

Abstract

This paper reads “Halfway to Free” as a critique of Populationism and the co-option of Environmental Justice (EJ) and Reproductive Justice (RJ) frameworks to displace ecological responsibility onto gendered bodies. It reveals how, amid compounding socio-ecological crises, reproductive control and caregiving can be recoded through rhetorics of empowerment and planetary duty to enforce coercion against targeted groups. Drawing on non-essentializing images of womanhood in ecofeminist and Irish cultural criticism, it traces how bio- and caregiving technologies can endorse control under the guise of progressive agency and autonomy. Ultimately, it shows how the story gestures toward an ethic of shared accountability across gender lines as a more equitable response to intersecting crises.

Keywords: Emma Donoghue; Eco-fiction; Environmental Justice (EJ); Reproductive Justice (RJ); Populationism;

Bodies in Crisis: Environmental and Reproductive (In)Justice in “Halfway to Free” (Emma Donoghue 2020)

I. Introduction

Throughout history, women’s identity and body have been the locus of intersected social and ecological injustices. In times of ecological crisis, as traditional caregivers, women are disproportionately made to bear the weight of ecological protection (Devika 2010, 754-7); similarly, reduced to “potential breeders whose reproductive capacities must be controlled” (Mies, Shiva 1993, 293), they are overburdened with ecological guilt for carbon emissions resulting from population growth. This twofold tendency finds particular resonance in the Irish socio-cultural context, where a longstanding association between femininity, nurturing and nature has underpinned the socio-cultural and political regulation of female identities and bodies (O’Connor 2022, 53). Irish author Emma Donoghue makes this structural continuity explicit in her eco-short story “Halfway to Free” (2020), exposing how ecological crises can become a pretext for reinscribing old injustices in a near-future world exploiting progressivist language for supporting targeted interests.

The story builds on a “Global Pact” (Donoghue 2020, 6) that pursues global carbon reduction. What makes the Pact insidious is not its ecological ambition but the ideological foundations and rhetorical strategies that sustain the agenda. Grounded in Populationism¹ - a 1960s theory that frames population growth as a direct driver of climate change (Albertyn 2023, 143) - the Pact targets “Optimum - three billion - by the start of the twenty-second century” (Donoghue, 5). It operates by co-opting Environmental Justice (EJ) and Reproductive Justice (RJ) discourse to dress reproductive coercion as feminist empowerment and ecological duty, thereby concealing an agenda that disproportionately serves global elites: reproduction becomes a class privilege - acceptable only when individuals can “[o]ffset” (ibidem, 3) their newborns’ carbon legacy - as healthcare or technologies are simultaneously repurposed as instruments of population management and resource control. The result is a world marked by a rapidly shrinking birth rate and a longer-lived population, where a reduced number of reproductive individuals translates into concentrated rights and resources among global elites.

The paper argues that the constraining of women’s identity and body functions as the structural pillar of the story’s populationist agenda, held in place by two interdependent mechanisms: (a) reproductive restraint is moralized as both feminist empowerment and ecological responsibility. Women, associated with animalistic “[broodiness]” (ibidem, 4) and ecological damage, are subjected to a language of choice, sustainability, and responsibility that governs bodily autonomy under the guise of progressive values; (b) caregiving is dehumanized and delegated to robot caregivers controlled by the elite. As human labour is displaced onto nonhuman service, robots are ascribed the traditionally-female caregiving role, inviting comparison between feminized human labour and nonhuman service. These strategies reveal how the story’s populationist logic overburdens feminized humans and feminized nonhumans with socio-ecological responsibility - not to dismantle structural injustice over women, but to reproduce it under new forms.

Donoghue’s critique holds particular resonance within Irish Studies. By inscribing the female body within a populationist storyworld, the story extends a tradition of Irish women’s writing in which feminized land, nature, and nurturing have long served the construction of national identity (O’Connor 2022, 53) - and in which women’s bodies have long served as sites of governance. Situating this legacy within a broader Western tradition of intersecting social

¹A theory that garnered much public attention throughout the 1960s, Populationism, or Demographic Populationism, endorses practices that “restrict bodies, reinforce boundaries, and create spaces of exclusion and violence” (Albertyn, 143; Hendrixson, Ojeda; Sear 2021, 207).

and ecological injustices makes “Halfway to Free” a compelling read in times of intersecting crises.

The paper proceeds in six sections. Section II examines ecofeminist resonances in “Halfway to Free,” showing how the story both inherits and contests the cultural logics binding femininity to nature, instinct, and reproductive duty. Section III traces the emancipatory force of EJ and RJ frameworks and their vulnerability to rhetorical co-optation. Section IV situates the story within populationist debates. Section V examines how technology can produce an illusion of liberation for targeted groups while reinforcing older structures of gendered control. Finally, through close reading, section VI delves further into the representation of reproductive power, ecological guilt, and care in the story, showing how Donoghue redistributes agency across gender lines and gestures toward a modern ecofeminist “ethic of partnership” (Puleo 2017, 30).

II. *Essentialist constructions of womanhood and ecofeminist critique in “Halfway to Free”*

“Halfway to Free” renders visible the structural inequalities underpinning socio-ecological injustices. This section aims to foreground cultural underpinnings of these injustices, and the wider crisis contexts in which they arise, arguing that a significant contributor to the unequal distribution of ecological burdens across the social spectrum lies in the historical association between women and nature as “the looked-upon” (O’Connor 2022, 1041). This logic, as the paper will show, is not dismantled by the populationist order but rather recycled in new institutional and progressivist-like forms.

The populationist “Global Pact” (Donoghue, 6) in “Halfway to Free” builds on the historical link between femininity and attributes traditionally associated with nature and nonhumanness. As ecofeminist scholarship has shown, the idea of a supposedly female proximity to instinct, irrationality and passivity has served to legitimize women’s subordination (Gladwin 2019, 148-54). Pictured “as non-agent and non-subject” (Plumwood 1993, 4), women are ascribed the role of mere background to men’s achievements. Reason and culture are thus construed as men’s exclusive domain or, more precisely, as a prerogative of “the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur” (ibidem, 4). In either case, women’s link with nature systematically excludes them from the sphere of “from knowledge production” (O’Connor, 51).

Plumwood’s concept of *master identity* illustrates the hierarchical dualisms - reason over nature, mind over body, male over female, and culture over nature - structuring Western culture. Sexual, racial, and ethnic traits have been used to justify the subordination of gendered, racialized, and colonized groups framed as “closer to the animal *and* the body construed as a sphere of inferiority” (1993, 4, emphasis added). As Plumwood notices, this cultural structure generates an *impasse*. The subordinated other can either accept being associated with nature - and what the “naturalism” entails on a socio-cultural level - or reject it and “endorse the dominant mastery model” (ibidem, 36).

“Halfway to Free” provides a narrative reading of traditional cultural models constraining female identity, as well as an affirmation of ecofeminist alternatives. The former clearly emerges in the language that supporters of the “Global Pact” (Donoghue, 6) use to disdain reproduction and pregnancy as animalesque instincts. This interpretation surfaces in Miriam’s exchange with Diwanna, who senses the cause of her colleague’s sickness at the sight of the “3D of the first Reveal of 2060” displayed through her Headpiece (ibidem, 1). In this scene, Diwanna affirms herself as a male-like figure, guiding Miriam through the acknowledgement of her reaction to the baby’s image as the result of the instinctual legacy of reproduction. The latter is described as a “leftover, like the appendix, [...] one of those flight-or-flight, lizard-brain things that made evolutionary sense back in the day” (ibidem, 4). The semantic fields of evolution and animality reveals the character’s attempt to draw a line between culture and nature, thereby guaranteeing a place for herself in the former. By rationalizing Miriam’s reaction

through the Darwinist framework, Diwanna acknowledges humankind's status as a species insofar as it is framed as some kind of ancient burden. In doing so, the character distances herself from the sphere of nature that Miriam represents. The fact that Diwanna hastens to reach Miriam in the bathroom reinforces the cultural pattern already discussed: from her perspective, Miriam appears as an irrational creature who needs supervision. Diwanna's intervention does not stop at the level of abstraction. She explicitly tells her friend how she can suppress her animalesque instinct - "You have to acknowledge the craving, so you can rechannel it into something more positive" (ibidem, 4). Diwanna tries to bring Miriam back into the zone of patriarchal control by animalizing the baby, whose supposedly grotesque look would have to be understood as a rational confirmation of the animalesque nature of reproduction.

By casting them as irrational, animal-like, instinctual creatures, the Pact essentializes women and frames social engineering as a reasonable and benign intervention done in the name of reason, progress, and planetary duty. This is precisely the type of essentialism that modern ecofeminism tries to transcend. As Ingman notices, contemporary ecofeminism has done an about turn on the foundational principle of the movement, as established by Francoise d'Eaubonne in her "Feminism or Death?." In the essay, women are framed as ideal leaders of "the ecological revolution to save the planet" on account of their historical closeness to nature (Ingman 2005, 517). The idea of women as "naturally nurturing" (ibidem, 518) places a disproportionate ecological burden on them. In Donoghue's storyworld, this burden is translated into reproductive restraint, which women experience as a double obligation.

Miriam's progressive realization of women's range of possibilities echoes the Irish mythic or pre-Christian tradition affirming a pluralized female identity. The myth of the divine triad is illuminating in this sense. The Irish narrative focuses on "multiple, sometimes contrasting attributes" of womanhood, which contribute to challenging the traditional "maiden/mother/crone model" through which women have been reduced to an embodiment of passivity and biological predetermination (Bowley 1997, 10). As the story's central character, Miriam challenges, even if not always consciously, the populationist logic that wants to confine her within a monolithic profile, one on which female empowerment has to build on the systematic refusal of reproduction and childbearing.

The game *Two Truths and a Lie* she plays with her colleagues at "Global Care" (Donoghue, 1) is evocative of her self-determination attempt. Organized as part of the company's team-building strategy, players are asked to remove their Phris to avoid distractions and favour bonding. Miriam's unease from her conversation with Diwanna the previous day resurfaces during the game, when she inadvertently reads aloud a sentence written, perhaps, as a way to get that burden out of her chest: "I've always wanted to have a baby" (ibidem, 5). The silence and "giggles" (ibidem, 5) filling the room reveal that the wish for a child has already become an unspeakable taboo even in supposedly safe, private contexts. Silence and language serve to discipline women and frame childbearing as socially deviant. This idea is internalized to the point that, later in the story, the protagonist herself realizes that nothing had really prevented her from removing Phri, "only a sense of taboo that made [her] fingers tingle" (ibidem, 16).

Another way Miriam's characterization challenges a monolithic image of womanhood is by inheriting her Aunt Lucille's legacy. Long before Miriam, Lucille had resisted the populationist order not through motherhood, since she had no children of her own, but through her refusal of ideological conformity. Lucille, "who'd once been a dentist" (ibidem, 8), joined the so-called "dropouts" (ibidem, 8) in 2035 and became their caregiver. She motivates her decision by stating: "I just didn't want to be told what to do, nudged into a corner, then walled up in it. And the thing about me is, I just prefer to be around the whole human span. I fix everyone's teeth here [...] "one-year-olds to hundre-year-olds" (ibidem, 24). In this sense, Lucille offers a more nuanced model of womanhood, one defined not by adherence to a single social role but by the intersection of self-determination, independence, and ethical responsibility. Her

characterization unsettles any easy association between femininity, maternity, and care, including the assumption that caregiving is inherently tied to feminine traits and, therefore, to the reduction of women to “breeders” (Gaard 2010, 110). It is this legacy that Miriam inherits, one rooted in the freedom to define one’s own identity, whether through motherhood or through forms of care and commitment that build on it or move beyond it.

This cultural script linking femininity to nature is recycled rather than overcome by the “Global Pact” (Donoghue, 6). This occurs by legitimizing population control through the vocabulary of feminist liberation and ecological responsibility, which disguises traditional patriarchal paradigms under new forms. Progressivist language plays a critical role here, as it makes the co-optation of Environmental Justice (EJ) and Reproductive Justice (RJ) possible and legible. As Section VI will show, this mechanism highlights ecological duty as even more central to femininity on account of their inherent proximity to nature. The story shows how frameworks designed to protect self-determination are turned against their very recipients. This becomes visible in the enthusiasm that Miriam’s colleague, Sharon, has toward the populationist rhetoric when discussing “the latest VR she was curating, “to celebrate the centenary of the pill” (ibidem, 10). As Plumwood notes, however, “the resolution of gender dualism must correspondingly be interwoven with resolution of other dualisms” (Plumwood, 66). This observation has a specifically Irish resonance. In Irish cultural, religious, and political discourse, women and landscape have often been symbolically linked, whether through national allegory, Marian femininity, domestic ideals embedded in post-independence governance. These images have repeatedly associated women - as well as the Irish - with wilderness and animality. Women have been repeatedly depicted as guardians of purity and care, but also as emotional and passionate creatures governed by their instincts, and thus as in need of control (O’Connor 8, 58; Ingman 2005, 517-9). Donoghue’s story world updates this cultural tradition by transferring traditional constraints over women from the socio-cultural onto the ecological sphere.

III. *Environmental Justice (EJ) and Reproductive Justice (RJ): Progressive Language and Gendered Control in “Halfway to Free”*

Ecological issues are not gender-neutral (e.g. Reggers 2019). By bridging social and ecological injustices, “Halfway to Free” illustrates what Brown, El-Erian, and Spence term *permacrisis* - “an extended period of instability and insecurity” (2023, 7) where multiple, intersecting crises intensify existing vulnerabilities. As Donoghue suggests, this is especially true for women in contexts of ecological distress, who are often disproportionately overburdened with great ecological responsibilities.

Even though they generally contribute less to global carbon emissions (e.g. they rely more on public transport and consume less meat than men), women tend to be exposed to greater ecological risk. Persistent socio-economic disparities exacerbate this condition, as limited access to educational and professional opportunities hinder women’s ability to make informed decisions in contexts of crisis (Dukelow, Forde, Busteed 2024, 4, 25,96-8; Liddell, Kington 2020, 5; MacGregor et al. 2022, 38; Desai, Zhang 2021, 6). In this sense, one can consider how women - especially in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts - are often unaware of toxic chemical “bio-accumulating in fatty tissues” (O’Neill 2022, 6, 43) and the effects that these substances can have on their reproductive system. Similarly, women seeking refuge in storm shelters often face heightened risks of sexual violence, healthcare insecurity, and unintended pregnancies (McMullen 2024; United Nations Women, 2-3; MacGregor et al., 34-5).

The Irish context proves illuminating when addressing the intensification of existing vulnerabilities, including sexual healthcare and reproductive rights. In Ireland, contraception, abortion, sexuality, and female bodily autonomy are longstanding sites of controversy (Barry, 57). The passage from the 1983 referendum, which gave constitutional protection to the unborn, to the 2018 campaign that dismantled “one of the strictest abortion bans in the

European Union” (Kennedy, Blumenthal 2023) is especially revealing as a study in rhetorical transformation. During the first campaign, the Church intervened publicly in support of pro-life groups. As institutional scandals eroded its moral authority, however, it operated through lay organizations (Calkin, de Londras, Heathcote 2020, 6). In other words, the language changed but not its underlying structure. Even after repeal, many women reported feeling “unsupported by medical practitioners during the process and [...] made to feel ashamed” (Kennedy, Blumenthal 2023), compounding broader violations of rights to health, privacy, and freedom from discrimination (Sifris 2024, 9), and driving many toward unsafe practices or “abortion tourism” (Boddu 2023, 79).

Although “human rights, equality and freedom” in women’s “sexual and reproductive health” were addressed, for the first time at an international level, in the 1995 Cairo Conference, Albertyn observes that progressive language may still constrain bodily autonomy (2023, 138). For instance, in some societies, the rhetoric of “family well-being, respectability, and upward mobility” (Devika 2010, 759) is used to frame sterilization as an acceptable and positive practice for women. It follows that ‘choice’ in this context “cannot be easily read off as a sign of ‘voluntary acceptance’” (ibidem), for it grounds in a social and psychological manipulation of recipients who wish to ensure social well-being for themselves and their family. The co-optation of progressive discourse, in this sense, obscures systemic drivers of injustices and crisis (Albertyn 139).

Donoghue’s story reveals how this dynamic operates when the rhetoric of sustainability and female empowerment is co-opted to legitimize reproductive control as a universal, benign effort. RJ and EJ are critical here. Both movements were established to face structural violence against targeted groups (Chinn, Mutcherson, 2). RJ asserts “the right to have children, to not have children, and to parent children in a healthy and safe environment” (Liddell, Kington, 1). EJ draws attention to how ecological burdens are unevenly distributed across race, gender, and class groups (Figueroa, Mills, 2022, 427). “Halfway Free” builds on these assumptions and reveals how the co-optation of RJ and EJ is not merely thematic but also rhetorical, that is, implemented through slogans that normalize reproductive restraint as both self-expression and planetary care. The mechanism becomes visible when Phri’s promotional language is read against these vocabularies.

Launched in the year 2020, Phri is marketed as a means for feminist empowerment and ecological care. To wear it means to appear progressivist and modern. Conversely, to refuse it is to risk being seen as selfish, backward, and socio-ecologically irresponsible. The slogans “*Phri to Choose*,” “*Phri to Be Yourself*,” “*Phri to Love, Phri for Life*,” and “*Phri to Live Lightly*” (ibidem, 12) borrow directly from Phri’s vocabulary of autonomy, choice, and self-determination. Yet the story systematically delegitimizes the right “to have wanted children, free of coercion” (Sasser, 3), which is equally central to RJ. A woman who wears it is “a free individual, not some downtrodden breeding female from the bad old days” (ibidem, 28); to resist it is to yield to “mindless selfish impulse[s],” (ibidem, 28) and to “self-sabotag[e]” oneself (ibidem, 28). RJ’s framework is preserved in form while being emptied of one of its constitutive principles: reproductive restraint is repackaged as liberation, and reproductive desire as its opposite.

EJ’s co-optation follows a parallel logic. The slogan “*Set Earth Phri*” (ibidem, 12) borrows the language of shared ecological responsibility, framing reproductive restraint as a universal duty for planetary protection. Yet this universality is selective. In a storyworld in which financial grants and social rights are bestowed or withdrawn on account of one’s capacity to offset carbon costs, the less privileged are pressured to surrender their reproductive agency in exchange for social and financial support. Having children means renouncing access to the government-issued “Dividends” (ibidem, 20) - which people spend on rent - “free eldercare” (ibidem, 20), and other social benefits, while the wealthy, such as “the royals,” can publicly offset their carbon legacy through expensive green solutions - such as “distributing ten thousand solar stoves” (ibidem, 3) - that are promptly spectacularized. The result is an uneven

distribution of ecological burdens and social rights disguised as just and universal commitment to ecological protection. EJ's principle of equitable burden distribution is thus invoked to reproduce the very asymmetry it was designed to contest.

Together, these two inversions reveal the mechanism of co-optation at the heart of the "Global Pact" (ibidem, 6). Progressive frameworks are not simply ignored or rejected but exploited. The resulting form of governance is harder to contest precisely because it uses the language of the rights it violates. As the following section shows, this rhetorical mechanism is enacted through two material instruments - biotechnology and caregiving robotics, both targeting women's bodies as the primary site of socio-ecological governance.

IV. *Populationism: Ecological Crisis and Social Inequality in "Halfway to Free"*

"Halfway to Free" shows how Populationism simplifies the ecological crisis by framing population numbers as its primary cause (Albertyn, 143). According to Populationism, higher population numbers mean increased global carbon emissions. From this position one may deduce that with fewer resources to share, reproduction becomes a threat for planetary well-being and ecological balance. However, Populationism overlooks multiple intersected factors that give rise to deep socio-ecological crises and injustices. Through the "Global Pact" (Donoghue, 6) the author exposes the limits of populationist work and movements, such as Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) and Earth First!, which grounded ecological duty in the "generalized anti-sex and anti-human stance" established by neo-Malthusianism and eugenics (Stein, 2013, 189),² without considering the impact that other systemic drivers of climate change and ecological damage - such as sustained financial production - have on the planet.

In Donoghue's storyworld, Populationism functions both as a worldview and as a policy framework built on demographic management. Logical choices such as "Optimum" (Donoghue, 6), "rightsized" (ibidem, 6, 11) and "carbon legacies" (ibidem, 3) render this managerial logic visible by recasting reproduction as an issue of numerical adjustment and ecological balance. Reproductive restraint does not appear as a mechanism of social engineering but as a rational correction of human excesses. This manifests throughout the story, including in Miriam's father's remark that there is "a strong argument that two billion - or even more - might be better" (ibidem, 11) for humanity and the planet, and in Sharon's celebration because human numbers have "rightsized from nine billion to down to six already, even faster than predicted" (ibidem, 11).

The story presents reproductive restraint as collective duty, yet not all social classes equally contribute by making the same sacrifices and facing the same risks. In Donoghue's storyworld, Populationism does not abolish reproduction as a whole. Rather, it stratifies across class lines: privilege compromises the universality of reproductive restraint and the influence of material determinants on social classes' decision-making. Ned's comment that "the fucking royals don't count" (ibidem, 8) as a model of resilience underscores the hypocrisy of the supposedly universal logic of the "Global Pact" (ibidem, 6). Royal couples such as "Beyoncé's grandson and King William's granddaughter" (ibidem, 3) can reproduce spectacularly and without social blame thanks to their capacity to curb the carbon emissions through expensive green interventions. Conversely, ordinary people's bodily self-determination is disciplined through "financial penalties" and influenced by the fear of "losing jobs and medical care" and of "becoming pariahs" (ibidem, 21). In this sense, the story exposes Populationism not as an impartial ecological ethic to reduce humanity's impact on the planet but as a system for allocating rights and risks across the social spectrum.

²Neo-Malthusianism asserts that while populations grow geometrically, food production increases arithmetically, leading to resource depletion and environmental destruction (Stein 2013, 185). Accordingly, Eugenic theories call for an "optimal" size and consumption" level by means of population control (Hendrixson, Ojeda, Sasser, 4).

By minimizing climate change as a cause-and-effect mechanism linked to population numbers (Ehlers, Krafft 2006, 7; Johns-Putra et al. 2017, 2), Populationism obscures the role that systemic drivers such as extractive economies, unsustainable transportation, and industrial and agricultural practices play in the climate crisis (Albertyn, 140-3). “Halfway to Free” unveils this dynamic through the carbon-intense lifestyles of Miriam’s colleagues at “Global Care” (ibidem, 3). Firm supporters of birth control as both a groundbreaking feminist achievement and a sustainable measure, Jane’s and Diwanna’s characterization reveals carbon-intensive habits. The first-person narrator’s description of Jane as “a sucker for the latest wearables” (ibidem, 3) suggests that the character repeatedly endorses consumer culture. Although this is not explicitly argued in the story, Jane’s association with unsustainable habits that benefit capitalist production frames her as contributing to the uneven distribution of ecological burdens across the world, with disadvantaged countries - particularly in the Global South, where fashion production is facilitated by mild ecological regulation - being mostly affected by ecological disasters.

Conversely, the narrator’s claim that “[Diwanna] needed every dollar of her Dividend for rent because she’d just upgraded to a seventeenth-floor space” (ibidem, 3) invites two observations. On one hand, the term *upgraded* inscribes the character within a corporate-like and social-climbing environment. On the other hand, the fact that “[Jane] needed *every dollar* of her Dividend” (ibidem, 3, emphasis added) highlights the systemic pressure to maintain spatial and social hierarchies, with the less developed “old suburbs” (ibidem, 3) being rewilded and undertaking the reuse of dead people’s houses. In a world plagued by climate change and biodiversity loss, the juxtaposition between the building’s *upgraded* concrete structure and the “forest view” (ibidem, 3) favoured by its height suggests the idea of nature’s commodification for the aesthetic pleasure of targeted groups. While dovetailing the anthropocentric nature-culture division, the populationist “Global Pact” (ibidem, 6) leans on creating new needs that urge people like Jane and Diwanna to make huge sacrifices to maintain their lifestyles. In this sense, structural consumption behaviours are normalized while childbearing is underscored as an ecological problem.

As the following sections will show, Donoghue’s storyworlds highlights longstanding essentialist constructions of womanhood crucial to the populationist “Global Pact” (ibidem, 6). Within this framework, biotechnological birth control is presented as a groundbreaking tool for female empowerment and ecological protection, ostensibly freeing women from their traditional role as family regulators. Yet this logic remains grounded in traditional views of women as reproductive agents, overburdening them with ecological responsibility on account of the damage supposedly caused by their “broodiness” (ibidem, 28). The story’s construction of women as reproductive agents builds on institutionalized representations already present in the extra-literary world. The 1987 Brundtland Report on Sustainable Development, for instance, described women “as agents of degradation, victims of environmental stress, potential contributors to environmental restoration and culpable for alarming population growth rates” (Albertyn, 140-1). Similarly, long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) campaigns have been funded as “an innovative solution for poor women” in the Global South (ibidem, 144-5), while thousands of scientists have proposed population control as an effective measure for mitigating climate change (Sear, 208). Taken together, these examples show that Donoghue’s speculative representation of Populationism is rooted in real-world, institutionalized images of womanhood that have long treated women’s bodies as sites of ecological governance. In doing so, such discourses have not only systematically obscured the structural drivers of crisis and inequality, but have reinforced their cultural foundations through the language of policymaking and research.

V. *Feminized Bodies, Nonhuman Agents, and the Governance of Care: the role of Technology in “Halfway to Free”*

In “Halfway to Free,” biotechnological devices like robot caregivers and Phri reveal how the populationist ideology of the “Global Pact” (Donoghue, 6) enters the intimate spheres of the body, caregiving, and domestic life. These technologies do not function as neutral tools: they reshape autonomy in a selective way, seemingly expanding individual freedom and improving social well-being. However, this occurs only insofar as bodies remain aligned with the broader populationist order. Donoghue thus shows that technology itself does not reproduce oppression. Rather, it becomes an instrument of control when embedded within specific ideological arrangements.

This ambivalence is especially visible in the representation of caregiving robotics. On the one hand, Donoghue acknowledges that robot caregivers can be helpful from both a practical and ethical value. The elderly in need of day care assistance can find in these nonhuman agents a means to acquire their declining autonomy. As Colella observes, robot caregivers may preserve the dignity and autonomy of the cared-for subject, thereby mitigating the social asymmetry beneath caregiving relationships (2023, 1). In Donoghue’s work, this emerges through the substory of Miriam’s 104-year-old great grandmother. For Thelma, it is a lot less mortifying to have one of [their] smartbeds wipe her ass than a person do” (Donoghue, 9). The term *mortifying* frames robot caregiving through affective vocabulary rather than the rhetoric of technological progress, highlighting how automated care can benefit society by reducing humiliation for vulnerable subjects.

On the other hand, robot caregivers are embedded in the socio-cultural context that has made care labour gendered in the first place. When Miriam explains that the nurse robot has “a hundred and forty-eight degrees of freedom” (ibidem, 15), the phrase resonates with the story’s broader concern with gendered, unpaid care labour and restricted bodily autonomy. The language used to describe the robot reinforces this reading, as the nonhuman agents’ mobility is enacted through controlled motions and modular tools by means of “end effectors” such as “anti-collision sensors, temperature and pulse readers, brushes, disinfectors, magnets, grippers, lifters, needle-inserters, eye-in-hands” (ibidem, 15). The listing of functions contrasts the robot’s supposed “freedom” (ibidem, 15) showing how its mobility is, indeed, merely a manifestation of optimized controllability.

The same mechanism is operationalized through Phri and the rhetoric of liberation. The device’s inherent promise to free women from both reproduction and childbearing conceals a structural continuity of control over female and feminized bodies. Biotechnological reproductive control appears here as a chosen right than a socially normalized obligation, one maintained through stigma, taboo, and material penalties. This emerges in the protagonist’s characterization. First, since she entered reproductive age Miriam has been socialized into participating in the populationist project, even before she could fully recognize how deeply Phri would affect her and her body. Second, as a female engineer working in “Functionality - what [she] calls the *actual work* of the company” (ibidem, 14, original emphasis), Miriam daily puts her expertise at the service of the very system that produces and maintains technologies that govern her body. In both cases, her agency is shaped by conformity to a broader order, so that autonomy is negotiated and only partially available. Finally, Miriam introduces the ultimate conceptual link between female carelabour, reproductive governance, and nonhuman service when imagining a depopulated future in which “machines birthed new babies, and bots raised them” (ibidem, 12). In this hypothetical future, both childbearing and caregiving are systematically off-loaded to machine agents, showing how the same technological infrastructure that grants people more bodily autonomy can also restrict people’s free bodily self-determination.

As Section 6 will demonstrate, the characters’ endeavour to take back their bodily self-determination allows them, particularly women, to thoroughly affirm their identity. This process opens up a range of possibilities for women by showing that womanhood and

motherhood can carry more radical possibilities than those established by dominant cultural models, particularly those of the Christian tradition (Murgia, 2011).

VI. *Reproductive Power, Ecological Guilt, and Caregiving in “Halfway to Free”*

In “Halfway to Free,” technology plays a central role in making social engineering appear humane, sensitive, and progressive. It does not merely enforce the “Global Pact” (Donoghue, 6), it normalizes population by embedding it in the language of liberation, self-care, and ecological responsibility.

Phri is the clearest example. A homophone of the word *free*, this biotechnological contraceptive is portrayed as the most significant social advancement since “the pill,” a 1960s symbol of “[w]omen’s liberation” (ibidem, 9). As one of Miriam’s colleagues observed before the pill women were reduced to “baby ovens” (ibidem, 10), often forced to resort to “backstreet abortion” (ibidem, 10), a practice that resonates much with the Irish Catholic context (e.g. Barry 1988; Calkin, de Londras, Heathcote 2020).

One of the ways this practice manifests is through women’s animalization in the story. Framed as too instinctual to make informed decisions about their bodies without mediation, women emerge as “irredeemably fallen” (Ingman, 517) and driven by their “bloody” instincts (Donoghue, 4). Their desire for procreation is not justified as a meaningful expression of selfhood and self-determination but as an impulse to be dominated and rechannel[led] into something more positive” (ibidem, 4), such as becoming a royal nanny, a surrogate for “really big names” (ibidem, 38), or pursuing a “job, friends, [or] an apartment in a great building” (ibidem, 28). Surrogacy exposes the system’s deepest system of control. The desire for children remains acceptable among elites, provided that the embodied risk and labour of reproduction is displaced onto others and that the paying recipients can wash their hands through offsetting measures. For disadvantaged women, according to the dominant theory, it can constitute a means of release, although it most decisively represents a means of economic sustenance. Reproduction, then, is not abolished but redistributed along class lines - protected or outsourced for some and penalized for others.

Alongside animalization, which objectifies women as nonsentient bodies, the story depicts the broader cultural framework through infantilization. The story does not merely depict women as incapable of decision-making. It frames them as overwhelmed by medicalizing and moralizing information that positions pregnancy as irresponsible and dangerous. Phri’s pre-written speeches compile a comprehensive list of “physical, emotional, and mental changes” caused by pregnancy, including “fatigue, breast tenderness, nausea, excess saliva, increased urination, bloating, mood swings, cramping, hunger, constipation, food aversion and cravings, indigestion, heartburn, flatulence, [and] lines on skin” (ibidem, 18). Women are cautioned about “the stress of caring for an infant, which include sleep deprivation, social isolation, loss of partner intimacy, and logistical and financial burdens,” potentially leading to “shrinkage of gray matter” (ibidem, 18). Beyond these symptoms, however, Phri is trained to frame pregnancy as a driver of instability and deprivation, a pathway to becoming “homeless, unemployed, impoverished, and isolated” (ibidem, 20). Phri’s technological mediation helps frame women as subjects in need of protection, as the impersonal presentation of information by the device reinforces the pseudo-objective tone and authority of the construction.

The system’s insidiousness emerges through the normalization of biotechnological birth control at the very threshold of reproductive age. Miriam vividly remembers the party held for when she turned sixteen and received her Phri. Her fond recollection of it - “[s]illy games, and dancing, and the special cake” (ibidem, 16) - frames reproductive restraint as a social ritual, one that profoundly shapes a young woman’s identity. The institutionalization and commercialization of this event renders refusal almost unimaginable. In this sense, Miriam’s recognition of the imposition she underwent, which occurs only when she is already an adult, highlights the extent to which Populationism has shaped her sense of self. The violence

experienced here is ritualized through the normalized celebration of reproductive restraint among family and friends. Marked as an important milestone in a teenage girl's life, therefore, biotechnological birth control hardly appears as a form of coercion.

The role of masculinity becomes crucial in this sense. The story suggests that populationist governance impoverishes masculinity as well as femininity. If women are made to bear the bodily and moral burden of reproduction, men are detached from caregiving and intimacy. Ned serves as a structural counterpoint to the dominant gender order. The character's fear that his desire for parenthood would make him look like "a psychopath" (ibidem, 17), particularly from men's perspective, reveals how caregiving has been stripped of any positive connotation. His statement "I don't remember a time I didn't want a baby to hold" (ibidem, 17), alongside his revelation that "[he] wouldn't be willing to miss out on the actual hands-on of being a dad" (ibidem, 22), opposes the idea of a supposedly unique "maternal instinct" (ibidem, 10) which assigns care obligations exclusively to women. Furthermore, it challenges the assumption that engaging in procreation represents a conscious attempt to "[poison] the planet" (ibidem), as well as to harm women. These observations contribute to highlighting Ned as a marginal subject within the implicit readers' own model of dominant masculinity. Indeed, Ned is the only male character openly associated with vegetarianism, for he chose to meet Miriam in a "kind of grungy [veg bar] and far enough from the office" (ibidem, 7) to discuss their shared taboo desire. This image challenges the model of "affluent masculinity" that, in the extra-literary world, links virility with ecologically costly meat diets (Dunfow, Forde, Busteed, 25).

Miriam's father provides a second important example of alternative masculinity. Unlike the detached patriarchal male, he is emotionally engaged, environmentally aware, and willing to discuss parenthood and ecological governance with his daughter. His participation in sustainable activities, such as "naturing by light rain" (Donoghue, 9), further positions him as a figure in whom human and ecological care coexist. His statement - "Really, what right had the two of us to bring one more child into an overpopulated world...But hey, we could never regret you, Miriam" (ibidem, 13) reveals his emotional vulnerability and ecological attentiveness. In this sense, Miriam's father challenges both populationist ideology, which treats reproduction as irresponsible, and patriarchal masculinity, which frames caregiving as feminized and, therefore, trivial.

These masculine counterpoints prepare the ground for the redistribution of reproductive and ecological responsibility in the story's finale showing Miriam's and Ned's thoughtful decision to engage in intercourse in the attempt to procreate. Intercourse is described as "ceremonial," marked by "the dread, the longing, the guilt, the terror, the relief" typical of "forbidden" acts (ibidem, 29). The scene is charged with heightened symbolic meaning, as Miriam and Ned are aware of what it entails for both "past generations" and "future ones" (ibidem, 29). Most decisively, this act paves the way for redefined gender and species relationships. By including Ned into the discourse of reproduction and care, Donoghue positions both men and women [as] part of both nature and culture" (Plumwood, 36). In doing so, the story can be interpreted as undermining traditional patterns of gendered oppression. Soper's view, cited in Ingman, is relevant here, particularly on account of the story's Irish background. Indeed, men's implicit association with nature offers a direct opposition to the long-standing feminization of the land "as [a] source of purity and authentic self-identification" embedded in nationalist imageries of Mother Ireland and Marian femininity (Ingman, 518-9).

The finale aligns with ecofeminist perspectives calling for more relational and less asymmetrical perspectives. The characters' equal commitment to the socio-ecological consequences of potential procreation illustrates the ideological underpinnings of Merchant's "ethic of partnership," which establishes a relational understanding of humans and nature - thus of men and women - as "equal partners" (Ingman, 518). Donoghue's story "anti-dualist

approach,” as Plumwood observes, “does not force women into the choice of uncritical participation in a masculinebiased and dualised construction of culture or into accepting an old and oppressive identity as ‘earth mothers’” (36). Echoing Plumwood, one can argue that by the end of the story, Miriam “[is] not seen as purely part of nature any more than [Ned] is” (36).

The characters’ union sets off a new ethics of shared ecological and parental responsibility, thereby challenging “the reproduction and proliferation of patriarchy” (Gladwin, 150) and, simultaneously, refuting the “generalized anti-sex and anti-human stance” (Stein, 189) underpinning populationist agendas. Their union rejects the structural asymmetry by which men’s relationship to reproduction is reduced to their power to either permit or deny it, while care falls disproportionately on women as a gendered obligation. Ned’s nurturing disposition positions him as Miriam’s equal as a potential caregiver. The story’s final act thus becomes emancipatory for both characters: it challenges a system built on the traditional family model that has confined women to the role of primary caregivers, thereby exempting men from caregiving responsibilities. In this sense, the story can be read as aligning with Hamilton’s engagement with Donna Haraway’s motto “Make Kin, Not Babies!”. Haraway’s notion of *kin-making*, Hamilton argues, should not be conceived as a replica of the traditional model that has made social and ecological care gendered. Conceived on these terms, *making kin* demands no less effort “the more undesirable and mundane kind of housework involved in making babies” (Hamilton, 2019, 19). By positioning Ned as Miriam’s equal in caregiving, Donoghue’s finale dismantles the “oppressive identity” that has historically framed women as motherly figures - among them the archetype of the “[earth mother]” (Plumwood 36) and, by the same token, exiled men from the intimate sphere of family and domesticity.

To conclude, one further point deserves emphasis: at the intersection of EJ and RJ makes clear, a fully equitable response to reproductive and ecological injustice grounded in a practical redefinition of cultural paradigms and what they imply for everyday existence. The dismantling of socio-economic gaps and barriers that contribute to constraining women’s self-determination and, in many cases, that expose vulnerable subjects to heightened ecological and social risks, is paramount in this sense. This tension remains unresolved in the story, but it is precisely what makes “Halfway to Free” such a timely text, one which highlights the continuing urgency of the work performed by EJ and RJ movements.

VII. Concluding remarks

By underscoring the ecological crisis as “a matter of feminist concern” (Cuomo, 695), this paper has shown how eco-fiction can make visible forms of domination that are often normalized and institutionalized. Donoghue’s “Halfway to Free” does not simply depict the convergence of reproductive and ecological injustices; it reveals how that convergence is naturalized through the institutionalized and pseudo-emancipatory rhetoric of liberation, care, and responsibility. In this sense, the story’s deepest political insight lies in its exposure of the complicity of EJ and RJ to sustain the unequal distribution of ecological burdens and rights.

Echoing a longer Irish cultural tradition in which the association between women and nature has served as a terrain of political and social governance, Donoghue develops an ecofeminist critique of Populationism as a system that renews older structures of domination. “Halfway to Free” reveals that reproductive restraint is internalized and ritualized, with reproductive desire framed as taboo and bio-technological birth control as an achievement of both feminist empowerment and ecological protection. Reproductive power and care labour are redistributed across human and nonhuman subjects, including human surrogates and robot caregivers. This mechanism does not undo the underlying hierarchies that, historically, have sustained the control of women and other feminized subjects. In Donoghue’s storyworld, technology plays a critical role in the establishment of these new hierarchies. However, the potentially positive contribution of technological devices such as robot caregivers highlights how technology itself does not necessarily have a negative impact on society. It may have when

embedded within an ideological framework that uses technological advancements to disguise control as freedom and inequality as fairness and responsibility.

Ultimately, by underscoring the multiple intersections of ecological and reproductive injustices and, particularly, their effects on feminized identities and bodies, “Halfway to Free” invites a “politics of listening” (Dukelow, Forde, Busteed 2024, 98), one that understands ecological balance as inseparable from social justice. The story does not only warn that multiple forms of domination persist, but also that it may become increasingly difficult to identify such domination when dominant powers appropriate the language of progress and justice to turn it against the subjects it aimed to support.

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