Writing the Sheela-na-gig:
Semiotic Complexity, Ekphrasis, and Poetic Persona
in the Poetry Collection *Strange Country*

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the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-mode PhD comprises an ekphrastic poetry collection, *Strange Country*, and a critical component that accounts for my research and writing processes and articulates my poetics of ekphrasis as practised in the collection. *Strange Country* focuses on sheela-na-gigs, stone carvings of naked female figures that prominently depict the vulva, which are found on medieval churches, castles, wells, and town walls in Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. Historians and archaeologists, as well as poets, have suggested that they were/are variously meant to: act as warnings against lust and sin; ward off evil; aid in conception and childbirth; symbolize female power and sexuality; demonstrate the power of nature to give and take life; signify sovereignty over land and nation; or facilitate passage from one state to another. However, their meaning, dating, and origins are impossible to determine definitively.

In contrast to these approaches that decide the sheela-na-gigs' meaning, I aimed to poetically inhabit their semiotic complexity in a full-length collection. This aspiration arose from my research and writing process, which included reading the literature on sheela-na-gigs, visiting over sixty of them, and reviewing from a practitioner's perspective literary criticism on ekphrasis as well as existing poems on sheela-na-gigs by other poets. As I strove for this semiotic complexity in my poems, I deployed a range of poetic techniques. On the one hand, I wrote lyric and narrative associative poems that have a clearly defined, autobiographical poetic persona using a technique I call 'associative ekphrasis'. On the other hand, I also chose to forgo consistent use of this speaker and came to write found and visual poems derived from an archive I compiled of documents on sheela-na-gigs (dating from the 19th century to the present). Finally, I wrote a long poem that uses a hybrid formal strategy.

The critical commentary traces my creative decision-making process with a particular focus on the position and function of the poetic 'I'. In the commentary, I use Roland Barthes's notion of *punctum* and Federico García Lorca's *duende* to describe my experience of the carvings and my desire to emphasize their inexplicable impact and enigma in my poems. In order to analyze the sheela poems by other poets and to account for my own writing practice, I use literary terminologies and debates relating to ekphrasis, and I employ perspectives on the poetic 'I' from the poetics of lyric 'deep image' and 'postmodern witness' poetry as articulated by Robert Bly, Alicia Ostriker, and Tony Hoagland alongside the 'uncreative' poetics of Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin. In addition to contributing a collection of poems to the body of creative

responses to sheela-na-gigs, this collection and critical commentary complicate the argument that poems written in a lyric mode are necessarily more expressive, 'creative', or faithful to the ekphrastic object than those written 'uncreatively' using found text and ultimately demonstrate the productive possibilities of an non-polarized approach to these debates.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CREATIVE COMPONENT

Manuscript of

STRANGE COUNTRY

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

Framing and Articulating My Poetics

In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson writes:

> If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?[1]

Dickinson's musings are a passionate and metaphorical poetics-in-miniature, a litmus test for determining a poem's worth or value. As a poet herself (rather than a literary critic or a reader of poems), Dickinson's statement can be understood as a self-evaluative criterion, as well as a statement of her beliefs about what poetry should do more generally. Dickinson's quote resonates for me as a practising poet in terms of the standards it sets and in its very existence as a personal poetics. I imagine Dickinson holding herself to this standard and wonder if this contributed to her keeping her work hidden. I also recall my own experiences reading her work, experiences for which her quote is an accurate description.

Poets write about poetry – both propositions regarding the constitution and functionality of extant poems by other poets and assertions in relation to their own past and future poetic activities. This coextensive, but not necessarily coterminous, production of creative and critical writing dates far earlier than the existence of critical components for Creative Writing PhDs – at least as far back as Plato's writings on poetry and Aristotle's *Poetics* of the 3rd and 4th centuries B.C. Furthermore, in addition to poetics written as essays or books and clearly identified as such, poetic manifestos-in-miniature are embedded in poets' letters, journals, and other writings. Part of the ongoing work of any poet is to engage with such writings in addition to poetry itself. In his preface to *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, a collection of prose writings by 20th century poets, James Scully asserts the vital distinctions of temporality and purpose between literary criticism and poetics: 'All selections in this book have been drawn from the prose writing of poets, not from those of theoreticians; the majority are concerned with poetry as a present and future activity, as a "making" or strategy.'[2] Thus, poets read and write essays, manifestos, letters, journals, *ars poetica*, and, more recently, dissertations and theses

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[1] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters," *The Atlantic Monthly* 68, no. 4 (1891), 444.
[2] James Scully, "A Prefatory Note," in *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (London: Collins Fontana, 1966), 7.

alongside their creative practice for the purpose of *making* more, better, or different work.

In a similar manner, Robert Sheppard underscores the notion that poetics are 'built upon the *making* of text rather than upon its rhetoric or effects' [my italics].[3] Though critical in its evaluative (and sometimes interpretative) orientation, this 'expert practitioner' vantage of poetics contrasts with the analytic and classificatory 'expert spectator' orientation of criticism.[4] Susan Melrose uses the terms 'expert spectator' (critic) and 'expert practitioner' (artist) to distinguish between these points-of-view. Melrose asserts that only the artist, the 'expert practitioner', has access to the 'intuitive processing' that went into making a work.[5] In other words, only the poet herself can account for the decision-making that occurred in the development of a poem or a poetry collection. As such, a poetics can reflect upon poems that have already been written with the aim of speculating upon specific processural insights that have been gained, as well as directions for future work.[6] This is what I intend to do in this thesis.

In this poetics, I account for the methods and the 'creative decision-making processes' that I employed while writing my poetry collection *Strange Country*.[7] When I discuss theme, rather than interpreting my work and offering potential meanings as a literary critic would, I examine those themes which persisted in my consciousness prior to and during the writing, but which may or may not be in evidence in the final work. As Melrose argues, only the practitioner has access to such knowledge, as processes are not always discernible in the artwork itself. I also frame the genesis of the collection on the basis of my initial *spectatorial encounter* with the sheela-na-gig stone carvings (the subject of *Strange Country*), which later gave way to a *practice-based encounter*, a process that will be chronicled throughout the thesis. When I discuss poetic form in this thesis, I do so in terms of the technical discoveries and decisions I made during the writing process. Thus, this exploration is 'a speculative discourse […rather than] a [merely] descriptive one' in that I consider the implications of such discoveries for how poems could or should be

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[3] Robert Sheppard, "The Necessity of Poetics," *PORES: An Avant-Gardist Journal of Poetics Research*, no. 1 (2000) (http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/1/Robert%20Sheppard,%20%27The%20Necessity%20of%20 Poetics%27.htm).
[4] Susan Melrose, "Still Harping On (about Expert Practitioner-Centered Modes of Knowledge and Models of Intelligibility)" (keynote lecture, National e-Science Centre, Edinburgh, July 2007); Melrose, "Confessions of an Uneasy Expert-Spectator," (http://www.sfmelrose.org.uk, March 12 2012).
[5] Melrose, "Still Harping On."
[6] Robert Sheppard supports idea that poetics can be reflective: 'Poetics is a prospectus of work to be done, that might involve a summary of work already done.' "The Necessity of Poetics."
[7] Melrose, "Still Harping On." Melrose coined the phrase 'creative decision-making processes' in order to describe practice-based accounts by artists about their own work.

made and demonstrate that such realisations undermine arguments contained in the poetics of other poets and even in my own prior poetic assumptions and writing practice.[8] Finally, in this poetics I borrow terminology from philosophy and theory, and at other times I use metaphor, maxim, or anecdote to frame and account for my decision-making.[9] These terminologies and figurative phrases (taken from other poets or critics or created myself) were in some cases tacitly used during the writing process, and sometimes form the very basis of my approach to writing and encountering a work of art. In other cases, I discovered *post facto* that certain terminologies offer apt descriptions of what had occurred or what I had hoped to achieve.

Background to the Writing of Strange Country

Strange Country focuses on sheela-na-gigs, which are stone carvings of naked female figures that prominently depict the vulva. They are found on medieval churches, castles, wells, and town walls with over 100 carvings found in Ireland and around 35 found in England, Scotland, and Wales and are thought to date from 1000-1500 A.D.[10] I first encountered sheela-na-gigs in a book in the gift shop at the Newgrange Neolithic tomb (circa 3200 B.C.) in Co. Meath, Ireland. A perusal of this book by Maureen Concannon (*The Sacred Whore: Sheela Goddess of the Celts*) immediately spurred my partner and I to go in search of sheela-na-gigs in Ireland. We went first to Fethard, Co. Tipperary, where two sheela-na-gigs are located, one on the town wall and one on the church wall. Concannon's[11] book was the only text on sheela-na-gigs that I owned at the time, and I was immediately critical of her argument and methods. She contends that sheela-na-gigs depict an ancient pre-Christian goddess and the power of female sexuality and that they could become a powerful healing icon for contemporary society. Though I was drawn to the sheela-na-gigs themselves and even to these ideas, I was troubled by this particular book's approach to research. Her book uses no systematic methodology or evidence from archaeological or primary sources. While I waited for additional books I had ordered to arrive in the post, an internet search revealed similar problems with methods and evidence for other claims made about sheela-na-gigs. Later, as I read the texts I had acquired, it became increasingly clear that no one knows definitively what the sheelas

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[8] Sheppard, "The Necessity of Poetics."

[9] Sheppard explains this eclecticism in the discourse of poetics: 'Poetics takes is structural homologies from science and philosophy, but also from gardening and pinball, if it needs to.' Ibid.

[10] Barbara Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[11] Maureen Concannon, *The Sacred Whore: Sheela Goddess of the Celts* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2005).

were, who made them, when, and for what purpose. In my view, though each of the varying viewpoints are argued with passion and commitment, the evidence, even when systematically examined, is insufficient to settle the issue. As I will continue to explore in this thesis, the myriad of strongly-vested arguments about the sheela's origin and meaning coupled with a lack of incontrovertible evidence in favor of any one of these arguments artistically attracted me to them.

Indeed, the more sheelas I viewed *in situ* or in museums or photographs, the more I felt an intense desire to write poems about them. On the one hand, I wondered what they were doing on churches, who made them and for what purpose, and why their haggard and sometimes aggressive countenances and gaping vulvas attracted rather than repelled me. On the other, when I saw them or reflected upon seeing them, I *felt* – to return to Dickinson's poetics – 'as if the top of my head were taken off'. This feeling arose from some combination of elements specific to sheela-na-gigs (and was more intense with some sheelas than with others). Due to this metaphorical *removal of the top of my head*, sheela-na-gigs fit my general criteria for what art should do. Though they were clearly not *art* according to what has been meant by the term since the Renaissance (whereby art is understood as existing primarily for aesthetic purposes), sheela-na-gigs do *have something* and triggered in me a feeling similar to what I have had when viewing certain works of art, reading certain poems, or listening to certain music. This feeling of having 'the top of my head taken off' could be described as *punctum*, to borrow a term from Roland Barthes.[12]

In his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes contrasts a viewer's experience of *punctum* with the perception of *studium*. *Studium* is an '*average* affect, [derived] almost from a certain training' and a viewer's conscious focus.[13] For Barthes, *studium* describes a baseline *interest* in something. As Barthes flatly remarks, *studium* 'is the order of *liking*, not *loving*'.[14] *Studium* is relevant to this thesis because, as I will discuss below, I was to a large extent *pre-disposed* and 'trained' to be interested in an image like the sheela-

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12 Melrose coined the phrase 'a notional engagement with theoretical writing', which describes the manner in which I am using Barthes's ideas (and those of other philosophers and theorists): 'A notional rather than thorough engagement […] characterise[s] the uses of theoretical writing by PhD practitioner-students, where these same practitioners take creative practice as their primary focus, and use writing, on the basis of a sense of empirical fit with aspects of their own experience, to illuminate it.' Thus, Barthes's and others' accounts 'empirically fit' my sense of my own artistic practice. Melrose, "Signs of Life, Signs of Times: And If All Artists Are Semioticians?" (keynote lecture, ADSA Conference, Edith Cowan University, Curtin University and Murdoch University, WA, Australia, July 9, 2009).

13 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 26.

14 Ibid., 27.

na-gigs. It comes as no surprise based on my background and interests that I might 'like' or be drawn to such an image. Barthes also explains that *studium* is always 'coded' – it can be analyzed for or explained. Sheela-na-gigs certainly lend themselves to this sort of 'decoding' according to my own experiences and training.[15] Indeed, my persistent researching of sheela-na-gigs (discussed in Chapter Two) throughout this process arises to some extent from this trained and studied capacity.

On the other hand, when I encounter sheela-na-gigs this *studium* very quickly bleeds into or is exceeded by *punctum*. I strongly *feel* another 'element which rises from the scene, shoot[ing] out of it like an arrow, and pierc[ing] me' – the *punctum* – 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.[16] This feeling is due, I believe, to the accumulation of the sheela-na-gigs' strangenesses – their most basic contradictions and complexities that are also their defining features – a fecund and exaggerated vulva combined with a haggard sunken ribcage or missing breasts, the very fact that they are positioned above the doorways of churches, and, most importantly, the sheer impossibility of knowing just what they mean. This sense of *punctum* the sheela-na-gigs prompted in me, even more than *studium*, led me to pursue writing *poetry* about them, rather than, for example, a critical study using quantitative methods or a qualitative discourse analysis of texts that have already been written on them.

During that initial phase of the writing process, I wrote two poems on sheela-na-gigs and continued to feel a sense of *punctum* when I encountered more of the carvings.[17] I soon realized that I wanted to devote an entire collection to the subject because of their complex status and my own complex reactions to them. Though I had initially proposed a different PhD thesis, I decided to shift my focus to writing a collection on sheela-na-gigs. Reflections on these first two poems provided a starting point for my articulation of the formal and thematic concerns that would persist and transform during the next three years of writing. From this point on, I engaged in extensive reading about the carvings. Since so little has been written on sheela-na-gigs, this included compiling two archives of references to them in 19th and 20th century antiquarian publications and in *The Irish Times*, the main Irish newspaper.[18] I also undertook numerous fieldwork trips to view over sixty of the carvings. As I began to draft more poems, I realized that I needed to explore ekphrasis – poetry about visual art or architecture – and so I read extensively about this

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[15] Ibid., 51.
[16] Ibid., 26-27.
[17] These poems were 'Bucranium' (p. 15) and 'All Saints' Day' (p. 16).
[18] These archives will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Five.

topic. I also examined poems on sheela-na-gigs written by other poets. The influence of all of these research methods on my writing process will be examined in detail in this thesis.

Situating the Self

Since this poetry collection arises from my subjective experiences, observations, and reflections, and from my 'expert practitioner' status as a poet, I must situate myself in relation to the sheela-na-gigs and my motivation to write about them. This 'situating' requires that I ask from where my artistic impetus and expertise are derived. Estelle Barrett indicates that this knowledge is both explicit and tacit:

> Since creative arts research is often motivated by emotional, personal and subjective concerns, it operates not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit knowledge […] Though not explicit, ineffable or tacit knowledge is always implicated in human activity and learning (Polanyi 1969). It refers to embodied knowledge or "skill" developed and applied in practice and apprehended intuitively – a process that is readily understood by artistic researchers who recognise that the opposition between explicit and tacit knowledge is a false one (Bolt 2004).[19]

Barrett's quote demonstrates that there are a range of possible motivations for artistic work as well as the broad realms from which knowledge and expertise that contribute to making this work can be drawn. As I indicated above, the strongest impetus for my writing on the sheelas was the sense of *punctum* I felt in relation to them. However, reasons of *studium* – arising from my prior training and experiences – and my general poetic principles also influenced the poems I came to write. Therefore, this hazy opposition between the tacit and the explicit persists even in the *punctum/studium* dichotomy. Though Barthes assuredly contrasts *studium* and *punctum*, he is still unsure about where *punctum* comes from – what part of the self responds to an image in this way? Why does the self respond to this image (or aspect of an image) in particular? Barthes attempts to answer these questions when discussing a photograph of African Americans by James Van der Zee, a subject in which, from a *studium* perspective, he is 'sympathetically interested'. Ultimately, though, for him this photograph's subject:

> interests me but does not prick me. What does, strange to say, is the belt worn low by the sister (or daughter) – the "solacing Mammy" – whose arms are crossed behind her back like a schoolgirl, and above all her *strapped pumps* (Mary

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[19] Estelle Barrett, "Introduction," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 4.

Janes – why does this dated fashion touch me? I mean: to what date does it refer me?). This particular *punctum* arouses great sympathy in me…[20]

Barthes remains unable to explain *why* he feels this way and quickly moves on to another example of *punctum.* Thus, I understand *punctum* to be deeply personal in an almost genealogical sense – it is as though the images that prick us are somehow linked – whether consonantly or dissonantly – to something else in our consciousness, something highly complex and *unsayable* as such because to do so would require reconstituting the self and all its facets. As Barthes says: 'Very often the *Punctum* [sic] is a "detail," *i.e.*, a partial object. Hence, to give examples of *punctum*, is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up.*'[21] He later gestures toward this unsayability of *punctum*'s origins saying '[w]hat I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.'[22] And yet perhaps the *naming* linguistic register of theoretical writing made such a giving up of the self impossible for Barthes. Perhaps a different type of writing in relation to these images that for him have *punctum* – ekphrastic poetry or literary prose – might have productively explored the questions he poses here.

As will be examined in more detail in the chapters that follow, my ekphrastic collection *Strange Country* is, in the poetic sense, a giving of examples of the sheelas' *punctum* (from my perspective) and therefore a *giving up of myself* and what 'pricks me' in the process. This self 'contains multitudes', as I, along with Walt Whitman, believe all selves do, and as such, like Barthes, I cannot provide a full account of the *punctum* of the sheela-na-gigs here in this critical text.[23] Instead, I can only offer the poems. At the same time, there are modes of knowledge and practice that contributed to the writing of these poems that are explicitly *sayable* or *'codeable'* in an academic linguistic register for the purposes of developing and understanding my writing process in this thesis.

Firstly, I am a formally trained and professionally-recognised poet, so part of my knowledge of and expertise in poetry, both implicitly acquired and explicitly acknowledged, arises from this status. My continually expanding awareness of the poetry and poetics of other poets informs my writing practice, which includes both the poems I write and what I believe about writing (my poetics).

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[20] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43.
[21] Ibid., 43.
[22] Ibid., 51.
[23] Walt Whitman. "Song of Myself." in *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, ed. F.O. Mattheissen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 352.

Secondly, my poetics, or '[t]he compositional principles to which [I] subscribe'[24] are derived from, on the one hand, my view of the function of art in everyday life, and, on the other, what I believe art should *do* to its viewer/reader/listener. In the first instance, I see art's function as the 'enhancement [...] of the processes of everyday life' as philosopher John Dewey describes in *Art and Experience*.[25] Dewey's primary argument about the essential relationship between art and everyday experience articulates my belief in its ritual function. He further explains that:

> The hostility to the association of fine art with normal processes of living is a pathetic, even tragic, commentary on life as it is ordinarily lived. Only because that life is usually so stunted, aborted, slack, or heavy laden, is the idea entertained that there is some inherent antagonism between the process of normal living and creation and the enjoyment of works of esthetic art.[26]

Dewey's secondary argument is that the impoverishment of our lives, mainly through the instrumentalization of our bodies and minds in the service of profit, distances audiences from art and artists from audiences. Importantly, for Dewey, this distancing is not *caused* by the supposedly inaccessible or esoteric 'genre', 'content', or 'style' of that art, as some might argue. Thus, Dewey supports what I see as the need for poets to persist in the making of poems despite the fact that poetry does not currently function in a consistent and significant manner in the lives of many people.

Dewey's arguments on the alienation of audiences from art and the fact that the artist must not allow this state of affairs to shape her/his work brings me to the second instance: the kind of impact I believe art should have on the viewer/reader/listener. As discussed earlier, Barthes' concept of *punctum* describes my stance, as does Federico García Lorca's notion of the *duende*, the demon, the 'dark sounds' of art's manifestation of our shared vulnerability to the inevitability of death, as well as our defiance in the face of it. Lorca's lyrical essay on *duende* uses vivid anecdotes and figurative language to define the term:

> Years ago, an eighty-year-old woman won first prize at a dance contest in Jerez de la Frontera. She was competing against beautiful women and young girls with waists as supple as water, but all she did was raise her arms, throw back her head, and stamp her foot on the floor. In that gathering of muses and angels – beautiful forms and beautiful smiles – who could have won but her moribund duende – sweeping the ground with its wings of rusty knives.[27]

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[24] B. M. Reed, "Poetics, Western," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene and others , 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1058.

[25] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1934), 5.

[26] Ibid., 27-8.

[27] Federico García Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, ed. Christopher Maurer, trans. Norman Di Giovanni, Edwin Honig, Langston Hughes, et al (New York: New Directions, 1995), 54.

Furthermore, *duende* cannot be explained – hence Lorca's use of anecdote and metaphor – it is the *unsayable* wound of *punctum*. According to Barthes, 'the effect [of *punctum*] is certain but unlocatable, it does not find its sign, its name; it is sharp and yet lands in a vague zone of myself; it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence. Odd contradiction: a floating flash.'[28] According to Lorca:

> These "black sounds" are the mystery, the roots fastened in the mire that we all know and ignore, the fertile silt that gives us the very substance of art. "Black sounds," said the man of the Spanish people, concurring with Goethe, who defined the duende while speaking of Paganini: "A mysterious power which everyone senses and which no philosopher explains."[29]

Dewey's, Lorca's, and Barthes's ideas align with my experience of the sheela-na-gigs, objects which were in some way a part of everyday life as evidenced by their placement on churches, castles, and town walls, and which also inflict *punctum* on me as a viewer – that 'wound' or 'bruise' that coincides with the *duende*'s emphasis on vulnerability and death. This belief in a ritual purpose for art and in *punctum* and *duende* underlies both my experience of the sheela-na-gigs and my aims for my poems.

Thirdly, I have long had an interest in the notion of the 'feminine' in the arts, from male poets' invocations of the (usually female) Muse, to rebuttals by feminist poets of artistic portrayals of idealized femininity, to calls by still other poets to revive a lost mytho-poetic understanding of the 'feminine principle' in the face of a patriarchal, capitalist, technocratic system. This interest arises not only from my status as a female poet, but also from time spent during university in the United States (where I am originally from) as a student of poet Fran Quinn, a colleague and close friend of Robert Bly. During this period, I was exposed to Bly's view that the wars and environmental destruction of the modern era have been caused by society's rupture with the 'divine feminine'. Since the 1960s, Bly has committed himself to resurrecting global spiritual and poetic traditions of the Great Goddess, a project which includes his annual Conference of the Great Mother and the New Father, now in its 39th year. (I attended one of these conferences in 1999.) Bly emphasizes the need for men to realize their essential heroic masculine potential and was greatly influenced by Jungian psychology in this regard. My early exposure to the appeal of Bly's deep appreciation for myth and his attempts to ameliorate the denial of the 'feminine' in spiritual and artistic traditions on the one hand,

[28] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 52-53.
[29] Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, 49.

and his clumsy and controversial positions on actual relationships between men and women on the other, makes it unsurprising that something like the sheela-na-gigs drew me in.

Fourthly, I have formal training in feminist theory and in social scientific research methods, and I have worked as a queer and feminist activist. These experiences have led me to view with suspicion many of the arguments regarding the sheela-na-gigs' meaning, origins, and purpose, as well as to critically examine any overzealous embracing of the carvings as unequivocally demonstrating either the misogyny of the church or an essential female power worth reclaiming in contemporary society. Equally, however, my experience of *punctum* undermines these feminist 'understanding[s]' of the sheela-na-gigs just as readily as the views of Robert Bly *et al.*[30] Barthes explains that on the one hand *studium* allows a viewer, 'to approve or disapprove of […a photograph's intentions], but always to understand them…' while *punctum* 'shows no preference for morality or good taste: the *punctum* can be ill-bred.'[31] Thus, merely *reading* the sheela-na-gigs (from whatever theoretical perspective) leaves me, the viewer, at the level of the *studium*. However, my experience of *punctum* can be 'politically incorrect'. Even if the sheelas are 'problematic', I still feel the 'wound'. As I previously indicated, this bleeding over of *studium* into *punctum* when I am faced with a sheela-na-gig formed the basis of my initial impulse to choose them as a subject for a poetry collection and characterized my emerging writing process. When I encounter a sheela-na-gig, all aspects of the self outlined above – the artistic self (poet and viewer of sheela-na-gigs), the scholarly self, and the activist self are in operation simultaneously, and there is still someone else that cannot be '*giv[en] up*' except, perhaps, in the poems.

Research Question, Hypothesis, and Outcomes

From my standpoint as outlined above, the central research question for this doctorate became:

> *How will I write a collection of ekphrastic poems about the sheela-na-gig stone carvings that poetically encompass both their semiotic complexity and my complex reactions to them?*

While on the one hand I was drawn to the *studium* of the carvings due to my autobiographical experiences and my political and theoretical commitments, on the other hand, I had this experience of *punctum*, of the complex and inexplicable 'accident' of their

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[30] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.
[31] Ibid., 27-8, 43.

existence (an accident that includes many elements–mainly, their appearance, location, and semiotic complexity.[32] Rather than force this complexity to submit to the *studium*, to any of the possible 'understand[ings]' of the carvings that I might favor or choose whether on autobiographical or theoretical grounds, I instead sought to *inhabit* this complexity in my poems. My commitment to inhabiting complexity in relation to an object that so obviously invites 'approv[al]' or 'disapprov[al]' and the formulation of some sort of an 'understand[ing]' was a struggle. I hope this struggle led the poems to contain those vital 'accident[s] [that] prick' the reader.[33]

The chapters that follow give an account of the methods and processes used to write *Strange Country* and answer the above research question. They also trace expected and actual outcomes for the poetry collection and propose further applications of the poetic discoveries made during this process. Initially, I hypothesized that in order to poetically respond to sheela-na-gigs in a sufficiently complex manner as framed by my research question, the poems would make nearly exclusive use of an autobiographical poetic speaker – my 'self' who experienced the *punctum* of the carvings *and* the *studium* of the various arguments about their meaning. To this end, I planned to develop a poetic technique that I called 'associative ekphrasis', which would use the poetic 'I' as a starting point for the eruption and elucidation of associations around the carvings. I expected that those associations would arise from the 'self' I outlined above (and the ineffable self who first experienced the *punctum*) as this 'self' traveled to experience sheela-na-gigs first-hand and researched them. While I imagined I would spend some time experimenting with this 'I' by writing monologues from the perspective of a sheela-na-gig, I still expected that the overall focus of the collection would be the autobiographical poetic speaker's associations rather than descriptive or interpretative 'readings' of sheela-na-gigs as is the dominant approach by other poets to the carvings. I also planned to use anaphora and litany to access a ritualistic linguistic register appropriate to the subject matter and to employ repeated motific words and phrases within poems and across the collection in order to introduce and develop thematic and associative material. I expected that my research and fieldwork would influence the writing indirectly and associatively as I thought the poetic persona would filter all of the experiences and research into poems.

In the end, as I will show throughout this poetics, the poetic 'I' remained the focus of my writing process, but with far different formal results than I originally

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[32] Ibid., 27.
[33] Ibid., 26-27.

expected. Instead of a collection comprised primarily of first-person poems, or even monologues and dialogues, I mainly wrote poems comprised of found text from my archival and field research. While I did use anaphora and litany and repeated motifs as planned, this use of found text foregrounds the multi-vocality and materiality of my research rather than a sense of a coherent poetic persona. Thus, instead of *indirectly* influencing the development of poems through the associational capacity of a clearly defined poetic speaker, the very material of the archival and field research was used to *make poems*. I suggest that this formal shift was due to the fact that I experienced *punctum* when encountering the archival text, not just when viewing sheela-na-gigs.[34] Therefore, I believe I attained the associational and the atmospheric goals that I set out to achieve at the beginning, but through far different formal techniques than expected.

Outline of the Poetics

In Chapter Two, I examine the scholarly reading I have done on sheela-na-gigs. This research formed a part of my tacit knowledge and influenced my poetic encounters with the archival and fieldwork aspects of the research, though it is not necessarily systematically evident in the finished collection. This chapter will also outline the thematic frameworks borrowed from critical theory and philosophy that I had in mind throughout the writing process.

In Chapter Three, I review the literature on ekphrasis from a practitioner's perspective. The purpose of my research into ekphrasis was to write ekphrastic poems of my own, rather than contribute to literary criticism on that subject. As such, this literature review is 'notional' rather than exhaustive and refers only to terminology and theoretical perspectives that I found useful to describe my writing process and decision-making.[35]

Chapter Four analyzes the ekphrastic approaches of poets who have previously written on sheela-na-gigs. My seeking out of these poems and subsequent analysis of them in the early stages of writing was vital to my creative process and offered me a more definitive framework with which to articulate my nascent goals for my poems and to later reflect upon and describe what I was writing.

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[34] Ibid., 27.
[35] Melrose, "Signs of Life, Signs of Times: And If All Artists Are Semioticians?."

Chapter Five is a detailed examination my poetic methods and the discoveries I made while writing *Strange Country*. At times in this chapter, I employ figurative language to illuminate my attitudes to the material before, during, and after the writing process.

Chapter Six discusses the significance of my findings within broader poetic and artistic contexts. It draws upon the insights examined in Chapter Five in order to build theory for future poetry writing by myself and other poets.

CHAPTER 2
Inhabiting the Complexity: Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives
on Sheela-na-gigs

Chapter One explained that when I began writing the collection *Strange Country*, I was determined to *inhabit* the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs despite the fact that these objects so immediately invite 'approv[al]' or 'disapprov[al]' and seem to beg for some sort of an 'understand[ing]' or explanation.[1] I decided to seek out and read as many scholarly texts on sheela-na-gigs as possible because of my recognition that *studium* bleeds into the *punctum*, and that tacit and explicit knowledges are not cleanly divided from each other. Furthermore, I noted that the sheelas' *punctum* is quite possibly derived from somewhere in my 'self' that might resonate with or be made clearer by images or ideas present elsewhere. At the very least, these texts would give me a sense of those aspects of the carvings' complexity that *had* been stated. I read all extant books and articles on sheela-na-gigs with the exception of brief mentions of them in antiquarian and archaeological articles and travelogues from the 19th and early 20th centuries for which I relied upon Barbara Freitag's excellent literature review.[2] (I later compiled these early sources into an archive that was used directly in the collection, which will be explored in Chapter Five.) As will be shown below, there are not many sources on the subject, and those that do exist are methodologically or theoretically problematic from an empirical or feminist perspective. Furthermore, though the writers of these texts were interested in sheela-na-gigs and might even have felt a sense of *punctum* when encountering them, the goal of their texts is empirical – to argue in favor of particular origins, dating, or purpose. While I did encounter these texts as arguments rather than as artworks, I also immersed myself in their complexities and contradictions – in their status as 'stories' about sheela-na-gigs, albeit dryly told.

This practice of immersion in a topic, particularly in the early phases of writing, is not uncommon, nor is an obsessive return of writers to subjects or themes with which they are in some way familiar. In this sense, I would argue that there is an element of *studium*, of study and training previously undertaken, of interest, and of 'liking rather than loving' that informs the writing process. In the case of ekphrastic writing, *studium* informs an 'expert practitioner' encounter with an artwork to which s/he wishes to respond. That

[1] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27-8.
[2] Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma.*

practitioner must move from *feeling* to *making*, which requires an operation and acquisition of both explicit and tacit knowledge. This bleeding over of *punctum* into *studium* in the creative process is shown by poet David Kinloch's account of writing ekphrastic poems on the paintings of Scottish and French painters. His choice of subject drew upon both his already acquired academic knowledge of Franco-Scottish relations and his personal response to the visual arts in general and to these paintings specifically.[3] This mode of activity in *making* that combines *studium* and *punctum* is that of the artist as *bricoleur*. *Bricolage* describes an artist's taking of things from wherever, no matter what, in order to make an artwork.

The term *bricolage* is commonly used to describe this aspect of the artistic process and has previously been applied to social scientific research that borrows from various disciplines and frameworks. Robyn Stewart explains:

> The bricoleur appropriates available methods, strategies and empirical materials or invents or pieces together new tools as necessary. The choice of research practices depends upon the questions asked. The questions depend on their context, what is available in that context, and what the researcher can do in that setting. It is not easy being a bricoleur. A bricoleur works within and between competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms (and is familiar with these).[4]

In my own case, while immersion in the empirical perspectives and paradigms of the texts on sheela-na-gigs could seem counterintuitive in the face of my emphasis on their *punctum/duende* and their unsayability, to *avoid* reading everything I could on sheela-na-gigs would have seemed to me, as a bricoleur-poet, to be an absurd restriction of my natural impulse to gather. This restriction would be tantamount to a sculptor driving by potential raw materials on the side of the road. Indeed, a bricoleur-artist cannot remain forever in the state of experiencing *punctum* or *duende* – if she wishes to in some way respond to/capture/express this experience, paint must be mixed, pencils sharpened, books read. In other words, something *must be done*, which includes gathering materials – even those that seem like they might not 'work'. In the case of this collection, I felt I had to read deeply on sheela-na-gigs and on ekphrasis, (the type of writing I would be undertaking, a topic which will be discussed in the next chapter).

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[3] David Kinloch, "The Poet in the Art Gallery: Accounting for Ekphrasis," *International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 7, no. 1 (2010), 19-29. doi:10.1080/14790720903469854.

[4] Robyn Stewart, "Practice vs Praxis: Construction Models for Practitioner-Based Research," *Text* 5, no. 2 (October 2001). http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/.

Moreover, these texts on sheela-na-gigs do demonstrate some aspects of the semiotic complexity that initially triggered me to write about them. Reading them formed a part of my growing knowledge of the carvings and influenced my poetic encounters with the archival and fieldwork contexts. More specifically, having an understanding of the arguments and theories about the sheela-na-gigs was vital to my initial development and ultimate infrequent use of a clearly delineated poetic 'I'. Art historian Martha Easton has demonstrated how present-day assumptions about medieval sexuality affect viewers' interpretations of the sheela-na-gigs and other medieval erotic art:

> How exactly the gaping vaginal holes of the sheela-na-gigs are to be interpreted depends at least in part on the viewer. Is it an unveiling of that which usually remains hidden, for reasons perhaps warningly apotropaic? A passive invitation to penetration? A voracious hell-mouth entrance hungry to consume? A benign or even magical reproductive exit? The ultimate display of girl power? From the distaste of the antiquarians to the embrace of some feminists, without a clear understanding of the way the sheela-na-gigs functioned in their original context, we are forced at least partially to construct the context ourselves, and in doing so, perhaps we reveal more about ourselves and our own predilections than we do about the subjects of our study.[5]

In this manner, what we *think* we know about the sheela-na-gigs demonstrates our biases because so little actually can be known. As a poet rather than a social scientist or art historian, instead of viewing this epistemological crisis as a call for new empirical data or historical research to contribute to a discovery of their 'true' meaning, I see it as an irresistible invitation to interact artistically with the unsayable, the ineffable, in other words to wrestle with the sheela-na-gigs' *duende*. It is not that I completely reject interpretations of the sheelas as, for example, fertility figures or symbols of female empowerment; instead, I am stimulated not only by the fact that these meanings are impossible to support incontrovertibly due to insufficient evidence, but also that these meanings are both highly seductive and problematic *and* that there are other semiotic possibilities.

In short, I am fascinated by the sheer variation in what others *believe they see* in the carvings, what is at stake in these beliefs, and the lengths they have gone to sustain them. This fascination is not merely on the textual level – throughout the fieldwork I conducted I was interested in what people I met *said* about sheelas and about maintaining their own interpretations of them. Thus, throughout the collection *Strange Country* and this thesis, there is a refusal on my part to settle on a meaning for the sheelas because not

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5 Martha Easton, "'Was it Good for You, Too?' Medieval Erotic Art and its Audiences," *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* (September 2008).
http://differentvisions.org/issue1PDFs/Easton.pdf.

only is such settling impossible, it also would mean a relinquishing of the *punctum* and *duende* I experienced and that I hope to create in the poems.

In order to provide the reader of this thesis with a sense of the available textual raw materials used to develop the collection, in the first section of this chapter I draw upon these sources to give a basic description of sheela-na-gigs and briefly overview the range of available scholarly viewpoints on their meaning, origin, and dating. I complied this literature review for myself during the writing process, not with the intention of deciding upon a meaning, but in order to immerse myself in available ideas on sheela-na-gigs and form a basis of knowledge them from which I could draw during the writing process. In the second section, I overview the arguments from books and articles written since the mid-20th century and refer to some poems from the collection that engage with these ideas. In the third section, I outline the theoretical/thematic frameworks that were most evident and operative throughout my process of engaging with sheela-na-gigs and the literature on them.

What is a sheela-na-gig?

Sheela-na-gigs are stone carvings of naked female figures that prominently depict the vulva and range in height from nine to 90 cm.[6] They are found on medieval churches, castles, wells, and town walls with over 100 carvings found in Ireland and around 35 found in England, Scotland, and Wales.[7] The display of the vulva is a characteristic feature of the statues, and the genitals are generally exaggerated in size or position, even to the point of anatomical incorrectness. They are often portrayed in the act of pulling open the labia or splaying the legs. The rest of the body is often emaciated or haggard, with sagging, small, or missing breasts (though some have more than two nipples). Sheela-na-gigs can have jutting ribs and bared teeth. They are generally bald or have little hair (though some do have hair (plaited in a few cases), caps or headdresses). Their brows and foreheads can be deeply furrowed. Some have chevron-shaped striations on their faces like wrinkles or tattoos. In addition to their exaggerated vulvas, sheela-na-gigs usually have disproportionately large heads, eyes, and ears, and their legs, arms, and torsos are often understated or not visible. Some sheela-na-gigs been broken or

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[6] Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma.* In addition to contributing her own theory of the origin and purpose of the carvings, Freitag has undertaken the most comprehensive and detailed review of the literature on sheela-na-gigs, and for that reason I will draw heavily on her book to provide background information.

[7] Ibid. Freitag points out that several sheela-na-gigs have been dug up or found in rivers, which makes their original location impossible to determine.

completely hacked away, and others have been found in fields or riverbeds or hidden in the masonry of town walls or buildings, suggesting that at some point there were attempts to get rid of them or conceal them.

The meaning, dating, and origins of the sheela-na-gig are disputed. Most scholars suggest that they were carved between 1000-1500 A.D (the medieval period). However, dating is difficult to pinpoint because most of them are crafted from different materials than those forming the structures on which they are found. Furthermore, many sheela-na-gigs are found *ex situ* (having been buried in fields or dumped in riverbeds). No written records from the medieval period mention the sheela-na-gigs by name. Scholars often focus on the uncrafted appearance of the carvings, arguing that their 'crude realism and poor workmanship' is suggestive of a folk art tradition[8] and that though some seem to be more:

> finely carved than others […] there is a sense of determination in their multifarious designs […] indicating that the people who carved them were well-versed in that long forgotten symbolic language which probably determined their extraordinary and bizarre forms.[9]

During my own visits to the National Museum of Ireland and the British Museum, I have noted that the style of the carvings differs dramatically from Irish religious art of the suggested time period. Sheelas are also stylistically different from earlier Romanesque stone figures that are thought to be their originating models.[10] Ultimately, when scholars put forward a possible date, this can be confounded by the contradictory style in which they are carved. Likewise, focusing on style can undermine any view on dating.

The first written records of sheela-na-gigs occur in the 17th century in Ireland when provincial statutes and regulations declared that they must be hidden or destroyed. There are three mentions of what are thought to be sheela-na-gigs in archival research included in *The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (published in 1981). In 1631, Tuam's parish priests were instructed to destroy or hide the *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae*. In 1676 in Ossory, a Diocesan regulation ordered the burning of such objects, which was also being ordered in Waterford (suggesting the possibility of wooden sheela-na-gigs). In the same year in the diocese of Kilmore, actual women called *gierador* were to be kept from receiving the sacraments. The meaning of gierador is difficult to

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[8] Ibid., 1.
[9] Joanne McMahon and Jack Roberts, *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Ireland and Britain: The Divine Hag of the Christian Celts, an Illustrated Guide* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2001), 12.
[10] Julian Chapius, "Romanesque Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rmsq/hd_rmsq.htm (accessed March 30, 2013).

determine, though it has been taken in context to mean promiscuous women or women who expose themselves.[11]

Sheela-na-gigs were not written about *by name* until 1840 in the Irish commission of the English Ordnance survey in which Thomas O'Conor reports a figure on Kiltinan church in Co. Tipperary. In the 1820s, the survey mapped Ireland county by county, including cartographic details and 'history, place names, architectural remains and other cultural artefacts'.[12] O'Conor described a sheela-na-gig as: 'an ill excuted [*sic*] piece of sculpture' and said it either came from a nearby castle or 'the wantonness of some loose mind'.[13] Another surveyor, John O'Donovan, agreed with O'Conor's judgment. They both collected local stories about the figure, including its name, *Síle Ni Ghig*. Barbara Freitag speculates that once O'Conor mentioned the first sheela, other sheelas began to be recorded in the Ordnance survey. (Previous sheelas had likely already been *noticed* but not named by other surveyors, perhaps for prudish reasons.)

Following this entry into the written record (by name), the sheela-na-gigs capture the attention of 19th-century antiquarians, amateur hobbyists participating in societies or clubs who were the precursors to modern archaeologists. In 1842, German geographer and historian Johann Georg Kohl collected stories from local people that support the notion of the *gierador* mentioned in the Diocesan regulations cited above. (It is important to note that the above-mentioned diocesan regulations were not interpreted as referring to sheela-na-gigs until the 20th century.) Kohl's informants indicated that the statues were intended to avert the Evil Eye and that there were certain *actual* women who used the power of genital exposure for this purpose and were called *Shila na Gigh*, a name which was apparently transferred to the statues.

During the second half of the 19th century, antiquarians increasingly documented and debated the sheela-na-gigs' origins, purposes, and folk histories at the Royal Irish Academy and in related publications. By 1894, a list of known sheela figures appears in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*.[14] These antiquarians mapped the sheela-na-gigs' locations and attributed their origins to paganism and ancient pre-Christian fertility worship and to early Irish Christianity, which they differentiated from Roman

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[11] The source for all information in this paragraph is: Anthony Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[12] Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs*, 20. Freitag believes that Ian Webber-Smith was referring to sheela-na-gigs in 1838 when arguing that the round towers of Ireland were symbols of phallic power similar to Eastern obelisks. He states that their counterpart was 'the female figures carved on some of the old Irish churches'.

[13] Ibid., 16.

[14] McMahon and Roberts, *The Sheela-na-Gigs*, 16.

Christianity.[15] These early sheela experts compared the carvings to apotropaic and sexual cult artefacts and practices from antiquity and from contemporary Africa. That time period and continent were also being documented by colonial administrations and antiquarians at the time.[16]

These parallels drawn between Irish sheela-na-gigs and antiquities (Greek, Roman, Egyptian) and the then-contemporary cultural practices in British 'possessions' in the Middle East, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent were made possible by the stretch of British rule across the globe and the Empire's systematic investigations (e.g. Ordnance surveys), nascent academic disciplines (anthropology and archaeology), and learned and powerful hobbyists (antiquarians). Interestingly, the Ordnance Survey conducted on the island of Britain itself (comprising England, Scotland, Wales) focused only on creating maps and *did not* chronicle local histories or objects and sites of architectural or archaeological significance. Virtually no writings of the time refer to English, Welsh, or Scottish sheela-na-gigs or seek to determine their significance.[17] Perhaps Britain thought it already knew its significant objects and sites, or was not able to sufficiently objectify itself in order to discover the 'Otherness' within?

The varying claims (and silences) about the origins and purposes of sheela-na-gigs demonstrate continuing debates regarding the social and cultural history and geographical boundaries of Ireland and Britain – in particular, the view of the Church and Western society regarding the status of women; the relationship of humans to nature; competing narratives regarding past and ongoing encounters between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon cultural traditions (including the disputes over the meanings of 'Christian', 'pagan', 'Celtic', and 'Anglo-Saxon'); and, the effect of the Reformation on Britain and Ireland (which could possibly be why there are so few sheelas in Britain and in the counties in six of the counties in the province of Ulster where the project of Protestant 'plantation' was most successful).

To return to my overview of written documentation of the sheelas in the 1880's, W.F. Wakeman asserts that like medieval gargoyles on Continental churches, sheela-na-gigs could have been intended to warn churchgoers against lust and other sins. (This same speculation had been forwarded by O'Conor 50 years prior.) There is no other theory regarding the sheela-na-gigs discussed during this period. As Freitag indicates, this

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[15] According to Freitag, Clibborn argues that early Irish Christianity originated in the gnostic symbolism of northern Africa and the Middle East. Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs*, 20.
[16] Ibid., 19-24.
[17] Ibid., 24.

argument that, 'Sheelas were images of Lust [and warnings against it] would overwhelmingly dominate scholarly debate 100 years later' in the writings of Jørgen Andersen, Anthony Weir and James Jerman, and ultimately, in the more recent texts written by museum curators.'[18]

In the intervening years before Andersen's landmark study of 1977, English antiquarians in the 1930's recorded the locations and related folk legends of the sheela-na-gigs in Ireland, and by this point, Britain. They concentrated their comparative efforts not in the direction of Africa or the 'Near' East, but instead toward northern Europe, considering the mythic, linguistic, and cultural inheritance of the Britons, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Scandinavians, Celts and Normans and drawing connections with the Norse goddess Freya (Brian Branston), the universal category of mother goddesses (Egyptologist Margaret Murray), a pagan symbol of fertility (Edith Guest), and a Celtic goddess (Marcus Keane and Robert MacAlister).[19] In particular, Vivian Mercier and Anne Ross turn to Celtic (specifically Irish) myths and sagas, drawing upon the transformative triple goddess and hag traditions found in sources such as *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* (The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel)[20] in which the king encounters a large-mouthed hag exposing her vulva.[21]

Review of Recent Literature on Sheela-na-gigs

The previous section summarized definitions of the sheela-na-gigs according to 19th and early 20th century writers. Since 1977, book-length studies and scholarly articles and book chapters on sheela-na-gigs have been written from various disciplinary perspectives, including art history, archaeology, rhetoric, and interdisciplinary studies. As indicated in Chapter One, encountering these arguments and methods was vital to my initial plans for the collection's use of a clearly-defined poetic 'I' who associatively encounters the sheela-na-gigs themselves and the texts written on them. In the early stages of writing, I expected to critique more directly some of these books' arguments using this associative poetic persona. Though this expectation was not entirely realised, these books nevertheless formed the basis of my 'training' on the sheela-na-gigs and most certainly influenced creative decisions I made when writing the collection (as will be discussed in Chapter Five). Below I offer an overview of the recent texts on sheela-na-

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[18] Ibid., 23.
[19] Ibid., 30-31.
[20] *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* is one of the pre-Christian Irish sagas and part of the Ulster Cycle. It survives in Old and Middle Irish.
[21] Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs*, 32-33.

gigs and make reference to poems in the collection that engage with their specific arguments. (Please note that in the interest of space I refer to only *a selection* of relevant poems from the collection that address these ideas.)

Scholars in the late 20th and early 21st century suggest that sheela-na-gigs are, variously: warnings against lust and sin[22]; fertility charms that aid in conception and childbirth[23]; icons of female power[24]; emblems of the power of nature to give and take life[25]; protective talismans against the evil eye[26]; or symbols of sovereignty over land and nation[27]. For some, the liminal location of sheelas above doorways or windows and their sometimes concealed placement[28] indicates that they were intended to ward off evil (an apotropaic function) or to facilitate passage from one state to another (life to death, man to king, or general spiritual transformation). More recently, scholars provide more nuanced readings of the carvings that attempt to take into account their medieval context and developments in critical theory (in particular feminist theory).[29]

The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles by art historian Jørgen Andersen (published in 1977) is the first book-length study of sheela-na-gigs and is still considered one of the authorities on the subject.[30] Though Andersen's book brings together several strands of thought on the carvings' potential origins and meanings, later researchers tend to singularly select Andersen's argument for a Romanesque origin. This view links sheela-na-gigs to exhibitionist gargoyles and figures found on Continental Churches. Andersen suggests that traveling stonemasons brought these motifs to England and Ireland where they were transformed through an amalgamation of Norman, Celtic, and pagan influences into the solitary sheela-na-gig. According to Andersen, the sheela thereby began to take on two specific meanings – to inspire the rejection of carnality and to serve an apotropaic function.

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[22] Jørgen Andersen. *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1977); Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*.

[23] Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs*.

[24] Georgia Rhoades, "Decoding the Sheela-na-Gig," *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 167-195 (http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.mdx.ac.uk /pqdweb?did=0000002232063191&Fmt=3&cl ientId=43168& RQT=309&VName=PQD).

[25] Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs*; Concannon, *Sacred Whore*.

[26] Concannon, *Sacred Whore*; MacMahon and Roberts, *Sheela-na-Gigs*.

[27] Catherine Karkov, "Sheela-Na-Gigs and Other Unruly Women: Images of Land and Gender in Medieval Ireland," in *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context*, ed. Colum Hourihane (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2001), 313-331; Concannon, *Sacred Whore*; MacMahon and Roberts, *Sheela-na-Gigs*.

[28] Some sheela-na-gigs are found in the 'occluded' position, meaning they are inserted on their sides or very high up making them difficult to discern (e.g., those occluded sheelas found at the Rock of Cashel and Doon Castle).

[29] Easton, "Medieval Erotic Art and its Audiences"; Theresa C. Oakley, *Lifting the Veil: A New Study of the Sheela-Na-Gigs of Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2009); Rhoades, "Decoding the Sheela-na-Gig."

[30] Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall*.

Andersen's Romanesque thesis is prevalent in the brief text found in Stella Cherry's guide for the National Museum of Ireland (1992).[31] Likewise, Eamonn Kelly's National Museum guide (1996) also emphasizes contact with the Romanesque style, but this time through the 'Anglo-Norman' invasion.[32] He cites Cormac's chapel at Cashel (circa 1134) as the first example of this influence, a site which also contains a sheela-na-gig. Along with Andersen, Kelly credits the pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela for bringing to Ireland moral attitudes and depictions of female genitalia meant to warn against lust. He concludes that the meanings of the sheela-na-gig shifted from a warning against lust to a general apotropaic purpose before finally morphing into more recent positive interpretations:

> Contemporary interest tends to lay stress on the positive aspects of female sexuality, and, in particular, on the reproductive function of the classical models out of which the sheela-na-gigs arose than was the case with the exhibitionist figures carved in European male-dominated feudal society. In the context of Ireland, this process of redefinition has been on-going since the figures were first introduced during the twelfth century.[33]

Unsurprisingly, as representatives of the National Museum of Ireland, which holds over 15 sheela-na-gigs, including some exhibited with permission in county museums and libraries outside Dublin, Cherry's and Kelly's concurrence with Andersen has influenced the captions on sheela-na-gigs that I have noted around Ireland.[34]

In *Strange Country*, I engage with Andersen's arguments in several poems. For example, in 'All Saint's Day' the apotropaic function of the sheela-na-gig is complicated. The poem questions who the sheela-na-gig is protecting and from what, as well as whether this sort of protection is even possible. In 'Doon Castle', the sheela 'stands confident on her stage / with pert breasts and a brasser's eyes', thereby undermining the thesis that she is definitively warning viewers *against* lust (lines 8-9). This poem also emphasizes time, thus underscoring the possibility that what sheelas seem to mean now might be different from what they were originally intended to evoke. The perspective

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[31] Stella Cherry, *A Guide to Sheela-na-Gigs* (Dublin: National Museum of Ireland, 1992).
[32] In his expansive history of Ireland Bartlett highlights the morphing of the name used for the invaders of Ireland in 1169 A.D. Citing primary source texts in which these people described *themselves* as English (*Engleis, Angli*), he argues that even though they had blood ties to the Norman invaders of England, they saw themselves as English. He suggests that, 'Only in the late nineteenth century, and largely on grounds of political sensitivity, was the identity of the English invaders fudged by these non-historical terms [Anglo-Norman, Norman, Cambro-Norman].' Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 34.
[33] Kelly, *Sheela-na-gigs*, 46.
[34] For examples of such captions see: Clare County Museum, Ennis; Millmount Museum, Drogheda; Cavan County Museum, Ballyjamesduff; the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin; and the Hunt Museum, Limerick.

that the sheela-na-gigs' attributes or indeed the general attributes of 'the feminine' can be positively recuperated for feminist ends is troubled in 'Bucranium' when the speaker must confront the actualities of birth control in the face of a desire for a ritualized and symbolic significance for female reproductive capacity.

In *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (published in 1999), Anthony Weir and James Jerman focus on Andersen's Romanesque theory and examine a wider corpus of exhibitionist figures. They critique Andersen's ambivalence, insisting on a Continental French origin and a pedagogical function for the carvings, believing them to be unequivocal warnings against lust:

> We suggest in this book that the function of these sexual exhibitionists is not erotic but rather the reverse, that these extraordinarily frank carvings were more probably an element in the medieval Church's campaign against immorality, and that they were not intended to inflame the passions but rather to allay them.[35]

They assert that sheela-na-gigs exemplify the misogyny of the Church and its conviction that 'Woman' is the source of the Fall. I ironically evoke this perspective in 'Rite' (p. 33) using found text from a variety of archival sources (a technique which will be explored in detail in Chapter Five):

> and so everywhere woman
> is depicted as subject
> to atrocious punishments
> monsters toads tortoises snakes
> bite her breasts
> gnaw her nether regions
> anyone for celebrity sheela-na-gigs?
>
> (section IV)

In *The Divine Hag of the Christian Celts: An Illustrated Guide of the Sheela-na-gigs of Britain and Ireland* (published in 2001), Joanne MacMahon and Jack Roberts emphasize an apotropaic meaning and native Irish origin and argue that sheelas had a ritual function. They refer to ancient Irish mythology that states that in order to secure kingship a man must marry the goddess of the land who is often depicted as a hag (*cailleach* in the Irish language) who will later transform into a beautiful woman. They also point to examples of sheela-na-gigs found on undated standing stones at ancient sites (on the hill of Tara, site of the ancient kings of Ireland) and at Stepaside, Knockarley, and Swords in order to suggest a pre-Romanesque origin (prior to the 12th century).[36] MacMahon and Roberts

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[35] Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, 11.
[36] MacMahon and Roberts, *Sheela-na-Gigs*, 45-47.

underscore the overall lack of excavations at Tara and these other sites, which would make it much easier to determine a date range for the surrounding artefacts and sheela-na-gigs. Furthermore, they connect sheela-na-gigs to figures carved in a similar style found in Ireland and Britain, which are dated from the 9th to the 11th centuries.[37] Like MacMahon and Roberts and Margaret Murray before them, in her book *The Living Goddesses*, archaeologist Marija Gimbutas makes brief reference to sheela-na-gigs, connecting them to 'frog goddess' imagery dating to the Neolithic (circa 7,000/6,000-3,000 B.C.) and onward to the Bronze and Iron Ages (circa 2,500 B.C. to 500 B.C.).[38] MacMahon and Roberts's critique of the argument for Romanesque origins and Gimbutas's ancient comparison appealed to me because they suggest further semiotic complexity. In a similar manner, in 'In Bodies as in Gods' (p. 35) I reference religious iconographies related to the sheela-na-gigs: the simultaneously phallic and vulva-like Hindu Shiva Linga paintings of Rajasthan and Christian mystic Hildegard von Bingen's illumination 'The Universe in the Shape of an Egg' that resembles both an egg and a vulva.

In her chapter, 'Sheela-na-gigs and Other Unruly Women: Images of Land and Gender in Medieval Ireland' (published in the book *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context* in 2001), art historian Catherine Karkov traces the shifting meanings of the sheela-na-gig from Ireland's colonial past to the present-day, providing context from primary source documents. She begins with the historical figure Derbforgaill, who has acted in Irish lore – both in ancient texts and in a 20th century play by Lady Gregory – as the scapegoat for the Anglo-Norman (Old English)[39] invasion due to her betrayal of her husband, O'Rourke, King of Breffney. Derbforgaill also happens to have provided money to finish the nun's church at Clonmacnoise in 1167, which has one of the famous Romanesque examples of what is thought to be a sheela-na-gig. Karkov points out that the figure is 'much closer to its French acrobatic models than are the rest of the Irish sculptures' which is why it is sometimes considered not be a sheela-na-gig at all, or – for those who believe in a Romanesque origin – to be one of the first examples.[40] Karkov goes on to chronicle anti-Irish sentiment in Rome and in England (particularly in relation to Irish legal and cultural

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[37] Ibid., 48-49.
[38] Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 255-256.
[39] Karkov uses 'Anglo-Norman' in her chapter.
[40] Karkov, "Sheela-na-Gigs and Other Unruly Women," 315.

practices regarding gender and sexuality as outlined in the Brehon laws).[41] She suggests sheela-na-gigs could demonstrate these negative attitudes and might be a product of Anglo-Norman (Old English) propaganda that sought to diminish Irish sovereignty. Karkov also relates sheela-na-gigs to hag characters found in the Irish sagas, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley')[42] and *Da Derga's Hostel*, before providing a more generalized reading of the sheela's combination of attributes that she reads as symbolizing the cycle of life and death. The essay ends with a Freudian interpretation that links the sheelas to the notion of *umheimlich*, the uncanny, or literally, unhomeliness: '[…] they are also typical of our interest in (or fear of) the *umheimlich*, the 'entrance to the former *Heim* of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning'. I grapple with Karkov's discussion of the sheela's dual meaning and her allusion to *umheimlich* in 'Strange Country' (p. 36):

> At last or for once I entertain the thought
> that maybe women wanted it:
>
> to be the earth to which all bodies
> are returned by interment.
> That persistent uttering of the womb-tomb
> scenario…
>
> (lines 9-13)

Barbara Freitag's *Sheila-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma* (published in 2004) argues that sheela-na-gigs portray stages of birth and that they are the purview of 'ordinary people and rural traditions' related to women's childbirth practices.[43] Unlike all other writers on the subject whose studies are drawn from the vantages of the history of art and architecture, Church ideology, Irish myths and sagas, or modern psychology, Freitag (an intercultural studies professor) situates the sheela-na-gigs in the context of medieval living conditions. She focuses in particular on the dangers faced by women of the period during pregnancy and childbirth and connects sheela-na-gigs to other examples of European birth charms – birthing stones, girdles, chants, and sacred midwives. She suggests that sheelas were placed on churches in order to bring women into the Church and cites European practices of the period by which the women had to go to the Church to obtain birth charms and access previously non-Christian birthing practices and rituals.

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[41] The Brehon laws were the Irish laws dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries that lasted in some form until the consolidation of English rule in the 17th century.

[42] The pre-Christian legend *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is part of the Ulster Cycle of Irish sagas and is set in the 1st century A.D. Ireland. It survives in three manuscripts from the 12th and later centuries written in Old, Middle and Early Modern Irish.

[43] Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs*, 68.

Though she critiques Andersen's notion that sheela-na-gigs are apotropaic symbols, suggesting it is silly to believe that an exposed vulva would scare away the devil or an army, she wholeheartedly accepts the utility of sheela-na-gigs and these charms in easing childbirth. Ultimately, regardless of the strength of her own theory, Freitag has contributed enormously to scholarship on sheela-na-gigs due to her comprehensive review of the literature and her systematic mapping, describing, and measuring of sheela-na-gigs in Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. I indirectly reference Freitag's central argument that the sheelas are birth charms throughout the collection in poems such as in 'Birthing Stone' (p. 24) and 'Strange Country' (p. 36).

In *The Sacred Whore: Sheela, Goddess of the Celts* (published in 2005), Maureen Concannon, a practicing psychologist, brings together the varying interpretations of sheelas with the aim of promoting a contemporary goddess-centred spirituality. She argues for the psychological and therapeutic significance of the carvings, asserting that the sheelas signal a need for individuals and society to 'rebalance' with the feminine principle in order to avoid environmental, psychological, and cultural destruction, a position not unlike that held by some cultural feminists and one that is also shared by Robert Bly and Robert Graves.[44] Concannon's book is the only sheela-related text available in the bookshop of the visitor's centre at Newgrange, a significant Neolithic site in Ireland, which could possibly demonstrate the commercial appeal of her contemporary self-help approach in contrast to Freitag's more academic undertaking. The collection is imbued with a complex attitude toward this perspective, as in 'Strange Country' (p. 36), 'All Saint's Day' (p. 16), 'Bucranium' (p. 15), and 'Birthing Stone' (p. 24).

Martha Easton includes sheela-na-gigs in her article on sexual imagery in medieval art entitled '"Was it Good for You, Too?" Medieval Erotic Art and Its Audiences' (published in 2008). She bases her interpretation of the sheelas and other examples of medieval erotic art on a framework that problematizes present-day understandings of medieval sexuality:

> In spite of the prevalence of sexual imagery in medieval art, both religious and secular, a misconception predominates, certainly in the general public and to some extent even among scholars, that Christian morality perhaps prudishly constrained medieval people.

Easton offers an overview of the previous literature on sheela-na-gigs from this critical perspective, underscoring both the impossibility of knowing their origin and meaning

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[44] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

and the potential significance of interpretive trends, trends which, as she suggests at the end of her section on the sheela, 'reveal more about ourselves and our own predilections than […] about the objects of our study.' Easton does not forward a definitive argument of her own; instead, she briefly analyzes some previous interpretations of sheelas for what their discourses demonstrate about the investments of those scholars doing the interpreting. Easton's approach reflects my own desire to embrace the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs and is most evident in the collection's numerous found poems (such as 'From the Museum Director' (p. 13), 'From a Feminist' (p. 12), 'Rite' (p. 33), and the vulva-shaped visual poems) in which I extract voices from archival text on the carvings in order to demonstrate their perspectives.

Theresa C. Oakley's book *Lifting the Veil: A New Study of the Sheela-Na-Gigs of Britain and Ireland* (published in 2009) overviews the literature on sheela-na-gigs and provides new empirical data on their characteristics. This data includes the percentages of frequency and variation of various features, including the presence of hair, striation marks on the ribs, and the presence and shape of the breasts. Oakley argues that prior theories of their meaning 'occlud[e] the deeper significance of the image, whose ambiguity and danger is more suggestive of a herald of the sacred or otherworldly icon.'[45] Oakley draws on theories of the sacred in relation to ambiguity, liminality, the monstrous, the apotropaic, and the grotesque. She overviews numerous examples of such concepts in classical and European thought and in the archaeological record. However, she does not coherently synthesize these disparate sources into an argument *specifically* about the sheela-na-gigs. Nevertheless, the sheer range of material that she brings together in the book does show that previous unitary interpretations of sheela-na-gigs as warnings against lust or a fertility figures are quite possibly oversimplifications. As with Easton's complicating of unitary, chronocentric interpretations of the sheela-na-gigs, Oakley's book provided me with further support for my decision to engage directly with the archival text by writing found poems.

In her article, 'Decoding the Sheela-na-gig' (published in 2010), Georgia Rhoades, a rhetorician, reviews the literature on sheela-na-gigs and connects the figures to practices of 'skirt-raising' or 'display' of the genitals or breasts in folklore, literature and contemporary activism in Irish and other cultural contexts. Examples from Irish literature include Queen Mebh scaring away her enemies by exposing herself and a section of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley') in which 150 women reveal

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[45] Oakley, *A New Study of the Sheela-Na-Gigs*.

themselves to a warrior in order to counter his rage. She also refers to Marija Gimbutas and Jørgen Andersen who both link sheela-na-gigs to skirt raising practices.[46] Rhoades concludes with an analysis of contemporary examples of women using exposure as a tool of protection or protest.[47] Rhoades avoids an essentialist argument that the vulva itself has particular magical powers, instead arguing that 'display as a statement of rejection or protest appears in more than one culture as a more effective rhetorical strategy than words'.[48] She understands sheela-na-gigs in this context, arguing that 'contemporary feminist scholarship is more likely to regard sheelas as empowering female figures through shifting roles in the rhetorical relationships between the figure as agent and decoder.' In 'All Saints' Day' (p. 16), I suggest that the power of skirt-raising might have already been undermined by contemporary attitudes towards women's bodies and that a similar negative attitude could have led to the destruction of sheela-na-gigs in the recent and more distant past:

> Has a flashed cunt quelled the pyre lately?
> Put an end to the number elevens? What
> of the *gierador*, the living *sheela-na-gigs*,
> the hags, the women who simply lift
> their skirts and end the insanity
> with a *How dare you*? Or are cunts too
> tidy now? Neatly swept and fumigated
> for all our sakes, or rubbed out, hacked down
> from church walls.

(Section III)

Despite the research on sheelas overviewed above, it is clear that no one knows for certain when sheela-na-gigs were carved, by whom, and for what purpose. The arguments that have been made, while often valiantly supported using a range of sources and interdisciplinary methodologies, unfortunately do not use or have access to sufficient primary source documentation or empirical methods (such as carbon dating) to be wholly convincing. This variation in perspectives and ultimate uncertainty regarding their meaning made my commitment to inhabiting their semiotic complexity in the poetry collection even stronger, and I allude to and critique these arguments in the collection.

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[46] Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, 28; Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall*, 138. Gimbutas refers to an occurrence of skirt-raising in Egypt as chronicled by Herodotus (445 B.C.) and a ritualized dance with a bull mentioned by Diodrus (50 B.C). Andersen discusses La Fontaine's fable of the young woman who saves her village from the devil by lifting her skirt and a Russian folktale whereby a bear is similarly scared away.

[47] Rhoades, "Decoding the Sheela-na-gig." Rhoades cites Wangari Maathai's discussion of women baring their breasts in Nairobi and other women removing their clothing in the U.S. in protest against government-sponsored violence and the Iraq war.

[48] Ibid.

Thematic/Theoretical Perspectives

Throughout my research into sheela-na-gigs I identified certain key themes that drew me to write about them. These themes can be elucidated by 'notionally' using theoretical and philosophical texts that 'empirically' fit with my sense of certain aspects of the carvings.[49] As indicated in Chapter One, my perception of the sheela-na-gigs and my poetic responses to them are influenced by my theoretical and practical background (*studium*). Thus, to a certain extent my response to these carvings is always in some way imbued or in conversation with philosophical and theoretical debates with which I was familiar or encountered during the course of my reading. These themes are also deeply felt by me, as they are integrally linked to and often arise from my own and other people's 'real world' experiences or from my stance on the function of art in society. Therefore, my use of such frameworks below should not be viewed as a distancing tactic or as a *post facto* overlaying of ideas onto an existing writing practice, but instead as an activity inherent to that practice.

Importantly, these frameworks each undermine the assignment of a fixed meaning for the sheela-na-gigs. They lend themselves to the increasingly complex perspective I was in the process of elucidating in the early poems, and that, in the early stages, I had planned to employ throughout the collection using the technique of associative ekphrasis. Therefore, I did not use *all* the theoretical frameworks and terminologies that might seem to be 'empirical fits' with the sheela-na-gigs. For instance, while I was familiar with the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, and Bracha Ettinger, these theories did not adequately describe the complexity I was reaching for in the poetry, and, in fact seemed to me to have the potential to prematurely explain it away. Here, I discuss the three broad thematic areas that helped me to engage the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs throughout the research and writing process:

1. the tension between a desire for ritual and a critique of gender essentialism
2. gender and notions of 'Irishness'
3. the sheelas as grotesque.[50]

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[49] Melrose, "Signs of Life, Signs of Times: And If All Artists Are Semioticians?."
[50] I will define these terms below.

Ritual and Essentialism

As discussed in Chapter One with reference to Roland Barthes, Federico García Lorca, and John Dewey, I have long been interested in the ritual and transformative function of art in daily life. Furthermore, in my capacities as an activist and scholar, I have engaged in an ongoing critique of those systems that undermine our sensuous encounters with the physical world and art. I have been drawn to artists whose work explores these themes and to critical texts that chronicle the shifts from social life organized by integrated ritual and artistic practice toward one of mechanized alienation characterized by an instrumentalization of the body, a devaluation of the senses, and a compartmentalization of aesthetic experience. As such, John Dewey's definition of ritual aptly describes my view of the fundamental link between ritual and artistic practice (my italics):

> The connection of many arts with primitive rituals becomes more evident with every excursion of the anthropologist into the past. Only those who are so far removed from the earlier experiences as to miss their sense will conclude that rites and ceremonies were merely technical devices for securing rain, sons, crops, success in battle. Of course they had this magical intent, but they were enduringly enacted, we may be sure, in spite of all practical failures, because they were *immediate enhancements of the experience of living.*[51]

According to this formulation, the ritualized placement of sheela-na-gigs on churches, castles, and town walls might well serve a practical ritual function (e.g., to warn sinners against lust, ensure fertility, etc.). However, in addition to this use-value there is something else about the carvings that leads them to 'immediat[ely] enhanc[e] the experience of living' – this is their capacity for *punctum*. And yet, as Barthes' warning that *punctum* can be 'ill-bred' reminds us, the basis for these rituals is hardly neutral in sociopolitical terms: for example, the ritual to 'secur[e] sons'. Indeed, ritual practices are often mired in gender essentialist views of women/the female body/the 'feminine principle', and these problematic views are likewise paralleled in the arts as has been shown by numerous feminists who have critiqued the marginalization of female experience and subjectivity or the objectification of the female body in the arts. Thus, sheela-na-gigs reveal rather than resolve an inherent tension between my politics and my poetics as they instantiate this conflict between my desire for a ritualistic aesthetic and my suspicion of essentialism.

Gender essentialism can briefly be defined as the view that certain characteristics are essential and driving forces particular to women (or to men). Broadly speaking, the belief in these essentialized characteristics has kept women covered up, in the home, and

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[51] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 5.

out of the workplace or politics because their 'natures' supposedly suit them for other things. The tension between ritualism and essentialism is one aspect of the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs that I considered throughout the writing process. Clearly, sheela-na-gigs evoke ritual due to their purported meanings as explored above, their association with folklore and mythology, their placement on churches and at sacred sites like the hill of Tara or holy wells, and their 'immediat[e] enhanc[ement of] the experience of living'.[52] At the same time, due to their obvious depiction of female genitalia, they raise questions about what constitutes the 'female' or the 'feminine', including whether or how the female body possesses *essential* female attributes and serves as a foundation for patriarchal religious/mythic hierarchies and social structures.

Debates around essentialism are central to feminist theory and praxis in the 20th and 21st centuries. These debates directly influence my own perception of sheela-na-gigs and my creative responses to them. Critiques of essentialism generally fall into two major strands. The 'intersectional' critique, suggests that the category of 'woman' is far too diverse to essentialize women's traits or experiences across differences in age, race, class, (dis)ability, geographical borders, sexual orientation, etc.[53] In other words, different women experience gender differently due to the other identities they have. The 'social constructionist' critique argues that gender is not the same as sex and that gender is learned and constructed based on social norms. Simone de Beauvoir's quote forms the basis of this critique: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'[54] As such, characteristics such as passivity, an affinity for nurturing, and empathy are not inherently female and based on genitalia, hormones, and chromosomes, but are instead human characteristics 'constructed' and learned as 'natural' gender characteristics. Judith Butler furthers the 'social constructionist' critique in her book *Gender Trouble*. Butler suggests that biological sex, what we understand to be physical evidence of the 'essence' of gender, is itself always-already constructed by normative gender frameworks perceived as

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[52] Ibid., 5.

[53] The 'intersectional' critique of essentialism arose during the 1970's when women of color questioned white women's ability to set the feminist agenda for all women. In the U.S. black women had been working out of the home first as slaves and later in menial, low-paying jobs. While middle-class white women were aspiring to use their college educations to make their own money and have meaning in their lives beyond housekeeping, black women also faced the additional experience of oppression based on their race – they were never seen as 'just' women, and, according to the Combahee River Collective, faced oppression from white men and women due to their race and from white and black men due to their gender. Contrasting the perspectives found in The Combahee River Collective's 'A Black Feminist Statement' with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* will give a sense of this intersectional critique.

[54] Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989.) English translation of *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 301.

essential.[55] Therefore, the 'essence' of gender is nowhere; it must be enacted repeatedly and collectively, and sex must be perceived as the precursor to gender even though determining sex is not as straightforward as it seems as shown by Anne Fausto-Sterling's research on the treatment of intersex conditions.[56] The natural-seemingness of these enactments and perceptions makes gender seem like a foregone conclusion.

The appearance of sheela-na-gigs invokes both of these critiques of essentialism. On the one hand, the haggard, aged aspect of the sheelas is combined with a gaping vulva. What, if any, collective 'womanness' is being represented here? The varying interpretations of the sheelas over the years demonstrate the gender norms excavated by the social constructionist critique. Are these statues misogynist representations created by the church in order to reinforce gender normativity and inequality? Or are they symbols of an essentially female power? What is meant by an *essentially* female power and can such a thing ever exist in any liberatory sense?

This notion of an 'essential' female power resembles 'pro'-essentialist arguments such as those forwarded by cultural feminists including Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, and Catherine MacKinnon. Cultural feminists argue in favor of the superiority of a female essence and traits.[57] According to cultural feminists, the female attributes designated and denigrated by patriarchy need not be abandoned by women and can instead form the basis of feminist theorizing and praxis:

> [Adrienne] Rich argues that we should not reject the importance of female biology simply because patriarchy has used it to subjugate us. Rich believes that "our biological ground, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings" holds the key to our rejuvenation and our reconnection with our specific female attributes, which she lists as "our great mental capacities…; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multi-pleasured physicality".[58]

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[55] Judith Butler states regarding essentialism:
> Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 78.

[56] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Perseus Books, 2000).

[57] Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicolson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 330-355.

[58] Ibid., 333.

As we will see in Chapter Four, some poets who have previously written on sheela-na-gigs have taken this cultural feminist position. Writers like Rich and Barbara Walker[59] are less extreme than some cultural feminists in their attitudes toward masculinity, espousing a view that does not require a wholesale rejection of males or masculinity.

Perhaps surprisingly, these arguments of cultural feminists regarding the 'the feminine principle' are not unlike the views held by male writers such as Robert Bly, Ted Hughes, and Robert Graves.[60] These writers attribute the current state of affairs – mechanized and ubiquitous war, environmental destruction, and denigration of women – to an overpowering and misguided patriarchal masculinity that has decimated previous matriarchies and goddess-centred religions and destroyed men and women's valuing of their 'complementary' gender differences. Like the cultural feminists, these writers blame masculinity, but turn to mythology and archetype in order to resurrect a 'positive' heroic masculinity and seek reconciliation with the 'feminine principle'. However, amidst these arguments it is often unclear where *actual* women are left in this male psychic and spiritual journey. Along these lines, anthropologist Paula Webster makes an important distinction between a high ritual/mythic status for 'the Great Goddess' versus the experiences and social position of real women. Her position has implications for the arguments made by cultural feminists and the male writers indicated above: 'Reverence, a highly ambivalent expression of awe and fear, but most clearly of distance, does not necessarily result from or lead to the high status or power of the revered object that is symbolically presented.'[61] Thus, though a sheela-na-gig might be a goddess or a symbol of female power, this does not necessarily mean that the status of actual women will be raised simply by recognizing her as such, nor does interpreting sheela-na-gigs' prominent genitalia along essentially gendered lines necessarily equate with empowerment for women. Instead, as this discussion of essentialism and its critics demonstrates, notions of 'women', 'the feminine', and even the vulva as a 'sign' of sex are highly complex.

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[59] Barbara Walker, *A Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983).

[60] Robert Bly began writing on the 'feminine principle' in the 1960s and went on to lead a men's movement to recuperate a primal masculinity he understood to be threatened by both the destruction on the goddess-centred religions, and, conversely, by feminism because of its rejection of essential gender differences and roles. Influenced by Robert Graves's book *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, Hughes devoted much of his poetry, in particular *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow* (1970), to resurrecting 'the feminine' and rejecting a misguided masculinity. In *The White Goddess* (1948), Graves argues for the existence of a European 'triple goddess' to which all 'pure' poetry is connected and with whom poets must commune.

[61] Paula Webster, "Matriarchy: A Vision of Power," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 143.

A critique of gender essentialism also creates a crisis of epistemology as has been shown to affect research design and data analysis in the social sciences,[62] and by extension, studies of sheela-na-gigs. Of particular relevance to this thesis is a study of 'Venus' figurines – the statues of voluptuous female figures produced during the Upper Paleolithic period that are thought to symbolize fertility and/or goddesses despite no written records and few if any objects found with them that would indicate the gender relations or spirituals practices of the period. Thus, contemporary perceptions about the essential characteristics of the 'feminine principle' and the female body have quite possibly unduly influenced interpretations of the ritual significance of this object that is widely found across Europe and Asia for a period of several thousand years.[63] This same bias could easily influence perspectives on sheela-na-gigs. We are left with fundamental questions: *Just what are we looking at? How do we know what we are looking at? Why do we see what we are seeing?* And so we are back to Barthes's notion of *studium/punctum*.

As I suspected when I initially identified this theme as vital to my engagement with the sheela-na-gigs, I have found this incommensurable debate between ritual and essentialism to be highly productive in triggering poetry that explores these ideas and their psychic and aesthetic impacts. In my poems such as 'Strange Country' (p. 36), 'In Bodies as in Gods' (p. 35), 'Bucranium' (p. 15), 'A Figure' (p. 2), and many others in the collection, I note both a yearning for the sacred and mythic *and* for a redress of the sociopolitical effects of essentialism on perceptions of women and, importantly, on women's perceptions of ourselves. Furthermore, there is the *punctum* of the sheela-na-gigs that cannot be ignored, no matter how 'ill-bred'. This theme's unfolding in the poems will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Five.

Gender and 'Irishness'

The majority of sheela-na-gigs are found in Ireland (rather than Scotland, England, or Wales). Even though no one is certain where they originate, texts on sheela-na-gigs tend to foreground their Irishness.[64] This is possibly because Ireland is viewed, and, (arguably)

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[62] Margaret Conkey and Ruth E. Tringham, "Archaeology and the Goddess: Exploring the Contours of Feminist Archaelogy," in *Feminisms in the Academy*, eds. Domna C. Stanton and Abigail J. Stewart (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 199-247; Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[63] Marcia-Anne Dobres, "Re-Considering the Venus Figurines: A Feminist-Inspired Analysis," in *Ancient Images, Ancient Thought: The Archaeology of Ideology, Proceedings of the 23rd Annual Chacmool Conference*, ed. A. Sean Goldsmith and others (Calgary: University of Calgary Archaeological Association, 1992), 245-262.

[64] All but two of the sheela-na-gigs I have viewed have been in Ireland because I lived there and accessing them was more financially feasible. Anecdotally speaking, the Romanesque argument seems to allow some

views and projects *itself* as an anachronistic land of strangeness and otherness in relation to Britain and Europe – strangeness of land, language, myths, rituals, and people. As such, the sheela-na-gigs' bizarre appearances and mysteriousness must make them 'Irish'.[65] One of my initial interests and concerns in writing this collection was the issue of engaging with an 'Irish' artifact of disputed origins. My concern was due in part to my position as an American (albeit living in Ireland), but mainly arose from the political and historical complexity of the very notion of 'Irishness'. As noted in the literature review on sheela-na-gigs, the disputed origin of the carvings has political and historical connotations in terms of Irish/British relations and cultural delineations and differences (among Celt, Saxon, Norman/Old English, etc.).

Rather than *decide* upon the significance of these carvings culturally and politically, I sought to retain their existing complexity and consider the carvings from a contemporary viewer's perspective (rather than project into the past). I wanted to avoid idealizing a misty, anachronistic Ireland because I was drawn to the carvings in part due to their decidedly unpalatable, anti-*Bord Faílte* mein – indeed, they will not replace the harp as the symbol of Ireland any time soon, nor do they fit the commercialized *Riverdance* projection of Irish culture.[66] Though sheela-na-gigs sometimes circulate in Ireland in common parlance, popular culture, and the work of artists from various disciplines, they certainly do not adorn the bus tour advertisements in Dublin, brochures for 'The Gathering'[67], nor are they permitted to demonstrate all their complexity in the work of Ireland's poets (as will be demonstrated in Chapter Four). Once again, *punctum* is 'ill-bred'.

Irish people to blame the carvings on the sexual openness of 'the French', while in reality there is a huge stylistic difference between the Romanesque gargoyles and the blocky, crudely-carved sheela-na-gigs.

[65] For a discussion of this idea in relation to Yeats and the end of the Irish Literary Revival see Seamus Deane's essay: Seamus Deane. "Literary Myths of the Irish Revival," in *Essays in Modern Irish Literature: Joyce, Yeats, O'Casey, Kinsella, Montague, Friel, Mahon, Heaney, Beckett, Synge* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 28-37. For a consideration of the British colonial impact on Irish racial/cultural self-definition, see Enda Duffy's essay: "'As White as Ours": Africa, Ireland, Imperial Panic, and the Effects of British Race Discourse," in *Empire and After: Englishness in Postcolonial Perspective*, eds. Graham MacPhee and Prem Podder (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 19-55.

[66] *Bord Faílte*, the Irish national tourism department, is often criticized for putting forward a narrow, sanitized depiction of Ireland in its international public relations campaigns. *Riverdance*, originating in the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest, is a highly commercially successful theatrical show that features Irish step dancing and traditional Irish music. The format of both the music and the dance has been critiqued as inauthentic and commercialized. *Riverdance* gave way to several spin-offs marketing 'Irish culture', including *Lord of the Dance* and *Celtic Woman*.

[67] 'The Gathering', organized by the Irish government in 2013, is a year-long call to 'the 70 million people worldwide [who] claim Irish ancestry […] [to come] home to gatherings in villages, towns and cities.' It is a major commercial venture aimed at jump-starting the Irish economy and attracting foreign (particularly American) investment. It has in some cases been critiqued and satirized by the Irish public and the press, largely because of a recent surge in emigration. "The Gathering Ireland 2013." http://www.thegatheringireland.com/ (accessed April 9, 2013).

Additionally, a gendered dimension is significant when it comes to writing on an 'Irish subject' that depicts 'the feminine'. Poetry about ancient Irish artefacts and myth has been an important part of Ireland's literature throughout the ages. In the 19th century and early 20th century, Ireland is personified as female, and goddesses factor in a politico-historical psychodrama between Ireland and Britain – one thinks immediately of the *aisling* tradition of the 17th and 18th centuries and of Irish Literary Revival's emphasis on 'Mother Ireland'. This gendering of the nation has of course been problematized by feminists. Luz Mar González-Arias cites Nira Yuval-Davis's book *Gender and Nation* on the relationship between gender and national identity and self-definition in some Irish poetry:

> In her extensive study of the gender implications of nationalist movements globally, [Yuval-Davis] states that women invariably play the roles of biological, cultural and symbolic reproducers of the nation to which they belong. In this respect, then, Ireland does fit a larger pattern, as its nationalist movements used women's bodies as allegorical representations of the land colonized, penetrated, raped – Hibernia – or else as an icon for the national cause – Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Mother Ireland.[68]

Due to the complexity of writing about the concept of 'Irishness', including its gendered implications, from my own position as a non-Irish person, I drew upon feminist standpoint theory as a way of thinking about the poetic persona I wished to construct in my poems.

A standpoint is similar to the mode of address or point-of-view in a poem; however, standpoint theory emphasizes the 'I's social and political status and interests. In contrast to empiricism, feminist standpoint theory suggests that knowledge is, as Donna Haraway argues, 'situated' and 'partial'.[69] Supposedly objective knowledge is, in fact, produced in specific contexts and in the interest of certain power relations. Thus, using this theoretical framework, I can contextualize Irish poets' conflation of woman with the land/nation in the context of anti-colonial nationalism without having to ignore its patriarchal problematics. Standpoint theorist Sandra Harding calls for a championing of 'traitorous identity' on the part of researchers and activists. Assuming a 'traitorous identity' requires a commitment to challenging existing power relations and taken-for-

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[68] Luz Mar González-Arias, "'Wide Open to Mirth and Wonder': Sheela-Na-Gigs as Multiple Signifiers of the Female Body in Ireland," in *Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts, and Contexts*, eds. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh and Christine St. Peter (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), 102-118.

[69] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3. (1988), 575-599.

granted notions – even when one is part of a group that benefits from them.[70] As such, the sheela-na-gig demonstrates a treachery to idealized Irish female/nation as González-Arias has described. Likewise, the sheela-na-gig is also *not necessarily* Irish to begin with, demonstrating a further treachery and semiotic complexity in contrast to taken-for-granted narratives about the carving specifically or Ireland more generally. Finally, as I initially intended to develop a clearly-delineated poetic speaker who would encounter sheela-na-gigs, I found standpoint theory to be useful in maintaining an associative relationship to them. My position differs in terms of my nationality, experience, and knowledge, from, for example, previous Irish poets who have written on sheelas, and the associative aspect of my poetic process would therefore arise from this standpoint, which I sought to make evident in the poems. I found this connection between standpoint theory and poetic persona to be useful in continuing to inhabit the complexity of the carvings throughout the writing process. As we will see in Chapter Five, I ultimately chose not to sustain such an autobiographical poetic speaker throughout the collection. Nevertheless, the critical concerns I describe here and for which standpoint theory was apt as a framework, led me towards other formal solutions.

The Grotesque

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque opens sheelas to semiotic possibilities beyond these debates about gender essentialism and national identity. Bakhtin's ideas are rooted in ritual and as such 'empirically fit' both my poetics and sheela-na-gigs themselves. During my research on the medieval period, I discovered Bakhtin's book on the medieval grotesque in the work of Rabelais. Bakhtin contrasts the modern view of the body and aesthetics with the medieval period's complex, performative, and grotesque rituals and art. According to Bakhtin, in the medieval period the body was viewed as a liminal, generative nexus. This focus on orifices resonates with the open-vulvaed and often open-mouthed sheela-na-gigs:

> Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separate from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on apertures and convexities, or on

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[70] Sandra Harding states: 'So achieving a traitorous identity or social location requires the performance of difficult and painful tasks.' Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 293.

various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other.[71]

In Bakhtin's theory of the medieval grotesque, women *and* men are linked to the body, thus undermining an essentialist view (decried by de Beauvoir and other feminists) that relegates women to nature/the body and men to the science/the mind. Indeed, as this quote indicates, the functionality of *all* human bodies is emphasized (farting and belching are not gender-specific in the literature and festivals of the period!), even though differentiated genitalia (phallus and vulva) are described in terms of their different functions regarding reproduction.

Bakhtin also underscores the theme of 'degradation' in medieval art and ritual, suggesting that in that period, to degrade something was to reveal its most basic potentiality, offering another perspective from which to view the supposedly crudely exhibitionist sheela-na-gigs:

To degrade is to bury, to sow, and kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.[72]

Here, in the medieval view, the body is not a valueless and imperfect husk preventing transcendence, a view which contrasts the views of many feminists who argue that the relegation of women to the realm of the physical body has meant exclusion from the public sphere of thinking and speaking.[73] Instead, according to Bakhtin, during the

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[71] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 25-26.

[72] Ibid., 21.

[73] Judith Butler paraphrases this debate in the work of Simone de Beauvoir:

although [Beauvoir] is often understood to be calling for the right of women, in effect, to become existential subjects and, hence, for inclusion within the terms of an abstract universality, her position also implies a fundamental critique of the very disembodiment of the abstract masculine epistemological subject […] This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body,

medieval period the body and its functions were viewed as the *gateway* to transformation. While I am not suggesting that those feminists are incorrect in their critique of the dichotomies of man/woman, mind/body, Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque does further complicate the sheela-na-gig's emphasis on the body and the open orifice. Bakhtin's perspective was helpful to consider during the writing process, as I sought to inhabit the sheela's semiotic complexity, and it became a defining theme in some of the 'grotesque' sheela poems such as 'Cullahill Castle' (p. 4), 'All Saints' Day' (p. 16), and 'Bunratty Castle' (p. 29).

These three theoretical frameworks complicate the claims made by archaeologists, art historians and others about the sheela-na-gigs' meaning, origin and dating and also sustained my thinking about an aspect of the carvings. While I was researching sheela-na-gigs and considering these theoretical frameworks, I was also reading on the subject of ekphrasis, the type of writing I would be doing in the collection. Chapters Three and Four focus on ekphrasis and the ekphrastic poems that other poets have written on sheela-na-gigs.

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fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom.' Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16.

CHAPTER 3
'No Maps to the *Duende*': Defining Ekphrasis from a Practitioner's Perspective

Once I had chosen sheela-na-gigs as the focus of a full-length poetry collection, I realized that I would be writing *ekphrastic* poetry: poetry about visual art or architecture. I had previously been exposed to ekphrasis throughout my university studies, from the famous 19th and early 20th century examples – from Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', Keat's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', W.H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts', and William Carlos Williams's 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', to contemporary ekphrastic poems such as John Ashbery's 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and full-length collections such as Charles Simic's *Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell*, which combines ekphrasis with biographical and critical essays on the artist. Though I had written a few ekphrastic poems before – poems that I would now categorize as juvenilia – I had never practised this type of writing in a focused and sustained manner. As with my research on sheela-na-gigs, this examination of the literature on ekphrasis formed a part of my tacit knowledge as I was writing the collection. These terminologies and debates have provided me with a way of thinking about what I have done and have allowed me to locate my work alongside other ekphrastic poems on sheela-na-gigs.

In this chapter I give a brief overview of the history and definitions of ekphrasis and extract and discuss those aspects of the literature that are deployable in accounting for my own writing process and in understanding the sheela poems that have been written by other poets. This discussion of ekphrasis should not be understood as comprehensive from the vantage of a critical *study of* the subject, but instead as 'notional' in its use of only those frames of reference that were *relevant* to my writing practice. To this end, I will be using this terminology in detail in Chapter Four where I analyze the sheela-na-gig poems written by other poets and contrast their approaches to my own aims, and again in Chapter Five when I go into greater detail about the specific creative decision-making underlying *Strange Country*.

What is Ekphrasis?
Ekphrasis is a type of descriptive writing originating in ancient Greece. (During this period, ekphrasis was not restricted to describing visual arts and architecture.) Ekphrasis was the final and most difficult writing exercise in rhetorical training, and students were had to convey not only the physical descriptions of a person or object, but also their

emotional impact and resonances.[1] At that time, painting and poetry were understood to be *imitative* of lived experience (*mimesis*) and to have functions that mirrored each other as Horace suggests in his *Ars Poetica*: 'as in painting, so also a poem [ut pictura poesis].'[2] Simonides of Ceos concurs with this view, and he is attributed by Petrarch as referring to poetry as 'a speaking picture' and painting as a 'silent poem'.[3] Thus, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the original Greek the word ekphrasis combines the sense of 'to speak' and 'out', implying that a voice is given to an otherwise mute object.[4] Early examples of ekphrasis include tomb inscriptions and the captions of paintings in which the objects 'speak out' for themselves, sometimes in the first-person. On the other hand, in contrast to this 'speaking' function, for some contemporary poets and critics ekphrasis should emphasize physical description rather than an affective impact on the viewer: 'the goal of this literary form is to make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present'.[5] In this more recent formulation, *seeing* rather than *feeling* the ekphrastic object is central. Some of these ideas dovetail with my own writing practice. First, my determination to transfer the *duende/punctum* and semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs to my poems is supported by the ancient Greeks' concept of ekphrasis. This underpinning remained vital for me in distinguishing between ekphrastic practices that focus on what is *seen* rather than what is *felt* and my own aim to evoke both the physicality of sheela-na-gigs and their *duende/punctum* in my poems. Likewise, the etymology of the term resonates with sheela-na-gigs as carvings that seem to be *saying something*, even though no one is sure just what that is. This indeterminacy is a central feature of their *punctum*.

Moving from the ancient Greeks to the 18th century, in his famous essay 'Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry' Gotthold Ephraim Lessing studies the Laocoön sculpture in comparison to Virgil's poetic rendering of the same subject.[6] As an aesthetic philosopher, Lessing concludes that poetry can use beautiful

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[1] "Visual Arts and Poetry." *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993), 1360-1363.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Ecphrasis." Oxford English Dictionary Online Version. December 2012 (1891), Accessed December 12, 2012. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59412?redirectedFrom=ecphrasis#eid.

[5] M. Munsterberg, "Ekphrasis," *Writing about Art, Createspace* (2009). Accessed November 11, 2011. http://writingaboutart.org/pages/ekphrasis.html

[6] The Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons are entangled in a serpent, punishment by Apollo for Laocoön's warning the Trojans not to accept the Trojan horse. Virgil portrays Laocoön as sounding like a roaring bull as he tries to fend off the snakes, whereas the sculpture shows an anguished expression that is not suggestive of vocalization. The contrast in the way the two art forms convey the same scene prompts Lessing's exploration of the 'limits' of painting and poetry.

language to portray the ugly (in this case Virgil compares Laocoön to an escaping and bellowing sacrificial bull), whereas the visual arts must avoid any overt ugliness of technique in order to create a 'noble' work of art. (Lessing views Laocoön's anguished expression in the sculpture as beautiful.) Lessing's ideas are unsettled by sheela-na-gigs, objects which are on the whole already 'ugly' and 'crude' in style. The dichotomy Lessing creates between the appropriate raw materials for painters versus poets is further unsettled by my desire to write about sheela-na-gigs in *whatever* linguistic register suffices to evoke their complexity. Furthermore, contemporary critic Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux critiques Lessing's gender essentialist opposition wherein the 'image […is] bodily, present, replete, still, silent, natural, and feminine; and word […is] abstract, rational, active, eloquent, and male'.[7] As will be shown in Chapters Four and Five, Loizeaux's argument about this early formulation of ekphrasis is particularly relevant to my collection on sheela-na-gigs, as they are 'natural', 'female', 'bodily' objects even *prior to* the ekphrastic encounter.

Ekphrastic writing involves the intersection between the visual and the textual, and as such it foregrounds debates regarding the differences and similarities between the 'sister arts' as outlined by Lessing as well as the relationship of 'the subject' to 'the other'. Loizeaux summarizes Mitchell's views on both:

> […] at the centre of the ekphrastic relationship, for Mitchell, is Leonardo's *paragone*, the contest of the arts. In ekphrasis, he argues, language tries to overcome the image, to best it, to turn it to its own needs…Another way of framing it is to consider the challenge the image issues to the ekphrastic poet: the poem must at least equal the image if it is not to be a "mere" addendum, caption, decoration…

On the one hand, the ekphrastic poem must struggle to be as *necessary* as its visual subject. This is the *paragone* or struggle between the two arts to achieve – despite different materials and modes – what the other has done so well. Thus, in his article on his process of writing an ekphrastic poetry collection, David Kinloch demonstrates an envy commonly felt by poets of what is believed to be a more inherent *immediacy* of visual art:

> My mother is a painter and I have always envied what I perceive to be the more immediate access to the real offered by her art. This is a commonplace feeling among writers. The American poet J.D. McClatchy (1988: xiii) reminds us that 'for most [twentieth century] poets paintings are primal, as "real" as the bread and wine on the table, as urgent as a dying parent or concealed lover in the next room'. Such sentiments are expressed with similar eloquence by representatives of the French poetic traditions. René Char (1979: 169) for example, evokes the

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[7] Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14.

ability of visual art to accede to 'the real's primal identity before words take over'.[8]

While I do feel this sense of immediacy when I view some examples of visual art, I also feel it with some poetry and do not believe one art form to be superior to the other. As Charles Olson has argued, poetry has as its basis the essential unit of human life – the breath – which also creates a sense of immediacy and realness.[9] The *paragone* is similarly complicated by accounts from poets speaking about their relationships to works of art. Loizeaux cites Gertrude Stein, Ntozake Shange, and Cole Swensen, who refer to their ekphrastic relationships in terms other than the competitive or envious:

> Mitchell's paragonal model has been less satisfying, however, when it comes to understanding, or even recognizing, such modest, and profound, feelings as companionship or friendship, the terms in which poets often describe their ekphrastic motives […] a complicated sense of the ekphrastic relation […] can be neither adequately explained as paragonal, nor discounted as naïve or disingenuous or even productively blind. We are right to be wary of cheerful professions of sisterhood – antagonism and competition do inform much ekphrasis – but it repays us to take seriously the sense of a shared world these comments [from poets themselves] depict.[10]

For my part, I do not view either of the arts as inherently more immediate or real than the other. For me, the appeal of writing ekphrastic poetry is not borne of a general awe or envy of the capacities of the visual arts, but instead emerges from a feeling of *duende/punctum* that I get from sheela-na-gigs specifically.

While the paragonal model does not 'empirically fit' my writing practice (to again use Susan Melrose's term), the other component of Mitchell's formulation is highly relevant to me. Mitchell points to the interaction between the self and the other that occurs in the ekphrastic encounter: 'The central goal of ekphrastic hope might be called "the overcoming of otherness"'.[11] This concept is succinctly summarized by Loizeaux: '[ekphrasis] expose[s] the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire – representation as something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone'.[12] This understanding of the relationship of power, knowledge and desire to representation underlies my rationale for writing about sheela-na-gigs using – as initially planned – a clearly defined poetic 'I': the

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[8] Kinloch, "The Poet in the Art Gallery: Accounting for Ekphrasis," 19.

[9] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley, (New York: New Directions, 1966), 15-26.

[10] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 15.

[11] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 151-181.

[12] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 14.

'self' (the poetic persona) encountering the 'other' (a sheela-na-gig). As Mitchell indicates, this poetic speaker has power over the silent sheela-na-gigs through the very act of representing them in language; however, my particular desire is to represent their *complexity* rather than to narrowly decide upon their meaning. While I do recognize that this desire to represent complexity still has power and knowledge at its base (the ability to choose what known aspects of complexity will be represented and how), this mode of engagement is still quite different from the scholarly literature discussed in Chapter Two and the sheela-na-gig poems by other poets, which, as we will see in Chapter Four, focus on *deciding* the carvings' meanings rather than on *inhabiting* their complexity.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, there has been a proliferation of ekphrastic writing – both in art criticism (important examples include the work of Ruskin, Pater, and Hazlitt) and in literature (in poetry and in the ekphrastic descriptions found in prose fiction). The ekphrastic poem has nearly become a requisite part of contemporary poetry collections, with some books given over completely to an ekphrastic project, focusing on a particular artist or art of a particular time period.[13] Literary journals offer special issues on ekphrasis and call for submissions of ekphrastic poems. Critics like James Heffernan have considered what seems to be the increasing prevalence of 'the poet in the art gallery', concluding that the art museum is 'the shrine where all poets worship in a secular age'.[14] Heffernan sums up the 'explosion' of contemporary ekphrastic writing in the 20th century: 'The salience of ekphrasis in modern and contemporary poetry becomes still more striking when we consider that at least one poem about a work of visual art has come from almost every major poet of our time'.[15] As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I had not previously engaged in ekphrastic writing until I began writing this collection. I was aware of its prevalence and had – in all honesty – been *avoiding* writing ekphrastic poems because although I had frequently felt *punctum/duende* from many works of visual art, I had not yet felt the additional strong urge to *write* about any of them. I did not wish to write ekphrastically unless I felt this desire to transfer that *duende/punctum* into my work. (Clearly, I did get this sense from sheela-na-gigs.) Finally, considering the prevalence of ekphrasis and the fact that I was now undertaking it, I was heartened to be reminded of its flexibility in terms of the styles and poetic 'schools' in which it manifests, as Loizeaux explains:

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[13] Peter Barry, "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2002), 156-165.

[14] James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 138.

[15] Ibid., 135.

> Although ekphrasis has had certain forms associated with it (primarily the sonnet), it is not itself a form, but a rhetorical situation and a set of practices and tropes that offer non-prescriptive possibilities for exploring that situation. Ekphrasis, is, thus, not easily drafted into arguments pitting formalists against avant-gardists. Examples of it are routinely cited by critics across the range of poetic tastes.[16]

This fact of stylistic diversity became even more important to me as my initial plans for the form and style of my collection dramatically shifted toward techniques I had not previously used or even considered using. This shift and its relationship to poetic 'schools' will be the focus of Chapter Five.

Key Definitions and Terminologies

My growing understanding of the indeterminacy of the sheela-na-gigs (as described in Chapter Two) coincided with my reading about the definitional slipperiness of ekphrasis itself. Several texts written in the past 25 years have been devoted to clarifying the definition of ekphrasis, and these efforts sometimes result in further complications of what does and does not constitute ekphrasis. (Interestingly, despite this upsurge of interest, the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s entry on 'ecphrasis' has not been updated since 1891.) I grappled with the numerous and varying understandings of ekphrasis including these commonly-cited definitions from contemporary critics:

- 'the verbal representation of visual representation', James Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation'[17]
- 'an umbrella term that subsumes various modes of rendering the visual object in words', Tamar Yacobi, 'Pictorial Models and Narrative Ekphrasis'[18]
- 'the name of a minor and rather obscure literary genre (poems that describe works of visual arts) and a more general topic (the verbal representation of visual representation)', W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other'[19]

Though seemingly straightforward, these definitions are slippery and problematic, particularly when considered from a practitioner's point-of-view. Firstly, the idea that an ekphrastic poem *merely* describes or renders the art object would, for many poets, undermine the reason or impulse for writing the poem – we seek something *else* or something *in addition to* mere representation. (Some of us seek to transfer *punctum/duende*.) Even for the Greeks, mere description was not enough to constitute ekphrastic writing –

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[16] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 10.
[17] James A. W. Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation," *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991), 297-316.
[18] Tamar Yacobi, "Pictorial Models and Narrative Ekphrasis," *Poetics Today* 16, no. 4 (1995), 599-649.
[19] Mitchell, *Ekphrasis and the Other*, 151-181

the writer had to make the image/object seem to be *present* for the reader in all its complexity of physical appearance and emotional resonance. Secondly, it is possible that the work of art was not the most central trigger for the poet's ekphrastic poem at all, but instead acted as a processural container or additive, leaving its traces behind, thereby leading the poem to be labeled 'ekphrastic' even though its deepest roots lie elsewhere. In the case of Heffernan's definition, the idea that an ekphrastic poem *represents* something that is *representational* itself is immediately complicated when considered in relation to sheela-na-gigs. As I explored in the previous chapter and in line with Mitchell's view on representation referred to above, sheela-na-gigs beg the question about just what they represented in their original context and point to the high sociopolitical stakes in representing and decoding 'the feminine' in our contemporary context. Taken on its own, Heffernan's definition leaves out an admission he makes later in his book: 'ekphrasis never aims simply to reproduce a visual work of art in words, so there is no point in judging ekphrastic poetry by a criterion of fidelity to the work it represents. We can better judge it by asking what it enables us to see in the work of art, or even just see, period'.[20] While this is a productive complication of his earlier definition, this quote still emphasizes the *seeing* rather than the *feeling* element of ekphrasis and as such it differs from my own ekphrastic aims (and those of the ancient Greeks).

Importantly, Heffernan's quote also refers to one of the key debates in ekphrasis – fidelity. More than one critic refers to ekphrasis as 'tricksy'. In discussing Tony Curtis' poem, 'Lottie Stafford's Neck' about a painting by Sir William Orpen, Barry muses about the layering of infidelity – the painter's infidelity to the actual person being painted and the poet's infidelity to the painter's version and to the biography of the person portrayed:

> Sir William doesn't paint what he sees, rather he projects a scene from the mind; in the same way, the poet doesn't just write what he knows about Lottie Stafford, but sets out a fictionalized version of her […] If we as readers find something slightly disturbing about this, and wonder whether we should let it pass without comment, the poet simply flashes his poetic license, confident that it will disarm all criticism. But there is, surely, an ethical issue here concerning how the negotiation between poetry and the real is conducted, an issue which ekphrastic poetry always seems to intensify. When a poet begins to write ekphrastically, there is a kind of implicit 'compact' with the reader that this time, at least, there will be no tricks with the 'real', and the poems often begin with the kind of apparently straight description of the visual image […] But pretty soon the readers realize that poets in ekphrastic mode tend to be using the method as a

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[20] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, p. 157.

cloak for something which is, if anything, going to be even more tricksy than usual'.[21]

The 'compact' to which Barry refers arises from the actual existence of the ekphrastic object in the world – the reader can verify whether or not the poet's ekphrasis is accurate, which is not the case for subjects that cannot so readily be fact-checked. However, this notion of 'tricksy[ness]' is complicated by a semiotically complex object like the sheela-na-gigs. If the poet cannot be sure of what s/he is seeing, how can a poetic rendering ever be accurate? Likewise, Brinzeu points to the issue of (in)fidelity and ekphrasis, making the highly arguable assertion that linguistic translation seeks and achieves greater fidelity to an original than ekphrasis:

> [The variability among the Brueghel poems by W.H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, and Michael Hamburger] implies that from a translational viewpoint ekphrastic authors commit abuses and play tricks. They start from a different axiomatic of fidelity than the one cultivated by translators. They do not mean to render faithfully the chain of signifiers, the syntactic processes, and the discursive structures so important for linguistic translations, but to raise disturbing effects in the reader through emphasizing the difference between the two semiotic codes […] While translators have to fight seriously against the failure of negative translations, authors of ekphrasis can use differences creatively.'[22]

This poetic 'trickseyness' [sic] referred to by Brinzeu is not, in fact, resolvable by a mere 'flashing of poetic license' as Barry remarks or a '[creative] use [of] differences' as Brinzeu suggests. Instead, this issue of fidelity underscores the problem with understanding mimises/representation as the ultimate goal of ekphrastic poetry (or, really, any poetry). Such a goal does not necessarily coincide with poets' own ekphrastic aims and processes or the processes of much contemporary poetry, ekphrastic or otherwise. For example, my goal was not to 'raise disturbing effects in the reader' due to the *difference* between visual and textual modes. Instead, I aimed to disturb a unitary understanding of the carving itself, both as a visual object and textual presence in the archive I had compiled.

Michael Davidson describes the status of mimesis in contemporary poetics, arguing that linguistic self-reflexivity and a fundamental questioning of language's semiotic capabilities characterizes modern poetry:

> …contemporary poetry challenges such [a representational] attitude by forcing greater attention on the medium as productive rather than reproductive.

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[21] Barry, "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis," 161.
[22] Pia Brinzeu, "Ekphrasis: A Definition," *British and American Studies* 11 (2005), 249.

> Language in the modern period questions its ability to "paint," rhetorically, and turns the mirror which once faced outward to nature back upon itself.[23]

Though it is unclear when the 'modern' period in poetry begins according to Davidson, this complex relationship between language and representation certainly occurs as far back as the Romantic period, as chronicled by James Heffernan (who also cites William Freedman). These critics point to the complex layers of mediation in Shelley's 'Ozymandias' in which the speaker [mediation 1] refers to a traveler who tells of a statue [mediation 2] that has an identifying caption [mediation 3]. The traveler also describes the sculptor [mediation 4] who 'who knows how to read faces well and to represent them in stone so that expressions can *be* read' [mediation 5].[24] This process of mediation in 'Ozymandias' demonstrates Davidson's highly useful distinction between the 'poem "about" a painting' and what he calls 'a painterly poem' that 'produces' rather than 're-produces'.

I found Davidson's ideas to be extremely helpful in accounting for my ekphrastic aims. Rather than acting as a mere taxonomy of ekphrasis, this formulation elicits a necessary question: just what sort of ekphrasis do I wish to write? Davidson's distinction between a poem 'about' a painting and a 'painterly' poem was helpful for me to articulate my reluctance to pursue mimesis and my desire to foreground the complexity of the sheela-na-gigs' impacts and meanings.

Fig. 1: Davidson's Distinction[25]

'Painterly' Poem	Poem 'About' a Painting
• 'emphasis on…ability to embody the painting's formal strategies' • '…the poet reads the painting as a text, rather than as a static object' • 'reads larger painterly aesthetic' • 'confront[s] (formally or thematically) [the painting's] complex semiotic activity'	• 'emphasis on...mimetic potential' • 'pausing at a reflective distance from the painting' • 'poem is a means of penetrating the "psychological space" of the painting'

According to Davidson, engagement with 'complex semiotic activity' is largely sacrificed by the ekphrastic poem 'about' a painting due to such a poem's willfully transparent and

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[23]Michael Davidson, "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42, no. 1 (1983), 69.

[24] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 117-118.

[25] Davidson, "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem," 71.

unselfconscious rendering of the 'reality of the painting'. (Clearly, Shelley's 'Ozymandias' does not fit this category.) As I discussed in Chapter Two, to a large extent my orientation toward sheela-na-gigs arises from an ongoing acknowledgement of and obsession with their semiotic complexity. The question, 'Just what am I looking at?', continually raises itself in relation to this object and presses upon my ekphrastic practice. Finally, this 'painterly' orientation contrasts with the approach of some of the poems on sheela-na-gigs by other poets that I will discuss in the next chapter, which can largely be classified as poems 'about' the carvings.

Following on from these questions of fidelity, mimesis, representation, and semiotic complexity, John Hollander and Peter Barry have developed further sub-definitions of ekphrasis to differentiate between the varying qualities and statuses of visual objects in ekphrastic texts – whether they are real or imagined, named or unnamed, and possible or impossible in their qualities. These subcategories clarify discussions of my and other poets' ekphrastic poems.

Fig. 2: Ekphrastic Referents according to Hollander[26] and Barry[27]

Actual	An actual artwork	John Hollander
Closed	An actual artwork is named in text	Peter Barry
Open	An actual artwork is not named in text (no framing)	Peter Barry
Notional	An imaginary artwork	John Hollander
Fictional	An artwork that could exist (does things actual artworks can do and 'is presented in entirely "realist" terms')	Peter Barry
Conceptual	An object that could not exist (does things actual artworks could not do)	Peter Barry

As Heffernan explains, 'up through the Renaissance, nearly all literary ekphrasis outside of Italy is notional […] notional ekphrasis does not even presuppose the existence of the work of art it describes'.[28] For example, perhaps the most famous example of ekphrasis, Homer's description of Achilles shield in the *Illiad* is notional; the shield did not (and could not possibly) exist as described. On the other hand, many modern and

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[26] John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[27] Barry, "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis," 156.

[28] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 91.

contemporary ekphrastic poems are about actual artworks. Some of my and other poets' ekphrastic poems on sheela-na-gigs are *actual* – the objects do exist. However, these ekphrases can sometimes be *open* – when no particular sheela-na-gig is named – or *conceptual* – when the sheelas take on impossible, magical qualities. Considering these terminologies during and after the writing process foregrounded an aspect of the poems that I might not have examined or undertaken in the first place.

An additional helpful sub-definition is offered by Yacobi, who distinguishes between the 'art model' and the 'artwork', with the art model being 'a common denominator or a generalized image' rather than an 'allusi[ion] to a specific picture or statue'.

Fig. 3: Yacobi's Distinction[29]

Art model	'a common denominator or a generalized image'
Art work	'allusi[ion] to a specific picture or statue'

Yacobi points to the practical difference between the art model's generalized gesture and Spitzer's definition of ekphrasis as the 'the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptured work of art', as well as Hollander's emphasis on this description as 'address[ing] a particular visual image'. Once again, Yacobi's distinction is relevant to poems on sheela-na-gigs because I and other poets tend to refer to sheela-na-gigs as art models. Addressing an 'art model' varies from the open, actual ekphrasis described above because the reference could be made to *any* sheela-na-gig rather than a specific sheela-na-gig that remains unnamed but is still discernible, thereby offering a different possible impact.

In sum, I will use this overview and terminology covered in this chapter in my analysis in Chapter Four of the sheela poems by other poets and in Chapter Five where I detail my own creative decision-making process.

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[29] Yacobi, "Pictorial Models and Narrative Ekphrasis."

CHAPTER 4
Examining Existing Ekphrases on the Sheela-na-gigs

Sheela-na-gigs have appeared in the work of contemporary Irish, Scottish, and Canadian poets, including, John Montague, Susan Connolly, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Robin Robertson, and Molly Peacock. Amidst my research on sheela-na-gigs and ekphrasis, I sought out these poems in order to get a sense of their varying techniques and perspectives. Below I discuss the poetic and semiotic orientations of these poems from my vantage as a poet writing a full-length poetry collection on the carvings. Therefore, my assessment of these poems should be understood from a practitioner's standpoint (an orientation I set up in Chapter One and which has been maintained throughout this thesis), rather than as literary criticism. Examining these poems early in my writing process helped me to better undertake and understand my ekphrastic practice *post facto*.

My analysis of these poems centres on whether these poets accept and explore the 'complex semiotic activity' of the sheela-na-gigs or write poems 'about' them that settle their meaning, to borrow from Michael Davidson's distinction between a 'painterly poem' and a poem 'about' a painting.[1] As I discussed in Chapter Two, the unresolvable questions around the meaning of sheela-na-gigs and the specific thematic implications of those questions was by far the strongest trigger for me to write a poetry collection about them. Therefore, at the beginning of my own writing process, I was particularly interested in how other poets approached these questions, or if they addressed them at all in their work. I must, however, acknowledge that the poems discussed below are *not* part of book-length collections on sheela-na-gigs, and that it is possible that a further creative focus on the carvings by any one of these poets might have led to different results in terms of their handling of semiotic complexity.[2] Nevertheless, I have identified three overarching strands in the ekphrastic approaches of these six poets that lay the groundwork for my elucidation of my own practice in Chapter Five:

1. All of these poets treat the meaning of the sheela-na-gigs deterministically (Seamus Heaney to the least extent). This includes seeing them as symbols of female empowerment, as erotic objects of desire and/or 'feminine' goddesses, as primal emblems of the psychosexual process of life, and as performative teachers of general life lessons about 'seeing'. In other words,

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[1] Davidson, "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem," 71.
[2] From the date of submitting this PhD, there are no published, book-length collections on sheela-na-gigs.

they all fix or directly state the meaning of the sheela-na-gigs. Though some of the poems do momentarily acknowledge difficulty in arriving at these meanings this acknowledgement occurs only briefly and is not as a focal point as is my aim.

2. All of the poems deploy a tutelary function for the carvings, which are portrayed as teaching the poetic speaker (and the reader) about the determined meanings indicated above. This is a not an uncommon practice in ekphrastic writing as demonstrated by Loizeaux.[3]

3. Most of the poems by male poets avoid/transform the characteristics of the sheela and/or elide the female point-of-view. On the other hand, the poems by the two female poets engage more directly with the physical characteristics and connotations of the sheela-na-gig.

Susan Connolly (1956-) is an Irish poet whose work often explores Irish history, myth, and gender. Her collections *Forest Music* and *For the Stranger* each include a sheela-na-gig poem.[4] The first poem 'Sheela-na-gig' (included below) is structured around a systematic interpretation of physical and gestural aspects of a sheela-na-gig – except for one moment in the poem in which the speaker wonders, 'image… / of what?' (section 4). The majority of the eight numbered sections describe the carving in clipped, simple language, ending with a one-line hyphenated interpretation: 'Her thighs/widely-splayed, / her enlarged / vagina / wide-open / place-of-the-snake' (section 1). The final section gathers these statements into a four-line closing assessment of the sheela's significance that unequivocally answers the question previously posed in section 4: 'place-of-the-snake / womb-of-the-mother / mother-of-us-all / sheela-na-gig'. Connolly's second sheela poem, 'Female Figure', is written in first-person from the perspective of a specific sheela-na-gig (located on White Island, Lough Erne), thereby demonstrating what Loizeaux calls 'the ekphrastic convention of prosopopoeia, the envoicing of the silent

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[3] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 23. Loizeaux underscores 'the common tutelary function of ekphrasis present in the tradition since Philostratus tutored his young charge by showing him the family art collection'.

[4] Susan Connolly, "Sheela-na-Gig," in *For the Stranger* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1993), 51-53; Connolly, "Female Figure," in *Forest Music* (London: Shearsman, 2009), 56-57.

image, the most radical means ekphrasis has at its disposal to animate the still, silent image into speech'.[5]

Susan Connolly
Sheela-na-gig

1.
Her thighs
widely-splayed,
her enlarged
vagina
wide-open
place-of-the-snake

2.
Face distorted,
deeply-furrowed
brow,
tip of her tongue
protruding
from a big wide
mouth;
both hands
clutch her cunt
womb-of-the-mother

3.
Eyes agape
everything
about her
wide-open…
to mirth
and wonder,
trust disgust

4.
Smell of stone
taste of stone
cold to touch
ugly-as-sin
stone image—
image…
of what?

5.
Women—
we leave our
thumbprints

[5] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 23.

on her vagina,
believe
in her power

6.
Sex-hunger
the fast
and the slow
of arousal,
sudden
seductive-power,
lying-down-together
again and again

7.
Sheela-na-gig
compels…
not ugly
but sad—
everything
about her
so exposed

8.
Clutching
her vagina
with both hands
place-of-the-snake
womb-of-the-mother
mother-of-us-all
sheela-na-gig

Susan Connolly
Female Figure
Sheela-na-gig, White Island, Lough Erne

Mouth fixed
in a wide grin,
puffed-out
cheeks
fingers to lips—
am I saying something bad?
No! after centuries of
darkness
I tell
the truth.

Women—
you look at me
and talk about

your 'desire-need'.
I hear a babble,
then your
wisdom.
Fingers to
lips I speak
my need of
you.

Eyes framed
by a heavy ridge
I laugh—
witness
and survivor.
Caught in stone
I celebrate
all who tell
the truth—
over centuries
of darkness.

The sheela in Connolly's poem claims to 'tell the truth' (line 12) and 'celebrate / all who tell / the truth— / over centuries of darkness' (lines 30-34). While 'the truth' spoken by the sheela-na-gig is never explicitly or even metaphorically conveyed, it evidently has something to do with women and their essentialized "'desire-need'" and 'wisdom'. Loizeaux understands prosopopoeia:

> [a]s a closing of the gap between poet and image, prosopopoeia can be seen variously as the most hegemonic of moves (language taking over the image, inhabiting it) or as the most altruistic (language liberating the frozen image to tell its story). Whether and how one can speak for others gets to the center of the ethical questions ekphrasis raises.[6]

In the case of Connolly's poem, both of these variations are felt – the poem is hegemonic in its determinism of the sheela-na-gig's meaning and altruistic in the act of claiming voice and power for a liberated corporeal femininity. Similarly, in her study of the use of sheela-na-gigs in Irish women's poetry and visual art Luz Mar González-Arias traces the problematics of this use of the 'corporeal' in a specifically Irish context:

> It could be argued that such a perspective may easily turn into the biological reductionism that feminist theories on the body are trying to avoid. In these works, an emphasis on the corporeal and its discursive, creative possibilities may involve the dangerous assumption that biology is destiny and that the female body hides some kind of universal 'truth' to be rescued from invisibility and oblivion. Goddess imagery can also mislead us to believe that, in the remote past, women had all the power over the systems of representation in a matriarchal

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[6] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 23.

Ireland whose existence, again, is difficult to prove historically. In general, the simplifications that can derive from the celebration of pagan myths have also been the subject of feminist criticism and artistic revisions. However, the deep influence that Christianity (in particular Catholicism) has played in the construction of 'Irish womanhood' turns pre-Christian myths into appropriate vehicles to resist non-corporeal representations of the women of Ireland…[7]

Despite my agreement with González-Arias's critique of essentialism, I find it difficult to accept the 'appropriateness' of this unreflective hearkening back to a pagan origin not only because such an origin is impossible to prove for the sheelas, but mainly because even a cursory examination of the transitions from the Celticism of the Irish Revival, to Irish Prime Minister/President Eamon de Valera and the Catholic Church's idealistic and oppressive vision for Ireland (particularly for Irish women), to the commercial success of *Riverdance*, demonstrates how such unreflective and often historically innaccurate *hearkening back* can create a fixed and singular origin story that can be too easily co-opted toward non-liberatory ends.[8] This critique is relevant to Connolly's work and also affected my own writing as will be shown in Chapter Five.

American-Canadian poet Molly Peacock's (1947-) poetry often deploys strict verse form in combination with colloquial language. Her sonnet 'Gargoyle'[9] reads the sheela as symbolizing the ancient wisdom of female empowerment. It centres on the enduring clitoris of the sheela which 'snorks past any dilemma / of what it is: sex flung wide above a / church door, a masturbating gargoyle wed / to worship' (lines 7-10). Like Connolly's work, Peacock's poem argues for the sheela as a symbol of autonomous female sexual empowerment, suggesting that its contorted facial expression is ultimately not just 'orgasm, or death, or warning', but is in fact 'the puckered surprise of the release of / her god inside—old, old among the folds. Of / the wisdom of wenches this: self love' (lines 11-14). Peacock's sonnet is an example of notional, conceptual ekphrasis. Firstly, most sheelas do not show a clitoris, and their poses suggest an opening of the labia around the vaginal opening rather than higher up around the clitoris. Secondly, the clitoris described by Peacock has impossible, magical qualities. It can endure the elements because it is 'a / prow that even when wind and hail blast a- / way her dugs and ribs and ears and bald' still survives to convey the sheela's message of sexual autonomy (lines 4-6, 14). This clitoris is reminiscent of Heffernan's discussion of the ideological

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[7] González-Arias, "Sheela-na-Gigs as Multiple Signifiers," 102-118.

[8] Eamon de Valera participated in the 1916 Easter Rising. His initial refusal to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty with the British brokered by Michael Collins led to the Irish Civil War and the death of Michael Collins. De Valera was Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and later President of Ireland (holding political office until 1973) and molded the country into an isolationist, and primarily agricultural, theocracy.

[9] Molly Peacock, "Gargoyle," in *Second Blush* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 45.

shift occurring during the Romantic period toward viewing the work of art as 'perpetuat[ing] a fleeting appearance' when previously:

> nearly all literary ekphrasis outside of Italy [was] notional. Since notional ekphrasis does not even presuppose the existence of the work of art it describes, it need hardly treat them as exempt from the ravages of time and historical contingency, and in this respect it reflects a conception that prevailed well beyond the Renaissance: the idea that visual art was perishable.[10]

Thus, the clitoris in Peacock's poem demonstrates a curious reversal. Instead of the familiar Romantic formula that views a work of art as capturing the brevity of existence, this sheela is arresting an old, enduring, and *repeatable* truth (due to the multi-orgasmic capacity of an actual clitoris). This clitoris has a magical quality in addition to its usual anatomical capacity, a quality that allows it to capture an ancient truth. The semiotic complexity in Peacock's poem, therefore, is derived from an exploration of potential meanings of sheela-na-gigs through a tracing of shifts of time/space: the time of the orgasm, the time of the elements, and the space of the statue, the body, and the 'self'.

Molly Peacock
Gargoyle

Shelagh na gig, lady on her haunches,
squats with arms down, pulling her pudenda
away from her clitoris which launches
out of her stone sculpted body's end a
prow that even when wind and hail blast a-
way her dugs and ribs and ears and bald head
snorks past any dilemma
of what it is: sex flung wide above a
church door, a masturbating gargoyle wed
to worship, her bulging eyes popping in
an orgasm, or death, or warning, or in
the puckered surprise of the release of
her god inside—old, old among the folds. Of
the wisdom of wenches this: self-love.

Though both Connolly's and Peacock's poems are more oriented toward a female-empowering reading of sheela-na-gigs[11] than the poems I will discuss below, they still forward potentially essentialist readings of the female body and female sexuality and do not reflexively problematize a contemporary poet's and reader's encounter with these ancient objects. As discussed in Chapter Two, the fact that sheelas raise these

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[10] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 91.
[11] Unlike Weir and Jerman in *Images of Lust*, these poets do not suggest that sheela-na-gigs are 'warnings against lust' demonstrating the misogyny of the Church.

feminist/essentialist readings – readings that as noted here are propounded by many of the extant poems on the carvings – triggered me to seek a subjective and semiotically complex manner of rendering them poetically.

In contrast to my own goals, Martha Easton describes the manner in which the 19th century antiquarians portrayed sheela-na-gigs in their sketchbooks:

> …these men seemed to feel threatened and even assaulted by the sight of the sheelas. Perhaps in order to regain control of their viewing experience, to restore (reinstate) the male gaze, antiquarian drawings of the sheelas often do not simply reproduce them, but rather alter them, so they seem to become more visually appealing, more arousing, more, shall we say, erotic. Some close their eyes and appear to be masturbating – no surviving sculptures match these drawings.[12]

I had the opportunity to view the original sketches found in William Simpson's secret notebook at the British Museum and can attest to the strange transformations undergone by particular sheelas. The sketched carvings have flowing hair, shapely breasts and thighs, and 'come hither' rather than 'back off' postures, which is in stark contrast to their actual appearances in photographs and *in situ* (as demonstrated by the photographs located in the Appendix). There is no Bakhtinian grotesque in these sketches! This bizarre reaction by Simpson and some of the other 19th century antiquarians is not unique to the period. Contemporary poems by Michael Longley and Robin Robertson also display a curious erasure of sheela-na-gigs' characteristic baldness, lack of breasts, and general grotesquerie. Like Connolly and Peacock, these poets skirt the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs; however, they choose to fix the carvings' meanings in the realm of the *placidly* sacred and erotic while transforming their appearance and atmosphere from the strange and grotesque to the palatable and sensuous. In both their poems, sheela-na-gigs teach the protagonists truths about sexuality and fertility.

In Irish poet Michael Longley's (1939-) poem 'Sheela-na-Gig'[13], word choice rather than pen strokes transform the Kilnaboy church sheela-na-gig from a blocky-headed, bald hag to a soft and comely goddess.

Michael Longley
Sheela-na-gig

She pulls her vulva apart for everyone to look at,
Not just for me, a stonemason deflowering stone.
She behaves thus above the church door at Kilnaboy
Where the orchids have borrowed her cunty petals.

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[12] Easton, "Medieval Erotic Art and its Audiences."
[13] Michael Longley, "Sheela-na-Gig," in *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 204.

> A proper libation would be sperm and rainwater.
> Ivy grows over her forehead, wall-rue at her feet.

The speaker of the poem is the carver of the sheela-na-gig who claims to be: 'the stonemason deflowering stone' and who can also be understood as a foil for the poet himself (line 2). This stonemason views the act of display on the part of the sheela-na-gig as *innate*. It is something she does 'not just for [him]' due to his act of carving her, but in general, 'for everyone to look at' (lines 1, 2). This moment of conceptual ekphrasis (though referring to a specific sheela carving) is not unlike the enduring clitoris in Peacock's poem. Longley's sheela somehow displays herself even prior to being carved! However, unlike Peacock's poem, the sheela's posture is not about herself ('self love'), but is instead about the viewer (she is 'displaying'), a contrast which raises the gendered perspective of the poet/viewer discussed by Loizeaux in relation to Lessing (the silent, female object and the articulate, male viewer). Furthermore, unlike the harsher language found in Peacock's poem ('dugs and ribs and ears', 'snorks', 'bulging eyes', 'wisdom of wenches'), Longley chooses softly assonant, fricative words following his revelation of the sheela's enduring display. The words 'orchids', 'petals', 'proper libation', 'rainwater', 'ivy', and 'wall-rue' contradict the stark and stolid appearance of the actual Kilnaboy sheela pictured in the Appendix. Though Longley describes the petals as 'cunty' and also suggests making an offering of 'sperm', these discordant and explicit words fail to disrupt an abidingly sensual and worshipful mood. Indeed, aside from these two words and the first line that mentions the 'pull[ing]…apart' of the vulva, the speaker could just as easily be worshipping and eroticizing a statue of the Virgin Mary based on the palette of language that is used. The contrast between the actual Kilnaboy sheela-na-gig and the poem's overall linguistic texture is astonishing.

Likewise, Scottish poet Robin Robertson's (1955-) 'Sheela-na-Gig' circumvents any acknowledgment of the carving's probable appearance (this is an 'open' ekphrastic poem with no specific sheela-na-gig named in the text) in order to construct an erotic narrative written from a third-person point-of-view.[14] The poem's protagonist is on a quest for this sheela through 'rain that is fallen for days' (line 2). The journey is rendered in the erotically-charged language of *double entendre*: 'He has reached her island by stones / pegged in swollen water' (lines 1-2). The double-meaning is also palpable as a sort of nature-bound consummation: 'He touches the welling mouth, the split stone; / she shows him the opening folds […] light deepens / at the lid of the lake, the water creased

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14 Robin Robertson, "Sheela-na-Gig," in *A Painted Field* (London: Picador, 1997), 9.

/ by the head of an otter, body of a bird' (lines 4-5, 8-9). Again, we do not see this sheela at all, and the atmosphere she seems to have triggered for this poet is of a non-threatening erotic encounter. The narrative structure of Robertson's poem is reminiscent of Loizeaux's reading of Lessing's gendered opposition of word and image. The poet is 'abstract, rational, active, eloquent, and male', and the sheela is: 'bodily, present, replete, still, silent, natural, and feminine'.[15] Likewise, Heffernan describes the narrative impulse of ekphrasis, which occurs in Robertson's poem: 'When ekphrasis converts the picture of an arrested action into a story, as it typically does, we can read this conversion in terms of gender: the male agent of narrative overcoming the female as image, as a fixed and fixating object of desire'.[16] The nature of this particular image – most likely a bald, haggard, and toothy female figure holding open her vulva – would seem to be difficult to *overcome* with such soft language, but somehow this is not the case in Robertson's poem.

> Robin Robertson
> Sheela-na-Gig
>
> He has reached her island by stones
> pegged in swollen water,
> through rain that has fallen for days.
>
> He touches the welling mouth, the split stone;
> she shows him the opening folds
> where rainwater troubles and turns.
>
> The rain slows, and stops; light deepens
> at the lid of the lake, the water creased
> by the head of an otter, body of a bird.

The poems of Longley and Robertson are relevant to notions of ekphrastic ethics and fidelity raised by critics Barry and Brinzeu. Clearly, these poets' renderings of sheela-na-gigs are empirically inaccurate. However, this inaccuracy is not a problem in and of itself, particularly if representation/mimesis are not the primary context in which the poets' work is being considered. My critique, therefore, is not leveled at the technique of these poets – whether or not they, in poetic terms, effectively describe the sheelas as they are or whether the carvings are transformed into whatever the poets might wish them to be. Instead, of most interest to me is how these particular inaccuracies imply certain ideological commitments and refuse to embrace the sheelas' semiotic complexity. Had

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[15] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 14.
[16] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 109.

these poets erotically rendered sheela-na-gigs as they actually appear (aged, bald, haggard, disproportionate), then the poems would have placed the speaker and reader at the centre of the semiotic complexity of the sheela and the female body rather than at an objectifying and skewed distance. Loizeaux argues that the 'feminist ekphrasis' of Marianne Moore and Adrienne Rich 'takes up the gendering of ekphrasis by asking what happens when women write it [and how women rewrite] the social and epistemological dynamics implied in the notion of an active masculinized word and a passive, feminized image'.[17] I would suggest that even though Longley and Robertson are male poets, they could have more sophisticatedly 'establish[ed] relationships to images and to others on less possessive grounds'.[18] (I view their renderings of sheelas in these fixed, eroticized, and beautified terms as a form of possession.) In fact, rather than repeat the romanticized tropes of the tutelary and nebulous sexual allure of the feminine, these poets could have reflected upon their own status as male viewers of this complex object, and even explored the fact that an object depicting an other than conventionally beautiful or young female could be an object of desire.

While John Montague's (1929-) sonnet 'Sheela na Gig'[19] does not beautify or mollify the sheela-na-gig in the manner of Longley and Robertson, he does place the carving in a supporting role in that age-old grand narrative – that of the (male) person who, once born from the 'bloody tent-flap […] slick with slime and blood' tries to 'return' to the female's 'first darkness' (lines 1-2, 11). Thus, in this poem the sheela is emblematic of the 'Cunt, or Cymric *cwm*, Chaucerian *quente*, / the first home from which man is sent' (lines 3-4). As such, Montague elides the existence of female people and non-heterosexual men in the grand narrative of birth and sexuality. To this end, he chooses 'man' rather than 'men' or 'a man'. This decidedly heterosexual 'everyman' even has the requisite size complex as he 'rais[es] a puny mast / to sail back into those moist lips' (lines 6-7). As with the poems of Longley and Robertson, I do not wish to critique Montague's poem technically nor fault him for merely writing from his male standpoint. Instead, at issue is the fact that in this poem this perspective is so totalizing as to exclude women completely from any existence other than as bearers of children and sexual objects. And all of this in a poem about a *female* figure! The poem's narrative stakes the whole purpose and mystery of life on a heteronormativity in which females are utterly reduced to their genitals and reproductive and sexual capacities ('bloody tent-flap' or 'the

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[17] Ibid, 25.
[18] Ibid, 26.
[19] John Montague, "Sheela na Gig," in *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1995), 307.

Mount of Venus'): 'For the howling babe / life's warm start: man's question mark' (lines 1, 9, 13-14). And this poem is not simply an account of Montague's journey. Its point-of-view is universalizing – this is the journey of *all* (presumably, all heterosexual *men*) the people for whom it is worth constructing the role of agent in this grand narrative. Aside from the title, the sheela itself is referred to directly just once and in a tutelary capacity as in the other poems. Montague's sheela is a wise figure who knows all about this story of 'Man': 'Small wonder she grins at us, from gable / or church wall' (lines 12-13). Once again, the meaning of the sheela, and it seems women, is fixed and immanent. Bizarrely, the sheela-na-gig smiles in abeyance.

> John Montague
> Sheela na Gig
>
> The bloody tent-flap opens. We slide
> into life, slick with slime and blood.
> Cunt, or Cymric *cwm*, Chaucerian *quente*,
> the first home from which man is sent
> into banishment, to spend his whole life
> cruising to return, raising a puny mast
> to sail back into those moist lips
> that overhang *labia minora* and *clitoris*.
> To sigh and die upon the Mount of Venus,
> layer after layer of warm moss,
> to return to that first darkness!
> Small wonder she grins at us, from gable
> or church wall. For the howling babe
> life's warm start: man's question mark.

In contrast to all the previously discussed poems that focus on the female genitalia and its common associations (sexuality and fertility), Seamus Heaney's 'Sheelagh na Gig at Kilpeck'[20] (1939-2013) makes an associative leap from the sheela-na-gig itself to an experience recollected by the speaker. The carving and the memory are then linked by a shared theme of looking. Like Connolly's poem 'Female Figure', Heaney uses prosopopoeia – the envoicing of the ekphrastic object – but only very briefly. Once in the first section: 'The astute mouth, the gripping fingers / saying push, push hard, / push harder' (lines 7-9). And again in the final section: '"Yes, look at me to your heart's content / but look at every other thing"' (lines 39-40). As these lines show, the poem remains tutelary throughout. In the first numbered section of this poem, Heaney describes the sheela's position on the church's corbel as similar to a caryatid: she 'bears

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[20] Seamus Heaney, "Sheelagh na Gig at Kilpeck," in *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 49-50.

the whole burden' of the church. He also refers to the other animals and beasts surrounding her. The initial lesson imparted by this sheela is related to strength, sacrifice, and labour. Importantly, though childbirth is implied by the reader's possible prior knowledge of the sheela-na-gig's appearance, Heaney does not refer to this theme directly in such terms. Instead, the sheela's characteristics and message remain gender neutral. The speaker in the poem is in this first section accompanied by someone ('We look up at her'). The speaker/protagonist is neither a solitary and objectifying male observer who is ready to play a lead role in a romantic or heteronormative narrative nor is it 'women' writ large who await the transmission of an ancient, sexually empowering message (line 1).

In section two, Heaney's speaker is now alone, but he makes a huge associative leap, comparing: 'Her hands holding herself' to 'hands in an open barn / holding a bag open' (lines 16-18). From this association – that tellingly repeats the word 'open' – Heaney recounts his experience of seeing this bag 'running grain' and then looking at the barn's ceiling to notice 'the dark mouth and eye / of a bird's nest or a rat hole' (lines 23-24). Interestingly, he does not associate the sheela-na-gig with something related to sex, (re)birth, fertility, or the cycle of life. At only one point in the poem – when the speaker 'stood still under heavy rain / wearing the bag like a caul' – does Heaney draw on birth imagery, but this resonance is not taken up, nor is it extended (line 30). Instead, the poet returns to the collective 'we', who are in the process of looking at the sheela. This shift underscores the connections among the speaker's present and shared experience of the open sheela, his memories of the open barn and open bag, and the theme of *opened vision* common to both experiences. To Heaney, the sheela is all about looking, and the poem is about taking in the basic and unromanticized details of the sheela, her surroundings, and one's past experiences ('She is twig-boned, saddle sexed, / grown-up, grown ordinary', lines 36-37). This includes the actual 'leaper in a kilt' but also the memories and visions of the poet's eye, however banal and ordinary they might seem (line 41). This emphasis on the visionary potential of the ordinary is a common theme in Heaney's work, and it is found throughout his many books. Interestingly, the specific sheela Heaney is writing about is more cartoonish and stylized and less threatening than others. In comparison to the Ballyjamesduff sheela, for example, Kilpeck's appears almost whimsical. It would be interesting to see how Heaney might have rendered these or other more grotesque sheelas (photographs of which are included in the Appendix) and if they would have triggered a similar association and theme for him.

Seamus Heaney
Sheelagh na Gig at Kilpeck

I
We look up at her
hunkered into her angle
under the eaves.

She bears the whole burden
on the small of her back and shoulders
and pinioned elbows,

the astute mouth, the gripping fingers
saying push, push hard,
push harder.

As the hips go high
her big tadpole forehead
is rounded out in sunlight.

II
Her hands holding herself
are like hands in an open barn
holding a bag open.

I was outside looking in
at its lapped and supple mouth
running grain.

I looked up under the thatch
at the dark mouth and eye
of a bird's nest or a rat hole,

smelling the rose on the wall,
mildew, on earthen floor,
the warm depth of the eaves.

And then one night in the yard
I stood still under heavy rain
wearing the bag like a caul.

III
We look up to her,
her ring-fort eyes,
her little slippy shoulders,

her nose incised and flat,
and feel light-headed looking up.
She is twig-boned, saddle sexed,

grown-up, grown ordinary,

seeming to say,
'Yes, look at me to your heart's content

but look at every other thing.'
And here is a leaper in a kilt,
two figures kissing,

a mouth with sprigs,
a running hart, two fishes,
a damaged beast with an instrument.

To conclude, these poems were compiled and read during the first year of this PhD, early in the process of writing the collection *Strange Country*. An ongoing consideration of these poets' ekphrastic approaches to sheela-na-gigs as discussed above helped crystallize my thinking about the goals and concerns I had for my poems. The aspects of these poems that I found frustrating or intriguing did much to reveal the direction I was beginning to take in my own work as well as the significance of that direction in terms of my contribution to ekphrastic poetry generally and ekphrastic poetry on sheela-na-gigs more specifically.

CHAPTER 5
Ekphrastic and 'Uncreative' Methods in *Strange Country*

As demonstrated by previous chapters, I initially had clear ideas about the rationale and shape of the poems I would write due to my experience of *punctum* from the sheela-na-gigs, which I believe arises from their semiotic complexity. I had aimed to write poems that would use a coherent and autobiographical poetic 'I' in a lyric and narrative mode. This speaker (whether explicitly deployed or simply implied) would encounter, describe, debate, and associate from the sheela-na-gigs with particular emphasis on the tension between a desire for ritual and a critique of gender essentialism, the complexity of 'Irishness', and the Bakhtinian grotesque. These poems would be characterized by the use of a unitary poetic speaker, a narrative arc, and coherent, descriptive imagery in contrast to the fragmentation and multi-vocality. As such, they would comply with Tony Hoagland's rubric for 'Poetries of Continuity'.[1] This poetic speaker would be the same as the 'I' of the poems written for my first full-length collection *Consent*, a collection based largely on my autobiographical experiences.[2] American poet Alicia Ostriker describes the role of such an 'I' in her essay on the 'poetics of postmodern witness'. According to Ostriker, postmodern witness poetry attests to and resists what Denise Levertov has called 'the horrors of our time.' Ostriker says that despite 'employ[ing] […] fragmented and polyglot associations […] and rejecting master narratives', 'witnessing' poets, including the high modernists, still use an autobiographical 'I' as a guide within the poem. This 'I' encounters the autobiographical and the political-historical. For Ostriker: 'The poem must include history. It must contain the news. But a poetics that denies the self is also useless; for without a consciousness that desires, suffers, chooses, there is no ethical or political model for the reader'.[3] In the initial stages of writing *Strange Country*, I would have agreed with Ostriker as I strove to create a 'consciousness' that would navigate the sheela-na-gigs' semiotic complexity.

However, throughout the writing process, the approach I planned for was largely overtaken by found poems demonstrating a *multi-vocality* derived from archival texts. The limits of an autobiographical poetic speaker were pushed as this 'I' became not only the

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[1] Post-language poetry is usually labeled as 'innovative' or 'experimental' in the UK/Ireland, while in the U.S. the two camps outlined by Hoagland co-exist but without definitive names – hence his polemical monniker: 'the skittery poem of our moment'. Tony Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," *Poetry Magazine*. (March 2006).
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/177773
[2] Kimberly Campanello, *Consent* (Co. Galway: Doire Press, 2013).
[3] Alicia Ostriker, "Beyond Confession: The Poetics of Postmodern Witness," *The American Poetry Review* 30, no. 2 (2001), 35-39.

poetic speaker in the associative poems, but also the unseen poet hacking at and shaping the archival research into found and visual poems. Ultimately, I came to write a hybrid collection comprised of more pages of multi-voiced and 'conceptual' found and visual poems than lyric or narrative poems of 'continuity'. My writing process and the resulting poetry collection undermine the notion that a 'desiring, suffering, and choosing' poetic speaker called for by Ostriker must always be *directly* in evidence in order to achieve an ethical 'postmodern witness' poem in relation to the thematic areas I previously identified, especially that of an overarching semiotic complexity. Following this writing process, I now question whether 'obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity' necessarily fail 'to locate and assert value'.[4] (Hoagland's view is not unlike my own belief in the ritual function of art as an 'immediate enhancement of the experience of living', to return to Dewey's phrase.)[5] In the sections that follow, I will elucidate my process of employing and ultimately discarding this autobiographical poetic speaker in favor of multi-vocality. The first section will examine the function of the fieldwork I conducted in the poems that use this autobiographical speaker. The second section will discuss the process of developing the technique of associative ekphrasis, again, still using this coherent, autobiographical poetic 'I'. The third section will examine my experiments with using prosopopoeia. The fourth section chronicles my process of using archival text in found poems, and the final section will elucidate the impetus for writing visual poems.

Fieldwork Poems: Poetics of 'Continuity' and the 'Museum Apparatus'

As noted in Chapter Three, writing ekphrastically can involve a poet visiting galleries or museums to be in the 'presence' of an artwork in order to render it as 'present' as possible for the reader. However, the literature also demonstrates that ekphrasis is possible without the poet having seen the object at all. The poet can even imagine an object that does not actually exist (as in the case of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn') or write ekphrastically about a photograph of an object that is not present. For example, Seamus Heaney's famous poem 'Tollund Man' is about a preserved human body dating from the 4th century B.C. that was found in a bog in Denmark. Heaney had not seen the actual Tollund Man when he wrote the poem. Instead, he wrote it after seeing a photograph of the Tollund Man and reading a book on the subject. Despite being an ekphrasis about a photograph of an absent object, this poem encapsulates an additional

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[4] Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment."
[5] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 30.

impulse that is shown in some ekphrastic poems, including my own – the *desire* on the part of the poet to be in the presence of the object. The poem thematically and structurally engages the speaker's desire to view the *actual* Tollund man and the land where he was found. Throughout the poem, Heaney implicitly associates the ritual killing of the Tollund man with the tribal violence in his own contemporary Ulster, and the poem refers to the speaker finally visiting the Tollund man. This yearning is similar to the urge I felt throughout this project to view *actual* sheelas, not just to read about them or view photographs of them.[6] For me, the desire was linked to the themes explored in Chapter Two and my initial feeling of *punctum*. Thus, my ekphrastic writing about sheela-na-gigs has involved immersion in the subject, including journeys to over sixty sheela-na-gigs in Ireland and the UK. I viewed these carvings *in situ* on castles, town walls, wells, churches, in private possession, and at museums, such as the National Museum of Ireland, the British Museum, and various county museums.

I sought out sheela-na-gigs in order to experience first-hand their contexts, variations, and *punctum*. During these visits I did not, as Barbara Freitag and Theresa Oakley have done in their recent studies, measure each sheela's dimensions and empirically note their various features. Nevertheless, my pursuit of these objects was still *systematic*, but in an artistic sense. There was a fixed plan: to view as many sheelas as possible. There was also a clear method (from a poet's perspective): to 'see what happens' poetically. This 'doing/pursuing' and 'seeing what happens' is, of course, an established method in arts practice. Artists and writers have long spoken of pre-meditatively *exposing* themselves to various experiences – both ordinary and extraordinary – whether this means having a routine pot of tea, taking drugs, long walks, moving to a different country, or visiting important sites. Whether poets seek to create conditions in which we might '[recollect] emotion in tranquility' (Wordsworth)[7] or 'a long, gigantic and rational *derangement* of *all the senses*' (Rimbaud)[8], seeking experience forms a part of the writing process. Artistic inquiry involves perceiving 'material' from both everyday and extreme experience for transformation into work. The artist's knowledge of the necessity of this experience, the nature of the experience needed, and the transformation itself demonstrate what Susan Melrose calls 'expert-intuitive processing'.[9] Such processes

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[6] Heaney, "The Tollund Man," in *Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 47-48.

[7] William Wordsworth," Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads," in *English Romantic Writers*, 2nd ed., (New York: Harcourt, 1995), 425.

[8] Arthur Rimbaud, "Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871," in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, ed. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 307.

[9] Melrose, "Still Harping On."

integrate arts expertise and intuition in practice.[10] The 'see what happens' aspect of my process initially took shape in the associative ekphrastic poems discussed in detail in the next section, as well as in the poems that directly address the fieldwork component of the creative process. I understood and still understand the fieldwork poems as serving a structural function within the collection: they provide a narrative thread or 'ground situation' and develop two core characters – an 'other'/lover and a poetic speaker that encounters the sheela-na-gig in these fieldwork settings and who navigates and instigates the cascade of resonances in the associative poems.

The fieldwork poems are characterized by a foregrounding of the encounter with the 'museum apparatus' (coined by Heffernan) and the 'fieldwork apparatus' (my phrase). Indeed, this encounter with the field and the museum became central to 'what happened' artistically and led to a marked shift toward found poems that both acknowledge and *enact* the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs. Heffernan discusses the effects of the rise of the art museum on contemporary ekphrastic writing, underscoring the framing of artworks through captions, curatorial essays, and verbal commentary. As such, the 'museum apparatus' acquires, selects, and positions works in the space of the gallery. Works are juxtaposed with each other for a range of reasons – because they 'come from the same hand' or the same time period or they demonstrate thematic or technical resonances with each other.[11] The 'museum apparatus' comprises the controlled conditions in which the poet sees the ekphrastic object, conditions which are a relatively recent historical development, coinciding with the advent of the fine art museum. Thus, according to Heffernan, earlier ekphrastic poems in which the artwork is mediated only by the poet and the artist gives way to Browning's 'The Last Duchess' in which the *owner* of the painting, the Duke, speaks and 'captions' it. This transition continues to W.H. Auden's aptly titled 'Musée des Beaux Arts', in which the placement of Brueghel's paintings together in a museum allows for a broad poetic meditation on the knowledge of the 'Old Masters'. Ultimately, the 'museum apparatus' can profoundly influence the ekphrastic encounter through its mediation and placement of the artwork.

The 'museum apparatus' affected my own work on sheela-na-gigs. Firstly, the viewing of many sheelas is highly controlled as they are held in institutions, and sometimes this control seems to be due to the nature of what they depict. For example,

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[10] Melrose, "Confessions of an Uneasy Expert-Spectator."

[11] Heffernan states: '…the experience of the museum and all the apparatus of institutionalized art in our time – especially reproductions and art-historical commentary – has informed the writing of ekphrastic poetry.' Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 138.

in 1987 an American woman was denied admittance to the basement of the National Museum of Ireland where the sheela-na-gigs held by the museum are kept. As is shown by a stream of Letters to the Editor in several editions of *The Irish Times* from that year, this controversy led to a debate about why the carvings were not on display on the first place, including speculation on the prudish attitudes of the museum staff and whether, in fact, 'diapers' were wrapped around sheela-na-gigs whenever they had to be moved. Even today, out of the thirteen held by the National Museum there is only one sheela-na-gig on permanent display. Permission is still required to view the bulk of the carvings and to take photographs. Likewise, the British Museum has three carvings (one actual sheela-na-gig, and two plaster casts), which had to be viewed by appointment.[12] Secondly, the museum apparatus affected my work through the 'captioning' of the sheela-na-gigs. County museums, libraries, the National Museum of Ireland, the British Museum, and castle museums caption the carvings, whether with written materials, which often provide a partial and misleading view of the sheela-na-gigs' meaning and origin, or with verbal commentary made by museum staff. Thirdly, the museum apparatus also affects the placement of sheela-na-gigs: sometimes they are located alongside medieval works and sometimes elsewhere according to a curatorial logic that is difficult to ascertain. In the case of some museums and institutions, I have often arrived expecting the sheela-na-gig in question to be on display only to find that it has been moved to a storage area or back hallway. I then have to explain myself and negotiate to gain access.

These conditions of the 'museum apparatus' had a direct and sometimes discernible effect on the poems I wrote. The proximity at the Cavan County Museum of the two sheelas to an exhibit on the Irish Famine in which mannequins 'still wear their clothes-selling expressions / and painted nails under tattered bonnets and rags' directly shaped 'All Saints' Day' (p. 16, lines 23-24). Likewise, in 'Bunratty Castle' the '*Come-all-ya* Paddy chotchkies / made in China' in the tacky gift shop and 'the Great Hall [where] the sheela disturbs the white-washed wall' are located under the same roof (p. 29, lines 3-4, 11). Indeed, in both of these poems, such curatorial juxtapositions form the basis of the poems' associative 'leaps', which are discussed in more detail in the next section. The 'museum apparatus' also extends to the fact that many carvings are situated in glass cases, making photography and a feeling of connection to the sheela-na-gigs more difficult. (Of course, no touching is allowed.) In the poem 'Rothe House, Kilkenny' (p. 8) this sense of

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[12] Following my visit to the British Museum, the Chloran sheela-na-gig (from Co. Westmeath, Ireland) was put on display in the medieval Europe section. According to James Peters, Collections Manager, the display of the carving was due to it coming to his attention upon my request to view it.

distance and the power of the 'museum apparatus' as a captioning and controlling force structures the short poem and instantiates its themes. In the first stanza the speaker learns from museum staff that: 'The people here / ate swans' (lines 1-2). In the second stanza, the sheela is isolated from this historical 'caption' as she is locked away in a glass case. The poem's speaker must ask the staff to turn the light on:

> She's standing naked
> in the glass case
> as though nothing happened.
> We ask for the light
> to be turned on.
>
> ('Rothe House, Kilkenny', lines 6-10)

In addition to these poems that interact directly with the 'museum apparatus', other poems are influenced by the fact that not all sheelas are found in museums, sites, and buildings controlled by the Office of Public Works or similar institutions.[13] Indeed, many sheela-na-gigs are found on private property – on crumbling castles in people's farmyards, in ruined churches on remote townlands, or leaning against or embedded into the owners' stone walls. What I call the 'fieldwork apparatus' surrounds these *in situ* statues that are specially 'controlled' by their keepers and neighbors. These custodians 'caption' the sheelas with their own commentaries and 'curate' their placement in relation to other objects on their farms or in their gardens. It is important to note that the attitudes demonstrated by these keepers toward these carvings is quite often anything but 'controlling' – at times they are affectionate, at times they are quasi-religious, at other times they are curious (which includes being curious about my curiosity). Despite this difference in attitude on the part of the keepers of the sheela-na-gigs from that of the institutions that systematically curate and caption them for educational and historical purposes (or hide sheela-na-gigs for reasons of modesty or lack of exhibition space), these *in situ* custodians do still have *power* in relation to my experience of the sheela-na-gigs – specifically regarding what they say about them, where they place them, and how they respond to my request to view them. These interventions are functionally similar to those made by a museum, which is why in this chapter I continue to use the terms

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[13] According to its website, the Office of Public Works in Ireland, 'is responsible for the management of the State art collection which comprises of c. 15,000 works. These works include both historical and contemporary paintings, original prints, sculpture, fine-art and decorative objects, music, and poetry. The Collection is located in State buildings throughout Ireland.' "The Office of Public Works: Art Management." http://www.opw.ie/en/artmanagement/ (Accessed April 9, 2013).

'apparatus', 'curation', and 'captioning' when referring to the people and situations I encountered during my fieldwork.

For example, in 'Cullahill Castle' (p. 4) the speaker asks permission from an 'old woman alone' who owns the castle where the sheela is located. The personal details learned about the woman ('Everyone she knows is dead. / The man down the road / brings her enough turf to get by.') and the sheela-na-gig's location on a castle 'look[ing] out over slurry and a few cows' trigger the theme of the poem (lines 5-7, 10). Likewise, 'Doon Castle' refers to the owner of the sheela by name and includes his warning that 'the hag might make me pregnant' (p. 31, line 2). More than any other fieldwork poem, 'Excursion' (p. 9) acts as an extensive anaphoric catalogue of the keepers' oral captions and the curatorial placement of numerous *in situ* sheela-na-gigs:

> …Always by proud old women. Proud old women in cardigans building shrines in the front garden and waiting for sons to slice it out of the old wall at last. Always children leading the way on motorbikes to unmapped townlands. Always children rubbing grass in the outline to bring its parts out. Always confident male farmers, all of everything under control, even 'Oh, that thing.' Always ancient male farmers with cleft palates and soft voices and pride in what was dug up from their fields…

All in all, *in situ* sheela-na gigs are found in particularized settings, which are evoked in the fieldwork poems. In 'Doon Castle', the setting around the castle includes 'electrified gates' and 'genealogies of cow patties', which are juxtaposed against the sheela's 'pert breasts and…brasser's eyes' and her fertility status – 'her vulva…has been rubbed many times' (lines 5, 6, 9). In 'Field Photograph' (p. 21), the speaker, who has a 'fresh zit like a third eye' is photographing the other/lover 'grunting down in the gravel' (lines 2, 3). In keeping with the trigger themes discussed in Chapter Two, such Bakhtinian imagery of the body and its processes – shitting, eating, death, birth, and sex – appears throughout the fieldwork poems, whether evoked by the sheela-na-gigs themselves or by the museum and fieldwork apparatuses as in 'Culahill Castle': '…one day / you will wipe shit / from your own father's ass / as he wiped it from yours' (lines 19-22). Through this encounter with and enactment of the discourses and settings of the sheela-na-gigs, these poems seek to inhabit their semiotic complexity. The complex curating and captioning apparatus of long-dead keepers and commentators on sheela-na-gigs are also used directly in the found poems, which will be discussed in greater detail in the fourth section of this chapter.

The 'Leap' of Associative Ekphrasis

As indicated above, I initially believed the collection would be comprised of fieldwork poems and associative lyric poems.[14] The first two 'sheela' poems I wrote reflect this aim ('All Saints' Day' (p. 16) and 'Bucranium' (p. 15)), and they were composed soon after viewing some sheela-na-gigs for the first time. During this two-week period, I had only read two books on the carvings (one by Maureen Concannon and one by Anthony Weir and James Jerman), and I was using Gabriel Cannon's online guide to locate sheela-na-gigs.[15] I had also begun to find some of the existing sheela poems written by other poets and was beginning to consider their ekphrastic methods, though I had not yet extensively researched the form. At this time, the associative structure of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Sheelagh na Gig at Kilpeck' struck me as most similar to my approach to writing poetry, as well as my own intuition about the shape my future writing about sheela-na-gigs might take. I dubbed this technique 'associative ekphrasis' in order to describe what Heaney was doing in his poem and what I aspired to do in my own.

This approach appealed to me because it did not heavily depend upon description or a mimetic rendering of the carvings. As such, it had the capacity to account for the feelings elicited by the carving and for the poetic 'I' (informed by standpoint theory) to roam beyond the carvings themselves and toward the complex and potentially contrasting ideas and images they trigger. I did not wish to narrowly pursue a mimetic, descriptive approach because my initial response to the carvings was so affectively and semiotically complex. Therefore, in contrast to an ekphrasis that is heavily rooted in a disembodied, universalizing description, using associative ekphrasis I would explore the wide-range of associations raised by the sheelas. Sometimes, as in Heaney's poem, the associations could move very far away from the object itself and its most obvious resonances. These associations did not have to remain limited to the geography, history, or cultural context of the carvings, and instead could depend greatly upon the field of reference of the poetic 'I' encountering the sheela-na-gigs. This method seemed most appropriate to this enigmatic and resonant object because it refused a definitive fixing of the sheela's function or symbolic significance.

During that initial phase, I reflected on the fact that this associating would occur from my unique perspective, with my particularities of gender, nationality, political and

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[14] As I will show later in this chapter, I did not sustain this associative approach throughout the entire collection. Instead, only around twenty-five percent of the collection is comprised of 'associative' poems.
[15] Gabriel Cannon, "Ireland's Sile na gigs," http://www.irelands-sheelanagigs.org/archive/ (Accessed November 16, 2012).

spiritual commitments, and personal experience. Thus, a number of my poems on the sheelas are structured around associative shifts from the ekphrastic object toward my own ideas, memories, speculations, and emotional states. These associative shifts enable the poems to evince both a semiotic complexity in relation to the meaning of the sheela-na-gig and to explore micro-level tensions between a desire for ritual and the socio-political traps of essentialism. These associations occur from the perspective of a lyrical, autobiographical, and self-avowedly female 'I' who affectively considers and juxtaposes concept and memory, critique and desire. In other words, while Heaney's poem could be considered an example of what I am calling associative ekphrasis, it makes a single large leap from the sheela-na-gig toward a general lesson denuded of the sheela's more blatantly contradictory and complex implications. Heaney generalizes from the particularity of the sheela-na-gig to a universal philosophy of life – a 'seeing [of] things'. While he certainly does not romanticize a gendered meaning for the sheela as other poets have done, he does side-step the complexities of gender/sexuality evoked by the carvings. On the other hand, as I will discuss in detail below, my own associative poems leap amongst particular trigger issues as discussed in Chapter Two (essentialism and ritualism, the Bakhtinian grotesque, notions of 'Irishness', and epistemic and semiotic complexity), all of which more directly relate to the carvings themselves.

Earlier in this section I used the word 'leap', which I borrowed from the American poet Robert Bly, whose coining of the phrase 'leaping poetry' in 1975 captured a particular 'deep image' stance among some American poets and, in Bly's view, the poets he was introducing to America through his translations (Lorca, Machado, Vallejo, Rilke, Tranströmer, Char, Éluard, among many others). As indicated in Chapter One, as a student poet, I was profoundly influenced by Bly's view of poetry through my mentor, poet/teacher Fran Quinn, who is one of Bly's close colleagues. (Bly and Quinn count Heaney among the 'leaping', 'deep image' poets.) Some of my own work, including these associative sheela poems, makes use of this 'leaping' technique, which Bly describes in his essay-*cum*-anthology *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations*:

> A great work of art often has at its center a long floating leap, around which the work of art in ancient times used to gather itself like steel shavings around the magnet. […] The work can [also] have many leaps, perhaps shorter. The real joy of poetry is to experience this leaping inside a poem. A poet who is "leaping" makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance. In 'Nothing But Death' Neruda leaps from death to the whiteness flour, then to notary publics, and he continues to make leap after leap. Though in terms of language, then, leaping is the ability to associate fast. In the great ancient or modern poems, the considerable distance

between the associations, the distance the spark has to leap, gives the lines their bottomless feeling, their space, and the speed of the association increases the excitement of the poetry.[16]

According to this view, 'images [are] a mode of thought rather than skillful decoration' used to 'highlight the associative powers of the mind as it responds to resonant imagery and opens the self to depths that must be acknowledged despite pressures from the culture and the individual's self-protective efforts to avoid them'.[17] I had used this deep image/leaping method in poems written prior to this project, and it seemed apt for engaging with the sheela-na-gigs due to their complex resonances with both macro-level political and spiritual implications and micro-level repercussions in daily life (particularly regarding gender).

My associative poems take two forms: explicit and implicit. The *explicit* associative poems refer directly to sheela-na-gigs (as in Peter Barry's notion of 'closed' ekphrasis) and associate from the carvings toward something else, or from something else toward the carvings; sometimes these motions occur repeatedly throughout the poem.[18] The *implicit* associative poems neither refer to sheela-na-gigs directly, nor describe them, nor even discuss them at all. Instead, they associate from *sheela-related associations* (though this fact is not evident unless the poem is read in the context of a collection of poems). Whether implicitly or explicitly ekphrastic, these poems explore the tension between essentialism and ritual and embrace the carvings' semiotic complexity, as well as the epistemological uncertainty surrounding just what these carvings were intended to be and are today. Texturally, the language and images in these poems tend toward the harsh and grotesque. In contrast to Robertson's and Longley's 'lid of the lake' and 'proper libation' (line 8; line 5), I have used words like 'fungal monstrances' and 'brasser's eyes' ('Cullahill Castle' (p. 4); 'Doon Castle' (p. 31)). (This approach calls to mind the opposition Lessing sets up between the visual and verbal arts in terms of their available techniques to portray of beauty and ugliness.) I chose to use this harsh imagery and word choice in some of my poems to evoke the sheelas' roughness, a technique also used to some extent by Molly Peacock and John Montague as shown in Chapter Four.

Three explicitly ekphrastic associative poems in the collection are 'All Saints' Day' (p. 16), 'Bucranium' (p. 15), and 'Bunratty Castle' (p. 29). In 'All Saints' Day', the

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[16] Robert Bly, *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 3-4.
[17] Leslie Ullman, "Deep Image," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Green and others, 4th ed. (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2012), 342-343.
[18] Barry, "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis."

association occurs toward the sheela-na-gig from something else. The leaps can be mapped as follows:

Fig. 1, Associative Leaps in 'All Saints' Day'

Section One	
a	'hungry children' (1970's Ireland)
b[19]	street names in Irish estates, which are names of important religious sites, many of which have sheela-na-gigs
c	the ritualized killing of a horse (1970's Ireland)
Section Two	
a	hungry children during the Great Famine of Ireland (1845-52)
d	reference to a specific museum exhibit on the Famine with mannequins (Cavan County Museum)
Section Three	
b	an interrogation of the power of the sheela-na-gigs
d	women/the feminine
e	reference to destruction/silencing of women and carvings
Section Four	
d	a scene in a sex shop including mannequins
d	reference to female power
e, c	destruction/silencing in relation to the killing of the horse

As shown, there are five associative leaps in this poem, and these leaps are woven together irregularly rather than consecutively. The starting point of this ekphrastic poem is not the sheela-na-gig itself. Instead, the carving is evoked by a seemingly unrelated location (a marginalized Irish housing estate) and its ecclesiastical place-names. However, the sheela-na-gig is the implicit endpoint of the poem – the simultaneous interrogation of the power of the carvings and the power of women in the face of human cruelty and suffering in Section III culminates in Section IV where gender-neutral culpability rather than a reliance on an innate gendered power is asserted. Thus, in 'All Saints' Day' the speaker references 'the feminine' and some of the folklore about the sheelas, but, in contrast to Susan Connolly's and Molly Peacock's poems, the 'I' does not 'fix' their meaning or assume their efficacy at 'quell[ing] the pyre'. The poetic speaker in this poem

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[19] The Crumlin housing estate in Dublin was laid out according to the shape of a Celtic Cross. Streets were named after abbeys such as Clonmacnoise, Cashel, and Clogher.

does the leaping and linking, navigating the complex emotions and ethics these images raise as articulated by Ostriker's 'poetics of postmodern witness'.[20]

'Bunratty Castle'[21] (p. 29) is a closed ekphrastic poem according to Peter Barry's definition.[22] The sheela's location is specified in the poem's title. Thus, this is an ekphrastic poem about 'art work' rather than about an 'art model' that stands in for all sheelas (as the generalized 'sheela' in 'All Saints' Day' had been).[23] This poem makes a large leap from the castle's tourist gift shop selling tenuously Irish objects to an autobiographical memory. Unlike 'All Saints' Day', the sheela is the *cause* of this associative movement. This chart demonstrates the poem's associations:

Fig. 2, Associative Leaps in 'Bunratty Castle'

Stanza 1:
  o   castle's gift shop

Stanza 2:
  o   sheela-na-gig in the castle's Great Hall
  o   simile comparing sheela to 'a blood clot on a bathroom title' that can be 'trace[d]' so that 'it spreads and shifts'
  o   simile comparing the 'trac[ing]' of the sheela to 'spread[ing] and shift[ing]' of a fish belly, which brings the poem…

Stanza 3:
  o   …to an enjambed third stanza and the autobiographical memory of cleaning fish with my father following the difficult birth of my brother

While this poem does leap from the sheela to an image of a blood clot (a reference to the female body and the grotesque) to a fish (an object commonly associated with the vulva and Christ), the shifts occur without resorting to an extended 'reading' of these images or a definitive interpretation of the sheela as occurs in the sheela poems by other poets.[24] Instead, the poem's link between the sheela and the mother/birth occurs via a scene in which the female body is not a direct factor in the narrative (cleaning a fish with the father). Certainly, there are strong thematic and symbolic resonances among the mother, the father, the fish, and the sheela, but I would suggest that unlike Susan Connolly's poem in which the sheela is emphatically declared 'mother-of-us-all', this resonance has

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[20] Ostriker, "Beyond Confession: The Poetics of Postmodern Witness."
[21] I also consider 'Bunratty Castle' to be a 'fieldwork poem', a type I will discuss further below.
[22] Barry, "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis."
[23] Yacobi, "Pictorial Models and Narrative Ekphrasis."
[24] Barbara Walker, "Fish," *A Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983), 313-315. Walker argues that the 'vesica pisces' (the 'vessel of the fish' and symbol of 'The Great Goddess') is a precursor to Christ's fish imagery.

not been forced from or onto the sheela and instead has arisen organically from associated images. This technique makes the associative ekphrastic pulse of this poem similar to Heaney's 'Shelagh na Gig at Kilpeck' and is in line with Bly's 'deep image' notion of the poet leaping among conscious and unconscious materials. Thus, in my explicitly ekphrastic associative poems, the poetic 'I' navigates varying associations toward or away from the sheela-na-gig while referring directly to either a particular sheela-na-gig, as in 'Bunratty Castle', or to the sheela-na-gig as an art model that stands in for all carvings as in 'All Saints' Day' (p. 16).

On the other hand, some poems in the collection are *implicitly* ekphrastic. These implicit poems differ from Barry's notion of 'open' ekphrasis. In 'open' ekphrasis, though an artwork is not directly named, it is recognizably described in the poem.[25] In what I am calling *implicit* ekphrasis, the object is neither named nor recognizable in the poem even though it is the poem's subject or trigger. The poem 'Salmon Eggs' by Ted Hughes is an example of implicit ekphrasis of the sheela-na-gig.[26]

Ted Hughes
Salmon Eggs

The salmon were just down there—
Shivering together, touching at each other,
Shedding themselves for each other—

Now beneath flood-murmur
They peel away deathwards.

        January haze,
With a veined yolk of sun. In bone-damp cold
I lean and watch the water, listening to water
Till my eyes forget me

And the piled flow supplants me, the mud-blooms

All this ponderous light of everlasting
Collapsing away under its own weight

Mastodon ephemera

Mud-curdling, bull-dozing, hem-twinkling
Caesarean of Heaven and Earth, unfelt

With exhumations and delirious advents—

[25] Barry, "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis."
[26] Ted Hughes, "Salmon Eggs," in *River*, with photographs by Peter Keen (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 120-124.

Catkins

Wriggle at their mother's abundance. The spider clings to his craft.

Something else is going on in the river

More vital than death—death here seems a superficiality
Of small scaly limps, parasitical. More grave than life
Whose reflex jaws and famished crystals
Seem incidental
To this telling—these tidings of plasm—
The melt of mouthing silence, the charge of light
Dumb with immensity.

The river goes on
Sliding through its place, undergoing itself
In its wheel.

I make out the sunk foundations
Of dislocated crypts, a bedrock
Time-hewn, time-riven altar. And this is the liturgy
Of Earth's advent—harrowing, crowned—a travail
Of raptures and rendings. Perpetual mass
Of the waters
Wells from the cleft.
This is the swollen vent
Of the nameless
Teeming inside atoms—and inside the haze
And inside the sun and inside the earth.

It is the font, brimming with touch and whisper,
Swaddling the egg.
Only birth matters
Say the river's whorls.
And the river
Silences everything in a leaf-mouldering hush
Where sun rolls bare, and earth rolls,

And mind condenses on old haws.

The carving is not directly mentioned in the poem, nor is it described. Indeed, the only reason a reader might know this is a 'sheela' poem is by a chance reading of Hughes's letters after which certain words in the poem could be understood as alluding to a sheela-na-gig.[27] On the other hand, my implicit poems form a part of a full-length collection on

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[27] Hughes writes in this letter:
　　...I enclose some pages. Two about rivers (from a book about rivers) and one about a bird from a
　　book of birds. The SALMON EGGS poem was originally a poem about Sheila-na-gig. An Irish
　　friend of mine is making a catalogue for an exhibition of Sheila-na-gigs. Do you know these
　　creatures? Literally, 'Woman Of The Tits'. They're the most primitive figurative sculptures in

the sheelas. Therefore, unlike Hughes's solitary implicit sheela poem, my implicit poems form an essential part of a larger structure, aiding in the development of a speaker's autobiographical and thematic range and preoccupations and the character of the 'you', a male 'other' who appears in several poems across the collection. The relationship of these implicit poems to a larger structure calls to mind Heffernan's discussion of the 'transformation of ekphrasis from incidental adjunct to self-sufficient whole, from epic ornament to free-standing literary work'.[28] Heffernan is referring to the move from the ornamental ekphrastic passage found in epic Greek poetry toward the atomized, self-sufficient modern ekphrastic poem. Importantly, he reminds us that the passages in Greek that seemed like 'mere adornment' are 'quite capable of revealing or prefiguring [the epic's] central themes.'[29] Thus, in the process of writing this collection and determining which poems should form a part of it, my selection was not based on a favoring of explicitly ekphrastic poems. Indeed, two of the most central poems to the collection's thematic and structural framework are implicitly ekphrastic: 'Strange Country' (p. 36) and 'Bucranium' (p. 15). These poems extend and associate from themes raised by the carvings without explicit recourse to the sheela-na-gigs themselves. The leaping to and from sheela-na-gigs is done 'off the page'. These implicit poems 'reveal' and 'prefigure' the themes raised by sheela-na-gigs in the other more directly ekphrastic poems.

'Bucranium' and the title poem 'Strange Country' contribute to the construction of primary thematic and poetic structures around which the collection orbits. 'Bucranium' explores the complexity of the mythic feminine and actual female reproductive capacity from the perspective of an autobiographical female speaker. The 'I' associates the bucranium – a depiction of the bull's head and horns, which is an ancient symbol of the Divine Feminine representing the uterus – with the T-shaped contraceptive coil: 'a bucranium within a bucranium' (line 5). 'Bucranium' was triggered

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these islands - always the same: high relief frontal of a woman with her knees splayed, and her orangoutang fingers hauling wide her giantess cunt - her face peering over it. Mostly in Ireland - two or three in England and Wales, built into churches - into the walls, often on the outside, just among the rough stonework - but always much older than the church, and always very crudely cut. In my poem ['Salmon Eggs'] I suppose that this woman is our oldest goddess (a death/battle/love goddess) who copulated with her consort standing astride rivers (I suppose where she also gave birth). (A suggested scholarly correction makes her Sheila-na-gog - woman of God, God's Wife. Gog in old Irish means God!) So my verses conflate the sculpture, the goddess, the red fish eggs and the swollen wintry river. Mainly, though, as you will see, it is about salmon spawning in the River Torridge - beside which I spent too much time. Hughes, "Letter to Ben Sonnenberg, 16 July 1979," in *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 448.

[28] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 137.

[29] Ibid, 137.

by my researching the copper coil and my reading of Marija Gimbutas's book *The Living Goddesses* in which she includes a discussion of the bucranium and the carving of triangles and bucrania on the abdomens of stone Neolithic statues:

> …the key to understanding Neolithic renditions of the bull's head and horns (*bucranium* in archaeological literature) comes through their resemblance to the female uterus and fallopian tubes. In the temples of Catal Huyuk, on a series of female forms there are actually depicted bucrania where the uterus and fallopian tubes should be. […] The analogy takes on more meaning when we consider that rosettes, often identified with bull's horns, correspond to the flowerlike ends of the fallopian tubes. The artist Dorothy Cameron, who originally made this observation, speculates that people observed the corpse's anatomy unfolding during excarnation, when birds of prey stripped away the flesh and exposed the internal organs. However peculiar this symbolism may seem, there is no denying its existence. Bucrania consistently appear associated with tombs and the goddess' womb.[30]

These associations explore the notion of women's bodies acting as 'stand-ins' for divine and transformative states, as well as the implications of this perspective for contemporary people. Sheela-na-gigs are not named in the poem, and though a specific sheela does appear in the poem's cascade of associations, the reference is unlikely to be grasped by readers, making this poem implicitly ekphrastic. (The Seir Keiran sheela-na-gig has drilled holes in her belly that are thought to have played a role in a ritual practice. It is referenced in line 8 of the poem.) 'Bucranium' leaps towards the sheela and then towards bullfighting, some forms of which involve snatching rosettes tied to a bull's horn's rather than fighting and killing it. The poem finally rests upon the implications of these ancient and contemporary associations for the poetic 'I' and her partner.

The implicit poem, 'Strange Country', forwards a central theme of the collection – the tension between a desire for a ritual and symbolic organization of daily life and the problematics of gender and cultural essentialism. The poem moves associatively – the speaker ranges from describing Greek funeral practices to alluding to the partition of Ireland, all from the perspective of a poetic 'I' who is questioning the validity of ritual and symbol, particularly in relation to women's status as embodiments of the nation and the sacred cycle of life and death. As such, the poem also grapples with the complexities of 'Irishness' from the vantage of this speaker who is clearly situated as apart from this identity. Furthermore, the 'strange[ness]' explored in the poem is not limited to an Irish locale or culture. As explored in Chapter Two, I sought to complicate rather than replicate poetic tropes (and indeed quotidian stereotypes) that suggest that Irishness and

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[30] Gimbutas, *The Living Goddesses*, 35.

Ireland are enveloped in misty anachronism. The lengthy exploration of these two themes make this implicitly ekphrastic poem vital to the collection and an apt title poem. Additionally, the word 'country' originates from the word 'cunt', offering another evocation of the feminine and the nation.[31]

Prosopopoeia: What Lesson? Whose Voice?

The previous two sections discussed the status of the poetic speaker in this collection. This speaker was shown to provide a 'continuity' in narrative and characterization and to act as an associational starting point. However, in one poem ('Cullahill Castle' (p. 4)) the speaker is an actual sheela-na-gig 'speaking out' in the ancient Greek sense of ekphrasis. When I began writing, I planned to experiment with this technique. As Heffernan indicates, 'prosopopoeia, or the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object' is a common ekphrastic practice found in the works of Dante, Shelley, Keats and Virgil, among others.[32] Prosopopoeia can be used to convey a lesson to the reader from the 'mouth' of the ekphrastic object. For instance, Susan Connolly's poem 'Female Figure' and Seamus Heaney's 'Sheelagh na Gig at Kilpeck' both include the voice of a sheela-na-gig that teaches a lesson. 'Cullahill Castle' is the only prosopopoeic poem in my collection, and it imparts a lesson about the cycles of life and death: '…The closeline mouth says it / The fires we light against death / have become pyrotechnic…' (lines 15-17). The fact that there is only a single instance of prosopopoeisis in my collection arose from my grappling with the semiotic complexity of the carvings and the descriptive textures of my interactions with them (from within the museum/fieldwork apparatus). Both of these elements rendered highly suspect any attempt at a straightforward or repeated envoicing of a sheela-na-gig, whether for overtly tutelary purposes or not. Several questions arose immediately when I attempted to extend prosopopoesis and a tutelary function to other poems: *In whose voice will the sheela-na-gig speak? What will she say and why? What lesson will she teach, if any?* Attempting to answer these questions demonstrated to me that to further employ prosopopoeia in the collection would foreclose other semiotic possibilities.

Indeed, writing *Strange Country* required a continually renewed formal approach in order to avoid obscuring the carvings' multiple 'locations' – semiotic, geographical and

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[31] Barbara Walker, "Cunt," in *Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983), 197-198. According to Walker, 'cunt' is: 'Derivative of the Oriental Great Goddess as Cunti, or Kunda, the Yoni of the Uni-verse. From the same root came country, kin, and kind (Old English *cyn*, Gothic *kuni*).'
[32] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 6.

textual. My reluctance to pursue prosopopoeisis coincided with my moving away from using a coherent and particularized poetic speaker. Notably, this was not a reactionary shift away from a poetics of 'continuity'; instead, it was organic to the subject and basic themes of the collection that I had identified very early on. It was at this shifting point that these themes began to be dealt with more *formally* as opposed to associatively. I refer to a 'textual' location for the sheelas because by the mid-point of writing this collection, it became clear that the 'archive' on the sheela-na-gigs that I had amassed had itself become an influential 'apparatus'. This archive contains myriad *voices* discussing sheela-na-gigs and arguments about the carvings' origins, meanings, and purposes. My commitment to avoid a fixing of any of these areas in the overall collection meant that the poems moved away from a unitary speaker, a narrative arc, coherent imagery and description (even when associative) toward something else entirely.

Speaking of the poems by William Carlos Williams on the paintings of Brueghel, Heffernan states: '…the Brueghel poems represent silent compositions not by envoicing them but rather by telling how the poet's eye – the eye of the art-book-reading-museum-goer – wanders through them.'[33] Heffernan's discussion of Williams reveals that ekphrasis can encompass and employ the 'museum apparatus' in the framing and form of the poems. Heffernan's comment could also apply to the speaker in my associative and fieldwork poems in which the poet's eye, informed by research on sheela-na-gig and other related topics, 'wanders' among the carvings. However, once confronted with the sum of the archive I had gathered on sheela-na-gigs, I came to realize that my poet's 'eye', as I will demonstrate in the next section, was wandering through that *physical archive* rather than merely being implicity or indirectly informed by it. To refer back to Ostriker's notion of the 'postmodern witness poem' and the necessity of the poetic speaker, I began to wonder, with some apprehension, how the poetic persona could effectively and evocatively witness all of this *material*, particularly when I also felt a sense of *punctum* from it.

Encountering the 'Archival Apparatus': Found Ekphrasis
As indicated above, a major shift occurred in my use of the poetic speaker in the poems of this collection. Despite my initial hypothesis that I would more or less consistently use an autobiographical poetic 'I' throughout the collection, a significant number of poems are 'found' as they are derived from two archives I created of sheela-related texts. These

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[33] Ibid., 169.

archives were amassed because there are so few books or articles dedicated to sheela-na-gigs (and even fewer texts that do more than simply rehash problematic arguments arising from equally problematic methods). Therefore, when I was first researching the carvings, I used search engines to locate even minor mentions of them. Due to the volume of the results of the two searches, I had them printed and bound into two archives.

Archive One is comprised of a search of *The Irish Times* newspaper for the word 'sheela-na-gig' and its variants, which occurred in the Letters and Opinion sections, as well as found articles in various sections of the paper between 1954 and 2009.[34] In these letters and articles, sheela-na-gigs are sometimes mentioned only in passing or as a synecdoche for a situation or an actual person – as in the 1993 article on Annie Murphy, who famously had an affair with Bishop Eamonn Casey at a time when the Catholic Church still held incontrovertible power and authority in Ireland. (This scandal had a profound effect on Irish life.) At other times, sheela-na-gigs are the topic of discussion, as in the 1987 controversy mentioned previously when an American woman was denied admittance to the basement National Museum to view their sheela-na-gigs. In sum, *The Irish Times* archive is full of stories, voices, and controversies. Though not all of them are directly related to sheela-na-gigs, the mention of the word was enough for me to include the text in the archive.

Archive Two is derived from references to sheela-na-gigs between 1840 and 2000 (with the bulk of references in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland*, *The Irish Naturalist's Journal*, *Man* (published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland), the *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society*, *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*, and *Archaeology Ireland*. These sources were accessed using the library databases at Trinity College, Dublin. The linguistic register of these documents is quite different from Archive One not simply due a difference in time period. The social class (which in Ireland can also be indicative of religion) of those men involved in these societies is evident. Additionally, though the tone used in these texts attempts objectivity in its

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[34] *The Irish Times* plays a central role in Irish sociopolitical life. Though it is conservative in its political leanings (as all Irish newspapers are), it does give over more space to in-depth articles, letters, and op-eds than, for example, *The Irish Independent*.

analysis of data and description of artefacts, biases permeate the language. As with Archive One, not all texts included in Archive Two are directly or extensively dedicated to sheela-na-gigs. At times, the carvings are only briefly mentioned in an article about a different topic.

When I embarked on writing poems using these archives, I was uncertain about how I would begin. The question of *how* to employ them creatively was highly complex due to the sheer amount and range of texts at hand, and the fact that my intuition suggested that these archives were repositories of sheela-na-gig poems waiting to be excavated. I mused on four key questions:

- Would I write lyric or narrative poems with an 'I' that encounters this archive – whether the 'I' is autobiographical or prosopopoeic?
- Would I read the archive and let it influence the poems indirectly?
- Would I create found poems?
- If I wrote found poems, how would I arrange these words on the page? How would the visual dimension of language affect the process of making these texts intelligible as poems rather than as their original textual genres?

I did not rule out writing poems in which a coherent 'I' encounters the archive – this does happen in some of the poems, though it is not clearly discernible that the archive is a source. Nevertheless, the more I engaged with the archive, the more strongly I felt that engaging *directly* with its language was essential and could introduce and extend the trigger themes discussed in Chapter Two. I also felt a sense of *punctum* from some of the scraps of the archive, and this feeling began to act as a guide for the construction of the poems. Additionally, I was coming to realize that continuing to use the same autobiographical poetic speaker had the potential to become overly strident and undermine the semiotic complexity I sought to evoke. How many times could this speaker say 'cunt'? For how many poems could this speaker's standpoint be productively used as an associational starting point? How could the collection continue to emphasize the most vital trigger issue – semiotic complexity – the fact that there is much more to the sheela than even associative poetic renditions can encompass?

Along these lines, poet Kenneth Goldsmith argues that found techniques can be more effective than deep image narration. He suggests that found text has the potential to effectively '*reflect…* rather than *express*' and avoid 'sermonizing'.[35] While I would not

[35] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011a), 98, 96. Goldsmith contrasts a poem by Tony Hoagland ('At the Galleria Shopping Mall', *Poetry Magazine*, July/August 2009) with a found poem by Robert Fitterman ('Directory', from the same issue of *Poetry*). While Hoagland's poem narrates the speaker's niece's perilous indoctrination into consumerism that lists elements of the mall within a cautionary tale, Fitterman's is

totally dismiss deep image poetics, Goldsmith's statement about the inadequacy of the 'deep image' coincides with my growing discomfort with extending an associative, autobiographical poetic 'I' throughout this particular poetry collection. While a sheela-na-gig is clearly different from a shopping mall (the subject of the two poems Goldsmith compares), the textural diversity of the 'archival apparatus' my poetic 'eye' had to confront (in the archive as well as in my general research on the sheela-na-gig) did in the end undermine a solely deep image approach that uses an autobiographical 'I'. Furthermore, Loizeaux suggests that:

> Twentieth-century poets are keenly aware that the work of art is made according to the peculiar vision of the maker. So in twentieth-century ekphrasis there is a heightened emphasis on the nature of the truth pictures convey, just as there is about the history it tells.[36]

In the case of my own ekphrastic collection, I came to engage not just with the carvings and their *makers* (in this case the curators/keepers since the actual carvers are impossible to identify) but also with the *talkers* about them who build and shape them *textually*. This multi-vocality was already evident in the fieldwork poems and became even more so when I turned to engage with the archive. I was not eager to write poems in which the 'I' would talk *about* this archive (to refer back to Davidson's distinction between poems 'about paintings' and 'painterly poems'). Instead, I wrote found poems – poems that are *archival* in their use of existing sheela-related text. However, it was vital to me that they stand as poems, not as 'research poems' in the sense that poetry is used in the social sciences. As such, I must briefly make a distinction here between my own poetic practice in relation to the archive, and what social science researchers do when they use poetry as 'a form for the evocative presentation of data' gathered in interviews, surveys, and reviews of literature and archival text.[37] While a social science researcher prioritizes giving an accurate rendition of the data set and contributing to knowledge on a given topic through their 'research poems', as a poet, I engage in an emergent process of 'doing/pursuing' and 'seeing what happens' in order to create an aesthetic, affective

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'simply a directory for an unnamed mall looped with poetic concerns for form, meter, and sound. […] that purports to be as numbing, dead, and dull as the mall experience itself, encouraging linguistic disorientation by *reflecting* rather than *expressing*.' According to Goldsmith, 'Fitterman has actually given us a more realistic experience than Hoagland, without having to resort to sermonizing to convince us of his point' while 'Hoagland chooses the wrong approach using the wrong materials: deep image doesn't fly in this weightless space'.

[36] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 15.

[37] Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009); Carl Leggo, "Astonishing Silence: Knowing in Poetry," in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, eds. J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole (Los Angeles: Sage), 165-174.

'enhancement of the experience of living'.[38] Thus, as I will elucidate in detail below, my poems on sheela-na-gigs do not gather or present data systematically and comprehensively. Indeed, in order to contribute to empirical knowledge on sheela-na-gigs, the archive could have been much larger, the poems more broadly reflective of the total 'data set'. Instead, I *intuitively* gathered and selected from the archive I had *intuitively* created in order to make poems that contribute to *poetic* knowledge and experience. Importantly, I also felt a sense of *punctum* when encountering passages in this archive, which, in some cases, guided my sifting and selecting to form the poems.

As shown below, though I selected text to create found poems, my 'coding' criteria and methods were not based on a social scientific paradigm of 'presenting data' about a topic.[39] Instead, my selection methods were intuitive and emergent from the process of engaging with the text as an expert poet − e.g., the *sound* of found textual extractions was just as important as the *sense;* the *punctum*, the 'accident [that] prick[s]' arising from certain phrases also influenced my process. Estelle Barrett describes this emergent and intuitive process in arts practice, which coincides with mine:

> This notion of intuitive knowledge is closely related to what Bourdieu has theorised as the logic of practice or of being *in-the-game* where strategies are not pre-determined, but emerge and operate according to specific demands of action and movement in time (Bourdieu 1990).[40]

Ultimately, my use of archival research in this poetry collection arose from my 'expert intuitive-processes' rather than a desire to provide a systematic examination of the data. This process arises from an intuitive encounter with the archives' numerous layers and *punctum* − aesthetic (in terms of sound, imagery, figurative language, and other technical qualities); thematic (which includes, but is not limited to, a feminist perspective); and evocative (as related to my personal autobiography in the Barthesian sense of *'giv[ing] myself up'*.[41] My methods for creating these archival found poems followed these phases:

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[38] Sandra L. Faulkner, *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research through Verse* (Walnut Creek, CA: West Coast Press, 2009); Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 5.

[39] Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, 78. Leavy created 'research poems' to present social science interview data on sexual identity and body image. First, she coded data with codes and metacodes (a normal practice on social science research). Leavy then went back to the results of the coding and extracted elements related to a particular topic, after which time she bolded text that she says 'captures the essence of what these women are conveying'. Then she used this bolded text to create poems that form a part of her social science publication. Her approach was driven by the literal fact of what the women were saying about the topic rather than figurative language, imagery, sound, thematic or narrative tension or resolution, or other poetic criteria.

[40] Barrett, "Introduction," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, 4.

[41] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43.

<u>Phase One</u> involved culling both archives for text that 'grabbed' me – whether due to its meaning/content or its aesthetic status in terms of sound/imagery or an ineffable *punctum*. Sometimes text was selected because of its strangeness, sometimes because it was repeated throughout the archive, and sometimes because I 'recognized' it as connecting to sheela-na-gigs or my trigger themes identified in Chapter Two. Since both archives were created by searching for any reference to sheela-na-gigs, no matter how minute, some of the text I was culling had very little or nothing to do with sheela-na-gigs at all, save a cursory mention. Nevertheless, I viewed these instances as part of the sheela-na-gig 'chatter' and used some of this text in the poems. I typed all culled text into one document, which I labeled UR-TEXT because I understood it to be a sort of fragmented, non-linear origin story of sheela-na-gigs.

<u>Phase Two</u> occurred in part simultaneously with Phase One and in part afterwards. In some cases, it involved identifying trends across the UR-TEXT and in other cases, isolating oddities or points of contradiction, whether in terms of the text's tone, connotative or denotative meaning, figurative possibilities, use of imagery, rhetorical influence and orientation, or, simply, how it sounds. Pieces of text were cut up and laid out on large poster size pages and in Word documents for formation into poems.

<u>Phase Three</u> was ongoing and involved returning several times to the archives as a whole, sometimes in pursuit of something in particular to drive a poem forward or in a different direction, sometimes with the fear that I had missed something the first time I had gone through the archives to make the UR-TEXT. (I worried that my fatigue from reading the droning of the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* or back-biting Letters to the Editor had led me to note less-deserving scraps and overlook other worthy ones.)

Importantly, though not in evidence in the poems themselves, the autobiographical 'I' was still making decisions about the found poems throughout all of these phases, and these decisions are a manifestation of my '*giv[ing] myself up*' in relation to the *punctum* of the sheela-na-gigs.[42] Alicia Ostriker argues that an autobiographical 'I' must be present in the poem because: 'The poet is not simply a phantom manipulator of words but a

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[42] Ibid., 43.

confused actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and transcend'.[43] However, I did not feel like a 'phantom manipulator' during this process and do not feel that the resulting poems have a 'manipulated' quality. Instead, I concur with Goldsmith's and Dworkin's view of the expressive and creative potential of found poetry. They make three key points about writing that uses found text:

1. Writing 'uncreatively' (using existing text) is *necessary* due to the sheer amount of material that exists today, and 'success' can still be in evidence despite the pre-existing status of the text.
2. 'Self-expression' and creativity are unavoidable.
3. Formal poetic techniques are used, and emotions are still present.[44]

Though I had not read these books on 'uncreative writing' prior to writing my own archival found poems, these three points usefully describe and support my realizations and intuitions at the time of writing.

1. 'Uncreative' Writing Is Necessary

In her definition of ekphrasis, Marjorie Munsterberg explains the prominence of travel and art writing:

> During the second half of the 18th century, ekphrastic writing suddenly appeared in a new context. Travelers and would-be travelers provided a growing public eager for vivid depictions of works of art. Without a way of publishing accurate reproductions, appearances had to be conveyed through words alone.[45]

This situation is not dissimilar to the one in which writers work today. According to Goldsmith:

> …faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists. How I make my way through this thicket of information – how I manage it, how I parse it, how I organize and distribute it – is what distinguishes my writing from yours.[46]

Though poets are decidedly *not* pressed by the public to depict unseen images (which can now be quickly called up using a Google Image search), we are in an historical situation whereby the accessibility of text and image via the internet places a particular pressure on writers to vividly *navigate* them. Do we now have a public eager for poets who can vividly *sift*? I found that in the case of sheela-na-gigs, sifting through the archival apparatus

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[43] Ostriker, "The Poetics of Postmodern Witness."
[44] Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds., *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011); Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*.
[45] Munsterberg, "Ekphrasis."
[46] Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 1-2.

involved seeing with a poet's 'eye' already informed by the non-textual apparatuses in which the carvings themselves and the archive are embedded. (I am referring to the museum and the fieldwork apparatuses discussed earlier in this chapter.) This was a process of 'parsing' and 'navigating' according to my previous experiences and tacit knowledge. Furthermore, as I was writing the found poems, I felt I was working with an 'archival apparatus', a multi-vocal entity comprised of 'speakers' with varying attitudes and social statuses, from a range of time periods and geographies, with varying formal textures to their writing that were in some cases capable creating *punctum*. This 'chatter' was sounding in concert with the museum and fieldwork apparatuses and with my own artistic consciousness as I made creative decisions in writing these found poems.

2. The Unavoidability of Self-Expression and Creativity

Referring first to numerous precedents such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Goldsmith underscores two key aspects of contemporary 'uncreative writing' that Hoagland, Ostriker, or an earlier incarnation of myself might flag as potentially problematic. Firstly, that despite the 'ready-made' character of the text, creativity is unavoidable, and secondly, that aesthetic judgment is possible – there are 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' found works:

> … the suppression of self-expression is impossible […] The act of choosing and reframing tells us as much about ourselves as our story about our mother's cancer operation. It's just that we've never been taught to value such choices […] If it's a matter of simply cutting and pasting the entire Internet into a Microsoft Word document, then what becomes important is what you – the author – decides to choose. Success lies in knowing what to include and – more important – what to leave out. If all language can be turned into poetry by merely reframing – an exciting possibility – then she who reframes words in the most charged and convincing way will be judged the best.[47]

In other words, technique, artistry, expertise, all of the aspects of artistic practice assumed by artists (and by institutions that grant practice-based doctorates) are still operational even if the text is not 'original'. The process of making these poems felt extremely personal particularly because the standpoint of this poetic 'I' was now informed by my unfolding experiences with the fieldwork and museum apparatuses. For example, in 'N.B.' (p. 23) I extracted pieces of text from the entirety of Archive 2 (derived from sources such as the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* and *The Irish*

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[47] Ibid., 10.

Naturalist's Journal) that demonstrated uncertainty about the meaning, origin, and purpose of sheela-na-gigs because this abiding uncertainty was a key theme for me:

> The number of facts known are few,   and probably
>   it may
>   be premature
>   to attempt
>
>   a generalization.
>
> (Dogmatism is to be strictly avoided.)
>
> It is not intended
>   to enter at present into any / discussion on such matter of a controversial
>   nature
> ('N.B.', lines 1-9)

In Archive 2, most of the language purports to be authoritative and 'objective'; it is the language of empiricism, and yet it is unable to pin down the sheela-na-gigs. Therefore, despite this utter uncertainty, this poem is circular, like the archive itself. It ends by referring the reader back to itself: '*Persons anxious for further information are referred to this account*' (line 28). In writing this poem, I hoped to underscore not only the epistemological ambiguity surrounding the sheela-na-gigs, but to do so in a manner that humorously subverts an over-confident appraisal of the carvings, a confidence often expressed in the texture of the archival language and in the language of the more recent texts on the sheela-na-gigs overviewed in Chapter Two. I realized that a poem in which an autobiographical 'I' muses upon this sort of language would not have as great an effect as using the actual language and arranging it according to my own 'expert-intuitive processes'.[48] I also noted with pleasure the number of humorous passages throughout the archive and sought to create more poems from these in order to reflect a fuller range of the sheelas' semiotic complexity – hence found poems such as 'From a Feminist' or 'From a Museum Director' which use the voices of the archive to poignantly express the complex range of reactions to the carvings.

Likewise, in another poem, 'Britain's Legacy' (p. 19), I redact the entirety of a Letter to the Editor of *The Irish Times* in order to reveal the complexities of British-Irish relations, in particular regarding language, history, and culture. By using and manipulating (through visible redaction) the exact words belonging to this letter writer, I am able to provide evidence that such inaccurate and offensive views exist without resorting to

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[48] Melrose, "Still Harping On."

'sermonizing'.[49] Through my redactions, I intervene in and undermine this person's text, and, indeed, express my displeasure with what is being said. A similar technique is used in 'Excursion' (p. 9), in which I juxtapose an entry from Archive 2 about antiquarians taking a weekend boat trip to view various sites in Ireland (in which class divisions and an 'othering' of Irish culture and history are evident) with an account of my journeys to view sheela-na-gigs *in situ*. This poem problematizes my own standpoint as a contemporary 'antiquarian' hunting sheela-na-gigs. Unlike the archival text located in the left-hand column, which is distanced from the landscape, the people, the sites, and the artefacts, my own text seeks to reveal and engage with this 'fieldwork apparatus' – the curatorial control held by the 'keepers' of the sheela-na-gigs. The right-hand column culminates in a reproduction of another element of the 'fieldwork apparatus' that surrounds the *in situ* sheela-na-gigs: what the 'broadcast says' in the very car that transports the speaker from site to site. The presence of *RTÉ* radio (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, the public service broadcasters in Ireland) during these fieldwork journeys wrenches the poem toward present-day sociopolitical issues in Ireland and toward an affective anaphoric poetic structure. As such, this poem undermines the notion that a 'desiring, suffering, and choosing' poetic speaker must always be directly in evidence in order to achieve an ethical poem, and that, 'obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity' necessarily fail 'to locate and assert value'.[50]

3. Emotion and Form

Throughout the process of writing these found poems, I learned that even though the text does not *originate* with me as the author, there is still 'a confused actual person', to use Ostriker's words, who is *making* the poem. This person *feels* something when faced with the archival texts, and this *punctum*, when it arises, can guide the creation of poems. Craig Dworkin writes that:

> Despite the genuinely contrarian and oppositional stance of contemporary uncreative writing in its open rejection of some of the fundamental characteristics of poetry, the resulting texts frequently evince far more conservative and traditional poetic values than most of what passes for mainstream poetry: the formalist artifice of measure and rhyme […]; classical rhetorical tropes of anaphora, apostrophe, and irony […] and more than a few passages of unexpectedly, heartbreakingly raw emotion…[51]

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[49] Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 96.
[50] Ostriker, "The Poetics of Postmodern Witness"; Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment."
[51] Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo" in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, eds. Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011b), xlv.

My subjective status forms the basis of my creative decisions, and as such, the poems demonstrate formal poetic techniques *and* subjective responses to the archival text, all of which lead to particular selections and arrangements. For example, in 'A Figure', I extracted the term 'figure' from Archive Two where it was repeated numerous times. I also extracted words/phrases used to describe sheela-na-gigs':

- other names ('Saint Shanahan', 'called Cathleen Owen')
- location 'on a font / on a gable end'
- status ('much weathered'; 'now mutilated'; 'owned by a gentleman')
- size ('about the size of a small child')

The resulting incantatory poem conjures the sheela-na-gigs and issues around female sexuality, and, as in 'Excursion' (p. 9), did not require an autobiographical 'I' to do so. The extraction and positioning of the text demonstrates anaphora, rhyme, narrative, a range of types of imagery, word play, and irony along with affective references to themes discussed in Chapter Two – all of this emerges specifically from my poetic 'eye' which sees *punctum* in these microscopic scraps of texts peppered throughout the archive.[52]

Carving, Shaping, Hacking the Archive: Visual Poetry

While I was working on these found poems, I read a book on the visual dimension of poetry. *The Written Poem: Semiotic Conventions from Old to Middle English* by Rosemary Huisman overviews historical perspectives on the status of poetry as a visual object and how this visual element influences the apprehension of a text *as a poem*. Huisman explains that like many contemporary poets, Old English poets (writing before 1100 A.D.), 'base[d] their versification on the rhythm of conversational English [...] rather than syllable counting' but that their poems *appear* very different on the page, and she discovers:

> a great difference between then and now – the Old English manuscript text of a poem looks nothing like a twentieth-century poem printed on the page. The Old English text is written continuously across the page, filling the valuable vellum from left to right margin, without lineation or stanza spacing.[53]

She also underscores the fact that:

[52] David Antin, "A List of the Delusions of the Insane: What They Are Afraid Of" in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, 43-5. Antin uses Thomas Smith Clouston's catalog of 'actual examples of delusions of about 100 female melancholic patients' published in Clouston's *Clinical Lectures*. The resulting poem is affective, narrative, and incantatory due to the subject matter and the intervention of the author.
[53] Rosemary Huisman, *The Written Poem: Semiotic Conventions from Old to Modern English* (New York: Cassell, 1998), 1.

> The manuscript page of an Old English homily or sermon (from about AD 1000) looks very much the same as a page of an Old English poem […and that though] recent scholarship has pointed out the developing conventional use of the *punctus* (point) to separate metrical units, […] to our modern eyes this is a very faint graphic sign of 'poetry' compared to the later sign of 'short irregular lines'.[54]

In sum, Huisman explores how a poem is *seen* and recognized as such over time. She also overviews the impact the visual has on the expectations and experiences of the reader, and how this, too, is historically and socio-politically contingent. Huisman's book aptly supported my own increasing consciousness of the visual aspect of the found poems I was creating. From the early stages of my PhD when I printed and bound the archives into two books, I had an abiding feeling that the sheela archive was an *entity*, that it had an 'object' status that I needed to shape, carve, and hack like a sculptor carving the sheela-na-gigs. When I began drafting the found poems, I felt not only that I was writing text about a carving, but that I was *carving* text. Thus, a visual dimension began to govern the writing of the found poems, two of which became 'vulvas' and others for which the visual element became highly important (e.g., 'Britain's Legacy' (p. 19) and 'N.B.' (p. 23)).

At the time of writing, my enthusiasm for crafting visual poems was enhanced by the fact that visual poetry is not, as I had originally thought, a *new* phenomenon that began with with Apollinaire's *Caligrammes* or the Concrete poems of Brazil and Germany. Instead, some of the oldest poems are *visual* in that they draw particular attention to the *seen* element of language, including the *technopaigneia* of ancient Greece and the ancient Romans' *carmina figurata*.[55] Even fonts – the building blocks of the 'seen' text – have a context-specific impact and history. Craig Dworkin explains that despite the emergence of sans serif fonts like Helvetica in the early twentieth century as 'signifying a futuristic modernity in line with streamlined look of an industrial age' the fact is that these fonts were at one time a neo-classical trend because they looked *old*:

> [They] had originally been revived, at the end of the eighteenth century, as the signifier of the classical, conservative past. For the romantic-era reader, the sanserif – in marked and diametric contrast to a mechanized modernity – possessed unmistakable "associations of rugged antiquity".[56]

The fact that visual poetry is ancient coincided with the ancient status of carvings I was writing about and the type of writing I was doing (ekphrasis). This coincidence influenced my decision to further the 'semiotic complexity' of the sheela-na-gigs by

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[54] Ibid., 20.

[55] Willard Bohn, *Modern Visual Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 18.

[56] Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003), xx.

writing the two untitled vulva-shaped poems (pp. 6, 14) and to pay close attention to the visual appearance of the other poems in the collection, for example, the lay-out of 'Excursion' (p. 9) in blocks of facing prose and 'In Situ' in centred fragments.

All in all, semiotic complexity remained the most integral theme in the collection, and this persistence led to shifts in my thinking about and practice of poetic form. I went from aiming for a collection comprised entirely of associative ekphrases with a clearly-defined poetic persona to writing found and visual poems that enact the multi-vocal complexity of the sheela-na-gigs. I also realized that my encounter with some of the *text* surrounding the sheela-na-gigs created a sense of *punctum* just as the carvings had initially, and that this feeling could guide my creative decisions about what text to use. My experience of these surprising shifts in poetic approach was borne of a struggle to transfer that sense of *duende/punctum* I had had when first encountering the carvings to the poems I was writing. That this struggle shook the core of my poetics should perhaps come as no surprise. Lorca says of the *duende*, the goblin-devil with whom the artist must battle: 'But there are neither maps nor exercises to help us find the *duende*. We only know that he burns the blood like a poultice of broken glass, that *he exhausts, that he rejects all sweet geometry we have learned, that he smashes styles…*' [my italics].[57]

A Postscript: 'Smashing Styles' and 'Asserting Value'

The final poem I wrote for *Strange Country* was 'Birthing Stone' (p. 24). This poem is about Savita Halapannavar's death in Ireland in October 2012, which occurred because she was denied a medically necessary abortion. I had been hoping to include a poem on this subject in the collection as it concerns the status of women, specifically in an Irish context. Indeed, not writing a poem that engaged with Halapannavar's death in a collection that had thus far explored the complexity around this very subject would have been a pointed omission considering the time period in which I was writing and the media and political atmosphere in Ireland (and indeed internationally) following Savita Halapannavar's death. Thus, writing about this event is in keeping with the temporal and geographical location and existing themes and subjects of the collection as a whole.

Despite my desire to write an implicitly ekphrastic poem on this subject, I was initially unsure about how I would proceed in terms of the poem's form and style. I wanted to avoid 'sermonizing', and I wanted to create a poem that affectively emanated

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[57] Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, 51.

my horror at this event.[58] The poetic revelations discussed above regarding the potential for 'uncreative' writing to be expressive and to 'locate and assert value' offered an approach to writing this timely poem.[59] Thus, in February 2013 I amassed an archive of text taken from *The Irish Times*. In this major Irish newspaper, the story and subsequent political and legislative debate were unfolding day by day. Beginning with November 14th 2012 (the day the story broke) and extending to the present, I downloaded and saved every article that mentioned Savita Halapannavar's name, and I also took screen captures (photographs) of the full *Irish Times* screen as I was viewing the article. Screen captures include the adjacent website text and advertisements, which I felt should be part of the Savita Halapannavar archive. (Algorithms generate advertisements according to user location and demographic features stored in search history. Therefore, uncanny juxtapositions can occur.)

In February and March 2013, I began drafting a poem using this found text, but I had difficulties determining what constraint I would use to govern it. Determining an appropriate constraint had been vital to writing the found poems discussed above. In this manner, I part poetic ways with Craig Dworkin, who emphasizes the 'arbitrary' and 'minimal intervention' of 'uncreative writing', stating that he and Kenneth Goldsmith excluded certain works from their anthology of conceptual writing, 'because they were simply too creative – they had too much authorial intervention'.[60] While in some of these found poems I did 'determine pre-established rules and parameters […and] set up a system and step back and let it run its course', I also *intentionally* adjusted (what Dworkin might call 'heavily edit[ing] or masterfully polish[ing]') and sometimes even *abandoned* systems and entire poems that I felt were not working.[61] In order to write the poem on Savita Halapannavar, I had to determine what constraint I would use to shape it out of the archive, not unlike a sculptor carving a sheela from stone. However, I struggled to determine an apt constraint, and I ultimately abandoned the found poem I had drafted because I could not find a system that would work to sufficiently shape the archive into the affective poem I sought.

Time passed, and after writing this critical component in which I firmly articulated the falseness of the dichotomy between 'uncreative' and creative writing, I came to write 'Birthing Stone' (p. 24). (This occurred at the final stage of this PhD in July

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[58] Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*; Ostriker, "The Poetics of Postmodern Witness."
[59] Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*; Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment."
[60] Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xliv.
[61] Ibid., xliv.

2013.) In fact, I believe that writing this poetics helped me write this particular poem. 'Birthing Stone' combines my own text with found text taken from *The Irish Times* archive, the General Intercessions from the Catholic Mass, and Jeremiah 31: 7-9, which was the first reading at Catholic masses worldwide on the day Savita Halapannavar died. 'Birthing Stone' emerged as a 'twin' to the poem 'A Figure' (p. 2) both in its incantatory sound, its visual appearance on the page, and its emphasis on stone and the female body. It is also an important counterpart to 'Strange Country' (p. 36) due to its emphasis on location, ritual, and temporality. As the poem is a mixture of my own writing and found text, it demonstrates the poetic epiphanies I had during the PhD, particularly when writing this poetics.

I invoke the 'birthing stone' at Innismurray that looks out over the graveyard throughout the poem using the found language of the General Intercessions of the Catholic Mass ('Let us pray…'). As such, I combined the associative technique that governs some of my poems – when I first learned of its purpose, I immediately associated the birthing stone's juxtaposition of life and death with the similarly paradoxical appearance of the sheela-na-gigs – with the found techniques I had been using in others. This combined method allowed for a grappling with the theme of a desire for ritual/symbolism and a critique of gender essentialism explored by other poems in the collection. Even more directly than in other poems, in 'Birthing Stone' the stakes of this debate are not merely theoretical. The notion that women must 'embrace' and even be grateful for ('lucky you') their role as suffering sacrificial mothers is a powerful ideology that still exists in Catholic consciousness and is demonstrated in prevalent images of the Virgin Mary with her 'heart pierced / by a sword' (Section 1, lines 15, 9, 4-5). This ideology had 'real life' implications for Savita Halapannavar in 'the country / [she] was in / at the time / a Catholic country' (Section IV, lines 6-9).

I hope that 'Birthing Stone' suggests that even though women cannot entirely escape the dangers of childbirth and pregnancy (which is why the image of the birthing stone and sheela-na-gigs remain symbolically powerful), *everything possible* should be done to sustain women's lives *and* their choices about their own lives. If women are, mythically and mystically speaking, to be entrusted with the power to give life, we should also be entrusted with handling that power on an *actual* level. This position is at the crux of *Strange Country*'s poetics, which brings together the sheela-na-gigs' mytho-poetic resonances with the 'real life' of feminist standpoint theory *vis à vis* the poetic 'I' and multi-vocal perspectives taken from archival text. As such, in the final section,

Halapannavar's 'ashes / in the hold / of a plane' […] 'flying / with an immense / throng of mothers / and those with child' (language taken directly from Jeremiah 31) reveals the complex and disturbing conjunction between a mytho-poetic narrative of salvation and actual circumstances (in this case, the 'abortion trail' streaming 'out of the country [Ireland]' to Britain) (Section V, lines 2-4, 4-8). My use of found text and my own writing in 'Birthing Stone' makes this revelation possible.

CHAPTER 6
Conclusions

My initial aim was to write a collection of ekphrastic poems that poetically encompass the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gigs and my complex reactions to them. This aim was derived from my sense of the carvings' *punctum*, but also took into account their *studium* due to my autobiographical experiences and my political and theoretical commitments that made the carvings such an evidently suitable subject for me.[1] Throughout my writing process I chose not to force this complexity to submit to the *studium*, to any of the possible 'understand[ings]' of the carvings that I might favor or choose whether on autobiographical or theoretical grounds. Through reading and fieldwork, I expanded my understanding of the carvings and their contexts and of ekphrastic writing's history and terminologies. This research formed a part of my tacit knowledge as I wrote the poems. After writing this collection, I have drawn some conclusions about my own poetics and poetics in general.

As Estelle Barrett indicates, conclusions derived from practice-based artistic research are most often provisional because of the inherent subjectivity that motivates artistic practice and the emergent nature of creative processes.[2] However, Barbara Bolt adds that reflections on artistic practice can nevertheless lead to theory-building.[3] The realizations I had while writing the poetry collection *Strange Country* can therefore contribute to my own future writing practice and poetics, to the discipline of Creative Writing, and to the body of poetic responses to the sheela-na-gigs. If Sylvia Plath is correct in saying about the impact of poetry on a reader that '[i]n poetry, everything is changed in a minute', then I conclude that in *the writing* of poetry, everything about one's practice can also be changed quite suddenly, and yet some recognizable aspect of one's own artistic practice or self remains the same.[4]

Firstly, I learned that inhabiting semiotic complexity does not, as I feared, require a relinquishing of values derived from my own ethics. My feminist orientation and my

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[1] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.
[2] Barrett, "Introduction," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*.
[3] Bolt states: 'In the exegesis, particular situated and emergent knowledge has the potential to be generalised so that it enters into dialogue with existing practical and theoretical paradigms. [...] Thus, rather than operating as a solipsistic reflection on one's own practice, the particular situated knowledge that emerges through the research process has the potential to be generalised so it sets wobbling the existing paradigms operating in a discipline. In other words, through the vehicle of exegesis, practice becomes theory generating.' Bolt, "The Magic is in Handling," in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 33.
[4] Sylvia Plath, "A Comparison," in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, eds. W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000), 146.

alignment with a poetics similar to Tony Hoagland's led me to believe that shattering meaning or calling attention to its slipperiness could undermine ethicality and result in 'playfulness' for its own sake.[5] Instead, rather than being merely 'elusive' and 'playful' as Hoagland fears, the 'multiple, simultaneous interpretative' possibilities I came to offer in the poems in *Strange Country* emerged from a personally and ethically situated tension between my belief in a ritual function for art and understanding of the oppressive political pitfalls of essentialism.[6] Thus, my refusal to fix a meaning for the sheela-na-gigs was not motivated by the idea that there are no favorable possibilities available, nor that I wish to simply 'play' with language. Instead, through inhabiting this semiotic complexity I sought to reveal the terms by which certain meanings would be favored and to reflect the high stakes any such fixing would have, politically, historically, and personally. In this manner, despite this overarching theme of semiotic complexity, the poems still 'locate and assert value'.[7]

Secondly, through this probing of the semiotic complexity of the sheela-na-gig, my belief in the necessity of an autobiographical poetic 'I' and associative 'deep' image techniques was also transformed. This had been a fundamental tenet of my poetics, and this shift was therefore quite surprising. Furthermore, I realized the expressive potential of found and visual poetry and had my preconceived notions about those types of writing shattered. Throughout this poetics, I have used Tony Hoagland and Alicia Ostriker's essays as examples of commonly held views in favor of 'poetries of continuity' and the presence of an autobiographical 'I', respectively.[8] As Hoagland explains, poets, particularly poets in America, frequently divide along these two poles, or 'camps' – one that favors '[s]ystematic development' and another 'obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity.'[9] When I first began writing this collection, I would have wholeheartedly shared their suspicion of poetic fragmentation and multi-vocality. However, without ever intending to experiment in this regard, writing on sheela-na-gigs led me to employ such techniques. As I indicated above, this formal shift was not simply experimental, but was in fact undertaken in order to achieve the very same aims forwarded by Hoagland and Ostriker: 'to locate and assert value' and to proffer 'an ethical or political model'.[10]

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[5] Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of our Moment."
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ostriker, "The Poetics of Postmodern Witness."
[9] Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of our Moment."
[10] Ibid.

The hybrid nature of the final collection and indeed of the poem 'Birthing Stone' in terms of the range of forms and techniques employed demonstrates my rejection of what I now see as a false dichotomy between 'continuity' and 'fracture' and between a coherent 'witnessing' poetic speaker and a multi-vocal found text. I became increasingly convinced of 'uncreative' writing's expressive and ethical possibilities, possibilities that exist because 'I', the 'self' who '*must give myself up*', is not some automaton, but is in fact the one hacking at the archive and experiencing its shards of *punctum* that guide the construction of poems.[11] This practice-based conclusion has implications for broader poetics because it undermines the dichotomy between 'experimental' and 'lyric' poetries. It demonstrates that at this particular moment in poetry's history, a poet can select from a range of techniques (even those arising from 'opposite' camps and literary histories) and bring them into alignment with her overall aims and beliefs about poetry's purpose. In other words, in my own future poetic practice I suspect to be avidly engaging with formal techniques I had hitherto rejected out of hand, and I hope that this can be an example to those lyric or narrative poets of 'contuinity' (including myself up until this point) who have avoided taking these particular stylistic risks for polemical reasons. Indeed, what for some poets is a 'fear of narrative' for others is a fear of 'fracture'.[12]

Thirdly, the assumption at the root of my initial plan to develop and use the technique of 'associative ekphrasis' throughout the entire collection was undermined. I had thought that the fieldwork and reading I was doing on sheela-na-gigs would permeate my poetic consciousness and emerge organically through my subjective associations in lyric poems. I expected that my research would *implicitly* influence my writing – that references to it would naturally erupt and intermingle with the trigger themes I had identified in the early stages, and that, in some manner, all aspects of the collection would be imbued with this research element. I felt that the poetic 'I' was a conduit for all this information – *textual* in terms of reading about them and *experiential* in terms of seeking them out *in situ* and in museums. While I believe that this implicit effect did occur throughout the collection, these fieldwork and research methods also affected the writing in the form of poems that engage *directly* with the archival and fieldwork apparatuses. This was perhaps because my experiences of these apparatuses were so much more powerful than I had originally envisaged was possible. While the poems in my first collection *Consent* reflect my readings in feminist and social justice theory, my

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[11] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43.
[12] Hoagland, "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of our Moment."

experience as an activist, and the socio-political context of the time period in which I was writing, the poems in *Strange Country* directly carve and shape the archive of the sheela-na-gigs.[13] This distinction between the implicit and explicit use of archival text in ekphrastic poems challenges assumptions about the status of research in poetic practice. The commonly held view of the poet as 'conduit' is complicated when that 'conduit' engages directly in extracting from and shaping those influences that s/he is 'channeling'.

Due to my previous poetic affinities, each of these discoveries would have surprised me prior to undertaking this PhD. This process demonstrated to me that the broad thematic rubric of an ethically bound semiotic complexity could be explored in relation to other subjects in my future poetry collections and be used as a lens through which to consider, or re-consider, the work of other poets. In future poetry and poetics writing, I will have to start from a very different perspective than I would have previously. Already, writing this poetics has influenced my creative decision-making in 'Birthing Stone'. This writing has underscored for me not only the 'emergent' nature of the writing process as shown above, but also the *persistence* of my 'artistic signature' – the effect that a poet's self-recognition has on writing poetry.[14] In Melrose's formulation, 'signature' comes in part from recognition by people other than the artist her/himself (expert spectators and other artists). However, in writing this collection I have found that in writing and deciding to include those poems that seem to go *against* my signature (the found and visual poems) – against work I have previously done and against how I have previously defined my poetics – I still recognize some element of my own signature. This signature is a Barthesian '*giv[ing] myself up*' in relation to the sheela-na-gigs' *punctum*.[15] Finally, this collection and thesis constitute a contribution to artistic work on sheela-na-gigs. As the only full-length collection of poetry on the subject, and as the only group of poems that seeks to embrace and inhabit their semiotic complexity, I hope *Strange Country* marks a shift away from an essentializing or idealizing view of these complex carvings. I wish to conclude with Loizeaux's reminder that poets describe 'the ekphrastic

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[13] Campanello, *Consent*.

[14] Susan Melrose defines artistic signature as:

> not simply intellectual property ownership; but […] a relational mark, established between "the work", its maker/s, and its validation by those whose judgments of taste and value are vital to the disciplines concerned. Signature practices, in other words, are singular or self-defining; but at the same time an aspect of them recurs, across a body of work, and between that work and its contextualising framework/s; and they are repeatedly modulated within given disciplinary parameters. "Wooster", or "Mnouchkine", as signature, triggers in me an anticipation - that what I am about to see will be *im*-pressed with a mark that calls back, through the new, to what I have retained from a past engagement with signature practice. Melrose, "Confessions of an Uneasy Expert-Spectator."

[15] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43.

relation[ship]' between their poetry and the art work in a range of ways, from the companionable to the competitive.[16] Throughout the writing of this collection, sheela-na-gigs have remained as multitudinous as the self – friend, enemy, mirror, *duende* – these carvings have truly transformed my writing.[17]

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[16] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 15.

[17] Lorca, *In Search of Duende*. In Spanish 'el duende' means 'demon' or 'goblin'. In Lorca's essay, *duende* is both a demon with whom the artist must battle and a concept of the ineffable in art.

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APPENDIX

Sheela-na-gig Photographs

(in alphabetical order)