

## Sally Rooney's Sapiosexuals

“When I hear the phrase ‘sex scene’, I think about a dialogue scene.”

- Sally Rooney

By her own account, Sally Rooney has a thing for dialogue. Or at least she suggests as much in her memoir about her university days as a rising student debater. First published in the Dublin Review in Spring 2015, “Even if you beat me” is a characteristically ironic account of Rooney’s brief honeymoon with the elite university debating society. In the storytelling arc of this educational *bildung*, Rooney begins as a “friendless teenager living away from home” and ends as a world champion of the sport, rewarded by the accumulated social capital of prizes and recognition. ¶6 The narrative arc of Rooney’s debating career, however, is not one of straightforwardly upward educational and individual mobility. While her story begins with libidinal cathexis and proto-professional enchantment, it increasingly becomes the tale of intellectual and affective disinvestment. In the terms (also Rooney’s) of the epigraph to this essay, “Even if you beat me” is an example of how a certain ‘dialogue scene’ of advanced cultural capital is unevenly sustained or not sustained as a ‘sex scene’ of libidinal and erotic attachments.

After all, as she herself suggests, Rooney doesn’t so much choose debating, as find herself seduced by it. She observes how “the most talented speakers seemed to possess a subtle power and command that was almost glamorous.” In this erotic melodrama of cultural imitation and performance, she studies the retorts and gestures of the top speakers and tries to “replicate them in everyday conversation”. It’s not only the debaters themselves who are invested with romantic glamour, moreover, but also the abstract skills which they raise to the level of an art performance. As a student of this charismatic dialogue, Rooney “nursed

intense obsessions over droll counterfactuals.” Nothing, she reports of her own “passionate” and “forceful” dialogue, had prepared her for this encounter with her “own apparent ardour”. (¶19)

Like most honeymoons, perhaps, this erotic and cultural fantasy soon encounters the jaded landscape of red-eye flights and fast-food meals in seedy European hotel rooms in a naturalist nightmare of cosmopolitan drift: “That seven-minute interval of mild euphoria during which I actually delivered my speech”, Rooney complains, “came to seem like a tinier and tinier oasis in a desert of spiritual exhaustion and food served in plastic wrap.” (¶24) What initially attracts her as a form of charismatic intellectual ability turns out to be little more than standardized mental training: “The harder I practiced, the harder it was to recapture that sense of glamour that motivated me in the beginning.” (¶25) In the end, and despite her success, the debating scene amounts to the total gamification of intellectual experience, a purely abstract (and artless) performance of language-skills for the accumulation of social capital in the global economy. Rooney eventually gives up debating because she “[doesn’t] want to perform... for points anymore” and wants “to see if [she] could still think of things to say when there weren’t any prizes. To a greater or lesser extent,” she says, she is “still working on that.” (¶37)

This tension between personalized intellectual charisma and abstract social capital raises questions that are relevant not only to Rooney’s life but to her first two novels, as well as to contemporary literary and sexual culture in and beyond Ireland. Rooney’s glamorous induction into and subsequent break-up from high-stakes university debating can be read as a *vignette* of the broader experiences of highly credentialed Irish (though not only Irish) brainworkers during a period of rapid globalization and uneven modernization. Moreover, her tendency to invest immaterial labor with healthy dose of sexual glamour points towards what

this essay reads as one of the primary reaction-formations of modern immaterial labourers: the sexualization of charismatic intelligence in the face of its economic instrumentalization.<sup>1</sup>

After all, it's not just Rooney who has a thing for performative dialogue: her characters and her readers also appear to get off on scenes of charismatic cultural literacy. Reviewers have persistently (though perhaps not *critically*) drawn attention to the combination of sexual desire and dialogic intelligence in her work. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Adam Mars-Jones comments on the "unorthodox" nature of Marianne and Connell's flirting, consisting as it often does in pointing out how smart each other are. (§2) The *Guardian's* editorial on the TV adaptation of *Normal People* observes how Marianne and Connell constantly "vie to praise each other's brains" (§5) while Armitstead and Thomas-Corr comment in the same paper on how their attraction is "as much intellectual as it is sexual" (§6). Germane here, too, is the BBC screenplay of Rooney's *Normal People*, which sticks true to their first encounter in the book as an erotically charged exchange about who has the highest grades and then goes on to invest a good deal of sexual tension in their academic relations.

Although particularly evident in Rooney's fictions, this intermediation of sexuality and intelligence has recently been given a more general name in contemporary culture: sapiosexuality. Over the last decade or so this concept has emerged into the online dating scene, where it has come to mean something like an intense sexual attraction to intelligent people, or to intelligence itself (the equivocation between embodied person and abstract capacity being relevant to the concept's internal contradictions).<sup>2</sup> Like all emergent

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<sup>1</sup>I do not attach any inherent value, positive or negative, to the concept of 'intelligence', here. Rather, my analysis seeks to historicize intelligence as a variable field of social intelligibility, showing how it is constructed and valorised through social and erotic processes that might not at first glance appear to be apposite to it in a historical moment when the usual production mechanisms of symbolic capital (professional vocations, upward mobility etc.) are in widespread crisis.

<sup>2</sup>To be more precise, Google Books' usage ngram indicates that its frequency picked up from 0 in 2008 and then rocketed after 2009, a quantitative pattern which strongly supports the qualitative claims of my argument, as will become clear.

nominalizations, and particularly those which purport to describe a stable sexual identity, the concept of ‘the sapiosexual’ has not gone under the radar of intense debate and discursive policing.<sup>3</sup> My intention here is not to arbitrate its authenticity, nor less evaluate its sexual or ethical merit, but rather to show how the complex and uneven sexualization of intelligence in Rooney’s work, as well as in contemporary culture more broadly, might reveal more structurally embedded crises of social recognition during a period of rapid globalization and trenchant job stagnation, intensified exploitation combined with structural un- and underemployment.

This set of economic conditions is both specific to Ireland and apposite to citizens (and reading publics) across Europe and North America. As Joseph Cleary has demonstrated at length, over the last two decades or so Irish culture, along with its associated skills, competencies and values, has been fully integrated into the marketplace of immaterial goods and ideas. (2017) Perhaps more than in any other nation state in Europe besides the UK under Tony Blair, Ireland’s economic growth during the Tiger phase was driven by the rise of cultural and creative sectors via technology exports, media industries and cultural tourism. With this shift in the content of commodities and services there has been a concomitant change in the cultures of work, with Ireland – and Dublin in particular – enthusiastically following the path of other post-Industrial cultural capitals such as London and Barcelona in advertising the importance of its “creative economy” and extolling the myth of its creative

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<sup>3</sup> A significant body of online literature has arisen to address the question of whether sapiosexuality is a “real” or “authentic” sexual phenomena. A historicist approach asks a different question: what can the emergent conceptual field of sapiosexuality tell us about wider and more pervasive social and sexual contradictions in late capitalist societies? For journalistic responses to the concept, mainly in the context of online dating, see: Joho, Jess. “What people really mean when they identify as sapiosexual on dating apps”, 8 August 2019, <https://mashable.com/article/sapiosexual-online-dating-app-culture-term-lingo?europa=true>; Ulaby, Neda, “Sapiosexual Seeks Same: A New Lexicon Enters Online Dating Mainstream”, 8 December 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2014/12/04/368441691/sapiosexual-seeks-same-a-new-lexicon-enters-online-dating-mainstream?t=1602259796693>; Murdoch, Cassie. “Sapio, the dating app that wants to help smart people hook up”, 9 February 2017, <https://mashable.com/article/sapio-dating-app>; and Jenkinson, Rosmary, “I told all the men at a speed dating event I was a writer. Unanimous disappointment”, 25 November 2019, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/i-told-all-the-men-at-a-speed-dating-event-i-was-a-writer-unanimous-disappointment-1.4084135>

individuals, often as a way to legitimate the surreptitious dismantling of older promises of vocational security. Cleary makes the point that this new work ethic took hold particularly forcefully in Ireland, which had no strong manufacturing sector to fall back on but was blessed with “the discourses of Celticism, romanticism, and its achievements in high modernism”, which could support “an international reputation for ‘creativity’.” (165) This creative class revival was key to Ireland’s rise from a European satellite state and closed Catholic monoculture to an economic powerhouse and hub for global capital and labor.

Moreover, during the period between Heaney’s award for the Nobel Prize in 1995 and the financial crash in 2008, there was a fundamental realignment between artists and the established authorities of state and market, one which broadly resulted in a pact between cultural production and neoliberal economic imperatives. (144-145) Drawing on the international renown of artist-entrepreneurs such as Bono, Geldof and O’Connor, as well the prestige of literary heavyweights such as Heaney and Tóibín, Ireland’s International Development Authority and other cultural agencies such as the Arts Council of Ireland emphasized the importance of the arts to Ireland’s development in the global economy and in turn created new sources of funding and state patronage. Artists themselves largely fell into step with this new development discourse, creating what Cleary has described as generation of “postbohemian, postvanguardist” literary elites who “‘went global’ and brooked no distinction between economic and symbolic capital.” (165)

As with the implementation of neoliberal policies across Europe, however, the Tiger phase wasn’t by any means a boon for most ‘normal people’ living and working in Ireland. Unfettered access for global corporations went hand in hand with the erosion of workers’ rights, greater levels of income inequality, the decline of trade unions, the zoning of building development and the crisis of the leftwing parliamentary parties. Household borrowing rose to extraordinary levels, meaning that when the global crisis hit in 2007, personal and

institutional debt resilience was dangerously fragile. By 2008 Ireland's economy was in freefall along with the rest of Europe, a crisis which manifested nationally in mass unemployment and a return to net emigration, especially by the young and (now) over-trained precariat. (Finn, 32)

What sets the Irish economic situation apart from other recently developed nations such as Greece is the enthusiasm with which the center right government implemented extreme regimes of austerity, beyond even what was being called for in the UK. Ireland's politicians essentially ceded sovereignty to a Troika of European bureaucrats, slashing public investment with the sole aim of bringing down national debt. Yet in doing so, they drained the lifeblood out of many of the country's national institutions, from the relatively stable middleclass, Catholic family to the steady, upward trajectory of a professional, high-skilled career. Rooney's fictions, to echo one of her own metaphors, orbit the *ghost estate* abandoned by that neoliberal hollowing out of national space, imagining transitory yet often powerful forms of survival and belonging between an underdeveloped internal periphery and the de-territorialised flows of global capital and labor that are always trending beyond the nation's spatial and symbolic borders.<sup>4</sup>

In this way, her fictions to some degree challenge what has been the fairly lukewarm opposition of Irish (and more broadly Western) national culture in calling to account state austerity and European globalism. Indeed, in 2020, Cleary, writing in the *Irish Times*, hypothesized that a new generation of left leaning writers, from whom he singles out Rooney and Oisín Fagan, are challenging the cultural orthodoxies of the Tiger phase and producing

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<sup>4</sup> As both metaphorical figure and material ground, the "ghost estate" not-quite-inhabited by Marianne and Connell in *Normal People* indexes the suburban homes that *might* have been occupied by a prosperous national bourgeoisie had the 2008 financial crisis been averted. These emptied out residences are thus both sordid (because they represent the souring of heteronormative domestic ideologies) and utopian, because they point to queerer and more fugitive forms of attachment that *might* take flight in the crumbling material and symbolic remains of failed capitalist development. I fully acknowledge, moreover, that there is a sense in which Irish national culture has for a much longer period orbited a kind of 'ghost estate' of promised national prosperity undermined, first, by specific conditions of British colonial intervention and, subsequently, by the forms of under- and over-development characteristic of 'post-colonial' capitalist democracies generally.

fictions that contest the cultural and economic status quo. (¶28) This essay seeks to bear out Cleary's hunch by showing that Rooney's works do indeed constitute a significant intervention in the Irish cultural field post-2008, and one which has everything to do with the way her sapiosexual couple-forms intercept and irritate the smooth valorization of individuated cultural and creative capacities (a kind of Romantic, charismatic kernel) into abstract capitalist labor without, crucially, falling back on older compensatory structures like the heteronormative family and its ideologies of property, privacy and romantic sentimentality. To understand the libidinal and more broadly political significance of sapiosexual desire, we need to resist being seduced into perceiving Rooney's couples as the expression of individualized "private" desires – let alone as vanilla sex! – and understand them instead as symbolic narrative solutions (imperfect ones, but perhaps all the more powerful for that) to material contradictions constitutive of Ireland's recent inflection point between national and neoliberal (i.e. global) forms of capitalism, along with the thoroughgoing commodification of culture which drove that transition.

I this essay, I read Rooney's precariats' desires to feel smart via the couple-form as what Lauren Berlant (2007) described as a "scene of recognition" – one which I take to be largely symbolic and imaginary rather than socially mimetic or anthropological. In distinction to a structure of pure ideology or false consciousness, however, scenes of recognition dramatize

an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging that can be entered into in a number of ways, and that can best be tracked in terms of affective transactions that take place alongside the more instrumental ones. ('Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal, p.278)

By tracking those 'affective transactions' (in particular the sapiosexual ones) as they come to striate Rooney's simultaneously 'normal' and queer couple-forms, I aim to understand the

ways that they stand in for older forms of recognition and remuneration (whether by State or Family, Church or Economy) that can no longer be relied upon as stable and fortifying grounds of social identity and national belonging. There's a story here too, then, about the ways that sexual liberalization (again, in as well as beyond Ireland) creates conditions in which a residual version of the romantic couple-form – dislodged from its hegemonic social function – can come to carry symbolic burdens and promises beyond mere compensation and social reproduction, about how romantic bonds which seem nearly normal, to echo Berlant, can also appear nearly utopian.

Rooney's aspiring precariats' sexual-cum-vocational desires register the contradiction between the ambitions fostered by the Tiger phase of Irish growth and the grim realities of work post-2008. They combine elite training with vocational disenchantment, an almost arrogant belief in their own, personal intellectual capacities with a hard-nosed appraisal of the unappealing avenues for putting these capabilities to use as sources of either monetary value or deeper, humanist meaning. Moreover, they reveal the gendered dimensions of these forms of workplace fallout, dramatizing how "feminization" – in the sense of casualized and discounted labor – is now a burden for men as well as women in modern cultural sector jobs characterized by low status and pay and often implicitly justified as "labors of love".<sup>5</sup> It's within and against these crises in liberal meritocracy, national futurity and romantic normativity that sapiosexual desire becomes intelligible and compelling as a scene of recognition and a symbolic narrative solution - a way for subjects to preserve something of what André Gorz (2010) calls "honor" in the face of a degraded workplace culture and a structural lack of opportunity and vocation.

### **Conversations with friends, or performances for colleagues?**

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<sup>5</sup> See Sarah Jaffe (2021) for an excellent account of the way contemporary workplace precarity gets justified as a "labor of love" both in and beyond Ireland.



To understand sapiosexual desire as a scene of recognition in Rooney's fictions, we need first of all to grasp the concrete economic contradictions for which it offers symbolic palliation and narrative redress. Echoing Rooney's debating career, *Conversations with Friends* begins with an indeterminate scene of charismatic-cum-instrumental performance. "Bobbi and I first met Melissa", Frances tells us in the novel's opening line, "at a poetry night in town, where we were performing together." (3) As the scene continues, however, it becomes expressively unclear whether this "performance" points to the poetry act which has just concluded on stage, or to Frances and Bobbi posing to have their photographs taken outside the venue, or indeed to the broader social performance which ensues when the two women accompany Melissa back to her trendy apartment in Monkstown. In the taxi, Frances finds herself "already preparing certain complements and certain facial expressions to make [herself] seem charming." To echo Rooney, Frances is performing for points, presenting the feminine self in ways which will improve her standing in a social clique and purchase an ostensibly *pro bono* (but actually emotionally costly) publicity service: Melissa's photographic labor, which seeks, we might say, to capture their performance as artistic brand.

Existing in that postmodern space between leisure and work, Frances's self-administered responses are symptomatic of the colonization of everyday life by capitalist logics of feminized emotion work ("charm") and performative aesthetic labor ("preparing"). The bleed of both art-performance and feminized labor into the spaces of everyday life is made all the more visible by Frances because of her ironized distance from the self as an imperfect signifying technology. Finding it "hard to arrange [her] face in a way that would convey [her] sense of humour" (6), Frances's awkwardness brings into relief those micro-exchanges which are increasingly necessary for survival in the gig economy (especially for women) and which often fall under the radar of historical and economic accounts of work and value.

Of course, it's precisely through rendering this casualized yet necessary social performance as "hard" that Rooney's feminist fiction chalks it up as work, as arduous energy expenditure directed toward the production of value or, in this case, the acquisition of a service. At the same time as persistently revealing the economic and affective imperative to perform, however, *Conversations* is no straightforward upward mobility romance that rewards casualized postindustrial work with ample opportunity. Rather, as a young artist and cultural aspirant (much like Connell in *Normal People*) Frances both inherits and irritates what Joe Cleary has described as the post-crash pact between Irish cultural production and neoliberal economic imperatives at a granular, experiential level. She persistently jams the efficient valorisation of humanist interiority – complex emotion, cultural knowledge, artistic creativity – as a form of social capital via her awkward performances of emotional and cultural work. In her day-job, too, Frances becomes a site of fraught resistance to processes of modernization specific to Dublin's recent transformation into a metropolitan cultural and creative hub. She works as an "intern" for a literary agency where her job is to "read stacks of manuscripts and write one-page reports on their literary value. The value", she assures us, "was almost always nil." (17) Here, the administration of the arts via a business model results in the reduction of aesthetic appreciation to bureaucratic paper-pushing, revealing a bathetic absence of national cultural output.

To put it another way, Rooney's fictions appropriate the aspirational ideologies of entrepreneurship and "development" that were so central to Dublin's ascendancy to a creative class milieu and deflate them into naturalist farce. Frances's job is represented less as an opportunity for genuine development and more as the stunting of the progressive chronotopes of the *bildungsroman* and its promises of national and social futurity. She and her friend/colleague Phillip imagine themselves as children in the shadow of an adulthood structurally out of reach: "Sometimes Philip would sardonically read bad sentences aloud to

me, which made me laugh, but we didn't do that in front of the adults who worked there. We worked three days a week and were both paid 'a stiped' which meant we basically weren't paid at all." (17) While Philip not un-astutely diagnoses their underpaid employment as the "privilege" of being able to work for free, Frances refuses the function of this ladder of individual mobility altogether, telling him: "Speak for yourself... I'm never going to get a job."<sup>6</sup> (18) To be clear, then, there's active refusal as much as passive fatalism in Rooney's protagonists' demurral from workplace ambition. Frances doesn't say: *we'll never get jobs*. Rather, she re-narrates a structural situation of scarce and desultory work as a political principle, a negation of the value of the work ethic altogether. As she puts it elsewhere: "I certainly never fantasized about a radiant future where I was paid to *perform* an economic role." (23, emphasis added) Part of the appeal of Rooney's plots, especially for Millennials perhaps, is this de-cathexis of fantasy from what Herbert Marcuse presciently described as the "performance principle" of work in service-based economies of cultural and creative production, a performance principle which Rooney's fictions reveal in the form of feminized – casualized, discounted, elided – regimes of labor.<sup>7</sup>

The erotic glue in Frances and Nick's attraction, then, is their shared desire to escape the performance principles and affective regimes of post-Fordist work, a desire which Rooney lends biographical and historical depth by subtly mirroring their pre-diegetic childhoods as comparable experiences of the pressures of intellectual subjectivization as what Bobbi calls "childhood genius[es]" during the boom years of Irish growth. Both Frances and Nick experienced childhoods in which their performance of intelligence became a fraught

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<sup>6</sup> The full symbolic payload of this stunting of biographical growth might be illuminated when we consider it in light of accounts of the *bildungsroman*'s relationship to globalization. As Jed Esty (2011) has shown at length, periods of rapid international capital accumulation often manifest culturally in the breakdown of normative narratives of national/domestic becoming – a logic which, I will argue, is characteristic of Rooney's first two, and to some degree third, fictions.

<sup>7</sup> Since Marcuse's performance principle there have been a number of more recent studies which have developed the link between artistic and dramatic performance, on the one hand, and the forms of performance required and produced by service-based industries and creative economies, on the other. See especially, Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else* and Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*

marker of distinction for their families, and a source of anxiety for them as individuals. For Frances, childhood outings to the pub with her father became occasions for her to be paraded in front of his friends and family as his “little prodigy”. Being forced to participate in games of lower-middleclass aspiration, she would be asked to solve crossword clues and “spell very long words” for her father’s friends. (50) In these flashbacks to early childhood, the performance of intelligence is presented in its capacity to hyperbolically catapult Frances out of her local and national community and into the global economy of international capital and labor. Her father’s friend reflects that she’ll “go off and work for NASA”, while he’ll be “made up for life.”<sup>8</sup> In the boom years, intellectual performance brings monetary rewards and the prospect of individual mobility, but also the risk of dislocation from all sense of local belonging, here represented hyperbolically as the tension between the parochially painted scene of the local pub and a future working for the final frontier of American neo-imperialism. This is globalization as the anxiety of perpetual, unbounded mobility, and one which we’ll return to in *Normal People*.

If there’s something steeply gendered about France’s developmental plot, about the almost melodramatic conspiracy between the Father and the Economy to make her perform and catapult her abroad, then it’s not a gendering that the novel ties to any essentialist notion of biological sex, since Nick, too, experiences the nuclear family-form as an equally gendered training ground for feminized affect. Entered by his parents into a gameshow for exceptionally intelligent children, Nick refers to them as “the people who made me go on TV when I was ten wearing a fucking blazer and talking about Plato.” (123) Obfuscating a laborious and compulsory work ethic under the feminized guise of a labor of love, the

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<sup>8</sup> There’s an ironic echo of this scene in Lerner’s *The Topeka School* (another novel written by a former competitive debater) in which the central character, Adam, fears being sent by his parents to “space-camp” – a kind of work experience residency for teaching “dynamic problem solving and critical thinking skills” (197) to the children of the bourgeoisie – because he believes he might get launched into outer-space and never return home!

gameshow host asks what “makes [Nick] love the ancient world so much”. He responds: “Well, I don’t love it... I just study it.” Asked if he thinks of himself as a “philosopher king”, Nick responds that it would be his “worst nightmare”. (177)

Both Frances and Nick have grown up experiencing moderate (in Frances’s case) and extreme (in Nick’s case) forms of pressure from their parents to perform their intelligence for points, to echo Rooney on the debating scene. Moreover, in both cases these instrumentalizing pressures are narratively linked not just to pushy parenting styles but to the broader processes of globalization and neoliberalism – in Frances’s case via the final frontier of US imperialism (NASA) and in Nick’s via the intensification of Ireland’s internal ‘production’ of culture and its associated forms of training and advanced competition. Nick’s career as an actor is, we might say, both a literal and symbolic outcome of this intensification of performative training, and one which continues to cause him anxiety and psychological illness. In this version of the gig economy, even those at the top are losers.

### **Missing the performance**

In the context of these neoliberal trajectories, then, Frances and Nick’s relationship appears as a space for the pleasurable abnegation of the pressure to perform. Indeed, repeating and transvaluing the opening scene with Melissa, Nick and France’s adulterous relationship takes flight in the wake of another performance of poetry, but offers a narrative fork in the road leading back to the bleed of aesthetic labor into varieties of casualized work. As if marking its disjunction from the novel’s ur-chronotope of linking casualized performance to economic value, this sapiosexual scene of recognition is displaced into the mode of retrospective fantasy:

While I let myself into the apartment I thought about Nick entering the room while everybody applauded. This now felt perfect to me, so perfect that I was glad he had missed the performance. Maybe having him witness how much others approved of me, without taking any of the risks necessary to earn Nick’s personal approval, made

me feel capable of speaking to him again, as if I was also an important person with a lot of admirers like he was, as if there was nothing inferior about me. But the acclaim also felt like part of the performance itself, the best part, and the most pure expression of what I was trying to do, which was to make myself into this kind of person: someone worthy of praise, worthy of love. (41)

The socially symbolic fantasy at the heart of this affective transaction is of powerful social recognition (“love”) without the performance of alienating cultural and emotional labor. There is, I think, something tellingly impersonal about the way this fantasy is routed through an object of desire (Nick) that is simultaneously rendered secondary. In the first instance, Frances desires not primarily Nick’s own recognition, or his love, but his recognition that multiple, anonymous others (those applauding) recognize her as the “kind of person”, the social *type*, who could be “worthy of praise, worthy of love”. One can, I think, hear a class fantasy at play in the multiplication of all these aggregates – of being heard, of being desired, of being loved without condition, contract or exchange: this might be understood in one sense as a very old form of romantic sentimentality, of virtue beyond market rationality, of neo-Austenian romance! And there is, no doubt, something of what Lauren Berlant described as “aspirational normativity” in this late longing for the heterosexual couple-form in the moment of its historical evisceration: “the desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented” – or, we might add, performed. (181)

Yet the status of Frances and Nick’s relationship alone (as an adulterous affair and not an engagement) should alert us to the fact that there is something else at stake in this scene of sapiosexual excitement beyond the reproduction of bourgeois institutions and heterosexual norms, something queerer – both less, and more – than a marriage plot. Frances’s fantasy of Nick’s recognition in retrospect marks a temporal disjunction from the novel’s diegetic present – its “reality principle”, we might say – which is further intensified by a spatial and symbolic disjunction. Taking place between the spaces of the public and the private (in the

doorway of a property she doesn't and couldn't own), Frances's fantasy of Nick's recognition acts like a portal through which we are invited to glimpse a world beyond the spell of performative labor and heterosexual, propertied cohabitation, an aspirational zone neither quite normal nor straightforwardly utopian. Indeed, this broader social and symbolic dimension of Nick's erotic recognition is inferred by Melissa, of all people. Upon discovering the affair, she uncannily glosses what I am calling the structural dimension of the relationship as not merely private kink but indexing a shared class anxiety: "Equally if you're sleeping with him because you believe his attraction proves you to be a good person, or even a *smart person*, you should know that Nick is not primarily attracted to good-looking or morally *worthy* people." [my emphasis]

And indeed we might have some sympathy with Melissa's diagnosis, here, but my point is (again) not to arbitrate the moral dimensions of sexual formations and fantasies, but to understand them as complex narrative responses to broader social crises, and as unstable placeholders and inchoate clusters of promises in the absence or decline of "normal" institutions of reciprocal recognition. Repeating and reproducing the logic of their first encounter, Nick's general passivity in the relationship stages repeated scenes of recognition for Frances's intelligence. But crucially the romance and attraction of these scenes is to be found in their *inadequacy* to any means, in the way they fail in any meaningful form to capitalize upon intelligence other than as a pleasurable end. "You say cryptic things I don't understand", as Nick summarizes their sapiosexual dynamic, "I give inadequate responses, you laugh at me, and then we have sex." To stress my point another way, it's not that Nick sees that Frances is smart, and then assures her she has a bright future ahead of her, or could get a great job, which would I think be a familiar and glib portrayal of how relationships and certain kinds of "progressive" masculinity uncritically organized around individual mobility and the "equal opportunity" (to be exploited) can operate as forms of informal training for the

neoliberal pressures that Frances feels clearly enough as an individual proto-worker. (Indeed, this is the role Phillip takes on when he glibly reassures Frances, “you’re a real writer”.) It is instead that erotic couples in Rooney’s fictions become scenes of recognition *in their own right*, independent or “autonomous” from the instrumental performance of intellect. .

If, on the one hand, the recent history of sexuality in Ireland has meant the evisceration of the forms of economic stability that characterized older modes of class reproduction (like the monogamous, married couple) then, on the other, as I’m trying to show, the political and economic liberalization of the family, its dislocation from biological and social reproduction, means that narratives about “sex” are freed up to carry new kinds of symbolic payloads that aren’t aimed merely at the reproduction of class power or capitalism-as-usual, but spark strange forms of pleasure (for characters and readers alike!) that have structurally transformative dimensions.<sup>9</sup> To further grasp the broader libidinal and political anxieties and promises of these sapiosexual scenes of recognition, we’ll need to go abroad.

### **Foreign affairs and fairy godmothers**

Rooney has spoken of her use of foreign holidays as literary devices for precipitating change and crisis in characters’ developmental trajectory.<sup>10</sup> But the plotting of (internationally mandated) change also introduces the anxiety of economic dependency on fiscal resources beyond the nation’s coffers, allegorizing Ireland’s increasing dependence on foreign sources of development and rescue aid. When Frances and Bobbi go to stay with Nick and Melissa in “a huge villa type place in a village called *étables* [sic]” (88) they eventually encounter its

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<sup>9</sup> And indeed Rooney has been an active advocate for this liberalization via her writing in support of the legalization of abortion. See Rooney, *An Irish Problem*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n10/sally-rooney/an-irish-problem>

For an excellent overview of recent literature on sexuality in Ireland, see Cronin, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Sex: Modernization and Sexuality in Contemporary Irish Scholarship*, *Boundary 2*

<sup>10</sup> *Sally Rooney talks to Kishani Widyaratna about 'Normal People'*, 56.08 – 57.08, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts/at-the-bookshop/sally-rooney-and-kishani-widyaratna-normal-people>



owner, Valerie, Melissa's publisher and a big player in the international cultural elite. The holiday in France dramatizes Ireland's reliance on "dependent development" from capital sought from outside the nation at a personal, biographical level, with Valerie acting in a capacity comparable to what Bruce Robbins (2007) (writing prior to the 2008 crash) has called a fairy godmother figure – a cosmopolitan economic doner whose function is to bestow monetary and symbolic favors upon other, socially aspirational characters.

Valerie herself tries to narrate this relationship of economic dependency – *qua* fairy godmother – as one of pseudo-maternal care, enquiring after Nick's mental health during his absence from the dinner table one evening. Only Frances calls out Valerie's prurient concern for Nick's health as a conspicuous demonstration of her own social power over the assembled coterie: "[M]aybe you can ask after [his health] when he's actually in the room" (151), she says, challenging the unstated reverence that everyone else is paying to the foreign money at the dinner table. In contrast to Bruce Robbins's eroticized proto-welfare state doners, Valerie's prurient interest in Nick's health represents the displacement of intimate care by impersonal surveillance, social welfare by fiscal oversight. In this light, France's ugly feelings of "hate" towards Valerie contrast starkly with her affective ties of "love" in relation to Nick, a Manichean opposition that might be understood as expressing a tension between two alternative and to some degree irreconcilable modes of production (national and global).<sup>11</sup> In her capacity as *patron non grata*, Valerie becomes the foreign enemy against which Irish social and sexual bonds can be strengthened and fortified. The same night Frances expresses her concern for Nick's dignity he volunteers to tell Melissa about the affair, while Melissa and Frances themselves bond over their shared dislike of Valerie.

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<sup>11</sup> I say "to some degree" because as Janice Ho (2019) amongst others has demonstrated, national and transnational forms of capitalism are often intimately entwined, bolstering and reinforcing as much as out-competing and displacing each other – an entwinement which Rooney's fictions dramatize at a biographical level.

What this suggests is that via the idioms – or better, the *sensorium* – of friendships and sex, Rooney is searching for a placeholder to *reinhabit* the space of national culture and development. As a placeholder, however, this sensorial proxy for the traditional institutions of civil society and national capitalism – stable family, upward career, welfare state, etc. – can only stem the flow of capital and labor beyond the nation’s borders for as long as those itinerant and temporary bonds endure. They are not institutions, but fragile structures of feeling for and with others in a shared predicament.<sup>12</sup> And indeed, Valerie’s foreign cash has a remarkable way of insinuating itself back into the center of the plot’s symbolic and monetary economies. Frances herself becomes the indirect recipient of Valerie’s aristocratic largesse when a contact of hers offers to publish one of Frances’s stories. She thus comes to find (though perhaps not really to *process*) that her own development and maturation as an (Irish) writer is dependent on the same deracinated sources of cultural and monetary capital as those which she had earlier rejected as foreign meddling in domestic affairs.

Indeed, it might even be said that Rooney downplays and obscures (even represses!) this contradiction by having Frances complete the draft of her short story in one feverish sitting before sending it off without proofreading. That is, in contrast to Melissa’s ingratiating devotion to Valerie as an international professional gatekeeper, Frances’s nonchalant circulation of her spontaneous creative output (an artistic *sprezzatura* of sorts) positions her as the less economically dependent and ambitious subject – even as the money comes from the same deep international pocket.<sup>13</sup> In any case, despite these differences of professional

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, one can’t help thinking that Rooney’s casualized and geographically itinerant social units have something in common with that earlier, modernist social form of the bohemian coterie, which so often emphasized “personal relations” and the primacy of friends over national institutions (Forster), and which were, amongst other things, a longing for an earlier, pre-capitalist mode of production centered on craft, intimacy and community over and against cultural massification and cosmopolitanism.

<sup>13</sup> When the money arrives it is sent straight back to Nick to repay what he had given her; i.e. the money is washed clean of its association with international debt by its incorporation back into Irish sexual bonds.

style, the result of the story's acceptance for publication is Frances's entry into globalized cultural markets that once again play havoc with the equilibrium of homegrown Irish relationships – this time between her and Bobbi rather than with Nick.

### **Clear, brilliant sentences**

When Bobbi discovers that she appears in the published version of Frances's story Rooney writes this knowledge as a kind of adultery plot (in a pattern that will be repeated in *Normal People*). Frances has been more open with the anonymous readers of a prestigious, cosmopolitan magazine than she has been with her best friend and intermittent lover, with Bobbi feeling like she's "learned more about [Frances's] feelings in [the course of reading the story] than in the last four years." (265) Participation as a producer in global culture markets is written as trading off strong ties with old friends, not least because it abstracts those relationships into narrative material and capitalist commodity for consumption by an anonymous market. "You're not just an idea to me", writes Frances in her apology to Bobbi, "If I ever treated you like that I'm sorry." (299) But touching as the apology might be, the error was never strictly ethical, but structural: Bobbi becomes a necessary abstraction (an "idea", exactly) as a result of Frances's entry into the professional literary marketplace – especially since, like Rooney's, Frances's story appears to be largely mined from personal experience and close relationships.<sup>14</sup>

True to the logic of sapiosexual desire, it's in the light of this structural tradeoff that Frances and Bobbi start sleeping with one another again. To call this make-up sex would be one way of putting it. To be more precise, their rekindled romance seeks to *reincorporate* the intelligence that Frances had abstracted into her cosmopolitan writing-product. Notably, in

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<sup>14</sup> And indeed we might think of auto-fiction as a variety of neoliberal performance *par excellence*, an aesthetic category which is also quite literally a form of commodification of one's self and community.

this queer, woman-centered iteration of the problem, the recognition fostered by the couple-form is *reciprocal* rather than asymmetrical, based on mutual rather than unilateral recognition. Between the sheets, in the cultural form of sapiosexual desire, the abstraction of the global marketplace is counter-balanced by the sensorium of bodies and pleasure:

In bed we talked for hours, conversations that spiraled out into grand abstract theories and back again. Bobbi talked about Ronald Regan and the IMF. She had an unusual respect for conspiracy theorists. She was interested in the nature of things, but she was also generous. I didn't feel with her, like I did with many other people, that while I was talking she was just preparing next thing she wanted to say. She was a great listener, an active listener. Sometimes when I spoke she would make a sudden noise, like the force of her interest in what I was saying just expressed itself from her mouth. Oh! she would say. Or: so true! (304)

Bobbi's "unusual respect for conspiracy theorists" is reminiscent of France's earlier account of feeling like "a genius hidden amongst normal people". (34) Both forms of intellectual reaction evince a middleclass anxiety – bordering on that older, modernist syndrome of paranoia – about being conglomerated into economic aggregates of time, labour and subjectivity – into, we might say, the "many other people" who fail to recognize Frances as Bobbi recognizes her in bed.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to this anxiety and offering palliation for it, the sexualization of intellect offers to re-individuate subjectivity via an economy of pleasure. After all, from one perspective, what could feel *more* individuating than sex, which is perhaps the paradigmatic example of personal recognition by another soul? Then again, what could feel *less* individuating than sex, which is also the paradigmatic example of losing one's ego with another soul? Because of this paradox, sapiosexual desire contains – like all reaction formations! – an internal contradiction of its own. By translating the contradictions of economic performance into the sensorium of sexual feeling, vocational means into pleasurable ends, it risks obliterating subjectivity altogether in what we might call *la petite mort* of intellectual surrender. "I felt very flushed and could hear myself making a lot of

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<sup>15</sup> See David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism* (2001)

noise,” (70) says Frances of her first time with Nick, “but only syllables, no real words”. By the same sensorial logic, the enchanted and even orgasmic ending of *Conversations* feels like an ambivalent suspension of the performance principles of (workplace) dialogue which nonetheless comes at the cost of an ambivalent acceptance of intellectual limits:

I closed my eyes. Things and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I didn’t know about and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through certain things before you understand them. You can’t always take the analytical position.

Come and get me, I said. (321)

What is being surrendered here is not only women’s capacity for critical thought in the face of overwhelming sexual desire (*qua* Rooney’s Austenian heritage), but more broadly an ability to “map” the social world around one with any analytical comprehension (“participating in systems I didn’t know about and *never would*”). There is in this form of sexual and intellectual surrender what Jameson (1991) has described as a postmodern symptom of social and spatial dysphoria, in which the subject can no longer grasp or project a social totality in the face of globalized flows of capital and power (“A complex network of objects and concepts”). The irony, here, is that it is precisely this dispensation – the eroticization and subsequent cancellation of intelligence – which also wards off the neoliberal imperative to instrumentalize cognition: “All I could do with my attention was *use it* on other people” [my emphasis]. (305) With abyssal irony, sapiosexual desire begins as a way of recognizing and valorizing humanist forms of intelligence outside of the formal economy but ends up reacting so strongly against means-oriented logics that it climaxes in the displacement of thinking by desire altogether (“Come and get me, I said”).

### **“Two separate people”**

In *Normal People* Rooney will attempt to fix this contradiction internal to sapiosexual desire in part by granting her characters greater understanding of the conditions which render them

psychologically alienated and spatially adrift – even as there’s still little they can do about them. From a stylistic point of view, shifting from first to third person allows Rooney to inhabit the Austenian zone of free indirect discourse which is neither quite objective third-person reportage nor subjective first-person consciousness. Via this liminal zone, Connell is permitted to feel the bifurcated destinies of local particularism and globalist cosmopolitanism, a contradiction experienced most powerfully when Marianne convinces him to leave Carricklea and study English at Trinity:

Lately he’s consumed by a sense that he is in fact two separate people, and soon he will have to choose which person to be on a full-time basis, and leave the other person behind. He has a life in Carricklea, he has friends. If he went to college in Galway he could stay with the same social group, really, and live the life he has always planned on, getting a good degree, having a nice girlfriend. People would say he had done well for himself. On the other hand, he could go to Trinity like Marianne. Life would be different then. He would start going to dinner parties and having conversations about the Greek bailout. He could fuck some weird-looking girls who turn out to be bisexual. I’ve read *The Golden Notebook*, he could tell them. It’s true, he had read it. After that he could never come back to Carricklea, he would go somewhere else, London, or Barcelona. People would not necessarily think he had done well; some people might think he had gone very bad, while others would forget about him entirely. What would Lorraine think? She would want him to be happy, and not care what others said. But the old Connell, the one all his friends know: that person would be dead in a way, or worse, buried alive, and screaming under the earth. (26)

From one perspective, this remarkable passage represents a tension familiar to the *bildungsroman* as genre, with its pattern of economically mandated migration from country to city, from strong social ties in a traditional cultural and sexual community, on the one hand, to weak social ties in a metropolitan and sexually liberalized populace, on the other. But it’s also a pattern inflected here by key differences symptomatic of aesthetic *bildung* in the age of globalization and post-industrial work. For a start, capitalist modernization appears here as bound neither by the geographical nor symbolic limits of the nation. Reminiscent of Frances’s speculative career at NASA, moving to Dublin will, Connell fears, set him spatially adrift from the remains of national community altogether, migrating from one European cultural capital to another without any strong sense of vocational purpose or domestic

belonging – in a kind of hyperbolized image of the spatial and contractual logic of the gig economy.

It's not that Rooney is pleading for a return to some nostalgic idea of national belonging here, however. After all, *Normal People* persistently reveals the residual institutions of national life – the sexually conservative social groups, the laddish masculinity and dutiful femininity, the fatherless but-still-patriarchal-family – to be governed by immature and irrational forms of power and violence that are not only stifling but sinister.<sup>16</sup> Rather, this remarkable upgrade of the *bildungsroman* for the global era reveals the unbridgeable chasm which yawns open between these (bad) local particularisms and the (even worse?) cosmopolitan liberalization and deracination as a result, specifically, of *culture's* integration into the economy of goods and services. Upon moving to Dublin, Connell fears, culture will cease to be a set of integrated relationships and organic institutions – however brutal – and become something alienable, something akin to what he elsewhere scorns under the name of “culture as class performance”.

As class performance, culture will also, Connell fears, become *feminized*, or, more precisely, become transformed into varieties of bourgeois domesticity (“dinner parties”) and sexual-sensitivity-cum-emotion-work (“the *Golden Notebook*”). This feminization has a double valence to it. On the one hand, it represents an alternative to the compulsory and somewhat toxic masculine bravado represented by Connell's parochial college friends. On the other, it's akin to a kind of cosmopolitan emasculation which Rooney will later project onto the effete sons of the international financial elite (with their cultured dinner chat as refined alpha-sparring) so as to render Connell's boyishness a kind of rustic charm which breathes some native life into the novel's anxious depiction of Dublin's deracinated cultural

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<sup>16</sup> Matt Hart has spoken powerfully to this aspect of Rooney's fictions, pointing out how atavistic and patriarchal forms of violence linked to conditions of social immobility and economic stagnation persistently linger at the edges of the narrative's psychological discourse. See Matt Hart, “Wet Newspaper”, in *Post 45*, *Reading Sally Rooney*, <https://post45.org/2020/06/wet-newspaper/>

scene. That is, Connell's class and gender formation comes to symbolically mediate between sedimented cultural narratives of provincial under-development (toxic masculinity, nostalgic patriarchy, etc.) and metropolitan over-development (emasculated over-sensitivity and libidinally cold connoisseurship, as I'll go on to discuss). Moreover, that symbolic mediation works best – or perhaps only works at all – when authenticated by a special kind of sexual/intellectual scene of recognition: the sapiosexual couple-form.

### **“Smarter than I am”**

Luckily for Connell, we might say, Rooney has a magic trick up her sleeve, a powerful symbolic device for reintegrating the “two separate people” – provincial/metropolitan – into one erotic couple-form. This time round, she repatriates the economic donor to the inside of the sexual couple, making Marianne not only Connell's lover but his benefactor of sorts. Marianne might be inheritance-rich from family property, but it's (generally) not money that she uses to lubricate his path into the cultural elite, but social recognition. From the metropolitan perspective of the campus constituency, Connell appears as a “culchie”, a working-class provincial who drinks milk from the carton and doesn't possess the social graces to navigate the ritual hierarchies of the academy. What makes social life bearable (and perhaps even profitable) for Connell is other people's recognition of him as super-smart, a recognition that Marianne does a good deal to foster. “He's smarter than I am”, she says to her friends at one point, “No one knew what to say then.” (89) As a form of symbolic if not immediately financial capital, intelligence has a real, material levelling effect on Connell's status within Dublin's upper-middle class social circles, and is ultimately monetized in the form of the scholarship, a prize which, ironically but entirely in keeping with the logic of this argument, prompts him to travel abroad.



But this erotic-cum-institutional recognition of intelligence also generates its own contradictions, because via his burgeoning career as a writer (like Frances) it threatens precisely to induct him into the metropolitan culture-markets about which he felt so ambivalent at the outset of his journey to Trinity. In what feels like a rare, unresolved compositional and tonal contradiction in Rooney's otherwise nonchalant narration, she is keen at once to insist on Connell's academic and cultural capacities at the same time as attempting to subtract his achievements from extant economies of valorization and exchange: "It is generally known in their year group that Connell has received the highest grade in all but one module, and he finds he likes to be thought of as intelligent, if only because it makes his interactions with other people more legible. He liked it when someone is trying to remember the name of a book or an author, and he can provide it for them readily, *not showing off, just remembering it.*" (99)

One way to read such narrative ambivalence would be to say that Rooney is practicing a disingenuous form of political dissimulation in scenes such as this one, in which her leftwing politics refuses to acknowledge the individualist, meritocratic upward mobility romance that her novel is advancing at the level of plot.<sup>17</sup> Granted. But from a dialectical perspective, we also need to understand this scene as managing the more structural contradictions and imaginative transvaluations at play in the tension between the recognition of intelligence and its awkwardly restricted instrumentalization ("not showing off"). As in *Conversations*, the novel's discourse is struggling to preserve the honor (the "worthiness") of cultural and humanist knowledge and skill by subtracting them from the functional logics of economic circulation, exchange and aggregation.

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<sup>17</sup> This is indeed the charge that has been persuasively made against Rooney's novels and their adaptations by several reviewers, perhaps most forcefully by Jessa Crispin: "And our hero, who struggles to make his way from vague, poorly defined hardship into the upper echelons of career-making education? He completes his hero's journey into the creative class. He gets into that New York University MFA program." <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/05/sally-rooney-normal-people-hulu-bbc-soap-opera>

This contradiction is perhaps most forcefully dramatized when Connell attends a literary reading by a well-known author arranged by the Trinity creative writing club. Via Connell's perspective, the event appears as a sycophantic accumulation of cultural capital among the already-initiated, "culture as class performance". (221) That this clique is headed-up by an over-zealous and unpaid woman (Sadie) again speaks to Connell's anxiety that cultural work is becoming a brand of feminized emotion work, performed for love if not for pay. Nonetheless, the production of culture is equally not something from which Connell feels he can straightforwardly remove himself, at least not by recourse to a gender or class identity that would be in any way 'outside' the problem of feminization and commodification. As a young aspiring writer (much like Frances) he is seduced by the very narrative of cultural class ascendancy which he simultaneously disdains in this scene, albeit in a post-facto kind of way. Despite the fact that "[l]iterature, in the way it appeared at these public readings, had no potential as a form of resistance to anything": "Still, Connell went home that night and read over some notes he had been making for a new story, and he felt the old beat of pleasure inside his body, like watching a perfect goal, like the rustling movement of light through leaves, a phrase of music from the window of a passing car. Life offers up these moments of joy despite everything." (221)

It's no coincidence, I think, that Rooney turns to a kind of modernist affective sublime at the end of this disenchanting scene of symbolic capital, one reminiscent of the exalted, if fleeting, imaginative flights that one might find in the metropolitan fictions of E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf or Elizabeth Bowen, or indeed in the everyday epiphanies of James Joyce. The evocation of affective intensity disconnected from or suspended above raw social processes ("culture as class performance") offers palliative relief from what has just been critiqued as the thoroughgoing instrumentalization of creativity and aesthetic impulse. Again, one can't deny that there's a sort of class deflection taking place here, one which

hides the desire for individual mobility behind the veneer of a neo-modernist affective intensity. But that shouldn't preclude us from reading such intensity as richly productive of alternative forms of meaning and value. The turn to an intensity of "pleasure", here, points us toward a ghost economy of sapiosexual desire and recognition in the novel which seeks to counter the heteronomy of intellect-as-capital by housing it in personal, bodily and sexual intimacy. As with the erotic couplings in *Conversations*, sapiosex becomes the affective site where both Marianne and Connell find themselves symbolically suspended above the pressures of training and work in the formal economy.

The conversations that follow [sex] are gratifying for Connell, often taking unexpected turns and prompting him to express ideas he had never consciously formulated before. They talk about the novels he's reading, the research she studies, the precise historical moment that they are currently living in, the difficulty of observing such a moment in process. At times he has the sensation that he and Marianne are figure-skaters, improvising their discussions so adeptly and in such perfect synchronization that it surprises them both. She tosses herself gracefully into the air, and each time, without knowing how he's going to do it, he catches her. Knowing that they'll probably have sex again before they sleep probably makes the talking more pleasurable, and he suspects that the intimacy of their discussions, often moving from the conceptual to the personal, also makes the sex feel better. (97)

Is this a sex scene, or a dialogue scene? The undecidability of that question points us toward the tight embrace of desire and 'intelligence' in Rooney's novels. As in *Conversations*, this suspension of the logics of "culture as class performance" or "performing for points", as Rooney put it in relation to the debating circuit, does not mean a total refuge from the principles of performativity and gamification. Rather, the troping of dialogue as desire and vice versa imagines – or, better, "improvises" – a form of performance (the figure-skating dance) which expresses blissful cooperation and interpersonal synchronization, rather than competition and individual social climbing.<sup>18</sup> Moreover – and I really do think this is significant – the rescheduling of this performance from the tense buildup of foreplay (Nick:

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<sup>18</sup> It's notable that Pierre Bourdieu came back to the concept of "improvisation" at numerous points throughout his career to theorise forms of sociality and expression at the edges of social determination.

“You say cryptic things I don’t understand... and then we have sex.”) to the dissolving tension of post-coital chat solves the problem of *la petite mort* and allows cognitive mapping to re-enter the sapiosexual equation. Between the sheets, Marianne and Connell can process “the precise historical moment that they are currently living in”, or, what makes the effort appear all the more authentic, “the difficulty of observing such a moment in process.” This form of mutual recognition and cognitive processing, moreover, has become, like Frances and Bobbi’s queer bond, *reciprocal*, overcoming not only economic alienation but gendered bifurcation, the persistently pluralizing pronouns (their, they) breaking down the novel’s otherwise alternating division into man- and woman-oriented perspectives.<sup>19</sup> Like the central characters in one of Rooney’s short stories, ‘Mr Salary’, Marianne and Connell become at this moment “predictable to each other, like two halves of the same brain.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Properties of sex**

Appreciating the powerful ways in which sapiosexual desire symbolically palliates the economic and gendered alienation of cognitive and cultural workers also places us in a better position to demystify the sexual and dialogic errors and misadventures of Rooney’s characters which have somewhat confounded critics. “Why”, asks Sam Huber (2020) pertinently, “did every confrontation devolve into mute frustration and crossed wires almost

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<sup>19</sup> One way of historicizing the homo/hetero similarity I am arguing for here would be to note that materialist feminism and queer theory used to distinguish between hetero- and homo-sexual formations partly by tracking heterosexuality’s status as a hegemonic socioeconomic unit in opposition to homosexuality’s relegation to the cultural and socioeconomic margins. While this to some degree still remains the case, a number of developments in and beyond Ireland, including the liberalization of sexuality and the onset of more and more total forms of economic precarity, mean that such a distinction is nowhere near as clear cut as it once was. In this very specific sense, all sex has become “queerer” (i.e. less normatively proscribed and hegemonically functional) to the extent that its traditional institutions – marriage, taxation, co-habitation, division of labor, divorce – have been democratized and destabilized by processes of modernization. To that degree, I think it makes sense that we are beginning to locate sexual fantasies and crises which cut across the axis of hetero- and homosexual desire and which, indeed, disrupt the very coherence of that opposition. For queer scholarship on the material conditions subtending homo and heterosexuality, see particularly D’Emilio (1983) and Drucker (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Sally Rooney, *Mr Salary*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/mr-salary-a-short-story-by-sally-rooney-1.3016223>

as soon as it began? The novel's many arguments are all so brief, strained, preemptively aborted, its protagonists looking on helplessly as their own dialogue sputters and crashes before clearing the runway — what's that about?" (§4) Answering his own question, Huber suggests that Marianne and Connell's moments of dialogic disfluency evince an uncertainty about the usefulness and the limits of humanist forms of skill and training. Huber's account certainly chimes with my own diagnosis of the structural impoverishment of professional work under conditions of neoliberal employment. But his attention to those moments where the engines of eloquent dialogue begin to splutter also brings our attention to the ways in which Rooney's young characters persistently crash-land at the thresholds of traditional narratives and institutions of national social reproduction.

Nowhere is this more evident than when Connell tells Marianne he needs to move back to Carricklea for the winter, expecting her to offer her apartment up to him – a misunderstanding which critics have persistently, and I think unhelpfully, been drawn to as an *ethical* failure of communicative dialogue and 'emotional intelligence'. Instead, I would suggest that we read scenes such as this one as signaling the symbolic foreclosure of traditional ideologies about the heterosexual family and propertied cohabitation. Getting a nice girlfriend and moving in together just isn't what normal (bourgeois) people do anymore – or, to be more precise, that heteronorm of national becoming has been demolished by the wrecking-ball of uneven capitalist development which, as Rooney repeatedly shows us, creates bifurcated conditions of peripheral stuckness and global itineracy, angry families and transitory kin. Only this structural reading of that moving scene can explain the weird way in which, for Connell, the outcome of the conversation is already determined before it has begun, as if his and Marianne's dislocation from a proper(tied) home had been decided in advance for them – which, in a sense, it has. As Berlant puts it in a different but comparable context, neoliberalism means that "the work of (re)production has been shaped by the

increasing demand for flexibility and the increasing expectation that, in love as at work, one might well be only a temporary employee, without affective or material benefits reliably in the present or the future.” (297)

My point here is – again! – not to lament the liberalization and modernization which has rendered propertied cohabitation all but a normative puppet-show in the wake of new and more precarious forms of survival for straight folks as well as queer; rather, I wish to historicize from another perspective the national ghost estate which sapiosexual desire comes to occupy in the absence of more compelling and stable narratives of belonging and attachment. The negative light it shines upon the destabilized center of domestic national culture is again lit up when we place it side by side with Marianne and Connell’s sexual *misadventures*. Rooney has come under critical fire for what is perceived to be her aversion to kink, and particularly to the possibility of a fortifying woman-centered masochism.<sup>21</sup> From a socially symbolic perspective, however, Rooney’s disenchanted masochism looks less like moralizing about inauthentic desire and more like the staging of historical contradictions via a libidinal register. In this interpretive light, the infamous foreign affair between Marianne and Lukas is less an ethical question about what constitutes “good” or “bad” sex, and more a structural drama in which romantic bonds come to allegorize collective crises of belonging and community under specific historical and economic conditions.

In the genre terms of melodrama apposite to the coding of Marianne and Lukas’s fling, he appears as the sexually dangerous foreigner who disrupts the possibility of a stable domestic scene and of feminine sexual virtue (or “worthiness” to echo Frances) like that which was just foreclosed upon with Connell in Dublin. Crucially, however, Lukas’s debasing treatment of Marianne stems less from any perceived sexual sadism or pathology on his part or hers, and more from his status as a *cultural* pariah. Cosmopolitan and placeless, he

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<sup>21</sup> Stein, Jordon. “Victoria Falls”, Post-45, Reading Sally Rooney, 06/15/20, <https://post45.org/2020/06/victoria-falls/>

is a caricature of the aestheticist connoisseur who has “has managed to nurture a fine artistic sensitivity without ever developing any real sense of right and wrong.” And, of course, Rooney cannily extends the effects of this aesthetic and cultural detachment to Marianne, who becomes the sexualized muse to Lukas’s cold artistic (and implicitly commercially driven) gaze. Their sexual alienation from one another is written as cultural and dialogic as much as erotic, and their emotionally fraught trysts contrast strongly with the remarkable dialogic romance fostered by Marianne and Connell’s email exchanges with one another across the same section of the plot (a device or “gimmick”, as Connell thinks of it, that will form the building-blocks of Rooney’s third novel). Lukas and Marianne’s disenchanting kink, I am arguing, becomes a way to stage, or more precisely to *melodramatize*, strong feelings of dislocation from culture formally felt as a scene of ‘domestic’ belonging – in both the filial and national senses of the term.<sup>22</sup>

But if Lukas and Marianne’s disenchanting sex stages anxieties about cosmopolitan drift and culture dislodged from a living, ethical community, then things back home aren’t much happier. Connell’s home-town romance with his former economics teacher (the choice of subject is telling) stages the inverse anxiety: an encounter marked not by deracinated connoisseurship but a *déclassé* and parochial impoverishment of the material means of cultural production and consumption. Paula Neary’s house appears to Connell through intoxicated eyes as one of “a person with no hobbies: no bookcases, no musical instruments.” (129) Their drunken fumbling is less melodramatic than tragi-comic, the engines of erotic dialogue spluttering into intoxicated, linguistic incoherence.        These episodes of sexual

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<sup>22</sup> Of course, reading disenchanting masochism in an allegorical rather than ethical mode shouldn’t preclude us from noting that it is often the *men* in these scenes who are unable to embody the forms of responsibility and care that fortifying masochistic sex would require of them. Moreover, a different kind of approach to desire in Rooney’s fictions would explore how the leading women’s hunger for masochism might encode a form of political as well as sexual agency that eschews the cheery face of compulsory feminine service through a pain-rather than pleasure-oriented intensity of bodily affect – a kind of queer antisocial axis cutting across sapiosex’s prosocial embrace.

(and dialogic) misadventure not only serve, then, to allegorize economic anxieties via the sensorium of sexual feelings; they also bring into focus the libidinal and more broadly symbolic forcefield of Connell and Marianne's sapiosexual bond. As we have seen, that bond alone can serve as the stage for a different kind of performance of cultural and aesthetic capacities, one which wards off the forms of (perceived and actual) displacement and alienation of both cosmopolitan globalism and enervated provincialism. But nothing is guaranteed in this regard, and it's no doubt the case that sapiosex, however pleasurable or cerebral, cannot permanently immune characters, or indeed readers, from the bifurcating effects of globalization (a limitation which makes appreciating its appeal no less interesting, in my view).

In the final scene of *Normal People*, Marianne finds herself, temporarily at least, *at home*. Celebrating Christmas at Lorraine's house, it's all open doors and Catholic conviviality, it's "her chest of drawers" (262), it's the closest thing that Rooney has given us to a successful heterosexual domestic milieu – and a metonymic national community – until it all comes apart again.<sup>23</sup> When Connell receives the letter from the prestigious US writing programme, why does Rooney again write his entry back into the global cultural marketplace as if it were a form of adultery in which he has cheated on Marianne? "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the application thing", Connell says, "but like, how does that make you jump to the conclusion that I'm in love with some else?" (264) Most immediately, of course, this is a form of sexual envy – that Connell had told Sadie about applying to the US. But it also speaks to a broader sense of affective loss (of everything the relationship stands for, and stands in for) at the hands of opportunity's displacement onto foreign shores. It's as much the US, and the global flows of capital and labor which it again metonymises, I would argue, with which Marianne feels libidinal rivalry. And why not, since, as I hope to have shown,

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, what makes this falling apart so moving is perhaps that the working-class domestic space overseen by Lorraine is the closest thing Rooney gives us to an actually-existing stable and supportive family unit.



their relationship, like so many of Rooney's couple-forms, was written on the basis of a form of belonging desirous of alternatives to neoliberalism's centrifugal thrust.

In the final few pages of this essay I wish to draw attention to some of the broader implications of this argument for thinking about Rooney's position in relation to sex, culture and the economy today.

### **Globalisation, brain drain and belonging**

Rooney's books have been marketed to appeal to a global generation of millennials disaffected with sex, work and the general dearth of economic opportunity. But why are they so successful in this regard? Most popular responses allude to their disenchanted tone of nonchalant disillusionment and cool irony, hence the "Salinger of the snapchat generation". This essay has attempted to show that their appeal is altogether more positive and more powerful. I have argued that Rooney's fictions offer powerful scenes of symbolic recognition (imperfect ones, but perhaps all the more compelling for that) to the real social contradictions of globalization, which are both particular to Ireland's cultural transformation and more generally applicable to subjects living through periods of rapid, uneven economic development in which the productive forces of culture and creative know-how are being intensified at the same time as many of the systems of value capture and recognition (careers) are in decline. This explains, I suggest, what critics so far have not: why Rooney's so-called vanilla sex has been so seductive for global audiences – especially audiences in those media and cultural sectors most apposite to the kinds of exploitation and displacement experienced by Rooney's modern creative class.

André Gorz (2010) has written persuasively of how the knowledge and creative-sector worker who faces over-exploitation and under-recognition will "invest her dignity in the unpaid exercise of her capacities outside work, which leads to journalists writing books,

graphic artists creating works of high art, computer analysts demonstrating their virtuosity as hackers or as developers of free software – all ways of retaining one’s honour and ‘preserving’ one’s ‘soul’.” (18) I think we could add sapiosexual desire to that list of compensations, a cultural form which seeks to ‘preserve’ the honour of one’s soul – or to use a more modern vocabulary, one’s sense of basic self-worth (one’s “worthiness”, to echo Rooney) – by a kind of strange sexual choreography of talents and capacities. In the case of Ireland, there’s reason to believe that this is to some degree a symptom of and reaction to a post-crash brain drain in which young, over-trained labour-power is either fleeing the national economy or becoming heavily instrumentalized within it. Rooney’s sapiosexual couple forms find ways to keep humanist capacities *at home*, in the warm embrace of another (Irish) soul without employing them in an economy which is viewed as always trending toward psychological alienation and global displacement. In this sense, the politics of Rooney’s novels are perhaps not so different from the sentiments of those commentators in the Irish Times who lament that Ireland “weeps for the lost opportunities, *mourns the lost intelligence*, and craves the lost tax revenue” of those who have gone beyond its shores [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup>

It will be surprising, if not heretic, to some readers of Rooney to suggest that her “post-Irish” fictions contain cryptic laments for the lost symbolic space of the nation. But I would argue that in the end, her novels echo the independence-era anxieties of Irish intellectuals such as Daniel Corkery about the bifurcation of Irish identity into deracinated global bourgeoisie and a provincial, ethnically rooted folk-populace under different (though comparable) conditions of uneven capitalist development. Corkery wanted more than anything else to have a “normal literature”, by which he meant a national literature, and in a

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<sup>24</sup> O’Carroll, William, *Celtic Tiger cubs: citizens of the world*, *Irish Times*, ¶7, <https://www.irishtimes.com/blogs/generationemigration/2012/02/18/celtic-tiger-cubs-citizens-of-the-world/>

kind of weird, post-modern echo of this rhetoric, Rooney, too, wishes to project some degree of “normality” against the two extremes of endless displacement on the one hand (Dublin, London, Barcelona, NASA!) and hopeless stagnation and social immobility on the other (perhaps most vividly rendered by Connell’s schoolfriend who remains in Carricklea and (therefore?) takes his own life). But since globalization has eroded the organic institutions of “normal”, national life, forced ceaseless migration and intensified the split between an undeveloped internal periphery and an overdeveloped metropolitan nexus, there can be no progressive narrative of national *bildung* and becoming. In place - *as a placeholder* - of and for this ghostly national tale, Rooney’s fictions metonymize a kind of normality via the sapiosexual couple-form, which at once provides a magnetic feeling of erotic belonging whilst symbolically transvaluing the cognitive and creative resources of the global creative- and knowledge-economies into something altogether more aesthetically and sensually orgasmic.

Does this symbolic logic characterize other kinds of cultural production from the neoliberal era? Another brief example from a different national context – the UK – might suggest a variation on the same basic pattern. Lara Williams’s 2019 novel, *Supper Club*, is a remarkable piece of fiction which won the *Guardian*’s ‘Not the Booker’ prize (an alt-recognition structure of sorts). It centers around two female characters, very much reminiscent of Frances and Bobbi in their personalities and their hetero-queer bond, who come together to dumpster dive for the wasted treasures discarded by the capitalist food sector in order to stage baroque, woman-only supper clubs which involve healthy portions of over-eating, dancing and getting naked. The novel’s central premise is about women coming together “to indulge their hunger and take up space”. (43) But beneath the potlatch feminism and bourgeois farce there’s a more subtle (but perhaps also more fundamental) drama about certain crises in the distribution and recognition of social capital. The central character,

Roberta, is a Philosophy graduate who is quite literally unseen by her peers at university and then under-challenged and over-exploited in her creative-class job at a fashion firm, where she mainly completes rote clerical and manual tasks like booking train tickets and folding clothes while being told how much “potential” she has.

The supper clubs offer Roberta and her peers the opportunity to confront those experiences of which they are most “afraid” – often involving sexual mistreatment and assault. But these somewhat Surrealist feminist support groups also play another kind of palliative function, I think, in that they become highly aestheticised and libidinalised arenas for the gastronomic performance of cultural and creative skills and talents – ridiculously good cooking and party making! – that are not being utilized or recognised in the formal economy of so-called creative work (nor, indeed, in the otherwise culturally conservative and sexually stifling heterosexual units which punctuate and slow the manic flow of the renegade half of the plot). Here too, then, is a kind of sapiosexual scene of recognition, in which an erotic social formation becomes an alternative valorising structure for female subjects who are undervalued in the workplace – not a couple-form, admittedly, but a kind of queer/feminist collective which we might say, at the risk of sounding too Hegelian, is located further down the (British) timeline of sexual liberalization from the somewhat tame (but therefore all the more consumable?) sexual units which populate Rooney’s recently-post-Catholic fictions. Understanding *Supper Club* as a workplace recognition drama might become clearer if we recall that it has been billed as a feminist rewrite of *Fight Club*, the secret society novel/film which is a classic recognition drama about disaffected, male corporate drones, and a text which, in the words of *Conversations with Friends*, also centers around a “genius hidden among normal people” who comes to realize that he is, to recall the phrase from ‘Mr. Salary’, “two halves of the same brain.”

What this constellation of historical and aesthetic parallels suggests to me is that we are living through the early stages of a new phase of

workplace recognition crisis. Those ideologies which, post '68, post-Blair, post-2008 repeatedly re-legitimated capitalist structures of exploitation under the sign of creativity and feminine values are now entering their own signal crisis, one in which they can no longer paper over the cracks of work that is ultimately as dehumanizing as the old corporate structures, albeit in new ways. What we are seeing in recent fictions by Millennial authors, especially women authors (indeed, this might be one way to historicize what we mean by that generational term) is an evacuation or de-cathexis of libidinal investments from those now soured fairy tales of the “new capitalism” and the old family, and the imagined exodus of desire into strange and uncharted regions of pleasure, collectivity and belonging.

It would be easy enough to dismiss this recanalization of desire in sapiosexual narrative as false consciousness or puerile escapism. But I think we have more to gain by developing, as Berlant put it, “a more complicated notion of object choice and of what it means to desire and to have a cluster of *feelings* in lieu of having a *world*.” (297) It might seem disingenuous to suggest that Rooney’s characters don’t have a “world” (although the title of her next novel will imply the term is curiously apposite). They are not, after all, anywhere close to the lumpen or “surplus” populations which experience the worst forms of modern wordlessness. But her fictions provide us with a granular, everyday insight into the new forms of precarity and instability experienced by those even with relative wealth and prestige, a simultaneously privileged and proletarianized class position from which the future appears, like a mirage above a desert, hovering between uncanny normalcy and uncertain utopianism.

### **Coda: Beautiful sex, where are you?**

Since I wrote this essay Sally Rooney has published her third novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. This new work both confirms and complicates the thesis of this essay in ways that I

don't have time to fully outline here. To put it schematically, *Beautiful World* still revolves around the hollowed-out institutions of national culture, which are now the subject of characters' critical-cum-nostalgic reflections:

People our age used to get married and have children and conduct love affairs and now everyone is still single at thirty and lives with housemates they never see. Traditional marriage was obviously not fit for purpose, and almost ubiquitously ended in one kind of failure or another, but at least it was an effort at something, and not just a sad sterile foreclosure on the possibility of life. (186)

Sapiosexual desire no longer appears as a symbolic solution to this crisis of national futurity, however. It's not so much that it has disappeared altogether as been raised from a narrative engine to the level of characters' conscious intellectual reflections (as, for better or for worse, has so much else in that epistolary novel of somewhat abstract ideas). Quoting Proust's novel, *Within A Budding Grove*, Alice reflects to Eileen:

'Perhaps indeed there exists but a single intelligence, in which everyone in the world participates, towards which each of us from the position of his own separate body turns his eyes, as in a theatre where, if everyone has his own separate seat, there is on the other hand but a single stage.' Reading those words I feel terribly happy – to think that I might share an intelligence with you." (182)

If this is a comparable desire for cognitive disalienation as those sought after in Rooney's first two novels, however, it seems to have moved out of the sensorium of sex and become a more general phenomenological – one is almost tempted to say “spiritual” – desire. But what of the sex which is left behind after its cognitive content has been rarefied into ideational discourse? In the absence of a politically utopian payload – in the absence of richer *meaning* – it feels somewhat logistical, “not unlike moving furniture,” as Christian Lorentzen (2021) recently put it, “and [having] something in common with a couple of scenes of Felix sorting packages at the warehouse.” We might see this (bleakly) as the sensorium of work and productivity creeping into the pleasures of sexual feeling. But if so, such negativity should shine a revealing light upon what was so attractive about “sex” in Rooney's first two fictions: that it wasn't only or even primarily about private pleasure between individual bodies, but

sought to transvalue a much broader constellation of economic contradictions and anxieties into an orgasmic register. What if work could feel more like the best sex – personal, joyful, synchronous – those early fictions had asked. What if sex, Rooney’s third – one is tempted to say “late” – novel responds, becomes just another phenomenalisation of work?

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