ This form of inhabitation radically imposed itself in the European colonisation of the Americas from the fifteenth century and is built on the exploitation of the land, on land-grabbing, the notion of private property and the exploitation of life, both human and non-human. Colonial inhabitation therefore defines a relational imaginary based on separation, exploitation and xenophobia, or othercide – one that ‘doesn’t recognise the other as a co-habitant of the earth.’¹⁸

10 Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

As explained by Sylvia Wynter in ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (2003), pp. 257–337, and building on the work of Franz Fanon, ‘Man’ (white European) as a category came to stand in for human; and for Rosi Braidotti ‘Man’ is: ‘male, white, heterosexual, owning wives and children, urbanised, able-bodied, speaking a standard language, i.e. “Man.”’ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

11 Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. by Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

12 ‘Decolonial Ecologies’, *The Funambulist*, June 2021 <<https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/decolonial-ecologies>> [accessed 8 March 2024].

13 Reece Jones, ‘It’s Time to Rethink the Relationship Between Borders and Climate Change’, *Undark Magazine*, 2017 <<https://undark.org/2017/11/07/borders-climate-change-displacement/>> [accessed 4 March 2024].

14 Reece Jones, and Achille Mbembe, ‘Bodies as Borders’, *From The European South - a Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities*, 4.0 (2019), 5–18. The UN Climate Change Conference (the official name for Climate Conferences of the Parties) have taken place every year since 1995. These two-week summits see world leaders, politicians, experts and others discussing the climate crisis on a global level.

15 Walia, *Border and Rule*, p. 73; 74.

16 Walia, *Border and Rule*, p. 74.

17 Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, p. 26–27.

18 Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, p. 22.



To undo border imperialism means to straddle the colonial and environmental 'double fracture' that Ferdinand identifies, and regard it as both a colonial, racist crisis and a huMan-made environmental and ecological crisis.¹⁹ The dismantling of sovereign borders and the border imperialism that underpins them (and their associated imaginaries) is therefore a fundamental part of interconnected global struggles for decolonisation and racial justice, ecological struggles and environmental justice.

In the following pages, we attempt to capture something of this ecological framework in our practice research Eile, through commentary on selected components of the work that was shared in the 2022 exhibition, and the relations, interdependencies and alliances into which they were curated.

THE EXHIBITION/ INSTALLATION

The Eile {Border Fictioning} exhibition at Bloc Projects in 2022 was conceived as an assemblage of multiple aspects of the Eile research. It occupied two spaces of the gallery building, the first of which was a small bright foyer in which we placed different items contextualising the project. As visitors entered the gallery they were greeted by a text printed on the wall, setting up the story of Eile, a snapshot of an imperfect, partial origin story of sorts; a weaving of words which intentionally disrupted the 'real' and fiction, the personal and political, the self and other, human and non-human from the outset, thus setting a tone for the whole (fig 2). This story was also included in a book we produced, Eile {Border Fictioning}, which also includes photographs of our early fictioning experiments on the border with our four children (fig 3). Another photograph shows Paula preparing for a border performance

in her grandmother's home in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland (fig 4). This book sits on a shelf amongst a set of other books which narrate our thinking in developing the world-building of Eile, including writings by Harsha Walia, Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney, Samuel Beckett, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Sylvia Wynter, Simon O'Sullivan and David Burrows, Malcolm Ferdinand, and Lola Olufemi.

Visitors then walked through a thick curtain to enter an installation that filled the main gallery space (figs 5 and 6) – an immersive world of Eile, with magenta light streaming in from the skylight and windows. The whole space glowed. Sound filled the space: an array of sounds (field recordings of the border – wind turbines, rivers – sounds of Saturn's radio emissions, of oceanic decapods, metallic drones) overlaid with a woman's voice performing a poem written by us, in Irish and English. These overlapping sounds played on a continuous loop; a crucial component of the spatial and experiential design of the installation.

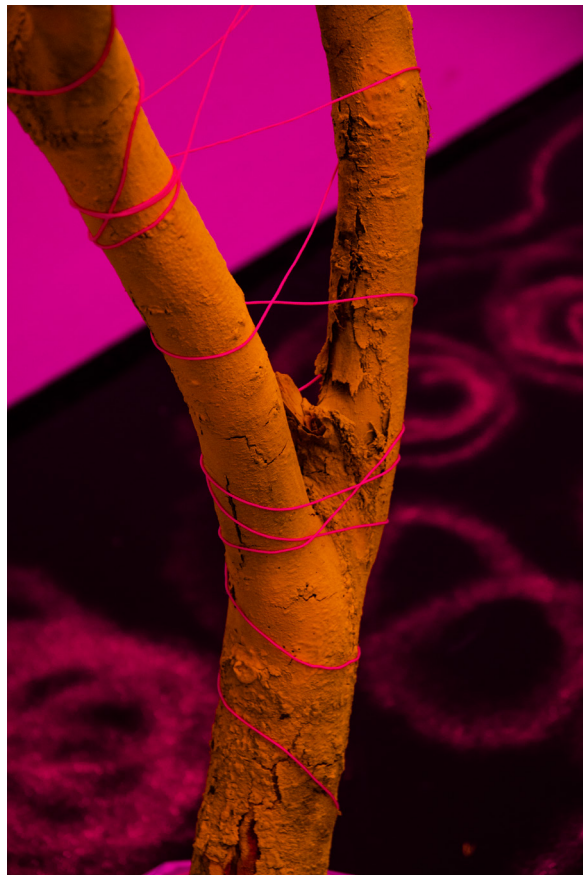
Figure 6 installation view 2, at exhibition Eile (Border Fictioning) at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, June 2022.

19 'huMan' is used here in recognition that colonialism and the climate crises are not caused by all humans, equally. This is based on the thinking, for example, of Sylvia Wynter (cited in note 11 above); that 'Man' (white, European) as a category came to stand in for 'human'.

Figure 7 installation view 3, at exhibition Eile (Border Fictioning) at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, June 2022.



Figure 8 installation view 4, at exhibition Eile (Border Fictioning) at Bloc Projects, Sheffield, June 2022.



The installation included three films (on four screens), a digital image (fig 9), a video clip of a White Cryptic butterfly projected on a suspended, fine, flowing fabric (seen in fig 5), a 'tree sculpture' of neon yellow with string (seen in figs 5 and 8), a large floating black 'portal sculpture' (seen in figs 5, 6, 7), and an eight foot sculpture of Eile (seen in figs 5 and 7). The latter has an elongated metallic neck and head emerging from a bespoke interpretation of the Kinsale cloak (fig 7).²⁰ On the opening night, a live performance by Paula took place in the space of the installation, which mimicked the ritualistic performances on the border seen in two of the films: *The Territories of Eile* (glitter ritual) and *Eile / Bog* (tree string ritual). Cutting a slight figure in silver and alien-like form with long white hair, the performance included knotting and looping neon pink yarn onto the installed tree branches; creating spiral glittery forms on the ground surrounding the tree in a complex dance of call and response, choreographed to the installation sound work. The traces and remnants of this performance then became part of the installation (fig 8).

In curating these diverse objects, many of which are already complex assemblages, into an exhibition, the site(s) and territories of Eile shifted from the border, where the original embodied performances took place, via the virtual border territories of the digital audiovisual films, to the specific ecologies evoked in the space of the gallery itself. We also acknowledged that it was a significant moment in the emergence of the utility of fiction ecologies in our work.

20 The cloak designed and made as part of the *Eile* sculpture references the traditional Kinsale Cloak, as depicted in this painting *Women of Kinsale* (1978) by Patrick Hennessy. Worn by both men and women in South-West Ireland used as an essential item of clothing and warmth (as a blanket), and typically made from the wool of the black sheep common in the area. In our sculpture the lining is metallic silver and from the cloak protrudes the long silver neck of a version of Eile the character.

Figure 9 a place of their own, Eile (Border Fictioning), installation detail, 2022, Bloc Projects, Sheffield, UK.



Figure 9 is an image still from the film *Eile / Lobster*, where Eile can be seen playing cat's cradle with a child-like Eile companion, in what appears to be outer space. Eile is performed by the mother, and the younger figure is performed by the daughter. In the installation, this image is repeated multiple times vertically on the wall, from the floor to the ceiling, resembling a length of 35mm film reel, but the image on each 'frame' is identical. Repeated over and over, the images conjure, as Gilles Deleuze explored, repetition as difference.²¹ This game of string figures and patterns between the players is used in *Eile* as a way to explore how we come to 'know' borders; nation-state borders as fictions themselves, and contemplating what the introduction of fictionings-as-method might do to this knowledge to disrupt hegemonic understandings of borders.

Cat's cradle has been associated with feminist philosophers Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway, but the origins of the game are trickier to pin-point.²² For Haraway, cat's cradle is used to enact multispecies reciprocity in storytelling:

Cat's cradle is about patterns and knots; the game takes great skill and can result in some serious surprises. One person can build up a large repertoire of string figures on a single pair of hands; but the cat's cradle figures can be passed back and forth on the hands of several players, who add new moves in the building of complex patterns.²³

Haraway's notion of string figures (or 'SF' – encompassing science fiction, science fact, speculative feminism, speculative fabulation and so on) is important as it proposes imaginative patterns of thinking with which to approach an ecologies praxis.²⁴ The game of cat's cradle in *Eile* is a nod to this thinking, and is used to explore the many human and more-than-human fictions and non-fictions of nation-state borders. Specifically, it

forms part of the fictionings of the border in *Eile*, interweaving the notion that nation-state borders are themselves fictions, as well as enacting alternate border fictionings across the praxis.

21 Deleuze, *Difference*.

22 Isabelle Stengers, 'Relaying a War Machine', in *The Guattari Effect* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 134–55; Donna Haraway, 'A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies', *Configurations*, 2.1 (1994), pp. 59–71 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/con.1994.0009>>.

23 Haraway, 'A Game', pp. 69–70.

24 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

25 Catriona Sandilands, 'The Marginal World', in *Every Grain of Sand: Canadian Perspectives on Ecology and Environment* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 45–54.

Figure 10 a place of their own, Eile / Lobster, still from HD Film with audio, 11'27", 2019.



Figure 10 is a still from the film *Eile / Lobster*, a short film which began with a performance on two coastal border sites, one near Ballyshannon, County Donegal (where Paula is from) and another near Omeath, County Louth. Situating this performance on the coast is an intentional affront to hegemonic border spatial and material imaginaries that posit borders as fixed lines on a map or walls across the earth. The coast is a liminal space, constantly in flux; between land and sea; with each continually transforming one another.²⁵ Such spatial conditions, of transition between ecological communities, ecosystems, or ecological regions have been termed 'ecotones'.²⁶ Astrid Neimanis, as part of her work on Hydrofeminism, writes that ecotones:

might be considered markers of connection and/or separation, but in ecological terms, they are zones of fecundity, creativity, transformation, multiplication, divergence, and reassembly [...] [where] Any difference between 'thing' and 'process', or 'verb' and 'noun', or 'body' and 'becoming' also blurs.²⁷

In the film, *Eile / Lobster* (as across the entire Eile practice research) there is an ongoing play with natureculture as defined by Donna Haraway: the notion that nature and culture are not dualities but enmeshed, entangled and mutually constitutive.²⁸ Natureculture has implications for thinking with border fiction ecologies as: 'natureculture is a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed.'²⁹

In the film *Eile / Lobster*, Eile is transformed into water, temporarily discarding their humanoid figure, to become-water. Neimanis tells us that humans are

all bodies of water, and as such already and always more-than-human: 'I am a body of water, as are you, as is a river, a snow squall, a walrus, a tamarind tree.'³⁰ Eile's watery body morphs into a creature of the sea, a marine crustacean, a lobster. This too is a moment that enacts natureculture. Lobsters are ancient beasts, having been around some 350 million years.³¹ Lobsters live in the mud and murk at the bottom of the sea. Scuttling in the watery depths, five pairs of their legs have claws. Once considered 'poor man's food,' lobsters are now valued as seafood and have become profitable commodities. They are also loaded with cultural coding. Think of Samuel Beckett's 1934 short story *Dante and the Lobster*, Salvador Dalí's *Lobster Telephone* 1938, and Yorgos Lanthimos absurdist science fiction film, *The Lobster*, 2015:

*Everything was all set now and in order. Bating, of course, the lobster, which had to remain an incalculable factor.*³²

Hotel Manager : Now have you thought of what animal you'd like to be if you end up alone?

David : Yes. A lobster.

Hotel Manager : Why a lobster?

*David : Because lobsters live for over one hundred years, are blue-blooded like aristocrats, and stay fertile all their lives. I also like the sea very much.*³³

26 Salit Kark, 'Ecotones and *Ecological Gradients*', in *Ecological Systems: Selected Entries from the Encyclopedia of Sustainability Science and Technology*, ed. by Rik Leemans (New York, NY: Springer, 2013), pp. 147–60 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5755-8_9>.

27 Sarah Bezan and Astrida Neimanis, 'Hydrofeminism on the Coastline: An Interview with Astrida Neimanis', *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*, 3.1 (2022) <<https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.1363>>.

28 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Cambridge: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

29 Nicholas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden, 'Natureculture', in *The International Encyclopedia of Primatology* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2016), pp. 1–2 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119179313.wbprim0135>>.

30 Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 86.

31 Heather D Bracken-Grissom, Shane T. Ah Yong, Richard D. Wilkinson, Rodney M. Feldmann, Carrie E. Schweitzer, Jesse W. Breinholt, and others, 'The Emergence of Lobsters: Phylogenetic Relationships, Morphological Evolution and Divergence Time Comparisons of an Ancient Group (Decapoda: Achelata, Astacidea, Glypheidea, Polychelida)', *Systematic Biology*, 63.4 (2014), pp. 457–79 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/sysbio/syu008>>.

32 Samuel Beckett, *Dante and the Lobster* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).

33 *The Lobster*, dir. by Yorgos Lanthimos (Film4, Bord Scannán na hÉireann / The Irish Film Board, Eurimages, 2015).

Figure 11 a place of their own, Eile / Lobster, still from HD Film with audio, 11'27", 2019.



Importantly, the lobster is a creature of material transformation: it must lose its shell and survive unprotected while it grows a new one. This process of making itself defenceless suggests change that requires vulnerability (or what the feminist artist psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger calls *self-fragilization*), as a way to reach empathy with the other.³⁴ In a time of enmeshed 'crises' – such as the border crisis (as Walia reminds us there never has been a 'migrant crisis') climate change, and capitalism – the notion of vulnerability becomes paramount.³⁵ It is essential for fostering connections and forming alliances, as Haraway suggests, not only with the self but also with others, both human and more-than-human.³⁶

Significantly, Ettinger's theories start with an original encounter, the womb as matrix, in her development of *matrixial theory*.³⁷ Ettinger proposes the *matrixial borderspace* as a shared realm that connects all humans to otherness. This original matrixial encounter, where a pattern of transsubjectivity is formed, is for Ettinger a way to access an original encounter with otherness that all humans both share and have access to, which can lead to responsibility beyond empathy – a form of co-responsibility for humans and more-than-humans. This, in turn, is integral to an ecologies framework.

Thinking of the intrauterine imaginary in relation to thinking beyond-the-human has permeated our work before, suggesting that viewing the intrauterine time-space as a process experienced by all humans can enhance our understanding of 'humanness', particularly in relation to the concept of original 'inhumanness'.³⁸ This correspondingly might be used as part of a wider strategy to reimagine ecologies, and 'human' relations therein, as a form of sympoiesis, or 'making with', as proposed by Haraway.³⁹ While such

an approach begins with the pre-human intrauterine experience, it can extend its consequences to reshape our understanding of what it means to be 'human' and how we could re-imagine our fragile, contingent and uneasy relationships with the non-human.⁴⁰

Although not explicitly referenced in the Eile research and its many art-led investigations, this thinking permeates the work, manifesting specifically in the references to mother and child relations. This is seen, for example, in the use of a maternal body to perform Eile, the mother-daughter space-game of cat's cradle, in the dancing sequence of the *Eile / Lobster* film (fig 11), the presence of the grandmother (fig 4), and numerous other complex intra-actions with other 'humans', non-humans (butterflies, lobsters, banshee) and things (glitter, peatbog, technologies) as ecological relationships (ecologies).⁴¹ Together, these elements entangle across the installation work to collectively create and conjure alternate and disruptive border imaginaries.

34 Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

35 Walia, *Border and Rule*.

36 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

37 Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*.

38 Paula McCloskey, 'The Non/Inhuman Within: Beyond the Biopolitical Intrauterine Imaginary', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 22.3 (2021), pp. 174–91 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2021.1961494>>.

39 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

40 McCloskey, *The Non/Inhuman Within*.

41 Karen Barad's notion (distinct from *inter*-action) of *intra*-action is where 'distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action'. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 33.

Figure 12 a place of their own, The Territories of Eile, still from HD Film with audio, 3'55", 2017.



The Territories of Eile film (figs 12–14) is partially situated in various terrains across the Irish borderlands, along hedgerows teeming with life, on the waters of Lough Melvin (County Leitrim/County Fermanagh), and in an abandoned RUC barracks in Belleek, that sits adjacent the river through which the border runs. We first entered here a few years ago, through huge rusty corrugated gates held together loosely by a metal chain which allowed for easy access. The broken surveillance cameras looked on lifelessly, though still managed to be accusatory, as we set up for one of our first Eile performances. The high walls, cloaked in barbed wire, housed several buildings, a site of violence throughout the so-called ‘Troubles’.⁴² The whole site, which overlooks the river, itself a watery border (and watery body), was littered with relics from a time when this border was a ‘hard’ one (a reminder that borders change over time).

We still see high numbers of physical borders being built around the planet to demarcate physical territories with lofty walls and barbed wire. Increasingly though, borders are becoming digitised territories and re-made as immigrant databases, digital IDs, electronic tracking systems, facial recognition software, and data fusion centres.⁴³

As Mbembe notes:

physical and virtual barriers of separation, digitalization of databases, filing systems, the development of new tracking devices, sensors, drones, satellites and sentinel robots, infrared detectors and various other cameras, biometric controls, and new microchips containing personal details – everything is put in place to transform the very nature of the border in the name of security. Borders are increasingly turned into mobile, portable, omnipresent and ubiquitous realities.⁴⁴

Such shifts in the practice of what Mbembe calls ‘borderization’ – ‘a new global partitioning between potentially risky bodies vs. bodies that are not’ – are part of a process that pushes, with devastating effect, borders further into bodies and other distributed spaces.⁴⁵ For Walia, it produces ‘mass displacement, while immobilizing migrants through oppressive technologies that prohibit and criminalize free migration, alongside policies expanding indentured migrant labor pools, all entwined in reactionary nationalisms.’⁴⁶ These border technologies are sinister and function to prop up, prolong and reinforce colonialism as this web of technology continues to grow in sophistication and reach, through interactions or intra-actions with other technologies, politics, with organisms and with the environment.⁴⁷ This ‘real’ world of borders is the stuff of hegemonic science fiction, where border imperialism has historically been a common trope.⁴⁸

In *The Territories of Eile film*, to create thresholds across space-time, we witness Eile performing a ritualistic dusting of glinting flecks (fig 13). Eile scatters these particles across the haunted structures and technological detritus. There are many rituals seen throughout the nested worldings of Eile, as a method to performatively blur and distort borders-as-real: borders-as-fictions to summon a world where borders do not exist.⁴⁹

42 Gerry Moriarty reporting on a mortar attack on the eve of the ceasefire: ‘On Good Friday a number of shots were fired at Belleek barracks. In 1994, on the eve of the ceasefire, the IRA attempted to bomb the barracks.’ May 11th 1998, *Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/mortar-attack-on-ruc-in-belleek-1.151238>

43 Mizue Aizeki, Matt Mamoudi and Coline Schupfer (eds.), *Resisting Borders and Technologies of Violence: Resisting Borders in an Age of Global Apartheid* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2024).

44 Achille Mbembe, ‘Bodies as Borders’, *From The European South - a Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities*, 4.0 (2019), pp. 5–18, (p. 9).

45 Mbembe, ‘Bodies as Borders’.

46 Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule*, p. 17.

47 Barad, *Meeting the Universe*.

48 Paula McCloskey and Sam Vardy, ‘Towards Border Fictionings’, *Architecture and Culture*, 11.4 (forthcoming 2024).

49 McCloskey and Vardy, ‘Towards Border Fictionings’.



Figure 13 a place of their own, The Territories of Eile, still from HD Film with audio, 3'55", 2017.

Figure 14 a place of their own, The Territories of Eile, Triptych of the 3 component films, 3'55", 2017.



Figure 15 a place of their own, Eile/ Bog, still from HD Film with audio, 5'56", 2022.



In the *Eile / Bog* film, we see Eile on a mountainous peatbog at Slieve Rushen (fig 14) which traverses the border in Ireland, between counties Cavan and Fermanagh. The mountain is made up of grey limestone with a cap of sandstone and shales and is extensively quarried by local mining companies. The surface is mostly covered with peatbog. The mountain is a protected area of the National Park and contains several caves and swallow-holes. More recently it became home to an electricity generating wind farm.

In this film, Eile is walking, her feet touching the moist bog (another watery body). The film offers a meditation on bog ecologies that are deeply enmeshed with Irish society and culture; and another example of natureculture. We watch Eile pushing their hands across the surface and caressing the delicate and fragile substance of this organism. Bog ecologies play a central role in the global carbon cycle (including its storage) as well as being a source of fresh water which is inhabited by distinctive, co-evolved, assemblages of organisms.⁵⁰

In times gone by, bogs have been approached with suspicion and fear. They ingest the dead, but leave imprints – haunting the future. In the Iron Age, bogs in Ireland were thought to be portals to other worlds; spaces of communication with spirits and more recently, the discovery of two Iron Age bog bodies in Ireland, incredibly preserved by the bog, have captured the collective imagination.⁵¹ These bog bodies would have borne witness to the insults laid upon them by repeated British intrusions as part of the settler-colonialism which gave way to the border imperialism of partition in the 1920s. It is well documented that one aspect of the British colonial project was to 'tame' the Irish: their way of life and their customs but also their land, as captured in the words of Giraldus Cambrensis or the Gerald of Wales, the medieval British clergyman in his account of the topography of Ireland in 1186-8:

The Irish are a rude people, subsisting on the produce of their cattle only, and living themselves like beasts – a people that has not yet departed from the primitive habits of pastoral life. In the common course of things, mankind progresses from forest to the field, from the field to the town, and to the social condition of the citizens...their pastures are short of herbage; cultivation is very rare, and there is scarcely any land sown. [...] The whole habits of the people are contrary to agricultural pursuit.⁵²

The *Eile / Bog* film moves across time, showing archive footage of peat cutting, to the creek of the wind farm in the distance, as reminder of yet more techno ecologies on this bog border.

50 Wisnu Adi Wicaksono, Tomislav Cernava, Christian Berg, and Gabriele Berg, 'Bog Ecosystems as a Playground for Plant-Microbe Coevolution: Bryophytes and Vascular Plants Harbour Functionally Adapted Bacteria', *Microbiome*, 9.1 (2021), p. 170 <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40168-021-01117-7>>.

51 Gladwin, Derek, *Contentious Terrains: Boglands, Ireland, Postcolonial Gothic* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2016), p.2. See the Bog Bodies Research Project for further information: [https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Irish-Antiquities-Division-Collections/Collections-List-\(1\)/Iron-Age/Bog-Bodies-Research-Project](https://www.museum.ie/en-IE/Collections-Research/Irish-Antiquities-Division-Collections/Collections-List-(1)/Iron-Age/Bog-Bodies-Research-Project).

52 Giraldus (Cambrensis), *The History and Topography of Ireland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 70.

FROM BORDER FICTIONS TO FICTION ECOLOGIES

Throughout this article, we propose the praxis of border fictionings in Eile as a response to the colonial inhabitation of border imperialism, through a countering, ecologies framework that articulates experimental fiction ecologies. Eile reflectively makes a contribution to this mode of counter ecologies towards and with ecologies that are embodied, migratory, everyday, queer, more-than-human and feminist; and that entangle fact, fictions, fabulations and folklore with pasts, presents, and futures. These ecologies are sensory, material and insensible while always striving to be decolonial.⁵³

The exhibition, and the installation it hosts, functioned for us as a sense-making encounter, carefully curated to hold seemingly disparate components together meaningfully affectively; to (re)negotiate their interrelationships. Through this reflection and (re)negotiation in co-curating the exhibition, we discovered how these nested fictions worked collectively to challenge the specific colonial inhabitation of border imperialism by refusing the naturalisation of border regime – and its own imaginaries and denial of the other.⁵⁴ The ecologies framework or assemblage is for us what John Akomfrah acknowledges as an ethic, which (potentially) enables acceptance of ‘the coexistence of difference.’⁵⁵ The ecologies described above map out unlikely but meaningful relations and alliances across places, times and bodies, that enact various fiction ecologies across difference: organic, technological, social and political.

In direct opposition to the imaginary espoused by the colonial inhabitation of the Earth, we approach the production of fiction ecologies as a form of ‘worlding’ through a ‘worldly-ecology [that] assumes a relational ontology that recognises that our existence

and our bodies are made up of encounters with a plurality of human beings *and* a plurality of non-human beings.⁵⁶ Within the Eile installation, the alternative imaginaries of the border, fostered by the practices of border fictionings, begin to open up the possibility of other modes of inhabitation of and with the earth. These modes not only demand, but also derive, existence through relations with others, ‘those without whom the earth would not be the earth.’⁵⁷ In so doing, this practice of border fictionings seeks to foster agency, and what Haraway refers to as ‘co-response-ability’, even in the most inhospitable of places, involving ‘a way of thinking that is not futurist but rather thinks of the present as a thick, complex tangle of times and places in which cultivating response-abilities, capacities to respond, matters’.⁵⁸ This approach denies the fixing, separating and controlling epistemes and ontologies of border imperialism and the fractures it creates. Instead, it advocates for plural ecologies that make and nurture various alliances and relations with the other.

53 For Kathryn Yusoff, the insensible ‘is neither sense nor nonsense; it is between—as agitator, contagion, and never as presence as such—only as force or motivation oscillating between the material and virtual, inhuman and human, organic and nonorganic, time and the untimely.’ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 213.

54 This exhibition was curated by Paula McCloskey and Sam Vardy as supported by the Bloc Project curator Dr Sunshine Wong.

55 John Akomfrah, *Co-existence of Times: A Conversation with John Akomfrah* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021), p. 11.

56 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*; Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*, p. 231.

57 Aimé Césaire cited by Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*. Ferdinand says that ‘Césaire provides a conception of inhabitation that does not “take the other into account”, but which can only be conceived of on the condition of the presence of others’.

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Dr Paula McCloskey is an artist researcher and co-director of visual cultural organisation *a place of their own*. Working at the intersections of art (performance, film, sound, publishing) and architecture, her research and practice develop collaborative critical fictions – to think (with diverse communities) about possible alternate, social and ecological futures. She has developed ambitious and complex artistic work and research about partition and the border in Ireland and developed creative, transdisciplinary methodologies to explore cultural interpretations and experiences of the climate crisis. Paula is a Lecturer and Researcher in Fine Art at the School of Arts, Derby University.

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