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## Confinement and the Transnational in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

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This article contends that Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) generates its transnational effects through its manner of narrating elements of the carceral situation which its central characters, Ma and Jack, survive. Situating *Room* within Donoghue's practice as a writer of historical fiction, the article studies the sources she drew on when writing her novel, the spaces the characters inhabit and the things that surround them, as well as the language used by the narrator Jack. It argues that, by focalising this narrative of coercive confinement through the worldview of a five-year-old child, Donoghue creates a text that is transnationally mobile in its approach to language, space and things.

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For all their focus on restricted space, narratives of coercive confinement are inherently mobile. In autobiographical accounts of incarcerated experience, the very impetus of writing is often to communicate to a broader audience what is, by definition, hidden from the outside world. In this sense, narrating coercive confinement is a form of border crossing, whether working from the inside out—telling of the long wait till freedom arrives—or from the outside in, bringing a reader into a world they do not know. Moreover, their restricted focus gives such stories the ability to communicate across actual territorial borders, due to the potentially broad resonances of a carceral narrative space. While each carceral institution is inherently local (it restricts a body to a particular place), the real-world presence of sites of incarceration in different parts of the globe allows stories of imprisonment to find differently informed readerships, which create new meanings in the process. As Monika Fludernik notes, ‘Western culture is steeped in images of imprisonment’; as she goes on to show in her wide-ranging study of metaphors of confinement in Anglophone literature, these images are refracted and (re)interpreted within specific cultural contexts (2019: vii).

Emma Donoghue’s *Room* is not an autobiographical account of incarceration, nor does it focus on a state institution of confinement such as a prison. Furthermore, its focus is not on confined experience alone—more than half the novel is devoted to describing the lives of five-year-old Jack and his mother, Ma, *after* they escape from a reinforced shed where Ma’s rapist, Old Nick, has kept her captive for seven years and as a result of which Jack was conceived. Nonetheless, it is the contention of this article that *Room* generates its transnational effects through the approach it takes to narrating elements of the carceral situation that Ma and Jack survive. I will examine these elements and their corresponding effects from three angles. First, *Room*’s sources will be studied, particularly the ways in which Donoghue shifts the reader’s attention from the case of Elisabeth Fritzl, which served as a starting point for her novel, in order to broaden the range of *Room*’s interpretations. Next, I will examine the confined spaces introduced via Jack’s narrative perspective and, through this, explore his relationship with the nonhuman objects in his midst. Finally, I will study the language used to communicate his and Ma’s experiences to the reader, showing how Donoghue departs from the richly detailed cultural backgrounds of her previous work to create a narrative that is much less firmly rooted in a specific place and time.

While mainly focussed on the novel, my analysis takes into account *Room*’s onstage and onscreen adaptations, which themselves are transnational texts. Indeed, the departure point of my argument is that *Room* was written to travel. According to her interviews, Donoghue had already drafted a screenplay before the novel was published, which shows her belief in the narrative’s transferability onto the big screen (Nathoo,

2016; Medley, 2015). She teamed up with director Lenny Abrahamson to redraft the script, working on it for ‘about a year and half to two year[s]’ (Wise, 2015). The resulting feature was financed by North American, Irish and British production companies; it was shot in Toronto, and set in Akron, Ohio.<sup>1</sup> The stage version followed transnational suit: premiered at the Theatre Royal Stratford East and directed by Cora Bissett, *Room*’s theatrical adaptation was a co-production with the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in association with the National Theatre of Scotland and London’s Covent Garden Productions.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Donoghue’s writing has travelled far beyond the field of Irish literature, so too has the author moved across national borders. The bio on her website describes ‘an Irish emigrant twice over’, who moved to the UK before settling in Canada (Donoghue, 2021b: half-title page); she has now spent more of her life outside of Ireland than in it. Indeed, when she discusses her work in terms of her Irishness, it is typically to emphasise the transnational aspects of her identity: Donoghue identifies not only the ‘gabbiness of the Irish’ as a feature of her art, ‘but also a great deal of confidence about being a European as well, and about being part of the British Isles, and part of the Atlantic or Anglo world’ (O’Neill and Donoghue, 2019: 139; see also Bensyl, 2000: 75; Lackey and Donoghue, 2018: 123). She also establishes a relationship between Irishness and coercive confinement when speaking of Jenny Bonnet, the main protagonist of her novel *Frog Music* (2014). Donoghue’s character is based on a real-life individual who spent time in an industrial school, and the author notes that this detail drew her to Bonnet’s story ‘as an Irish novelist’, since ‘locking up our young is a key part of our [Irish] history in a way’ (O’Neill and Donoghue, 2019: 135). As a reader, then, Donoghue finds resonances between the source material she draws on and Ireland’s history of coercive confinement.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to suggest that we should limit the search for sources of Donoghue’s confinement narratives to the island of Ireland, however. In an interview with Lisa Farrelly, the author mentions *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* as an important precursor to *Room* (Farrelly and Donoghue, 2017; Sachs, 1990). Sachs’s diary recounts his first spell in prison under the apartheid regime in his native South Africa and is filled with accounts of activities that also help the confined characters of *Room* to pass the time: exercise routines, the singing of songs, enumerating things in the confined space,

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<sup>1</sup> These production companies were Element Pictures, Film 4, FilmNation Entertainment, No Trace Camping, Ontario Media Development Corporation (OMDC), Screen Ireland and Telefilm Canada. For more on *Room* in the context of transnational Irish cinema, see Tracy and Flynn (2017).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Its North American premiere in Canada in March 2020 was cancelled due to the COVID-19 crisis’ (Donoghue, 2017a).

<sup>3</sup> Donoghue also drew on the 2009 Ryan Report, produced by the Irish government’s Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, when composing an account of institutional abuse in *The Pull of the Stars* (2021b: 242–4; Donoghue and D’Alton, 2020). For more on Ireland’s history of coercive confinement, see O’Sullivan and O’Donnell (2012); Cox (2018).

fantasies about life after confinement, trying to get the upper hand on captors and worries about health. While Donoghue is clearly aware of the resonances her writing has with Ireland's history of coercive confinement, her creative horizon is by no means limited to the island—nor should our interpretations be.

Moira E. Casey has outlined the author's deep awareness of the transnational dynamics of modern life, singling out her portrayal of 'technology, domestic spaces, and migration' in the 2007 novel *Landing* (2011: 68). The novel tracks the transatlantic relationship between Irish flight attendant Síle O'Shaughnessy and Canadian museum curator Jude Turner. Evoking the transnational sensibility that is present in Donoghue's novels at least as far back as *Hood* (1995)—in which a key role is played by the migration of the Irish protagonist's teenage crush to the United States—Casey quotes Inderpal Grewal's statement that 'those who stayed in one place were just as much transformed by transnational formations as those who moved' (Grewal, 2006: 36, qtd in Casey, 2011: 68). In this sense, what we might call 'transnational subjects' within a work of literature differ from David Damrosch's definitional account of world literature as 'all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin' (2003: 4). While, for Damrosch, works of literature themselves must be mobile in order to be considered 'world literature', its characters can be enfolded in transnational connectivities without ever leaving home.

Whereas Casey sees *Room* as the author's return to the domestic after the more overt transnationalism of *Landing* (2007) (Casey, 2011: 65), I contend that the transnational dimension is not erased in Donoghue's best-known novel; it is, rather, present at a different scale. Irish writing 'frequently transnationalizes the local' (Ramazani, 2009: 39); *Room* does so by taking the local to a microscopic degree of specificity, starting its narrative in an 11x11-foot shed, thus allowing for a very specific portrayal of how the world appears to Ma and Jack on their escape.<sup>4</sup> In keeping its initial focus so intensely local, Donoghue leaves her novel open to a multiplicity of readings.

## Sources

According to its author, *Room* was triggered by a story both close to home and distantly abroad:

I got the notion to write *Room* in 2008 when I was driving to a book event and mulling over a news story from a few days before about a five-year-old called Felix Fritzl, rescued from the Austrian dungeon where his mother had raised him and his

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<sup>4</sup> Ramazani here refers to postwar Irish poetry, but the statement also applies to a range of Irish literature.

siblings. By the time I parked, and grabbed a napkin to scribble down my thoughts, I knew my novel had to be from the child's point of view, would begin on his fifth birthday and be split into two halves by the escape, and would be called (in an echo of *womb*) *Room*. To tone down some of the horror, and distance Jack's story from Felix's, I made him a well-nourished only child, the captor a stranger rather than his ma's father, their home a locked shed with a skylight and ventilation somewhere in the US (2021a; emphasis in original).

As indicated here, Donoghue was uneasy about drawing on such a violent and traumatic case: Felix Fritzl's mother, Elisabeth, had been confined by her own father in the family cellar and forced to bear his children (Crown, 2010). Some of these children died, but others were still living when Donoghue drafted her novel; writing about their suffering, however obliquely, and at whatever distance, therefore presented an ethical burden.

Perhaps relatedly, in a note accompanying *Room*, Donoghue broadened her account of the source material by placing the Fritzl story *after* the theme of 'parenthood', as well as other, more distant cultural references:

A personal note: *Room* was inspired by... having kids; the locked room is a metaphor for the claustrophobic, tender bond of parenthood [...]. *Room* was also inspired by... ancient folk motifs of walled-up virgins who give birth (e.g. Rapunzel), often to heroes (e.g. Danaë and Perseus). *Room* was also inspired by... the Fritzl family's escape from their dungeon in Austria—though I doubt I'll ever use contemporary headlines as a launching point again, since I didn't like being even occasionally accused of 'exploitation' or tagged 'Fritzl writer' (2017b).

This intertextual web is expanded in Donoghue's 'Library for Ma and Jack', a twenty-three-page PDF posted on her website which outlines 'a sort of anthology of texts that might help them on the Outside' (2010b: 1), together with quotations. The Grimms' fairy tales of confinement feature prominently, as do other stories of incarceration which are referenced frequently in *Room* (such as *The Count of Monte Cristo*). Leaving aside the question of whether or not Ma and Jack would want to engage with this carceral reading material, it is clear that the list serves to broaden the intertextual web of the novel and branches out far beyond the details of the source story. Nevertheless, numerous details of the Fritzl case still remain in *Room*, such as a keyless entry code, miscarriage, the punishment of captives through switching off lights, gifts brought from the captor to the inmates, therapy to adjust to light, shelter in a secure facility and protection from the paparazzi. This information would have been available to Donoghue online in the

year she started writing the novel,<sup>5</sup> raising the question of the extent to which *Room* can be read in relation to its specific historical context, as well as in relation to the many literary intertexts with which it engages.

Donoghue is well accustomed to drawing on the particulars of history to create her fictional worlds. Her first historical novel, *Slammerkin* (2000), is built around the statement of an 18th-century girl that killed her mistress for 'fine clothes' (Donoghue, 2000: 336). Her next two historical novels, *Life Mask* (2004) and *The Sealed Letter* (2008), are accounts of forbidden love in 18th- and 19th-century London, and create richly detailed worlds out of primary source material such as newspaper and legal reports. In an interview with Ciaran O'Neill about the relationship between history and fiction, Donoghue emphasised the importance of historical fiction to her craft as a writer: 'I would say that I am primarily a historical fiction novelist. It just so happens that *Room* was contemporary, and that it hit the big time, but most of what I write is in some way inspired by history' (2019: 128).<sup>6</sup> Donoghue's comments on the Fritzl case show that *Room* was similarly inspired by world events, albeit ones much more recent.<sup>7</sup>

Following *Room* (2010), Donoghue has written novels about a real 19th-century frog catcher (the aforementioned *Frog Music*, 2014) and another based on the 'Fasting Girl' phenomenon of the same era (*The Wonder*, 2016), which features an invented central protagonist. Her most recent novels draw heavily on historical events: one focusses on a retired professor researching his family's Second World War history in the French Riviera (*Akin*, 2019) and the latest publication foregrounds the love between two women during the influenza pandemic of 1918 (*The Pull of the Stars*, 2020). All these works required deep historical research. They also focus on similar themes to *Room*: the reconstruction of the family unit in non-normative ways; the abuse of children, often through incarceration; critique of the media; and the struggles of women to tell their own stories in the public sphere. *Room* too features the themes which run through these novels, and uses a comparable level of research to build a fictional world around events in our own.

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<sup>5</sup> The Fritzl case *Wikipedia* page from 25 December 2008, available via the Wayback Machine internet archive (Wayback Machine, 2008), is indicative of the information that would have been available to the author while drafting *Room*. Donoghue stated that she researched the novel entirely online: '*Pour la première fois, j'ai effectué toute ma recherche sur Internet, explique-t-elle*' (Noiville, 2011; emphasis in original).

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Donoghue points to the connection between historical fiction and *Room*: 'Strange as it might seem, I found that writing historical fiction was the ideal preparation for ROOM. I decided that, as much as any medieval peasant or eighteenth-century prostitute, Jack should take his peculiar environment for granted' (2010b).

<sup>7</sup> In another interview in which Donoghue distances her story from the Fritzl case, she notes: 'The irony is that I have often written fiction closely based on real people and events, but if it's before 1900, nobody minds' (Back Bay, 2011: 6).

O'Neill points to the ways in which Donoghue's 1990s novels *Stir-fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995) are now 'passing into history' and might be considered 'period pieces and reflective of early boom-time Ireland' (O'Neill and Donoghue, 2019: 138). The question of precisely how old an event must be in order to be considered history is vexed, but in suggesting that *Room* is a novel about contemporary history, I would like to make a point about the consistency of this author's craft as well as the reading strategies we are invited to bring to her story. If we accept that *Room* is a novel about contemporary history, then we need to pay as much attention to the ways in which historical details are absorbed and transformed in this 'contemporary' novel as we would when researching Donoghue's more obviously 'historical' fiction. With this in mind, I now turn to the focalising narrator of the text, who gives us a very particular perspective on the reduced world to which he is confined, as well as the wider one into which he escapes.

### Vibrant Spaces, Vibrant Things

In his introduction to a paperback edition of *Room*, John Boyne asks: 'What transforms a novel from an ordinary book into a global phenomenon?' (2015: vii). An important part of the answer, according to Boyne, 'is the narrative voice itself' (2015: xii). Some of Donoghue's historical novels have the city of London as their canvas—a whole world which is minutely described. *Room*, by contrast, restricts its initial focus to a single 11x11-foot shed, told through the eyes of the five-year-old narrator Jack. This is the first time a first-person narrator has been used in a Donoghue novel since *Hood* (1995), and Jack colours our interactions with the fictional world through his vocabulary and unique worldview. By using this focaliser, Donoghue returns to the emotional immediacy of her earlier novel, albeit to construct a very different world. Indeed, the novel is structured around two worlds, both of which are filtered through Jack's idiosyncratic viewpoint: the world inside Room and the one Outside.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of the world—and the possible limits to our world, are central to the narrative arc of the novel, and this theme is explicitly introduced early on, when Jack sings 'He's Got the Whole World in His Hands' (34–5). In the second chapter, Ma starts introducing him to the idea of the world beyond Room. This helps prepare him for their escape attempt, which is precipitated by their captor telling Ma that he is out of work and out of money: 'You have no idea about the world of today', he tells her. 'I mean,

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<sup>8</sup> The five-chapter novel pays more attention to the time spent in the Cumberland Clinic than either the movie or the playscript. The playscript follows a two-act structure between inside Room and Outside, with the movie following the same basic structure (Donoghue, 2017c; Abrahamson, 2015).

where do you think the money's going to keep coming from?' (89).<sup>9</sup> On hearing this, Ma realises that she and her son urgently need to find a way out.

One of Jack's key lines encapsulates the kind of retrospective narrativising carried out by many humans, especially young children: 'When I was a little kid I thought like a little kid, but now I'm five I know everything' (126). In sentences such as this one, Donoghue draws attention to the fact that the world created in the novel is filtered through Jack's developing consciousness. The line echoes a biblical passage from 1 Corinthians, included in Donoghue's 'Library for Ma and Jack': 'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known' (*Holy Bible*, Corinthians: 1.11–12; see Donoghue, 2010a: 14). In its focus on the structure of perception, this intertext sets up Jack's descriptions of the world which sound very much like the words of an amateur phenomenologist. The problem after their escape is that Jack gets tired of the world: 'I've seen the world and I'm tired now' (193). However, he soon realises: 'We have to be in the world, we're not ever going back to Room, Ma says that's how it is and I should be glad' (237).

Indeed, we can see the narrative trajectory of *Room* as a coming-to-terms with being in a new world. Jack's description of his and Ma's new home echoes Stephen Dedalus's description of being-in-place in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'Our bedroom is MA'S ROOM that's in the Independent Living that's in America that's stuck on the world that's a blue and green ball a million miles across and always spinning. Outside the world there's Outer Space' (384; emphasis in original).<sup>10</sup> Like Dedalus, Jack has an emergent global consciousness which shapes the narrative, albeit their relationships to the world are quite different. While Dedalus reaches a fraught accommodation with the world, challenges remain for Jack, as he outlines when remembering his life in Room before he turned five, again evoking the passage from 1 Corinthians: 'When I was four I didn't know about the world, or I thought it was only stories. Then Ma told me about it for real and I thought I knowed everything. But now I'm in the world all the time, I actually don't know much, I'm always confused' (392). Thus, Joycean *Bildung*, which allows us to see Dedalus's emerging awareness of his

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<sup>9</sup> For more on *Room* as a post-recession novel, see O'Neill (2017).

<sup>10</sup> 'Stephen Dedalus | *Class of Elements* | Clongowes Wood College | Sallins | County Kildare | Ireland | Europe | The World | The Universe' (Joyce, 2004: 12; emphasis in original). This inscription on Dedalus's geography book is described shortly after he gives up studying the placenames of America. Donoghue cites *Portrait* as a source in Tonkin (2010).

place in global society—including his antagonistic relationship to his nation of birth—is displaced by Donoghue through Jack’s admission of confusion, highlighted by his use of the non-standard ‘knowed’.

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘[t]he body is our general medium for having a world’ (2005: 169). This comes across effectively in the film version of *Room*, in which the soundscape is shaped to present sounds as they appear to Jack; it is particularly evident during the scene in which he first meets Dr Mittal at the Cumberland Clinic, where he and Ma are taken after their escape (Abrahamson, 2015).<sup>11</sup> Discussing how the centre of his world changes when holidaying in a village far from his Parisian home, Merleau-Ponty points out that ‘[o]ur body and our perception always summon us to take as the centre of the world that environment with which they present us’ (2005: 333). *Room* can be seen as the story of two bodies, Jack’s and Ma’s, learning to inhabit a world which is completely alien to the confined space they have known for the first five years of Jack’s life—and the last seven of hers. The changes in that environment, the novel suggests, are directly linked to the development of Jack’s body. Coupled with her awareness of Old Nick’s financial difficulties, and the realisation that he will kill them both to prevent a repossessing bank ever finding them alive, Ma’s realisation that *Room* is ‘getting too small’ for her and her growing child spurs her to take action and plan their escape (140).

Since Jack’s relationship with *Room* (and the spaces he occupies Outside) is dynamic, the spaces of the novel can be considered ‘vibrant’, in that they are ‘more than a passive backdrop for human activity’ (Richman Kenneally, 2017: 16). As Rhona Richman Kenneally outlines, a house

can be studied as a universe in flux, its characteristics continually constituted and reconstituted through the dynamic interactions among the people who occupy it, and the material culture and energies such as wind or light that coexist within and around it. [...] A wall does not simply bisect a space into two segments; it segregates or separates, and thus requires individuals who wish to circulate through the full space to go around, climb over, squeeze under or cut out a hole to enable passage (2017: 16).

Richman Kenneally here speaks of a (presumably) non-carceral domestic space. However, her idea of ‘vibrant space’ is still useful in describing Jack’s and Ma’s experiences of *Room*, and the way in which that space literally shapes their world.

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<sup>11</sup> This is Dr Clay in the novel.

Richman Keneally's work draws on Jane Bennett's idea of 'vibrant matter', according to which both human and nonhuman bodies have vital energy. Bennett names things such as 'a dead rat, a plastic cap, a spool of thread' as 'characters in a speculative onto-story' to 'highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap'. She further argues that these 'things [...] are vital players in the world' (2010: 3–4). Calling things 'characters' and 'players', Bennett evokes the performative function of nonhuman objects, which Donoghue too emphasises by giving Room, Bed, Melted Spoon and other things capitals in Jack's narrative, as we would when naming roles in a performance text.<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere, Jack confuses animate and inanimate things; for instance, he thinks Ma is talking about Jeep when she gives out that 'you woke him [Old Nick] up' (65–6). He also confuses things on TV and things in 'real' life: 'Dora is a drawing in TV but she's my real friend, that's confusing. Jeep is actually real, I can feel him with my fingers. Superman is just TV. Trees are TV but Plant is real' (78). Dominique Héту points to the way in which Jack 'develops caring behaviours with ordinary objects' and 'does not seem to distinguish between himself as a human and things as being other' (2015: 161, 163). He "'switches off" as we would switch a light off' (Héту, 2015: 163), and even imagines becoming a chair, a skylight or a piece of dust (96). In such instances, paying attention to the resonances between Donoghue's novel and Bennett's vibrant materialism can help us understand how *Room*'s space is tied up with the 'vibrant' things in Jack's orbit. More specifically, it is the very narrow focus on these objects that create resonances for a transnational readership. As well as global commodities like Dora the Explorer and Superman, Jack has important relationships with the kinds of mundane things that surround many readers, which he gives the role of characters in his own 'onto-story'.

This particular 'onto-story' is structured by the carceral space in which it starts. One newspaper editor chooses '*BONSAI BOY*' as a cruel headline to describe Jack (269; emphasis in original), which evokes the deterministic limits of the carceral space and draws attention to the ways in which it has stunted his development. Jack knows from experience the damage that confinement can do to living things. When Ma explains the 'Bonsai Boy' headline, Jack immediately thinks of Plant, which died when Nick cut off the heating in their carceral shed (270). Though they survive the experience of imprisonment, incarceration is nevertheless inscribed on Ma's and Jack's bodies—notably on Ma's teeth. Emphasising the embodied nature of incarceration,

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Wendy Crewson is named as 'Talk Show Hostess' in the IMDb cast list for *Room*; Zarrin Darnell-Martin as 'Attending Doctor' (*Room*, 2022).

Dominique Moran notes the ‘changes to dentition’ which mark out Russian ex-prisoners from other members of society (2014: 36; see also Moran, 2015: 34–7). Referring to the US, Natasha H. Williams remarks that ‘having missing teeth is becoming a telltale sign of having been incarcerated’ (2007: 84). In a novel which focusses on the changes wrought to the individual’s body by confinement, dentition occupies a key place in the text: Ma goes for extensive dental work in the aftermath of their escape to address the damage caused by years spent locked in the shed.

As part of his socialisation in *Outside*, Jack is encouraged to do away with his ‘vibrant’ relationship to the things around him. Early on, he has trouble accepting the fact that there are many things with the same names as those he has previously used in *Room*. For instance, he is reluctant to accept a police officer’s offer of a blanket because it is not his and Ma’s Blanket (184). More generally, he finds it hard to deal with the multiplicity of things in the world, from lollipops to t-shirts, and more than one person having the same name. A key thing in Jack’s world—which at first is in Ma’s body but then spends a large part of the novel inside her son’s—is Tooth. This is initially known as Bad Tooth when giving Ma pain in *Room*, then simply as Tooth when Jack holds it in his mouth as a talisman and a reminder of Ma, thus ‘literally incorporating his mother’ (Rubik, 2018: 230). As Kathleen Costello-Sullivan points out, ‘he considers both himself and the tooth to be made of her “spit”, and he sees separation from Ma as deadening for himself and the tooth alike’ (2018: 100–1). Here is an early description, soon after it has fallen out of Ma’s mouth:

I go in Wardrobe and play I’m a coal miner. I find a gold nugget under my pillow, he’s actually Tooth. He’s not alive and he didn’t bend, he broke, but we don’t have to put him down Toilet. He’s made of Ma, her dead spit (128).

Note the anthropomorphism here: the recognition that this thing used to be part of Ma, and Jack’s effort to reanimate it by turning it into different things through the work of his imagination. At an early stage in Jack’s *Great Escape*, it is Tooth that gives the police a clear idea of the traumatic conditions in *Room*: ‘Officer Oh looks at Tooth up close and her face gets all hard’ (185). Jack saves ‘him’ from the bin in the Cumberland Clinic, when Ma would be happy to dispose of this former piece of her (216). It also plays a crucial role in comforting Jack after Ma’s suicide attempt, when the child is brought to live with his grandmother and step-grandfather: ‘I keep Tooth in my cheek for safe’ (322). When he and Ma move to *Independent Living*, Jack realises that Tooth has gone missing, telling Ma: ‘Tooth’s not just a thing, I have to have him’ (384). Jack’s coming to terms with losing this important, once-living thing marks his gradual accommodation to the world around him.

In *Room*, Jack has a ritual of saying goodnight to the things that make up his world: Lamp, Balloon, Wordy Ball, Fort, Rug, Jeep, Remote and Blanket, as well as Room itself (53, 110). As the novel goes on, he learns to accept additional things in his orbit, aside from those to which he is primarily attached. So, for instance, when his grandmother tells him not to eat his pad thai with Meltedy Spoon, it is the last mention of this thing in the book—presumably it stops being used or is thrown away.<sup>13</sup> When a bundle of his possessions is brought on his request from Room to his new accommodation, Jack is delighted, but Ma has no such desire to be surrounded by the tokens of her captivity. As Costello-Sullivan puts it, ‘What are markers of a traumatic past to Ma are personified companions to Jack’ (2018: 104). A fraught compromise is eventually reached, but not without conflict: Rug will stay in their new home, but only in Jack’s wardrobe. The narrative gives readers both characters’ perspectives on the personal significance of this thing: understandably, Jack wants to be close to items he feels comfortable with, especially in a strange and challenging environment; understandably, Ma never again wants to see the rug on which she gave birth to Jack and her stillborn daughter. As the novel comes to a close, Jack and Ma make another compromise by returning to Room, a request from the boy to which she reluctantly agrees. There, he gives each thing—Wall, Floor, Bed, Eggsnake, Wardrobe, Roof and Room itself—a final ‘Good-bye’ (401).<sup>14</sup> In doing so, Jack says goodbye to his own form of vibrant materialism; it is left to the reader to decide on the extent to which this constitutes a welcome development.

### Language

Different languages allow us to relate to the world differently. So, in the French-language translation of *Room*, the things which lost their definite articles in Jack’s five-year-old English regain an adjective or a form of address: the masculine nouns receive a masculine preceding term—Petit Dressing [Wardrobe], Monsieur Lit [Bed]—and the feminine nouns their feminine counterpart—Madame Lucarne [Skylight], Madame Lampe [Lamp] (Donoghue, 2011b). While *Room* is invested in the depiction of these things, the language used by Donoghue in her English-language original plays a key role in the novel’s transnational effects.

Justin Quinn has coined the term ‘the zero style’ to describe those contemporary writers who use English ‘that is not fixed to a particular locale or community—[that] avoids vernacular usages and minimizes specific cultural references’.<sup>15</sup> *Room* contains

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<sup>13</sup> ‘I want to eat my pad thai with Meltedy Spoon but Grandma says it’s unhygienic’ (366).

<sup>14</sup> In the movie, this corresponds to the round of hellos he gives each thing in one of the opening scenes (Abrahamson, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Email from Justin Quinn, 16 February 2022. I am deeply grateful to Justin Quinn for sharing these ideas with me.

cultural references galore and cannot be considered a work of ‘zero style’ to the same extent as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Whereabouts* (2021), in which the local colour of an unnamed Italian city is even further rinsed than *Room*’s setting of ‘somewhere in the US’ (Donoghue, 2021a). However, the narrative style is certainly *closer* to ‘zero’ than Donoghue’s highly culturally specific earlier novels based in historical San Francisco (*Frog Music*) or London (*Life Mask*; *The Sealed Letter*; *Slammerkin*). For instance, Ma has no proper name (she gains one in the film) and there are very few geographic markers in the text. By getting close to ‘the zero style’, albeit while still using a specific form of North American English, *Room* became Donoghue’s most successful attempt at connecting with an international Anglophone audience.<sup>16</sup> It is the contention of this final section that the novel’s use of language plays a crucial role in this endeavour.

The author’s account of how she created Jack’s dialect again links her historical novels to the writing of *Room*:

Just as in previous novels I put together a mini-dictionary of how people spoke in 1788 or 1864, this time I made myself a dictionary of my son’s kid-English, then narrowed it down to some classic errors and grammatical oddities that would not seriously confuse readers (2010b).

In the back matter for *Frog Music* (2014), Donoghue includes a glossary of French-language terms to help the reader negotiate the slangy speech of her characters. The effectiveness of *Room*, by contrast, lies in the lack of necessity for such a dictionary. It is written in a form of English which is straightforward enough to be understood by a range of reading communities, while being consciously crafted from the actualities of five-year-old English.<sup>17</sup> Donoghue is open about the fact that this dialect is synthetic: ‘if I actually wrote like a 5 year old nobody would understand it’ (O’Neill and Donoghue, 2019: 130); critiques of the novel for not corresponding to the lexicon of an actual five-year-old child may miss what the author was aiming to achieve (see Wood, 2010). Though numerous Americanisms root his speech to a greater extent than the language used by writers of ‘the zero style’, Jack’s dialect is sufficiently devoid of specific vernacular to be understood by a wide audience. This is a novel written to travel.

A key part of this transportability is the way in which the North American setting is communicated to the reader. The few street names mentioned—such as the fictional

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<sup>16</sup> As well as its success in the global language of English (selling over two million copies), the novel’s international reach is indicated by the translation statistics listed on Donoghue’s website: forty-two languages for *Room*, almost twice the number of her next most translated book, *The Wonder* (Donoghue, 2017b; Donoghue, 2017d). A study of *Room*’s reception in translation is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>17</sup> Jack also speaks a few words of Spanish which he has picked up from *Dora the Explorer*.

Carlingford Avenue, as well as the real Washington Drive (186)—suggest a setting in Granville, Ohio: a fairly standard slice of Middle America. Numerous bits of North American dialect support this impression—from a lawyer’s mention of ‘the DA’ (253) to his warning Jack and Ma about the ‘crazies’ sending them fan mail (249)<sup>18</sup>—but, given the dominance of North American culture in Anglophone communities worldwide, there is little here to hinder an international audience from engaging with the text.<sup>19</sup> As well as figuring in the language used, such cultural dominance is also visible in the figures of children’s entertainment that Jack loves: Dora the Explorer (created in the US) and Webkinz (created in Canada) are sold worldwide. In her narrative, Donoghue rarely resorts to a dialect that would obfuscate the communicative transferability of her narrative, with Jack’s mention of the ‘Laundromat’, ‘soccer’ and ‘Track’ about as locally rooted as his speech gets (356, 367, 388).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, to the extent that these terms are indeed alienating for a reader who is not familiar with North American English, they are of a piece with Jack’s attempts to communicate an increasingly strange world to outsiders. (His ‘normal’ is Room; Outside therefore registers as ‘weird’ in the narrative.)

One of the features Quinn identifies in ‘lingua franca literature’—so-called because of its emergence at a moment when English is used by two billion people worldwide, from a broad variety of cultural backgrounds—is the importance of backstory. Especially because writers of English as a second language ‘often tell a story of a journey from their culture of origin to this new idiom’, the weighting and distribution of backstory throughout the work becomes crucial: ‘for a lingua franca writer, backstory is not merely a thumbnail CV of a newly introduced character, backstory is the imaginative mainspring of the literary work’.<sup>21</sup> In *Room*, though written by a native speaker of English, we can see the importance of backstory in the way Jack and Ma have to explain themselves to the outside world upon emerging from their confinement. Just as their bodies show the continuing effects of confinement after they escape, other aspects of Room continue to shape their lives Outside; so much so that Jack begins to wonder if the Cumberland Clinic is another form of incarceration (238–9).

Once there, they are encouraged to talk about their carceral experiences: Ma’s mother wants to know everything about Room, but Ma does not want to talk about it. Most dramatically, Ma’s suicide attempt is precipitated by a TV talk-show hostess manipulatively squeezing details out of her for a national (and probably international)

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<sup>18</sup> Jack immediately absorbs this piece of dialect (249) and starts using it himself (276).

<sup>19</sup> According to David Crystal, US English ‘exercises a greater influence on the way English is developing worldwide than does any other regional variety’ (2012: 127).

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the Google Ngram showing far greater usage of the North American ‘laundromat’ than its British equivalent ‘laundrette’, albeit from a selective corpus (Google Books Ngram Viewer, n.d.).

<sup>21</sup> Email from Justin Quinn, 16 February 2022.

audience: ‘Believe me’, she tells Ma, ‘we’re just trying to help you tell *your* story to the world’ (291; emphasis in original). Ma emphasises to her interviewer that their incarceration was not unique by focussing on the high rates of solitary confinement in American prisons, as well as the institutional abuse of children: ‘People are locked up in all sorts of ways’, she argues (295). Telling one’s story to an unfamiliar audience is one of the hallmarks of migration narratives, and *Room* too is the story of migration from one culture into another: Jack is at one point compared to ‘a visitor from another planet’ (281). As Donoghue herself puts it:

I would never have written *Room* if I hadn’t glimpsed a way to make the strangeness of Jack’s *Room* somehow universal—a sort of microcosm of our world... We all start in a very small place (the womb) and emerge into a bigger one, then again in childhood we gradually move from a narrow social setting to a bewilderingly complex, even international one. So Jack’s journey is everyone’s journey, just speeded up (Tonkin, 2010).

Whether or not we agree with Donoghue’s contention that Jack’s story is ‘universal’, the ways in which the story has been disseminated across the Anglosphere certainly contributes to its transnational status. The language used in this narration of confinement to a broader audience—including critiques of the mediatisation of Jack and Ma’s story—plays a key role in making *Room* a transnationally mobile text.

## Conclusion

According to Donoghue, the international success of *Room* has changed the way she writes:

*Room* has altered something about my fiction. I don’t expect every novel of mine to be a bestseller, but there’s a new emphasis on gripping plots. I’m drawn to situations of unbearable intensity, such as the maternity quarantine ward in a 1918 Dublin hospital in *The Pull of the Stars*. The settings often have, if not a locked door, then a claustrophobic quality and a ticking clock. All our lives are limited, after all, so I like to see what happens when I set extreme limits—how my characters come to care so rapidly and intensely about each other, and even find moments of transcendence within their prisons (2021a).

This article has argued that the construction of the ‘prison’ in *Room* is central to the work’s capacity to resonate transnationally. As a novel triggered by contemporary events, it draws readers’ attention to its many sources, including the Fritzl case, which Donoghue herself balances with other intertexts. The filtering of this material

through a five-year-old's narrative perspective gives *Room* its particular style, which has allowed this novel to connect with readers in ways that other 'captivity narratives' might not. I have explored how this capacity for connection results from Jack's 'vibrant' relationship to the things around him. Just as Donoghue uses everyday objects to construct Jack's world, so too does the construction of Jack's language play an important part in bringing *Room* close to 'the zero style', avoiding dense dialect in favour of expression that is more mobile.

In *Extraterritorial*, Matthew Hart charts works of contemporary fiction in which individuals 'at once float free of territorial determination without ever losing the stink of the destiny that is geography' (2020: 234). In the case of *Room*, this 'stink' is hyperlocal and connected to the confines of Jack and Ma's prison: when explaining to Jack how big the outside world is, Ma points out that 'Room's only a tiny stinky piece of it' (105). For Hart, extraterritoriality denotes a collection of spatial practices through which nation states '[punch] holes in their own political plastic', extending or declaring a limit to state power in ways which can either be liberating (think of the open sea) or confining (think of the detention camp located beyond a given state's borders, such as Guantánamo Bay) (2020: 10). Though there is little in *Room* that directly links it to contemporary state politics, Hart's claim that contemporary fiction is 'trending extraterritorial' is suggestive when considering the novel (2020: 182, 9, 234).<sup>22</sup> For Ma and Jack, *Room* is extraterritorial in the basic sense of being 'situated outside a country's territory' (*OED*): as she tells him, and as he later repeats to the police trying to rescue them, *Room* is 'not on any map' (112, 182).

As I have detailed, it is possible to (roughly) triangulate *Room*'s geographic location using the cultural breadcrumbs Donoghue scatters throughout the text, with regard to places, things and language. Nevertheless, the 'stink' of geographical detail never comes to dominate the setting. Rather, it is the narration of the carceral situation in ways which take it close to a 'zero style' that has made *Room* a 'global phenomenon' whose reception demands to be understood transnationally.

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<sup>22</sup> Aside from a passing mention of a presidential inauguration (289), national politics figure little in *Room*.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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