

“I DON’T HAVE A DEFECTIVE VERSION OF WHAT YOU’VE GOT”¹: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF NEURODIVERSE GIRLHOODS²

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Abstract: This essay analyses a selection of texts written about and by girls, who because of their neurodivergence are unable to learn the complex, often unstated, rules that govern the language, representations and social interactions on which participation in contemporary society is contingent. Research into cultural representations of girls who are unable to fulfil their socially mandated roles due to a variety of reasons, including neurodiversity, suggest they are at best stereotyped, at worst completely ignored. Caitríona Lally’s *Eggshells* (2015) and Alice Franklin’s *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) interrogate the language and spaces of girlhood as sites of restriction and coercion for their neurodiverse protagonists. However, the novels suggest that the marginal status that results from this exclusion from the mainstream can also render visible the often invisible strategies by which social roles and identities are constructed, facilitating a significant site of critique. The novels suggest that the liminal, unnarrated social spaces occupied by their protagonists are where the potential to forge new and inclusive modes of girlhood will be found.

Keywords: girlhood; hegemony; neurodiversity; language; social spaces; liminality

“NO TENGO UNA VERSIÓN DEFECTUOSA DE LO QUE TÚ TIENES”¹: REPRESENTACIONES LITERARIAS DE LA INFANCIA Y ADOLESCENCIA DE NIÑAS NEURODIVERGENTES

Resumen: Este artículo analiza una selección de textos escritos sobre y por chicas que, debido a su neurodivergencia, son incapaces de aprender las reglas complejas y a menudo implícitas que gobiernan el lenguaje, las representaciones y las interacciones sociales sobre las que se basa la participación en la sociedad contemporánea. La investigación sobre las representaciones culturales de las chicas que son incapaces de desempeñar sus roles sociales establecidos debido a una variedad de razones, incluida la neurodiversidad,

¹ Stefanie Preissner in *Wired Our Own Way*, ed. Niamh Garvey (New Island Books, 2025), 125.

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sugiere que en los mejores casos son estereotipadas y, en los peores, completamente ignoradas. *Eggshells* (2015) de Caitríona Lally y *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) de Alice Franklin interrogan el lenguaje y los espacios para chicas como sitios restrictivos y coercitivos para sus protagonistas neurodivergentes. Sin embargo, las novelas sugieren que el status marginal que resulta de esta exclusión de las corrientes dominantes también puede dar visibilidad a las estrategias generalmente invisibles a través de las cuales se construyen los roles e identidades sociales, facilitando un importante punto de crítica. Las novelas sugieren que los espacios sociales liminales y no narrados ocupados por sus protagonistas es donde se encontrará el potencial para establecer modelos de infancia y adolescencia femeninos nuevos e inclusivos.

Palabras clave: infancia y adolescencia de las niñas; hegemonía; neurodiversidad; lenguaje; espacios sociales; liminalidad

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will discuss a selection of texts written about and by girls, who because of their neurodivergence are unable to learn the complex, often unstated, rules that govern the language, representations and social interactions on which participation in contemporary society is contingent. It will assess the language and spaces of girlhood as sites of restriction and coercion, and evaluate potential resistance to often invisible hegemonic mechanisms that may be found in the neurodiverse perspective.

The liminal spaces of adolescence offer a good opportunity to assess the process by which girls are laced into their gendered identities, what Judith Butler calls “girling”: “the process of becoming socially intelligent as a *girl* according to precedents for the performance of girlhood in any given sociocultural, geographic, political, economic, and historical context” (quoted in Switzer 851). This definition emphasises girlhood as a socially produced performance. Adolescence is widely seen as a site of contraction, where the fluid, unconstructed identities of childhood give way to a more ordered, culturally specific sense of self. This stage in their development exposes girls to “the domain of language and the complex matrix of social relations through the interpellation of gender” (Erevelles and Mutua 253). Louis Althusser coined the term “interpellation” to explain the way in which we answer the “hail” or call of the ideological forces operating in our society, whose function is to persuade us to act, dress and think in a manner that is considered socially appropriate (55). When we answer the hail, we are ritually connecting ourselves with the values of our culture (Williamson 40-2). Stuart Hall describes society as comprised of a series of ideas and meanings that circulate and determine “the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed” (4). Most significant are what he calls the “conceptual maps”, which teach members of a culture to interpret

the world in similar ways, thus producing a “shared culture of meanings” and constructing “a social world which we inhabit together” (Hall 18). Central to this is the existence of a shared language, without which members of a society would not be able to communicate effectively. Hall notes that language and the meanings it communicates are the result of “a set of social conventions” which must be learned (21). Children “learn the systems and conventions of representation, the codes of their language and culture, which equip them with cultural ‘know-how’, enabling them to function as culturally competent subjects” (Hall 22). Without this knowledge, they are unable to be admitted into the cultural in-group. As the neurodiverse subjects considered in this essay illustrate, those who cannot or will not master the rules of social discourse face exclusion and silencing.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ASSESSING MODELS OF GIRLHOOD

“Paradox” is a term used by many theorists in relation to the status and representation of girls in contemporary cultural texts. Marnina Gonick et al argue that although the concept of “girl power” emerged as a celebratory narrative of girls’ agency and empowerment in the 1990s, by the 2000s theorists became more cynical about the nature of empowerment purportedly on offer (1). Natasha Walter notes that in spite of the widespread language of empowerment and choice, sexualised images of women are effectively replacing all other representations of women across popular culture (68). Even texts that specifically address shortcomings in traditional, patriarchal representations of girls, such as adaptations of fairytales that transform the princess “from paragon of patriarchal feminine virtue to unruly female rebel”, in line with the pervasive “girl power discourse” that suffuses many postfeminist media representations of women, rarely offer a valid feminist rewriting of the canonical tale, functioning instead to reinscribe women within the patriarchal order they claim to challenge (Sibielski 590). Many postfeminist narratives of girl- and womanhood actually increase the pressure on women living in neo-liberal societies to “balance masculine qualities of phallic power with renewed pressures around hypersexualised visual display and performance of normative femininity” (Gonick et al 3)³. Most critical attention focuses on the commodification of female sexuality in media-led representations of girlhood and the persistence, in spite of claims to the contrary, of “heteronormative white femininity” (Gonick et al. 2). There are many

³ See also Angela McRobbie. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Sage Publishing, 2008).

intersectional studies that critique this from the perspectives of “race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation” (Bettis and Adams 4), but very little attention has been paid to girls who are further marginalised as a consequence of either physical or neuro-divergences.

Nirmala Erevelles and Kagendo Mutua claim that in contemporary Girl Power theory, the disabled girl is an invisible presence⁴: “To be marked as both disabled and female in an ableist society suggests that you may never really become a ‘girl’” (254). They explain that affirmative representations of girls in contemporary culture “rest heavily on ableist ideologies of independence, assertiveness, and strength laced with patriarchal notions of beauty and attractiveness” (254). By contrast, the disabled female body is ambiguously positioned both outside (she does not conform to these conventional representations) and inside (she is not male) the category of woman. Threatening the stability of the neat binary oppositions on which social control is predicated, the disabled female body is often characterised as abject (Erevelles and Mutua 255). Julia Kristeva theorises the threat embodied in the abject as located not so much in its difference, but rather in its refusal to be neatly contained within predefined categories: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The abject, according to this formulation, is dangerous because it undermines the comfortable boundaries that human society has built to categorise and thus control its members. Reading the disabled body as transgressive, therefore, marks it as “potentially dangerous and disruptive even to radical discourses of girlhood” (Erevelles and Mutua 255), in its capacity to subvert socially sanctioned norms and suggest alternative conceptions of identity.

Sandra Jones et al. make a similar point about neurodiversity⁵ and its cultural representations. In a wide-ranging survey of representations of autism in cultural texts, and the impact these have on both autistic and non-autistic audiences, they highlight the prevalence of stereotypical tropes, which range from the disparaging (presenting autism

⁴ In a note on terminology, Erevelles and Mutua explain that within disability studies scholarship, “disabled girl” is the preferred term because “within the more politicised understanding of disability as a social and political construct one’s disability is to be embraced along with one’s identity as gendered” (254).

⁵ Sue Fletcher-Watson defines neurodiversity as: “the fact that humans vary in their neurological make-up and that this variability dictates the ways in which we process information – and therefore our experiences of and responses to the world” (418). In 2023, the Department of Education in the UK estimated the incidence of neurodiversity as 15% of the school-aged population (see Webber et al. 323), a level that is consistent with research in other jurisdictions.

as non-human or othering) to the ostensibly positive but inherently patronising (autism as heroic or exceptional): “Autistic characters in fiction continued to be presented as burdens or saviours” (Jones et al. 2213). Interestingly, in relation to the theme of gendered identities, they note the overrepresentation of certain media-promoted stereotypes: “not all autistic people are white heterosexual males” (Jones et al 2213). Webber et al produce similar findings from their survey of representations of neurodiversity in Young Adult fiction, citing the importance of an intersectional approach, wherein other forms of marginalisation, including gender, should be acknowledged. Most important is the accurate situation of neurodiverse identities within the complex “interlocking systems of privilege and oppression” (325) that stratify and organise all social groups within society’s power matrix.

3. *WIRED OUR OWN WAY*: CONSTRUCTING A LITERARY SPACE FOR THE AUTISTIC VOICE

In her introduction to *Wired Our Own Way: An Anthology of Irish Autistic Voices*, Niamh Garvey explains the importance of literature in constructing a space where neurodivergent perspectives on the world can be articulated and shared: “Each writer began with the same empty space, free to express themselves without being stereotyped . . . In turn, the reader is freed from the clutter of assumptions and can approach each essay with unveiled eyes” (1). This literary conversation, she suggests, initiates a relationship “on an equal footing” (Garvey 2), which is not the lived experience of many neurodiverse people. Reflecting on her own experiences of not getting an autism diagnosis until she was in her thirties, she notes how much energy a neurodivergent child expends trying to “mask our differences from a young age, moulding ourselves on how other people behave” (Garvey 5). In other words, rather than being let get on with the already taxing business of negotiating their identity amidst the pressures of social and cultural norms and hegemonies, young neurodiverse people have the additional burden of trying to figure out what is expected of them from complex social cues they may be unable to read. Garvey identifies two primary “stumbling blocks” encountered by the neurodiverse: “language and communication mismatches” and “environmental sensory triggers” (Garvey 7). Using these fundamental building-blocks of social intercourse – identity, language and the negotiation of space – as a guide, this essay will assess the strategies adopted by those who, as a consequence of their neurodivergence, must seek alternative

ways to define themselves. The protagonists in Alice Franklin’s *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) and Caitríona Lally’s *Eggshells* (2015) address us from the marginal spaces they carve out for themselves amidst the plethora of hegemonic signifiers that define girlhood. Before turning to the novels, it is useful to consider some of the key parameters established in Garvey’s *Wired Our Own Way* (2025), which gathers together personal reflections by Irish autistic writers⁶ about their experiences of living in a world that, as Stefanie Preissner states, “has been created by neurotypical people and does not meet the needs of the neurodivergent” (in Garvey 129).

The constructed, mediated fabric of what is generally accepted as the natural and unquestioned ways of life of a society is a common theme in the essays, with many contributors criticising the unthinking assumptions made by the neurotypical that their way is the only right way to conduct social life. Freya von Noorden Pierce asserts: “I’ve learned that this world is not built for neurodivergent people, as much as corporate diversity and inclusion committees may have you believe”, and that inevitably having to live in a world where one is pressured “to fit in” means that those with “differing brains suffer” (in Garvey 105). A key theme in many of the essays is the need for the neurotypical to acknowledge their privilege in living in a world that is specifically designed for them and not disparaging those who struggle with its demands. It is important to note that although the majority of the population can be defined as “neurotypical . . . all neurotypes, while not equally *common*, are equally *normal*” (Fletcher-Watson 2022, 418) – or as Preissner defiantly puts it: “I don’t have a defective version of what you’ve got” (in Garvey 2025, 128). As this essay will demonstrate, a crucial element of the chosen novels is the extent to which the narrative style and perspective encourage the reader to notice the fabricated nature of what we take for granted as our reality. Rather than simply describing the difficulties experienced by the protagonists, the authors try to immerse the reader within language and ideological systems that do not make sense. They do this by focusing our attention on the vagaries of words, using language in a slightly unconventional way, thus introducing small spaces for contemplation, what Sharon Todd describes as “small, transformative moments . . . of ‘delicate care’ that disrupt the commonplace” (Todd 232).

3.1 SOCIAL SPACES AS SITES OF CONFORMITY

⁶ The discussion in this essay will focus only on the contributions written by women.

A common theme expressed by many of the contributors is feeling “like you were born on the wrong planet” (Preissner in Garvey 128). Nuala O’Connor summarises her autism as “an individual bumping up against social norms and expectations that feel uncomfortable and alien” (in Garvey 28). This analogy is used in both the chosen novels, in which the protagonists believe they are an alien (Franklin) and a changeling (Lally), such is their sense of discordance from the norms of their surrounding social worlds. Jane Cadman, who was almost seventy when she was diagnosed as autistic, notes that societies often try to deal with autistic people by silencing that which makes them different: “My behaviour would have been considered odd and was subtly corrected” (in Garvey 37). This approach aligns with Kristeva’s comments on the need to contain and neutralise the abject. Surviving in such a hostile environment depends on learning social rules and following a “script” of “appropriate behaviour”, as theorised by Hall: “I became very good at masking and assumed that that was what socializing was about. But it always left me with a gap between who I was in myself and other people and a need to get away from them to relax. I accepted a level of loneliness” (Cadman in Garvey 38). The artificiality of the constructs and interactions on which society is built emerges as a key insight in many of the essays. The difficulty of dealing with the sensory overload of contemporary urban society is another common theme, but what becomes apparent is that instead of silencing/masking their disquiet in order to fit in with social conventions, the writers can use their marginalised perspectives to critique them. Jen Wallace, for example, describes the various spaces on offer in contemporary society in terms of binary oppositions: “I am made for dappled shade, sea breezes and birdsong, not the relentlessness of modern indoor environments. Artificial lights, synthetic smells and industrial noises set me on alert and cause me distress” (in Garvey 13). The key words here are “artificial” and “synthetic”. The problem is not that the neurodiverse person has failed to learn to live in contemporary society, but rather that society as a whole has been persuaded to accept the contrived and false values of industrialism and fails to see how much these limit its freedom.

Underlying a number of the essays is the - perhaps peculiarly Irish - sense that a truer and more enriching mode of living may still be available to those who reject the artifice of contemporary industrial society and delve down to the traditional, authentic layers below. Wallace, finding peace in her late diagnosis, describes the relief she experiences when she can opt out of “human industrial scale discord” (in Garvey 17) and discover an older, more intuitive way of living in the world: “As the garden rewilds, I

find I am rewilding too, healing old institutional wounds, learning my own needs and boundaries and leaning into moving gently through this magical life” (in Garvey 15). Wallace’s words capture the suffering endured by many neurodiverse people at the hands of institutions that were interested only in forcing them to adapt to prescribed behaviours⁷. However, she also heralds the freedom that can be found when one has the courage to opt out of the hegemonic system and forge one’s own way. The suggestion that folk traditions can potentially offer a more fulfilling way of life is a key theme in *Eggshells* and resonates in many contemporary Irish women writers. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, for example, describes folklore as “the secret of storytelling”, which facilitates “a still deeper and older layer of narrative that was like a new continent, a magical world” (in Tallone 155). This aligns with Kristeva’s exhortation to women to reject limiting patriarchal structures by turning to alternative narratives of history and identity predicated on traditions passed down through female texts: “Such a feminism rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements” (20).

3.2 THE VAGARIES OF LANGUAGE: THE NEURODIVERSE PERSPECTIVE

The key source of conflict for all of the writers in Garvey’s collection is language and the obstacle it constitutes to their ability to communicate accurately and easily with those around them. One issue is the dearth of appropriate terminology to describe the experiences of neurodiversity: “I had no words for the levels of overwhelm, frustration and otherness I felt as a young person” (Wallace in Garvey 13). Wallace’s unconventional use of “overwhelm” as a noun here creates precisely the sort of discordance within language she is trying to articulate. Cadman describes the breakdown in communication that can occur when the learned vocabulary is insufficient for communication: “I think in images, and translating them into words is quite difficult” (Cadman in Garvey 40). The biggest problems, however, are the unspoken and culturally-specific rules and nuances that govern the operation of speech: “Like many autistics, I struggle around abstract concepts and social communication. We sometimes miss the subtleties and social conventions that come naturally to neurotypicals” (O’Connor in Garvey 28). A most interesting perspective is offered by Naoise Dolan, who compares her experiences of

⁷ Garvey notes that for much of the twentieth century, Irish autistic people who required support tended to be institutionalised, where they were subjected to “treatments” now regarded as cruel and traumatising (3).

learning Japanese to her struggles with her native English. When one is learning a foreign language, she explains, one is introduced slowly and in detail to the underlying rules governing not only the grammar but the cultural nuances. This is a level of detail never offered to native speakers, who are expected to absorb and internalise the implied rules of their language in the manner outlined by Hall – an impossible task for a neurodivergent learner, who needs consistency and clearly articulated concepts: “Irish people . . . communicate in this elliptical fashion. There are a million gaps where you’re supposed to know what to fill in” (Dolan in Garvey 83). The other key difference is the accommodation afforded to a foreign speaker, whose mistakes are accommodated: “I feel free speaking other languages in a way that I never really do in English . . . Since I have a native speaker’s accent in English . . . I am expected to know the rules. When I break them, people assume it’s out of malice” (Dolan in Garvey 85).

This insight into language use – and by extension, the rules governing all forms of social interaction - and the difficulty neurodiverse speakers have in learning its unspoken rules is a key theme in the chosen novels, with the two protagonists struggling throughout to communicate. It is of huge credit to the authors that they strive to demonstrate to their readers just how frustrating it is to have to use a language from whose accurate deployment one is excluded. Commenting on the literature of girlhood, Ann Smith notes that books that are simply *about* girls, regardless of how ostensibly feminist the message is, do little to disestablish prevailing literary tropes and stereotypes (1). To truly destabilise hegemonic assumptions and offer revolutionary new perspectives, the girl in the text must “function as its central point both actually and metaphorically” (Smith 1). Franklin and Lally both acknowledge that it is not sufficient to simply illustrate and even critique the challenges faced by the neurodiverse in a range of social situations. Rather they strive to wrench their readers out of their comfort zone with regard to the conceptual maps and words conventionally used. The spaces inhabited by the girls in the two novels must be understood as socially manufactured sites, where identities are determined and inscribed. Similarly, the language used draws attention to its own role in supporting the dominant discourse. This reflects what James Conroy insists is the central function of literature: “Poetry stands at the interstices of the world and the word, the personal and the public, and the local and the universal, and in doing so has a crucial role to play in maintaining discursive openness” (143). As this essay will strive to demonstrate, by allowing their protagonists to inhabit marginal spaces in which

hegemonic language and conceptual maps are destabilised, Franklin and Lally make a valuable contribution to the reassessment of girlhood, in particular neurodivergent narratives of girlhood, encouraging readers to reconsider what we take for granted about the spaces and communications systems we inherit.

4. *LIFE HACKS FOR A LITTLE ALIEN* (2025)

Alice Franklin's *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* (2025) is an account of a young, neurodivergent girl's struggle to navigate her way through adolescence in a society in which her language, ideas and identity are not acceptable. The book is written in the second person, with the narrator (possibly the protagonist as an adult) addressing the protagonist and trying to guide her through life in a society for which she seems hopelessly unsuited: "Climb up here, Little Alien. Sit next to me. I will tell you about life on this planet" (Franklin 3). The analogy of the alien is cleverly used to suggest both the extent to which the protagonist is alienated from the conventional workings of society, but also to enable critique of what much of humanity accepts without question. The use of the second person creates an intimate but also a jarringly externalised perspective on the protagonist's life. She is both subject and object, with the reader forced by the narrative perspective to accept our complicity in her feelings of alienation and otherness. Much of the book centres on the problems that arise when the protagonist tries to define her own identity within a society that insists on its rules being obeyed. The second person narrative conveys the pressure to conform that is imposed on anyone who feels different: "You won't be normal. Aliens can't be normal. You'll be normal enough, though. And by this, I mean you'll have just enough normal to seem normal without actually being normal" (Franklin 7). These sentences succinctly express the balancing act that constitutes life for many neurodiverse people, who are aware of their marginalisation and expend huge energy masking their own identities in order to adapt to what society demands of them. The word "normal" recurs through the text, its repetition emphasising the hegemonic binary oppositions that manufacture our consent by inducing in us a fear of the other. The protagonist's marginal position enables her to deconstruct its logocentric power, however, revealing it to be little other than a constructed concept that can just as easily be reinterpreted: "'Not normal' is the phrase she uses . . . It's normal to you though" (Franklin 84).

The narrative offers repeated reminders of how exhausting and restrictive it is to be constantly checking one's speech to ensure one is obeying social rules: "remembering to speak in full sentences, you remember to speak in full sentences"; "forgetting to make your voice go up at the end" (when asking a question); "trying to speak generally so as not to be caught out" (Franklin 40, 96, 136). The protagonist describes behaviours such as stimming that are essential to some neurodiverse people, but repugnant to neurotypical members of society, who view them as disruptive:

You try to muster up the strength to stop making your noises. You succeed – manage to lessen their volume, then stop doing them altogether. But you feel the need to do something else. The frustration can't just sit there. It has to go somewhere, be somewhere, manifest as something. And so, you do your body rocking – the other thing you do when you're frustrated. But alas, body rocking is another odd thing to do. Though not unheard of, it's largely uncommon – an easy target for ridicule. (Franklin 57)

The binary structure of society is evident here, with the neurodiverse – the abject – forced to hide behaviours that are natural, even essential, to them so that they can be contained within their socially sanctioned categories and their threat to social stability thus neutralised.

4.1 "HAS THE CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE?": IDIOMS AS EXCLUSIONARY MECHANISMS

The protagonist's frustration with language is the central theme in the text. Evidently a very bright and perceptive girl, she struggles to articulate her thoughts. Sometimes this inability is due to her own difficulties in marshalling her ideas: "You try to articulate these thoughts. But your thinking is sluggish . . . It's like some wiring has gone wrong, some sort of fog has descended, like your tongue is far away from your brain" (Franklin 55). However, most of the problems stem from her struggle to master the linguistic rules on which communication is based. The second person narrative is very effective here, as the reader sees for themselves the mismatch between what the protagonist thinks and what she is able to articulate: "Your vocabulary is enormous, or to be precise, your passive vocabulary is enormous and your active vocabulary is shite" (Franklin 3). Her schoolteachers, judging her only on her ability to reproduce learned words, dismiss her as below average intelligence and insist that she confine her reading to basic children's books, not realising that she is reading complex psychology books in her spare time. As becomes evident, the real problem with language, although most people do not realise it, is the extent to which meaning is determined by subtext.

The book is annotated with footnotes, which suggest the protagonist's forensic interest in how language actually operates and the extent to which this social knowledge must be learned. The unemotional, quasi-scientific tone of the second person narrative is very effective in forcing the reader to confront the often indecipherable workings of the English language and the impact this has on those excluded from its secrets. Expressing his frustration with her muteness, the deputy principal of her school asks her: "Has the cat got your tongue?" (Franklin 66). The protagonist's literal mind does its best to decipher how a cat could be relevant to the conversation, before confiding in the reader that: "This is an idiom. Idioms are strings of words, divorced from their typical meanings" (Franklin 66). The contradiction here between the calm acceptance of such figures of speech and the absurdity of any language system that communicates through such oblique means inserts a significantly resistant message. Echoing many of the contributors to Garvey's collection, the protagonist highlights the extent to which the nuances of language are inaccessible to those who process information differently. It makes no difference that she has studied language structures and learned complex vocabularies. Human communication continues to be out of reach for her because language ultimately works to exclude rather than include anyone outside the preordained social in-group: "you will know how words work, how they don't work and where they come from . . . But beyond the world of words, you will remain largely ignorant. This is unfortunate. When it comes to the point, the stuff of language is nearly always beside it" (Franklin 198). If she was "the ruler of the world", she would insist that words be linked to precise meanings so that everyone would understand what was actually being said: "Instead of speaking, people would carefully consider the thoughts they want to express and then write them down. That way, there would be no misunderstandings based on unintended tonal shifts, unintended emphasis, unintended facial expressions" (Franklin 135).

4.2 BINARY OPPOSITIONS AND GENDERED IDENTITIES

The protagonist's marginalisation due to her inability to communicate fluently and easily also extends to her difficulties in inhabiting what society deems to be her appropriate gender role:

During this pause, you get the feeling she is trying to figure something out. Maybe she is trying to decide whether you are an alien or a human, or maybe just whether you are a girl or a boy. Your hair is short and, as you are still prepubescent, you have no childbearing hips or womanly curves.

Your gender-based energy is also ambiguous. There is nothing rambunctiously boyish or carefully girly about you. You tread the line between nothing and neither. (Franklin 97)

This passage is very cleverly written, with an emphasis on the many binary oppositions that comprise human identities and the linguistic clichés that support them. Effortless social interaction, as Hall theorises, depends on compartmentalisation according to hegemonic norms. Failure to deliver expected signifiers relating to hair length and body shape threaten the social order. The protagonist’s automatic reliance on clichéd descriptors for male and female bodies reminds us how persuasive such ideas are and the extent to which they are internalised, particularly during the vulnerable stage of adolescence. Moreover, the disparity in power relations that enables boys to be “rambunctious” but demands that girls are “careful” and “girly” effectively highlights the limitations often imposed on girls in the name of femininity. The protagonist’s assertion that in refusing to comply with this categorisation she becomes invisible, “between nothing and neither”, is a depressing reminder why so many girls find it easier to cede to their interpellation and take up the only roles that society offers them.

One night when she is struggling to sleep at society’s mandated times (another subtle critique of widespread acceptance of social norms even when they do not support individual circadian rhythms), the protagonist comes across a late-night television documentary on an ancient manuscript, the Volynich Manuscript. Named after the man who discovered it in 1912, the manuscript subsequently became the obsession of an academic who believed it was the product of an ancient alien civilisation. This piques the interest of the protagonist, initially because she is relieved to think aliens may exist, thus suggesting that there are alternative societies in which she may feel more at home. What really fascinates her, however, is the language and notations in which the manuscript is written, which to date have not been linked to any known civilisation. This suggests to her that each society manufactures a system for communicating that is arbitrary and specific to them, but because some of these systems have become global, they attain the status of universality that hides their constructedness: “You find yourself thinking about what words are. About what it means to understand words. About how weird it is. Words are just ink on a page, arranged in a fashion dictated by convention – and yet they mean things because people have decided that they do. That’s weird” (Franklin 89). The switch here to “weird” from what had previously been defined as “normal” is important. The increased confidence she gains from this insight into the artificiality of language systems

enables her to begin the process of accepting her unique worldview and carving out a space for herself in social interactions, rather than trying to hide her personality in order to fit in. This in turn facilitates a wider revision of social customs and rules, with a particular critique of the monolithic identity demanded in contemporary society. Pondering on the limited narrative voice society offers its members, who are strictly delineated according to sex, race and other categorisations, she notes that this limitation is voluntarily adopted and could easily be rejected in order to facilitate a more flexible and equitable society:

You know many other languages have multiple ways of saying “you”. You know some languages have a formal and an informal “you”. You know some have a singular and a plural “you”. You think, as a language with only one word for “you”, English might actually be in the minority . . . You think you would like it if there were more words for “you”. After all, there are billions of people on Planet Earth. How can “you” be you but also she and her and them and him? To address everyone with the same second-person pronoun seems weird. You think you might like it if pronouns didn’t exist. You think you might like it if everyone everywhere were simply called by their name. (Franklin 232)

“You”, in this context, is the mechanism of interpellation, as defined by Althusseur, assigning everyone their preordained social positions. Linked to the operation of the ideological apparatuses that define us as subjects (Althusseur 54), the universal “you” works to eliminate difference. This results not in equality, but rather in the erasure of any identities that do not conform to dominant values. Aware that as a neurodivergent girl she is doubly excluded from positions of influence, the protagonist calls for a dismantling of reductive linguistic signifiers and demands the right to occupy her own unique voice. It is only by allowing everyone the right to represent themselves as they wish that divergent identities can be fully expressed and allowed to enrich society through the unique perspectives they can contribute.

5. *EGGSHELLS* (2015)

Vivian, the protagonist in Caitríona Lally’s *Eggshells* (2015), also defines herself as significantly at odds with her surrounding society, so much so she is convinced she is a changeling. In Irish mythology, a changeling is a sickly infant left in place of a human child, who has been lured to the Otherworld by the fairies. Vivian describes her daily efforts to return to her real home, visiting places around Dublin that she thinks may be entry points: “I unfold the map . . . and write in my notebook the names of places that contain fairytales and magic and portals to another world, a world my parents believed I

came from and tried to send me back to, a world they never found but I will” (Lally 6). This statement articulates Vivian’s sense of displacement in contemporary society. Her insistence that she is not quite of the human world functions as an effective literary technique designed to lure the reader into an ambiguous relationship with her, challenging our attitudes to those unconventional beings we encounter on our daily journeys around our own cities: “We are the passengers who won’t sit beside her on the bus. Vivian does not question her behaviour, but we do. Is this woman merely ditsy, or is she mentally ill?” (Kiberd 2015).

Before expanding on the novel’s analysis of social spaces and their impact on identity, it is worth noting Vivian’s reference to her troubled relationship with her parents. Ríona Ní Fhrighil explains that the changeling motif was often used to criticise Irish women perceived to have deviated from religious/patriarchal rules in contrast to socially compliant, good daughters (110). Recent texts by writers such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill⁸ and Doireann Ní Ghríofa⁹ have reclaimed the changeling motif to indict state-sanctioned abuse of Irish women, who were often incarcerated in institutions, like the Mother and Baby Homes, in order to manage and eliminate the threat posed by their deviance¹⁰. There is a hint in *Eggshells* that Vivian may have been incarcerated in such an institution in her teenage years by parents who wanted to divest themselves of responsibility for her (although like much of Vivian’s narrative this is never expanded upon so the reader is unsure whether or not to look for additional meanings in the oblique hints we are given about her past). There are multiple, although subtle, references to attempts made by her parents to return her to her fairy home, with Vivian occasionally describing repressed memories of attempted drowning and burning: “My father tried to send me back, he wanted to swap me for his human child” (Lally 249). Molly Ferguson reads Lally’s use of the changeling motif as a means of “speak[ing] the unspeakable about the violence of the heteronormative family” (309). The changeling motif is clearly a multi-accentual sign, that can be used to critique a range of abuses perpetuated by official religious and patriarchal institutions in the name of condemning and containing figures, usually young

⁸ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (The Gallery Press, 2007).

⁹ Doireann Ní Ghríofa. *Nine Silences* (The Salvage Press, 2018).

¹⁰ For a detailed overview of the use of Irish folklore as a mechanism of critique in Irish women’s writing, see Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh. “The Mermaid and Contested Narratives of Motherhood in the Poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Doireann Ní Ghríofa”. In *Mothers in Contemporary Irish Literature: Kaleidoscopic Reimaginings*, ed. Madalina Armie and Maria Veronica Membrive Perez (De Gruyter Brill, 2026), 67-83.

women, considered to be destabilising or abject. For the purposes of this discussion, however, Garvey’s assertion that “[t]here’s copious evidence of autism throughout history, right back to many of the Irish children accused of being changelings” (3) is most significant, suggesting that Lally’s novel can be read as an examination of the marginalisation of neurodiverse people by a society that wants to force them to behave according to its conventions.

5.1. NEGOTIATING NEURODIVERSITY IN HEGEMONIC SPACES

Like the protagonist in *Life Hacks for a Little Alien*, Vivian spends much of her day trying to negotiate her identity amidst the torrent of hegemonic assumptions and demands that confront her. She is well aware that she is perceived as somehow threatening by those she meets on her daily meanderings around Dublin in search of the elusive re-entry point to the Otherworld. She acknowledges that other people are not keen to sit too near her on the bus: “I know the one next to me will be the last one filled, if it is filled at all”, but as she has not “looked at my face in a mirror in a long while”, she does not know “what other people see that keeps them away” (Lally 97). Like many other aspects of her narrative, her lack of attention to her appearance, which is referenced several times throughout the novel, can be read in a number of ways, indicating either a lack of interest in conforming to social norms or more sinisterly as indicative of a traumatic fragmentation of her self-identity. She describes reaching blindly into her wardrobe to select her clothes and eschews regular showers so that her own body odour is not muted: “I get dressed without adding water to my body or looking in a mirror. I want to grow into my smell. I want to grow out of my appearance. I want a smell-presence and a sight-absence” (Lally 17). Retreating from the gaze offers Vivian the freedom to be herself in a society in which women, in particular, are expected to conform to socially prescribed standards of appearance. She is moreover aware of the artificiality of what passes for the norm in contemporary society. She points out that it is more natural, even healthier, for her to be surrounded by her own scent than to hide it with synthetic sprays: “When I enter my house, the waft of myself hits me . . . I heard on the radio that the rise in asthma is caused by an increase in the use of cleaning products” (Lally 36). This opposition between natural, instinctive behaviour and the learned, sometimes harmful practices that pass for “normal” in contemporary capitalist society is a key point of critique in the novel and is facilitated by Vivian’s unmediated, marginal voice. However, there is a dark undertone

to her resistance that is not quite fully articulated, possibly reflective of her unwillingness to revisit incidences from her past. She dresses for warmth and comfort which is commendable in a hyper-critical world, except that her obsession with covering her body completely could also be indicative of past trauma and abuse, as suggested when she inadvertently displays a much-scarred body to a friend towards the end of the book.

Another significant, although hard to interpret, element in Vivian's identity is her relationship with her sister, who is confusingly also called Vivian: "My sister and I have the same name. She was born first and has more rights to the name" (Lally 15). This lack of even the most basic signifier of identity could be read as further evidence of the protagonist's changeling status. Equally, the birth of a child perceived as abnormal may have rendered her unworthy of a name in the eyes of her parents. It is also possible to read sister-Vivian as the protagonist's socially acceptable double, living the life she is unwilling or unable to live herself. The opposition between nature and artifice is apparent in their sporadic interactions. Sister-Vivian is willing to perform the socially acceptable role of wife and mother, and is consequently rewarded with a husband and nice home. Rather than being envious, however, protagonist-Vivian is struck by the hard work that goes into her performance:

My sister throws words at me, whole lists of words, words that she took from her architect or her friends, words that mean nothing, words from advertisements and brochures and people who sell things for a living

. . . She starts talking about Angelique's splashbacks and Saoirse's counters. Her friends all sound like bridalwear shops or Gaelic chieftains. (Lally 81)

Authenticity is central to Vivian's conception of self and she finds herself constantly amazed by the lengths to which other people go to adhere to social rules which, when spelled out in her conversational tone, also strike the reader as absurd. Her comments on the manufactured needs that now surround even the simplest of tasks such as ordering lunch: "demanding all manner of bread I have never heard of. Where do they hear of such breads and why does it matter so much?" (Lally 35); and going for a walk: "there's something wrong with buying special clothes to walk in, instead of walking in old clothes that you already have" (Lally 240-1) succinctly indict consumers for whole-heartedly subscribing to the media-generated demands of late capitalism. Who, the novel asks, is more to be pitied: Vivian, who knows her own mind and refuses to capitulate to constructed standards of hygiene and appearance, or the mass of consumers who are

weighted down with the responsibility of choosing whatever form of bread today's advertisements have decreed appropriate?

5.2. RESISTANT CONCEPTIONS OF GIRLHOOD

Vivian struggles throughout the novel with the expectations imposed on her to look and behave as society decrees is appropriate for a girl. Her sister constantly exhorts her to adhere to her predestined life-plan: “She bothers me to clean the house and get rid of chairs and find a job” (Lally 10). Her neighbours lurk on their doorsteps to intercept her with advice: “find a husband, never mind your hobbies . . . About time you got a ring on the finger, a woman your age” (Lally 173). Although her daily sorties from the safety of her home under the hostile surveillance of her neighbours are described in comic ways, there is a sinister undertone to their interactions. When she tells her neighbour she is heading out to look “for the end of the rainbow” (a potential entry-point to the Otherworld), her neighbour responds in frustration: “Vivian, sometimes I think you're away with the fairies” (Lally 225). This is much more than a folktale-inflected figure of speech. Ní Fhrighil (2017) notes that blaming the fairies for inexplicable diseases or socially unacceptable acts was part of Irish tradition, and that the phrase “away with the fairies” was often used to dismiss women whose behaviour did not conform to social expectations. When Vivian's search for the rainbow's end leads her to the grounds of a deserted hospital, it is suggested to the reader that her trauma may stem at least in part from a period of incarceration. She never alludes directly to this time, but it is significant that she claims to have no memories or possessions from the years between childhood and adulthood: “My hoard is made up of things from my childhood and early teens, with a big gap from my adulthood” (Lally 24).

Like the protagonist in *Life Hacks for a Little Alien*, Vivian realises that she can make life easier for herself if she performs as is expected, although the deadpan comedic way in which she describes her efforts do little other than show how ridiculous much of this learned social behaviour is: “I throw my eyes up to heaven and give a little snort, the way I've seen women do when they talk about their boyfriends or husbands” (Lally 14-15). A significant point of resistance is her criticism of what is promoted as heroic and praise-worthy in society. Listing the types of programmes that fill her television stations: “A newsreader announces that a man has been shot in a case of mistaken identity . . . a giddy young man jumping around a cliff . . . sweating man in a T-shirt” (Lally 231)

illustrates the prevalence of male-oriented content and idealised tropes of masculinity, which offer little to female viewers. It is no wonder that Vivian prefers to “pause between the stations where there’s a bristle of static, the wordless gush of it settling something inside me” (Lally 198). The reader may not be as alienated from the gender roles offered to them by society as Vivian is, but the experience of being besieged by images of ideal masculinity masquerading as universal, human signifiers of success will resonate with many.

Language is a particular concern for Vivian. Like the protagonist in *Life Hacks for a Little Alien*, she struggles to communicate using a system which, to her mind, hinders rather than facilitating the accurate exchange of information. She criticises the arrogance of those who think that the complexity of her thoughts can be condensed into neat pre-defined expressions: “I never know how to respond to people who want small complete sentences with one tidy meaning” (Lally 13). She is equally uneasy with those who presume everyone can interpret the imprecisions that pass for instructions. When her social worker asks for a “drop of milk” in his tea, for example, Vivian is stumped: “He speaks with an admirable abruptness, but his sentences don’t provide enough information” (Lally 50). What bothers her most is the inaccuracy of much of what passes for information. Her perusal of historical sites is marred by signs that cannot seem to decide if the information they display is true or needs qualification: “All these ‘tradition has its’ and ‘reputeds’ and ‘near heres’ are unsettling my sense of certainty” (Lally 133). Most insightful, particularly given the possibility she was abused by her parents, are the comments on gravestone inscriptions: “Every dead person is ‘Dearly Beloved’ or ‘Sadly Missed’, but that can’t be true for all of them; death brings out the worst of lies” (Lally 136). If *Eggshells* can indeed be read as a commentary on Ireland’s shameful history of the institutional abuse of women it considered deviant, then Lally’s critique of historical narratives and their proclivity to hide the truth gives significant additional resonance to this observation.

5.3. CREATING ALTERNATIVE MAPS

Vivian’s life is comprised of routine and repetition, with every day similar to the one before. Henri Lefebvre characterises everyday life in industrialised society as alienating and homogenising, leaving the individual “[l]ost in routines, feeling helpless,

estranged from themselves and others”¹¹. Analyses of social spaces associated with women indict the stultifying, monotony of lives predicated on cleaning, organising domestic life and beautification¹², as summarised in Vivian’s observation on her sister’s chosen lifestyle: “Her world is full of children and doings and action verbs” (Lally 10). Vivian opts out of this cycle, explaining: “I’m uncomfortable with verbs; they expect too much” (Lally 10). This rejection of progress and action, long associated with success in the patriarchal world, echoes the work of Rita Felski, who asserts that just because society has traditionally rewarded members who actively participate, this does not mean that the alternative – rejecting the active verbs – cannot have its own value and even power:

[T]here is a tendency, clearly visible in the work of Lefebvre, to equate repetition with domination and innovation with agency and resistance . . . In our own era, however, the reverse is just as likely to be true. Within the maelstrom of contemporary life, change is often imposed on individuals against their will; conversely everyday rituals may help to safeguard a sense of personal autonomy and dignity, or to preserve the distinctive qualities of a threatened way of life. In other words, repetition is not simply a sign of human subordination to external forces but also one of the ways in which individuals engage with and respond to their environment. Repetition can signal resistance as well as enslavement. (21)

Felski’s comments are worth reflecting upon in relation to Vivian. On the one hand, the repetition of similar actions every day can indicate trauma (Alexander xv). Certainly, Vivian’s actions are infused with superstition – she always eats food in particular quantities and performs a variety of rituals before being able to leave the house. On the other hand, her actions can be interpreted in the light of Michel de Certeau’s conception of everyday life as a series of struggles between “strategies” (dominant social institutions which attempt to structure social spaces) and “tactics” (the ways in which individuals navigate their environments, constructing spaces for themselves amidst the constraints that surround them) (de Certeau xix). Vivian is particularly drawn to the liminal spaces which exist alongside, but invisible to, mainstream society. She protects herself from unwanted incursions on her privacy by retreating into her own private world: “To quiet the clamour of family noise in my head I turn the radio dial to static, and listen to the surge and crackle from beyond”; and tries to ignore the insistent messaging directed at her from every side: “My ears have been saturated with other people’s words recently;

¹¹ See Philip Wander. “Introduction”. In Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Transaction, 1984), xvi.

¹² See also Pamela J. Bettis and Natalie G. Adams. *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities of In-Between* (Routledge, 2005); and Linda McDowell. “Doing Gender: Feminism, Feminists and Research Methods in Human Geography”. In *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (vol.17, no.4, 1992), 399-416.

today I will hear only my own” (Lally 223, 71). Her resistance is particularly noticeable in her daily walks around the city of Dublin, one of the tactics heralded by de Certeau to reclaim one’s autonomy. Ostensibly motivated by her determination to find one of the “thin spaces” (Lally 31) that may allow her to slip into the Otherworld, her walks also construct an alternative map of Dublin. Following her own logic, she explores streets with potentially magical names such as “Scribblestown, Poppintree, Trimbleston . . . Thundercut Alley” (Lally 6), recording her route every evening on sheets of tracing paper, which she overlays on the official map so that she produces a palimpsest, her own version of space that accommodates multiple, evolving definitions that can both “intersect with and undermine the authority of dominant representations” (Ní Éigearthaigh 2019). Vivian is drawn to the oddities or contradictions she observes in the official topographic record. She notices, for example, that the various clocks around the city are set to slightly different times, suggesting a potential slippage in the authority of time. She is fascinated by graffiti artists who impose their own perspectives on the spaces they mark. She is particularly intrigued by street signs whose words have been changed, either by human or natural interventions: “The whole street sign has been blue-ed out: I have walked off-map onto a street that doesn’t exist, not in this world, at least” (Lally 73). These spaces that can be created when one has the courage and imagination to veer away from the conventional path become sites of “play”, wherein the marginalised and disenfranchised of society can carve out their own paths by using, but not being limited by, the signifiers provided for them. According to de Certeau’s argument, it is in precisely these small, daily, often unnoticed acts of rebellion characteristic of everyday life that the constraints of the dominant culture can be transcended.

6. CONCLUSION: FORGING AUTHENTIC MODES OF DIVERGENT GIRLHOODS

As all of the texts discussed in this essay demonstrate, negotiating identity as a neurodivergent girl is fraught with difficulty. Adolescence is the period in which girls are pressured into accepting the prescribed gendered identity constructed for them by a range of cultural and social texts, a process Butler calls “girthing” (in Switzer 851). Agreeing to perform one’s identity is a form of “interpellation” (Althusseur 55), through which one is ritually connected to the values of the surrounding culture (Williamson 40-2). Theorists of girlhood note that in spite of the emphasis on empowerment and choice in contemporary cultural representations of girls, hegemonic representations continue to

inscribe them within objectifying, sexualised patriarchal tropes (Gonick et al 1, Sibielski 590). Research into cultural representations of girls who are unable to fulfil these socially mandated roles due to a variety of reasons, including neurodiversity, suggest they are at best stereotyped, at worst completely ignored (Jones et al 2213). The constructed nature of social interaction is another key anxiety identified in the texts. As Hall argues, we all learn the systems and codes of our language and culture, equipping ourselves with the “cultural know-how” necessary to function (21-2). Language, conceptual maps and signifiers of identity - the building blocks on which a shared society is built - can exclude those who struggle to master their often unarticulated assumptions and nuances. However, the marginal status that results from this exclusion from the mainstream can also render visible the often invisible strategies by which social roles and identities are constructed, facilitating a significant site of critique. This is evident in both Vivian and the protagonist of *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* who demand the right to live their lives in a manner that is natural and authentic. Vivian, who loves to write down her thoughts, emphasises the importance of liberating herself from the constraints and rules of a hegemonic discourse to which she does not have access: “my notebook, which has kind blank pages that don’t scream at me to stay within the lines” (Lally 19-20). At the same time, Franklin’s protagonist finds ease in the anonymity she experiences when she moves on her own to London: “You are miles away from any of them . . . If someone wanted to contact you, they wouldn’t be able to” (Franklin 290). It is little wonder that they are both drawn to the liminal spaces that exist on the fringes of conventional society, not merely because invisibility grants them protection, but also because it is in these unconventional spaces that they can fully explore their unrealised potential. As the protagonists of *Life Hacks for a Little Alien* and *Eggshells* demonstrate, life in the liminal, unnarrated spaces is where the creativity to forge new and inclusive modes of girlhood will be found. Afterall, as Vivian explains: “I like the place where one thing meets another – that’s where the magic gets in” (Lally 66).

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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