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To cite this article: María Amor Barros-del Río & Melania Terrazas Gallego (2022): Irish Women's Confessional Writing: Identity, Textuality and the Body, Life Writing, DOI: [10.1080/14484528.2022.2104117](https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2022.2104117)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2022.2104117>



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Published online: 12 Aug 2022.



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## Irish Women's Confessional Writing: Identity, Textuality and the Body

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### ABSTRACT

In recent times, the Irish literary arena has witnessed an extraordinary flourishing of women's life writing, with a special interest in the examination of the female body. These works explore the relations between identity, memoir, and narration through the confessional, and reconceptualise the female body in the Irish context. This article sets out to examine collections of essays by two of these women writers, Emilie Pine's *Notes to Self* (2019) and Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations: Reflections from Life* (2019), as innovative explorations of identity by applying Michael Bamberg's integrative approach of narrative analysis. It aims to illuminate these examples of essayism as 'interactional and bodily performed' narratives, in Bamberg's words, and as testimonies of transformation and adaptation of the body-mediated selves not only in Ireland, but universally. Pine and Gleeson's essays look back on painful past experiences and explore the intersection of identity, textuality, and the body.

### KEYWORDS

Emilie Pine; Sinéad Gleeson; essayism; confessional writing; textuality; Irish writing

## Introduction

In recent years, the Irish literary arena has witnessed an extraordinary flourishing of women's life writing, including such works as Niamh Campbell's 'The Diary of Cures' (2017) and 'Vanitas' (2017), Maggie O'Farrell's *I am, I am, I am: Seventeen Brushes with Death* (2018), Emilie Pine's *Notes to Self* (2019), Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations: Reflections from Life* (2019), Mary Cregan's *The Scar* (2019), and Doireann Ní Gríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat* (2020). Whether prompted by the crash of the Celtic Tiger after 2008 or expressing a reaction to the punitive post-boom economic context, Irish women writers have responded to social and economic tensions by means of formal and aesthetic experimentation in order to render their lives in new ways.<sup>1</sup> These innovative collections not only aim at integrating questions of gender, culture, and politics, but also convey the literariness of many types of texts through the essay form.

In Ireland, the emergence of female essayists has been the object of attention of critics and scholars alike (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan 2017; Jordan 2015; Bracken 2020b).

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But the phenomenon seems to be difficult to categorise. In general terms, essayism has been defined as a form to ‘instruct, seduce and mystify in equal measure’ (Dillon 2017, 13), where the role of the writer is not limited to the practice of the form. On the contrary, essayism displays ‘an attitude to the form – to its spirit of adventure and its unfinished nature – and towards much else’ (20). This ‘toward much else’ is related to agency and purpose. What is more, according to Novak, ‘the proliferation of public interest in accounts of historical lives in recent decades – captured by such buzzwords as ‘biography boom’ or ‘memoir craze’ – is reflected in the similarly expanding field of life-writing studies’ (2017, 1). The term ‘life writing’ reflects a variety of work:

A range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed. These writings include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings, [...] marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms. (2017, 1)

But in the Irish case, this ‘new memoir genre’ has yet to find a specific categorisation, making do thus far with definitions that range between ‘memoir-essay’ (Ní Dhuibhne 2020b, 157), ‘confessional realism’ (Estévez-Saá 2020), ‘personal essay’ (Bates 2020), ‘confessional narrative’ (Harte 2020) and ‘life writing’ (RTE 2022).

In general, these works have broken through in the confessional mode, combining memoir, trauma, and the female experience in equal parts.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the essay form is used to challenge literary and gender conventions through innovative confessional representations of identity, the female subject and the body, and textuality. As Colleen Hennessy (2021) argues, this phenomenon has occurred because

The portrayal of women’s bodies in Irish literature, and in wider society, has created an impossible contradiction. Catholicism, of course, has played its part in the lose-scenario in which women’s bodies represent both the holy untarnished vessel of motherhood and the tainted evidence of carnal sin. But the canon of Irish literature read and taught in Ireland, as well as Irish studies in the United States and across the world, has played its role in framing and narrating a limiting role for Irish women, as well [...]. While in Irish literature today the inclusion of women’s stories and reflections on Irish society and identity has elevated experiences of motherhood, caring, sexual violence and health, and gender discrimination by political, cultural, and religious institutions, there remains a significant ‘profound deafness to the female voice,’ as described by authors Sinéad Gleeson and Anne Enright. (n.p.)

Within this context, several factors coalesce at the origin of this unique literary trend, particularly the inspiration of other female literary voices, and the auspicious and thriving dynamism of independent publishers and literary journals that back the essay form that, in Bates’ words, ‘fostered short-form writing, and [...] exerted a considerable influence on Irish writing’ (2020, 228–229). Emilie Pine has acknowledged the significant role of publishing houses such as Tramp Press, and journals such as *The Dublin Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, and *Granta*, in promoting the personal essay in Ireland (see González-Arias 2022). These and other magazines were created to promote new ideas and art forms, to take risks, and to ignore public taste in order to ‘provide an outlet for work that would not appear otherwise’ (Edward Bishop 1996, 287).

These issues also go hand in hand with recent social and legal changes in Ireland.<sup>3</sup> The activist nature of these examples of essayism coincides with recently passed laws to

support same-sex marriage (2015), Ireland's historic election of a gay and mixed-race prime minister in 2017, and the referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution on 25 May 2018, which were celebrated around Ireland and beyond. All these events constituted historic days for Ireland.<sup>4</sup> The interest of confessional writing in identity and the female body also coincides with a time in which Ireland is becoming more liberal in other respects. For example, the MeToo movement against sexual harassment contributed to producing some change in Ireland; as Casey (2020) has argued: 'we saw allegations around a number of high-profile men, discussions on acceptable behaviours in the workplace, grassroots movements to address gender balances, and an increase in the number of calls made to rape crisis centres' (n. pag.). MeToo reawakened the idea that the personal is political.

These recent events have made an impact in the field of Irish studies. Bracken (2020a) points out a turn towards the politics of matter in gender studies post-Celtic Tiger: 'this varied, dynamic, and energised work shares an interest in [...] the importance of lived experience and embodiment, the materiality of structures of control and biopower, affective and emotive sources of being to name just a few' (230). Furthermore, these intersections have prompted an academic interest in the relationship between the female body and pain that is proving very illuminating for an understanding of Ireland's literature and history (Dillane, McAreavey, and Pine 2016; Flynn and O'Brien 2018; O'Neill and Schrage-Früh 2021). In light of these considerations and the aforementioned Irish context, this article examines Emilie Pine (2019) and Sinéad Gleeson (2019) confessional collections and explores the way they portray the interrelations between identity, textuality, and body poetics in contemporary Ireland.

Pine's *Notes to Self* and Gleeson's *Constellations: Reflections from Life* have received much acclaim from critics and readers.<sup>5</sup> Both essay collections focus on the female body, which arises as a recurrent site of reflection and revisitation,<sup>6</sup> but they also engage with topical and taboo issues, such as family, womanhood, sexuality, reproduction, eating disorders, and the eternal dichotomy of private versus public realms. Their autodiegetic narrators, i.e. narrators who are also the protagonist in the story they are telling, are prone to reflection and dwell upon personal and intimate experiences, proving the essay form to be a 'particularly apt instrument for highlighting the impact that the cultural context may have on the life of an individual' (Gymnich 2013, 710). In short, these authors use the confessional mode to challenge ideas that readers might have about themselves, their bodies or the world, and to support contemporary social change, securing the continuity of their impact on the youngest generations, including future writers. For Barthes, the essay was 'the generating principle behind the evolution of all genres, a kind of genre of genres' (qtd. in Atwan 1995, 13). In this regard, Pine's and Gleeson's unique collections illustrate the need to acknowledge the literariness of the essay form and that literature cannot exist without it. These two collections of essays constitute brave, determined, and coherent representations of their authors' mediating role as social writers who, in holding a mirror up to politics, present a disruptive view of the female body and its agency for social transformation. Stylistically, the weight of their inquiry leads the reader into self-interrogation and of the way societies are often fixated on the body as a unitary entity. In this sense, Pine's and Gleeson's texts are courageous examples of essayism written from liminal spaces between thinking and creating, between the physical and the social. Thematically, their

writings are a means of coding corporeal experiences with cultural constructions to demonstrate that ‘bodies speak, without necessarily talking’ (Grosz 2018, 35). In associating the body with illness and pain, care, reproduction, and abuse, these essays unveil the intimate links between patriarchy and corporeality, power and matter, the nuances of female biology and the psychological, social and political consequences of the female body’s (mis)treatment. In sum, they epitomise ‘the cultural significance of body-centered life writing in contemporary Ireland’ (Harte 2020, 95).

Gleeson and Pine also stand out for their use of Irish memoir as ‘repudiation of cultural silencing and secrecy in Ireland’ (Reynolds 2020, 16). Their reflections on painful past experiences explore the intersection of identity, textuality, and the body. Past events, filtered by their memories, unveil fragmented and changeable subjects in the search of a deeper knowledge of themselves. Gleeson and Pine not only challenge the idea of ‘the ideal autobiographer as a unified, transcendent subject’ (Coslett, Lury, and Summerfield 2002, 2), but display a ‘fragmentary, fluid, personal and expansive’ style (Leszkiewicz 2019, n. pag.). These characteristics make Gleeson’s and Pine’s confessional writing a challenging territory for inquiry.

Following Bamberg’s (2011, 2020) contention about the inextricable relation between self, memoir, and narration, this essay sets out to examine Pine’s and Gleeson’s collections as means of identity exploration. Methodologically, Bamberg’s three-tier approach is applied to focus on, first, the relation between the narrator(s) and other characters; second, that between the narrator(s) and their audience; and third, the relation between the narrator(s) as subject(s) navigating dominant discourses and external forces. This triangular perspective, displayed in an integrative approach of narrative analysis (Bamberg 2020), illuminates Gleeson’s and Pine’s texts as ‘interactional and bodily performed’ narratives (Bamberg 2011, 16) and tags them as testimonies of transformation and adaptation of the body-mediated selves. The analysis of these two widely acclaimed collections evinces the literary value and potentiality of contemporary Irish women’s essayism as a healing and empowering form of writing used to unearth deep hidden feelings.

### **Emilie Pine’s *Notes to Self***

In *Notes to Self*, Pine’s interest is principally focused on ‘challenging aspects of female life in Ireland’ (Ní Dhuibhne 2020b, 156), which range from vivid scenes of female biology and sexuality to professional success and aging. Amidst these themes, gendered notions of care and duty, motherhood, and sisterhood, are pondered and challenged in a personal yet informed way, which ultimately makes this collection an essential contribution to the current debate around womanhood in Ireland.

Pine projects mutually reinforcing relationships between text, autobiography, and memoir that coalesce in the exploration of self- and identity formation processes. As a feminist academic and a woman who has gone through fertility treatments unsuccessfully, her professional and personal interests find a common anchor in the (fe)male body which, as Punday has underlined, can provide significance for characters and define the position of the narrator (2003, 3). The physicality of the human body, its nuances, and consequences are at the heart of Pine’s collection. In her view, the body is perceived as ‘something to be controlled’ (González-Arias 2022, 169). Hence, the

body, as a 'narratological object' (Punday 2000, 227), stands as a powerful signifier of the tensions between the individual and their culture. The present section examines how the subject is 'anchored to a historical position' (Braidotti 2005, 174) in a way that it mediates and challenges gendered roles, aspirations, and expectations.

In a recent academic contribution, Pine (2020) denounced 'the Irish social and cultural stigmatisation of women's bodies for what they do (bleed, have sex), for what is done to them (rape, symphysiotomy), and for what they have not been allowed to do (abortion)' (161). These and other corporeal ordeals are examined in her book of personal memories, compiled in six essays that have been judged as 'explicit and clinical, immediate and reflective, intimate yet somehow detached' (Leszkiewicz 2019, n. pag.). Notwithstanding the disruption of a linear chronology in the collection, Pine's essays provide 'a successful diachronic navigation between constancy and change' (Bamberg 2011, 3). In other words, the chronological leaps and switches in and between the essays respond to her need to elucidate highly stressful events and situations that circumvent any conscious narrative effort to attain chronological coherence.

'Notes on Intemperance', the first essay of the collection, recounts Pine's anguish at her father's appalling state of health and the unsanitary conditions she finds him in after a long-life addiction to alcohol. More broadly, this essay sets out a pattern where the relations between the narrator and other characters, such as her father, are examined from an intimate perspective, and where rape and fertility procedures are revisited as material evidence of body maltreatment. This idea is central to Pine's collection and is substantiated in its 'sensational and shocking' (Ní Dhuibhne 2020a, 266) opening lines: 'By the time we find him, he has been lying in a small pool of his own shit for several hours' (3). According to Pine's experience, such body neglect and contempt for illness and pain suggests a much more profound conceptualisation of the body as a carcass, as a material substance detached from its humanity, a recurring practice in social care. A clear example of this is given at the peak of her father's crisis: 'They call him 'The Corpse'. He is attached to machines that monitor his heart and other major organs' (12). Deprived of his human dignity, her father's body is objectified and perceived as an extension of the medical equipment to which it is attached. Upon describing this scene, the narrator can only be a witness to a field alien and hostile to her, a recurring form of exclusion that pervades this collection.

Although this particular event took place in Pine's adulthood, it triggers other memories of her childhood, including an absent father figure and his failure to perform his paternal role. Her remembrances are linked to a conscious reflection on the unstable nature of the father-daughter relationship and its damaging effects upon her: 'It is hard to love an addict [...] It feels like bashing yourself against a wall, not just your head, but your whole self' (17). The frank examination of the alcoholic father, that Irish cliché, presents a permanent feeling of insecurity and an unsatisfying desire to please him: 'And every time he calls, my heart races. My heart will always race' (35). This confession does not resolve the volatility of their relationship; its inconsistent nature is revealed to the reader by the autodiegetic narrator in a confessional exercise, where she blends essay writing and memory, and connects personal life stories and identity formation. The first essay includes an array of scenes that highlight how father and daughter are constructed in relation to one another. This two-way relationality, epitomised by the author feeding her sick father in a hospital bed, is not only 'bitterly ironic'

(14), but also illustrative of the nonlinear process of identity formation that unfolds in the collection. Consistently, her style cannot but be ‘digressive, multidisciplinary and contradictory’ (Leszkiewicz 2019, n. pag.), because it integrates the twofold performance of the author as a woman writer and as a character. This duality enables Pine to dissociate the subject/object self and situate herself in a more conscious and objective position. For Pine, writing past scenes of her father and herself is ‘a way of understanding the larger story of me and my dad’ (33). With this digression, the author puts forward the relation between identity and its relation to narrative in the essay form (Bamberg 2020). In other words, Pine reflects upon the emergence of a transitional identity in her through this essay. In doing so, she refers to an interim sense held by her about what she was becoming and which was critical to moving her change process forward.

‘Notes on Intemperance’ finds a continuation in ‘Speaking/Not Speaking’, the third essay in the collection, where the family as an institution is under examination. Departing from her personal experience as a child of separated parents in the last decades of twentieth-century Ireland, Pine brings to the fore the social pressure to keep up appearances and preserve the traditional idea of the Irish family.<sup>7</sup> Here, silence plays a major role both as accomplice of dominant discourses and as the only possible strategy to navigate them: ‘I sensed, even at five years old, that the world would rather I remained quiet, that our family was not appropriate subject matter’ (97). Decades later, the author resorts to writing as a dynamic healing practice wherein the pains of her childhood are overtly presented, revisited, and made peace with. Taking the essay as a means of healing, Pine artistically links text and memory in order to achieve a higher comprehension of herself: ‘My parents did not speak. My father suffered from depression. I was a lonesome child. Those facts, and all the accompanying stories, whirl around. I write them down. Perhaps they will be less overbearing that way, pinned in one place’ (105).

Pine’s interests align with Punday’s claims for a corporeal narratology, where the body entails ‘an ability to establish contact between individuals and elements’ (2003, 188). Prompted by her father’s illness and physical decay, Pine’s collection expands on the corporeality of female daily existence, and how it affects women’s sense of self and their position in society. In this regard, it is no coincidence that her second essay, ‘From the Baby Years’, begins with an enumeration of the mandatory performances of the female body in relation to pregnancy: ‘I pee on sticks and into sample cups. I pee on my own hand when the stream won’t obey. I open my legs wide for sex, for the doctor’s speculum’ (39). Pine’s interest in bio-power is translated into visual images that illustrate the corporeal ordeals attached to female reproduction in the same way that she vividly links organ failure to alcoholism in ‘Notes on Intemperance’.

Noticeably, from ‘From the Baby Years’ on, Pine turns towards a more personal and detailed account of the connection between the female body and the social construction of womanhood, an unbreakable association that is still very much present in contemporary Ireland (Ingman 2007; Martin 2012; Meaney 2010). The reader follows Pine’s tribulations, which are simultaneously personal and universal, as she describes how the female body undergoes a series of invasive procedures on the path to motherhood. These bare acts, too often taken for granted in Western societies, represent the medicalisation of the female body, especially in relation to reproduction. Moreover, Pine extends her contention to the direct effect that these practices have upon the female subject: ‘I am fearful and hopeful and shameful. I worry that I am empty, or that I am full of the wrong things. I

worry that I am disappearing, eroding, failing' (39). These disturbing feelings leave the writer with a sense of inadequacy in the face of the national idealisation of the mother figure, which was given legal recognition in the 1937 Irish Constitution, and became an established cultural symbol that has survived in Ireland to the present day. The text of the Irish Constitution (1937) reads:

Article 41.2° The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State. 2.1° in particular the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. (n. pag.)

Feminist criticism on representations of the mother in Irish literature, with particular focus on the mother figure as a carer (Fogarty 2002), the mother-daughter bond (Weekes 2000), the diverse experiences of motherhood, and the silenced experiences of maternity (Kennedy 2004) has become prominent. Pine's contribution also stands out for challenging the ingrained symbolic identification of Irish women with motherhood by acknowledging infertility as a natural state: 'I am done using the word *failure* about my body' (85). Her work, revolving around the difficulties of becoming a mother, the hardship of miscarriage and subsequent condescension of medical staff, the inevitable resentment of a sibling's pregnancy, the emotional support of virtual communities, and tender feelings for a sister's offspring, opens the door to the construction of a collective identity of childfree womanhood.<sup>8</sup>

As the reading progresses, a two-tiered function of Pine's collection becomes more and more evident. In pouring her hopes and fears into the text, Pine undergoes a healing process that allows her to come to terms with her non-motherhood: 'I can give myself permission to become someone else, someone other than a mother' (83). *Notes to Self* thus defies Irish tradition and becomes a textual means to counteract the social, legal, and cultural concealment of what she calls 'the unproductive female body' (117). At the same time, the text uses the authorial voice to address her own compliance with gendered constructions of womanhood: 'Unable to be a mother, I decided that I would define myself through my job instead' (196). With these words, Pine not only suggests that the maternal and professional roles may be perceived as mutually exclusive, but also acknowledges that sexist attitudes and expectations are entrenched within academia, too. She draws on her individual experience to demonstrate that academic relations and hierarchies are bodily mediated and that physical attributes and age are categories of discrimination against women. At the same time, her writing allows Pine the opportunity to consider how and why she remained silent when a male fellow scholar struggled to reconcile her good looks and manner with her talk about rape: 'I should have called him on his misogyny. But in the moment that he said it, I did not even allow myself to think about the implications of his comment. I wanted to look professional' (187). These reflections unveil the author's ambivalence, caught between 'self-differentiation and integration' (Bamberg 2011, 8) in the public domain, and confirm an existing gender bias that Pine is unable to elude.

It is at this point that the intersection of identity and textuality becomes more evident. Once she acknowledges the incoherence of being a feminist who unconsciously accepts



misogyny, Pine's narrative style changes to incorporate a dialogical tone: 'Are you ready? I don't care about your feelings. I don't even know you, but I don't care how you're feeling, what you're feeling, even if you have feelings at all' (188). In the absence of someone to blame, the author shifts fault onto the reader, whom she deems accountable for the sexist experiences she goes through in social life and in academia. This engagement in dialogue with her reader appears in moments of high tension, especially to dissociate herself from painful events.

In 'Something About Me', Pine recalls her teenage years and unruly behaviour. It begins with the sentence, 'I'm not here' (135) and the message is repeated twice in italics immediately after, in order to express the unbearable pain of recalling being raped at sixteen. That, together with her teenage eating disorders, her parents' separation, and her passing from one school to another (five secondary schools in three years), forces the authorial subject to step up and demand recognition from the audience: 'Let me pause, and just look out the window for a while. Let me stand up and walk away from the desk. Let me take a minute' (158). The use of this interactional strategy confirms the ability of the essay genre to establish an unsettling relation between author and reader, and to allow an exploration of an explosive subject in the search of the self. The narrative style used in *Notes to Self* presents other literary strategies and figures of speech that deserve attention. For example, to increase tension and rhythm, Pine favours enumeration and repetition, which eventually leads to the revelation of personal reflections, as in the following excerpt: [F]inally, I can stop obsessing about my body. I can stop noticing what movement of my cycle I am in. I can stop the charting, the monitoring, the *peeing on sticks*. And I can comprehend how oppressive it has become. And I can relax. (77) This stylistic strategy elucidates the intersection of identity and textuality that characterises her volume.

Needless to say, writing autobiographical memories is a painful, albeit necessary process for Pine: 'I write it because it is the most powerful thing I can think of to do' (175). In line with foregrounding feminist vindications of autobiographical writing (Miller 1986, 2014; Coslett, Lury, and Summerfield 2002), *Notes to Self* gathers a series of memoirs in whose fragmented shape, the nonlinear sequencing of events and deliberate selection of vocabulary one can detect a feminist perspective. The whole collection tackles sensitive issues around the Irish construction of femininity, especially the fourth essay, 'Notes on Bleeding & Other Crimes', where Pine reflects on how women's biological processes and body performances are considered disturbing, and hence silenced. To counteract this, she embeds the female body in her storytelling, explicitly naming sexual activity with words such as 'sperm', 'condom', 'egg', 'fallopian tubes', and 'cervical mucus'. Simultaneously, throughout this collection, Pine employs terms such as 'unspeakable', 'secrecy', 'taboo', and 'disgust' defying silence and the text serves 'to disrupt the phallogocentrism of existing language' (Lykke 2010, 103). Stylistically, Pine plays with meanings to bring the reader's attention to the paradoxical treatment of women's bodies in Ireland, and she does so with irony: 'Sanitary products for our unsanitary bodies' (112). Womanhood is also described ironically with another play on words: 'Perhaps because if getting my period was 'becoming a woman', I fear that the end of my period is the end of being a woman' (119). In sum, Pine's understanding of what writing as a woman is takes the form of a bodily mediated narration. Her accommodation of the essay form into a corporeal narrative derives from her need

to put her life story into words as much as from her determination to advocate for feminism.

### Sinéad Gleeson's *Constellations: Reflections from Life*

Gleeson's book of essays opens by referring the reader to a quotation from Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa*, advancing her intention – like Pine's in her opening essay of *Notes to Self* – to engage with taboos and debates about the private and public realms. When she quotes Cixous' argument that 'Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard' (n. pag.), Gleeson uses the body as a 'narratological object' (Punday 2000, 227) to recount her experiences of monoarticular arthritis as a young girl, and acute promyelocytic leukaemia (APML) before she gave birth to her first baby. Her reflections around these two serious diagnoses and their impact on her body offer the reader insight into her reworking of her vital experience of illness as her life story unfolds. In fourteen essays, each named after a constellation, Gleeson recalls long-term pain, fear, shock, frustration, anxiety, despair, shame, rage, and deep gratitude for the care of healthcare staff and the support of her beloved partner. *Constellations* is a thought-provoking example of essayism about the female body in pain, sexuality, the struggle for recovery and change – not only Gleeson's but also in the Irish context.

The first essay, 'Blue Hills and Chalk Bones' explores the relationships between identity, memoir, and narration, and this will be discussed from Bamberg's three-tier methodological approach as well. As suggested earlier, this focuses on the relation between the narrator(s) and other characters, that between the narrator(s) and their audience, and finally, the relation between the narrator(s) as subject(s) navigating dominant discourses and external forces. Like Pine's first essay, Gleeson's is telling of the relation between the narrator and other characters and is also set in the past (Braidotti 2005, 174). The book covers a large historical time span, from the moment Gleeson turned thirteen to 2019, when her book was published:

I started paying particular attention to mine [my body] in the months after turning thirteen. When a pain, persistent and new, began to slow me down [...]. Doctors mentioned an operation [...], which, even in the late 1980s, they were reluctant to perform. 'Especially on girls,' [...] That I would have years of wishing my body could do things it couldn't do, and explaining myself to others. (1–2)

The physical body is represented as a mere container, a 'moving mass of vessel, blood and bone' (1), yet also as an object that is a site of pain, gender discrimination, self-loathing, and the main cause of the narrator's loss of self-esteem and self-confidence as a young girl. The chapter continues with the narrator acknowledging the impact of the socio-historical context upon the female body through practices of exclusion and compliance:

When my older brother was born in 1970, my mother had to be 'churched' before she was allowed to return to Mass [...]. In the eyes on holy men, even giving birth tainted women's bodies. It was not until 2018 that Ireland held a referendum on abortion, and passed a limited law for terminations in certain cases of up to twelve weeks. (1–3)

Gleeson shows how the 'cultural space is modelled on the human body, and consequently has concerned itself with the body's role within representation' (Punday 2003, 118). She

argues that Irish society was shaped by ‘ideas of hierarchy and social order’ (118) concerning the body. Gleeson’s metaphor of Irish mothers in the 1970s being ‘churched’, used to describe the ideal female body within the historical Irish Catholic State, illustrates the idea of the gendered body and its cleansing ritual in patriarchal society at that time. This excerpt reveals not only how the female-gendered body was excluded in Ireland, but also how it was conceived as inherently sinful, disgusting, and impure. The passage closes with a reference to the legalisation of abortion in 2018, explicitly showing that social practices of control over the female body still need to be counteracted by legal norms.

The final section of the essay ‘Hair’ presents Gleeson remembering herself as a six-year-old girl as she combs her daughter’s hair. Her examination of hair and femininity extends to fashion and the importance of appearance. Gleeson also reflects on the misjudgement and discrimination against women for not fitting beauty standards because of race, sexual orientation or religious belief outside of normative Western models. Reading Gleeson’s reflection on hair loss in this essay from Bamberg’s integrative approach of narrative analysis uncovers a number of relevant ideological implications: ‘Hair as signifier and symbol represents everything from social position and marital status to sexual availability’ (24).

To illustrate this, she examines PJ Harvey’s song *Hair* and claims that: ‘As a teenager, I learned that there was power in absence’ (24). Referring to Irish singers, such as Sinéad O’Connor, for whom she was often mistaken, to her amusement, Gleeson adds that ‘Every time I’ve shaved my head [...] there is always a response, especially from men. They are mostly horrified, or bemused; some declared it attractive: but I was always asked to justify myself. To explain what I’d done. And why’ (26). In this way, Gleeson makes a point about the objectification of female hair by patriarchal social norms, which perpetuate gender stereotypes:

What did you do to yourself?  
 Did you have a fight with a lawnmower?  
 Are you a lesbian?  
 Why would you make yourself unattractive?  
 But ... it’s like sabotaging yourself.  
 What did your mother say?  
 (Note: never ‘father’). (26)

In a similar way to Pine, Gleeson uses irony to criticise the connection between the female body and the social construction of womanhood. The above excerpt offers a range of qualifiers of non-conforming women as aggressors of their own bodies (‘What did you do to yourself?’), as bodies with no aesthetic sense (‘Did you have a fight with a lawnmower?’ ‘Why would you make yourself unattractive?’), as bodies without the freedom to live their sexuality (‘Are you a lesbian?’), as unfulfilled bodies (‘But ... it’s like sabotaging yourself’) and as bodies asking for permission to be themselves (‘What did your mother say?’). The essay closes with the narrator’s memories of losing her hair during chemotherapy and her rejection of a wig that was a replica of her previous hairstyle; Gleeson seises this hair loss as an opportunity to become ‘something that was different from who I was before’ (32). She addresses the audience, navigating dominant discourses and external forces concerning her loss of hair: ‘I know that our brains selectively archive trauma, in illness or grief, but why was the wig censored?’ (33).

Gleeson's rhetoric of inquiry gives way to what saved her mind at the time: words and music, the same things she uses to take her daughter's mind off things when she combs her hair, because this is a tremendously painful experience for her: 'My hair. Her hair. Me. Her. Us' (34). Clinging onto the mother-daughter bond to overcome physical trauma helps her to find agency in her art and her writing, which become the means to subvert all the stereotypes related to hair loss.

The following essay, '60000 Miles of Blood', is beautifully crafted and is reminiscent of Pine's 'Notes on Bleeding and Other Crimes'. The relation between the narrator and her audience becomes evident in this essay as Gleeson reflects objectively upon the genetic characteristics and disorders of the blood, and the female body's capacity for healing. Her style becomes very evocative, eloquent, emotional, and intimate when she reflects upon the fear experienced, and the scars and pain inflicted on her body by doctors and nurses, after each blood test, the reasons why people donate blood.

What is more, the essay is a thoughtful reflection on the idea of blood having a market value: 'Blood helps the body to fix itself, and yet still, like everything else, it has a price' (40). Following this monetary idea of blood, Gleeson also writes of the art created by Franko B out of spilled blood.

Gleeson's essay is not just an ode to the beauty of blood and bloodstains, something that comes from 'her body, her female self' (52); she also transforms its corporeality into something philosophical. In doing so, Gleeson aligns with Pine in making a feminist claim about the power of blood: 'Women have been shamed for bleeding, encouraged to hide the process and their response to it. Using it as a medium in art is a feminist act of reclamation and confrontation' (53).

By commenting on Ana Mendieta's art and her use of blood as a tool of confrontation, the narrator also engages in prevailing discourses related to the uses of the body as a political tool, identifying it 'as a symbol of both patriarchal male violence against women, and the power of female sexuality' (53). All in all, the essay constitutes a celebration of sex and the magic power of blood in the female experience, yet also a 'reminder that my blood, peripheral or menstrual, is a biohazard' (55).

This conclusion, which brings back memories of the night of her leukaemia diagnosis, of her fears and tears, and her instinctive reaction to her parents' grieved incomprehension, is relevant because confessional writing, aspects of textuality, and the body are fused with Bamberg's methodological approach based on a tripartite understanding of the relationship between narrative and identity. This becomes particularly evident in Gleeson's conversation with her mother and her dwelling upon the social construction of women's identity:

I knew something was required of me. To hide my fear [...]. I have no memory of this but my mother told me years later that I looked into her face and said, 'I'm not going to die. I'm going to write a book.' To commit to writing or art, is to commit to living. A self-imposed deadline as a means of continued existence. It has taken me a long time to write that book and here I am, so very far from that awful night.

Art is about interpreting our own experience. Upon entering hospitals, or haematology wards, our identity changes. We move from artist or parent or sibling to patient, one of the sick. We hand over the liquid in our veins to have it microscopied and pipetted [...] blood [...] might as well use it as aesthetic agenda; a declaration of possession. (60–61)

Gleeson's essay takes a stand for the idea of the female body and its most defining identity trait, menstrual blood, as art. '60000 Miles of Blood' is conceived as a feminist manifesto of empowerment and agency rather than of fear, tears, and dispossession.

Gleeson's 'On the Atomic Nature of Trimesters' also shares several thematic traits with Pine's essay 'From the Baby Years'. Both writers elaborate on changes in the female body during pregnancy and their effects on a woman's sense of identity and sense of motherhood. Gleeson's unique sense of humour starts with a parody of the opening lines of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the female narrator criticises Victorian patriarchal social constructions around marriage and womanhood in ironic terms:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a woman in possession of a womb and a decent supply of eggs must be in want of a child. We know this, us women. The directive that every one of us must produce or will want babies even predates the Virgin Mary miraculously birthing Jesus Christ (without the prerequisite fuck). (89)

The intertextual referencing of Austen's novel to reflect on 'this pre-destination' (90) subverts the Irish Catholic Church's ideology and mandates on Irish women's reproduction, motherhood, and sexuality, as well as patriarchal constructions of the same. This essay differs from Pine's too in that it focuses on unexpected and unwanted pregnancy, reproductive rights outside of Ireland, problems during pregnancy and fearful motherly feelings evoked by her chemotherapy treatment and the chance that she might lose her baby. The idea of the pregnant body as a public affair evokes Anne Enright's memoir *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004) as Gleeson affirms: 'The pregnant body is not solely its owner's domain. In gestating another person, you become a public property. The world – women in shop queues, neighbours, the internet – is full of unasked for comments and advice' (99). Gleeson surpasses her body both in pain and in function, overcoming illness to become a mother: 'My body is done [...] My body is further away from the pristine thing it was when I was an infant like her [her daughter]. It depletes and declines, and yet gave me these children' (104).<sup>9</sup>

Gleeson's autobiographical collection subverts linearity by means of experimentation, which affects the whole structure of the volume. Present-day chapters, such as 'Twelve Stories of Bodily Autonomy (for the twelve women a day who left)' and 'A Non-Letter to My Daughter', are interspersed with others about the author's past ('On the Atomic Nature of Trimesters') and the pasts of other female artists and adventurers, as in 'A Wound Gives Off Its Own Light' and 'The Adventure Narrative'. Formally, Gleeson enriches her memoir with a variety of references that include poems, songs, artworks, and quotations from other artists and writers. This strategy expands the boundaries of the essay format it purports to be written in. Gleeson's texts succeed in drawing attention to the diverse forms of aggression inflicted upon the female body throughout history and the subtle reactions they have generated in that body itself and as a universal object of art and culture.

## Conclusions

As Gayle Greene once stated, 'feminist fiction is inherently unsettling' (1991, 292); so are Pine's and Gleeson's essays, in distinctive ways. Both writers explore a wide range of cultural constructions relating to gender, identity and trauma issues. Both examine the the

female body as the recipient of pain and resentment, and they do so honestly, generously and courageously. *Notes to Self* and *Constellations: Reflections from Life* draw from existing forms to construct new ones more suited to their authors' needs – forms that compel us to read differently, to enter into unique corporeal experiences intersected by shared cultural constructions. Furthermore, their interactional essence entails a double function: the reader is privileged to discover the authors' intimate thoughts and experiences and, at the same time, is engaged in the transforming effect of the texts.

In examining these two essay collections, Bamberg's integrative approach to narrative analysis has proved to be a suitable tool for uncovering the interrelationships between identity, textuality, and the body, a goal that both works achieve by different means. The collection by Pine thoroughly explores the relationships between the narrator and other characters, especially those with her father and other members of her family, with an intimate and sensitive tone. She makes use of memory to represent the story of her body, the inflicted pain, and fury, to gather all the pieces together, come to terms with her contempt and eventually make sense of her womanhood. She also approaches the relationship between the narrator and her audience, particularly noticeable in 'This Is Not on the Exam', where the issues under discussion, namely professional prestige, work-life balance, and female authority, are part of the public realm. As a result, the whole volume becomes a means for Pine's self-empowerment as well as for that of her readers.

Gleeson's writing not only focuses on her personal experience of living with an ill body and the ordeals of medicalisation, but also on how she achieved a certain balance thanks to resilience and eventual motherhood. Her recollections concentrate on the relationship between the narrator as a subject that navigates dominant discourses and external forces. It is an extraordinarily well-informed cultural product that not only crosses many social, ideological, and aesthetic borders regarding the female body but also shows concern for its objectification. Blood, organs, hair, and assisted reproduction are presented as embodied forms of exchange. At the same time, Gleeson subverts the commodification of the female body by bringing to the fore examples of mutilated and damaged bodies that can become art. She argues:

Kahlo died in 1954 aged forty-seven, a year after her leg was finally amputated; [Jo] Spence in 1992 from leukaemia (was it the same kind as mine?), and [Lucy] Greal, who became reliant on painkillers, a decade later at thirty-nine from heroin overdose. Representing a diagnosis – in art, words or photos – is an attempt to explain to ourselves what has happened, to deconstruct the world and rebuild it in our own way. Perhaps articulating a life-changing illness is part of recovery. But so is finding the kind of articulation that is specific to you. Kahlo, Greal, and Spence were lights in the dark for me, a form of guidance. A triangular constellation. (189)

Her use of intertextuality expands the reach of her claims beyond the personal realm and fosters cultural change.

Set in fertile ground, backed by a thriving literary and publishing moment, these two Irish writers fully exploit the potential of life writing as a means to vindicate the centrality of the body to human experience. In particular, they celebrate the female body as a site of care and empowerment despite the personal, social and institutional damage inflicted upon it. Through self-exploration and forgiveness, resilience, rebellion, and love, Pine's and Gleeson's collections highlight the importance of being conscious of one's self, caring for one's body, having the choice to say no as well as yes, keeping up the

drive for change and self-realisation and, finally, demanding social and cultural change. The stories in these women's life writing demonstrate 'the symbiotic relationship between women's public claiming of their diverse voices and women's achievement of social change' (Mulhall 2018, 402), which began in the 1970s and continues today. Through Bamberg's approach, these collections can be better understood as interactional and bodily-performed narratives with a commitment for transformation.

In broad terms Irish women's confessional writing functions as a powerful tool of self-empowerment based in personal experiences that project healing and change into societal and institutional levels. These essays not only bear witness to the legal and ideological transformations that have been taking place in Ireland in recent decades in the field of women's rights, but also break new ground in the artistic intersection between female identity, textuality, and the body.

## Notes

1. Well-known innovations in form and topic have arisen in the novel form at the hands of internationally acclaimed authors: Claire Kilroy in *All the Names Have Been Changed* (2009), Eimear McBride in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), Anne Enright in *The Green Road* (2015) and Lisa McInerney in *The Rules of Revelation* (2021), to name a few. For further insight into the relation between the Celtic Tiger and Irish women's novels, see Clark (2019) and Barros-del Río (2018). Other genres, such as theatre, poetry and short fiction, have been used to voice Irish women's interests as well (Bracken and Harney-Mahajan 2021).
2. The use of memory in feminist writing has been widely studied. See Greene (1991) and Harte (2007; 2018).
3. As Claire Lynch (2009) has rigorously argued, the appraisal of Irish autobiographical texts cannot be detached from the socio-historical context in which they are produced.
4. For further discussion of these gender issues, see Terrazas (2018, 1–5). Another recent historic day for Ireland and Irish women occurred in January 2021. This event is not included in the two books that are the object of study here because it postdates their publication. The final report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation, which recorded that around 9,000 children had died in such institutions between 1922 and 1998. The report's findings were so shocking that, a few days later, Taoiseach Micheál Martin made a formal apology to survivors on behalf of the state. It is no surprise that these issues are the focus of another non-fiction book, *Bessborough* by Deirdre Finnerty, forthcoming with Hachette and due in May 2022.
5. Emilie Pine's debut collection *Notes to Self* was awarded The Irish Book of the Year Prize 2018 and The Butler Literary Award 2018. Sinéad Gleeson's number-one bestselling *Constellations: Reflections from Life* won Non-Fiction Book of the Year at the 2019 An Post Irish Book Awards and the Dalkey Book Festival's Emerging Writer Award 2020.
6. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Ireland. On the contrary, there has been increasing interest worldwide in exploring the relationship between the body, pain and memory (Hillman and Maude 2015). Hirsch (2019) has detected memory and practice-based feminism as an emerging field of studies on the international stage, and she contends that this flourishing trend has become a way of mobilising "other forms of knowledge and alternative ways of intervention in national narratives and imaginaries" (4). Irish women writers seem to have joined this trend decisively in light of the successful confessional narratives that are flooding the Irish literary arena (Ní Dhuibhne 2020b). Undoubtedly, the universality of these issues opens the door to a more international reading of the female body and suffering, an idea that has been advanced by Bates (2020).
7. For further discussion of this issue, see Connolly (2015, 1–9), where she maps empirically key arenas of change in family life in Ireland (including marriage, separation, divorce,

cohabitation, fertility and reproduction, gender, sexualities and lone parenthood), and compares them with European trends to argue that Irish family trends are characterised by continuity and change in the twenty-first century.

8. A precedent of Pine's frank treatment of Irish motherhood and its ordeals can be found in *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* by Anne Enright (2004), an autobiography in which the author refuses to present herself as an ideal mother. For a more in-depth discussion of Enright's work, see Efrausino (2021).
9. From this essay on, the narrator dwells upon the fe/male artist's idea of the body in a large number of cultural practices "ranging from a wide range places and times, and produced by artists of different sex, race, class, ideology, religious belief and nation" (Terrazas 2020, 249). Gleeson chooses a broad line-up of public and historical figures as objects of analysis in the body-mediated narration of subsequent essays, such as Karl Landsteiner, Frida Kahlo, Roald Dahl, Dervla Murphy or the Maggies of the Magdalene Laundries, coming from all disciplines and countries. The collection uses the body to explore not only these figures, but also other well-known individuals and how their deeds, emotions, illnesses and work have had an impact on culture and society. In doing so, she reflects on a large number of cultural constructions around identity and trauma issues. Her artistic background and practice are manifest in a collection that uses a large number of cultural products to illustrate, compare and expand on the varied uses and abuses of the female body, whereas Pine is more focused on her personal experience.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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