

## Rites of passage: migrancy and liminality in Colum McCann's *Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness*

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This article deals with two novels by the Irish writer Colum McCann: *Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness*. Reading the narratives of both texts through the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, the essay reveals how McCann's characters undergo processes of liminal experience, which occasion structural changes in their familial relationships and in their individual identity. Turner's work primarily focused on the ritual behaviours of tribal groups and how liminality was used as a physical means toward spiritual ends; I diagnose similar dynamics in McCann's two literary fictions.

**Keywords:** Colum McCann; *Songdogs*; *This Side of Brightness*; liminality; diaspora; Victor Turner

### I

In 1798 the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed in the USA as a response to the recent influx of insurrectionary political ideas from Europe and to the arrival of revolutionary French and Irish republican political activists over the previous decade.<sup>1</sup> The Irish, in particular, were adjudicated to be constitutively incapable of participating in the rarefied, civil climes of the new American Republic, and, indeed, were more often identified with the unruly hordes of Native American 'wild men' in contemporary homologies of ethnic difference. The Acts were part of the broader moral panic that characterised the birth pangs of the newly inaugurated American polity, and Irish emigrant populations, who had been encoded as racially inferior in Britain, were now received under commensurate categories in the New World. The dissolute Irish national character had long been ratified in British colonial discourse; in addition, the rugged topography of the island, the emotional excesses of its population and their lavishly incomprehensible patois were contributory factors in such sectarian schematisations. And when significant numbers of Irish began to export themselves both East and West, it was as if a contagion had been released from the relative security of its island confines. The Alien and Sedition Acts were symptomatic, then, of more lateral political, philosophical and anthropological campaigns, which were pursued into the nineteenth century. Under these measures the incoming and resident Irish were demonised in terms of their rabid infective interiority within the respective British and American bodies politic. While the epidemiological and racial contiguity of the Irish short-circuited prejudice at 'face value', national character, superstition, revolutionary disposition, creed, lack of hygiene and retarded intelligence were corralled as definitive markers of ethnic distinction. In this way mobility into the urban heartlands of modernity, the very cores of economic and political hegemony, by so-called 'first peoples', engendered a reactionary mentality within these seats of authority. Such acute cultural hybridity dilutes

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the concentrated homogeneity of host cultures, creating heteronymous cultural milieus. Whether one turns to the Alien and Sedition Acts or more recent legislative acts of exclusion dealing with migrant or partial populations in Ireland, Britain, France or the USA, the common denominator is a cultural neurosis of gothic magnitude.

In a contemporary context, Edward Said invokes just such transitory populations in his efforts to imagine radical, material alternatives to the sedentary, and malignant, political agendas of global neo-imperialism. Said's own biographical experience as an exiled Palestinian intellectual both modulates, and legitimates, his reflections on the disruptive capacities of the migrant mind. Drawing on the work of the French urban sociologist Paul Virilio, Said suggests that 'the modernist project of liberating language/speech ... has a parallel in the liberation of critical spaces – hospitals, universities, theatres, factories, churches, empty buildings; in both, the fundamental transgressive act is to inhabit the normally uninhabited'. He continues, further extracting from Virilio, 'As examples, Virilio cites the cases of people whose current status is the consequence either of decolonization (migrant workers, refugees, *Gastarbeiter*) or of major demographic and political shifts (Blacks, immigrants, urban squatters, students, popular insurrections, et cetera).' Ultimately, for Said, such population flows, which quicken political and economic consciousness, 'constitute a real alternative to the authority of the state'.<sup>2</sup> Said divines a dynamic counter-hegemonic animus in the movement of migrant peoples; they are possessive of what he terms 'exilic energies', profoundly disruptive and creative voltages that contradict the centralising reification of the modern, capitalist nation-state. The migrant figure, who persists between languages and between homelands, throws into relief the contingency of all historical and political narratives of possession, origins and authorship. Clearly, such politically charged actions are not always conscious affronts to incumbent political authorities. But rather the very existences of incommensurable mobile populations, who refuse to, cannot, or partially participate in the micro-theatrics of capitalist modernity, furnish affective rebukes to the complacent digestion of modernity's self-validating narratives.

Cultural hybridity, liminality, diasporic consciousness, nomadism, migrancy, exile, each of these terms and conditions has become differentially privileged in recent theoretical challenges to the stasis of realist representation and its ossified cultural politics. Dispersal, migrant consciousness and motile communities of knowledge now additionally assail the very architecture of reason, thought and language, challenged in earlier decades by poststructuralism, postmodernism and feminism. Under such reconfigured imaginative and geopolitical boundaries 'thought wanders. It migrates, requires translation. Here, reason runs the risk of opening out on to the world, of finding itself in a passage without a reassuring foundation or finality: a passage open to the changing skies of existence and terrestrial illumination'.<sup>3</sup> The liberating political possibilities of such physical and imaginative travel are further canvassed by James Clifford, who argues that: 'if we rethink culture ... in terms of travel, then the organic, naturalizing bias of culture – seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, dies ... is questioned. Constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply into view.'<sup>4</sup> In this theoretical context the protracted histories of Irish diasporic communities are both enabling cultural extensions of the Irish nation-state's boundaries and they also serve as problematic reminders of its traumatic past; such a past is inclusive of emigration, political asylum, and enforced exile.

## II

While it may seem legitimate to stable Colum McCann's emigrant experience, and that of many of his contemporaries, with previous generations of expatriate Irish artists, such a

neat correspondence is limited. In effect, a process of cultural and artistic commuting has largely replaced the qualitative experience of early to mid-twentieth-century artistic exile.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, a writer such as McCann might reside in New York, but he maintains an active participation in Irish social and cultural debate, largely through readings and regular journalistic opinion pieces. In a sense, McCann is a writer in constant flow – his fictions and his other writings are channels through which the mobility of modern Irish identity is trafficked.<sup>6</sup> This is not just a consequence of McCann's biographical history of emigration and migration, which includes the North American continent and Japan, but it is also part of 'a new cartography of thought, a new landscape of desires, among the Irish today. Our mental maps are no longer necessarily located in twenty-six and thirty-two counties.'<sup>7</sup> As we have noted, mobility is a constant of Irish political and economic life – whether under duress or by conscious choice. But, perhaps, McCann is alluding to the changing textures of mobility over time: the proliferation of international economic opportunities, the contraction of global spatial and temporal coordinates, the fevered pursuit of multicultural exchanges, and the newly forged, and often disorienting, vectors of movement under postcolonial conditions. Naturally, then, such motility offers dilated imaginative geographies for the modern writer with which to negotiate the vagaries and tensions of individual identity, and those of his or her communities of departure and those of arrival. McCann's initial foray into literary fiction, the collection of short stories *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, drew heavily on the author's personal experiences of traversing the North American continent by bicycle over the course of a year.<sup>8</sup> And the stories are variously located in Ireland and in the USA; broaching such themes as familial estrangement, regret, emigration and personal exile – themes that are resurrected in much of McCann's subsequent writing. The fictional works under consideration in this essay, *This Side of Brightness* and *Songdogs*, are reflective of and 'modulated by the physical and literary landscapes'<sup>9</sup> through which McCann has travelled. The impetus towards movement is not just a thematic constant in McCann's literary fictions, but is, he has admitted, an enduring facet of both his personal lifestyle and of his *modus operandi* as a writer. McCann underscored this element of both his personal lifestyle and his artistic process early in his writing career in a 1994 interview with *The Irish Times*, admitting that

travel is really central to what I do. Travel pushes within me and pushes within these characters. I don't know when, but I suppose I'm going to have to stop and take stock some time soon. But I can't see myself as a writer coming to terms with a single place.<sup>10</sup>

Underlying McCann's novels and short stories, then, is his preoccupation with the historical mobility of successive generations of the Irish population, and the attendant traumas and reliefs of dislocated human interaction.

Both the physical experience and the emotional cleavage of either exile or emigration are commonplace in the recent history of Irish literary fiction. A summary list of Joyce, Beckett, Francis Stuart, Desmond Hogan, Edna O'Brien and, for a time, John McGahern will be familiar to any student of Irish culture. As the preceding cursory inventory indicates, the process of migration has typically been confined to the European or British mainlands. In this essay, however, I want to draw attention to McCann, whose experience of migrant displacement is mediated through what I term his liminally structured narratives. As mentioned, McCann's personal emigration has taken him to the USA, and the two texts through which I explore the experience of liminality, *Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness*, are set predominantly in the urban and rural landscapes of the North American continent. It is a truism to say that the fabric of Irish identity is no longer limited to the strict geographical contours of the island of Ireland; diasporic communities

complicate and supplement all notions of an integrated 'Irishness'. In McCann's two novels we witness the imbrication of diasporic Irish communities and individuals, African-American communities and native Mexican communities. And it is only through the experience of liminal distance, of personal trauma and of cultural polyphony that McCann's protagonists, and his narratives themselves, gesture towards more inclusive and satisfactory forms of individual, familial and communal identity.

McCann responded in a recent interview to the frequently voiced criticism of the ending to his 1994 novel *Songdogs*; he asserted: 'well you see, I think the whole of *Songdogs* leads to a moment of triumph. I think the son learns how to love. That's pretty upbeat I think! Some of the book, of course, is dark and dirty ... But what it moves towards is hope. I believe in hope.'<sup>11</sup> In both *Songdogs* and *This Side of Brightness* McCann's characters cleave to forms of moral and emotional hope, and, from a thematic perspective, the narratives register the durability and, most significantly, the possibility of hope. Furthermore, in ventilating his testified belief in hope, or personal redemption, texts can be read, I would argue, as evidential of liminal processes of both moral and emotional awakening. Separation, anonymity, silence, ambiguity, and repetition are the watchwords of McCann's liminal spaces, in which his characters alternatively seek moral and emotional redemption. The viscid darkness in the tunnels of *This Side of Brightness* is pregnant with redemptive silences; equally, the impressionistic obscurity of the American continent evident in *Songdogs* harbours obfuscatory silences that turn the narrator's focus back toward his hometown and, in particular, his father. The disintegration of interpersonal relationships impels the protagonists of McCann's two texts towards the liminal, and its attendant confrontation with the ambiguities of memory, identity and place. My concern, then, with the issues of identity and memory extends to Clarence Nathan Walker, or Treefrog, the product of his grandparents' interracial marriage, and his grandfather Nathan in *This Side of Brightness* and to Conor Lyons, the young narrator of *Songdogs*, together with his father Michael.

The anthropologist Victor Turner characterises the experience of liminality as 'a stage for unique structures of experience in milieus attached from mundane life and characterized by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, anonymity'.<sup>12</sup> Physical estrangement and emotional dislocation are inherent to the liminal experience, through which the individual is exposed to ambivalent social and physical spheres, and thereby endowed with a *potentially* liberating sense of anonymity. The structural fecundity of the liminal space, or the essential experience of liminality, is in its diversion from the indicative forms of the everyday. As Turner later suggests: 'the liminal phase is the subjunctive mood of culture, the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire'.<sup>13</sup> The ritual, liminal experience, then, offers the possibility of change, but does not promise. As I outline below, in McCann's texts the subjunctive liminality detailed by Turner is concretised in the somatic experience of estrangement, of alienation and of emotional displacement. In both novels we witness the liminal as somatic immersion in the unfamiliar, or, in arenas of re-configuration and subversion. However, the ambiguity or fructile chaos of the liminal context is not in any sense random. While the indicative operations of cause and effect are eschewed in lieu of conditional modes, the subjunctive liminal remains 'a storehouse of possibilities', what Turner terms 'a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to postliminal existence'.<sup>14</sup> The isolation, or perhaps invisibility, engenders a degree of spontaneity as detachment from the constricted mores of the quotidian occasions a dissipation of social responsibility.<sup>15</sup> The disillusioned hippies that lurch on the sidewalks of post-Beatnik San Francisco in *Songdogs* are as disconcertingly

ambiguous and ill defined as the so-called ‘moles’ that later populate Treefrog’s urban Hades in *This Side of Brightness*. Turner further extends his definition of the experience and condition of liminality to encompass a typical permanent liminal state. Liminality, then, does not necessarily assume a transitional aspect but can perforce exist as a state in itself. He concludes that ‘there exist individuals, groups, or social categories for which the liminal moment turns into a permanent condition’.<sup>16</sup>

McCann’s fiction is concerned with remembrance and redemption, and he composes in a narrative style that registers the intimacy of the immediate landscape with the formation of memory. The disintegration of interpersonal relations impels the characters towards the liminal, and its attendant confrontation with the ambiguities of memory, identity, and place. The ‘limen’, then, is both the known and the unknown as it problematises the familiar and domesticates the unfamiliar. My concern with the concepts of identity and liminality extends to the four male protagonists of McCann’s novels: Nathan Walker, his grandson Clarence Nathan or Treefrog, Michael Lyons and his son Conor. Firstly, the liminal experience serves as a transitional phase for the younger generations of both the Walker and Lyons families. Equally, the isolation of old age precipitates a yearning for erstwhile sandhog comradeship by Nathan, while Michael adopts a penitential routine of fishing. Nathan remains detached from the vagaries of an external world through totemistic dedication to desire and fantastic reverie. Crucially, however, while Nathan’s routine of fantasy and desire is indicative of such a liminal permanence, Michael’s habitual fishing is a post-liminal acceptance of change and is recognisably an act of love for his absent wife in tune with the ceaseless flow of the river.

### III

In his most recent collection, *District and Circle*, Seamus Heaney extends his excavation of personal, communal and topographical memories from the peaty repository of bogland to the mortared arteries of the London Underground. In the title poem, ‘District and Circle’, Heaney narrates the industrial sensuousness of the subterranean transport system. It is a poem in which past, present and future collide in the forms of a fleeting remembrance of the poet’s father, a minor moral qualm for the poet in his descent into the humid entrails of the metropolis, and the symbolism of the train’s mobility as it hurtles forward with a relentless and shuddering force. The symbolic form of the underground takes on a refurbished, updated, guise in ‘District and Circle’, but the content remains as resonant for the poet. Rather than narrating, or re-imagining, archaeological and memorial exhumations, and infusing such ‘re-births’ with moral and historical valences, Heaney now physically descends into the underground himself. The poet enters the liminal zone of evolution, he boards the channels of transportation that ferry people between concrete destinations; on the moving train one is neither at ‘District’ nor at ‘Circle’. Both the initial process of escalatory descent and the herd-like crowding on the underground carriage are spurs to poetic self-consciousness. While the brachiating lines of the metropolitan transport system are facilities of the functioning of capitalist modernity, and, as such, generate anonymity, silence, facelessness, atomisation among the population of users, the poet’s encounter with the underground busker and his facial reflection in the door window foster a sense of individual awareness and reflection, perhaps even crisis. It is telling that in this most public of transitional spaces Heaney is brought to a renewed pitch of personal, intimate self-reckoning.<sup>17</sup> And in his novel *This Side of Brightness*, McCann’s characters inhabit just such a landscape – a subterranean space of transition, remote from, yet coeval with, the normative patterns of metropolitan life in New York City. McCann’s fictional

portrait of this submerged urban landscape is based on the author's own personal research into life in the recesses of New York's subway tunnels. Entering the tunnels as much as four or five times a week, tentatively at first, McCann has testified to the variety of life pulsing through the redundant space of the tunnels. From both McCann's testimony and of course his fictional rendition, the subway tunnels are spaces in which despair can find refuge and escape, but also redemption and rebirth. In many ways they are exiled from the rhythms of everyday life, with its attendant pressures, routines, and expectations – locations where alternative modes of behaviour are pursued. Likewise, as McCann remarks below, a certain solidarity is palpable between the fragmented residents of the tunnels; their combined situation in the underground is an affront to, an indictment of, modern society's hypocrisies:

I met all sorts of people – junkies, war veterans, people who'd recently been let out of mental asylums, others who had just lost their jobs. I was put in all sorts of different situations. But being Irish helped me – I was never seen as part of the established order, the system. I was outside. And they were outsiders too. So often I felt aligned with the people who were living underground.<sup>18</sup>

Opening in 1916, a year with obvious historical resonances in an Irish context, *This Side of Brightness* is a lyrical narrative of individual trauma and alienation, and it is characterised by a narrative discontinuity in which liminal experiences occasion forms of personal redemption. McCann has commented that the novel is the story of a family, and that he was interested in the idea of dignity, particularly as seen through a family's experience of life.<sup>19</sup> The novel is divided into two seemingly disparate but in fact deeply related narratives: as mentioned, an historical narrative commencing in 1916 and a contemporary narrative. Crucially, the historical narrative is more panoramic in its focus, providing a lateral communal and family history, while the contemporary narrative is contracted to the tortured consciousness of one legatee of the family history. These combined narratives embrace diverse social discourses including race, economics, marginalised populations, immigrants, poverty, miscegenation, drug addiction, and mental illness. McCann's *mise-en-scène* is the multiethnic communities of New York City's emerging migrant quarters. And in keeping pace with the demands of its own industrial growth, the city's infrastructural architecture is physically completed by these very migrant underclasses of Irish, Italian and African-American labourers. We witness the unfurling social fabric of mid-century and latter-day New York simmering in the background, only occasionally penetrating the central narrative of urban subalternity – a social class that is epitomised by the sandhogs, black communities, economic underclass, and essentially the contemporary subway moles. It is a portrait of the transgressive heterogeneity of the urban sprawl that is New York City. In contemporary New York the discarded, and defunct, transportation arteries of New York house the cast-offs of modernity's shadowy underside. Peopled by criminals, psychotics, prostitutes, alcoholics and sexual deviants, the network of disused tunnels constitutes an urban gothic terrain. Recessed within its 700 mile geography we find society's combined repressions and guilt, whose actions and appetites are affronts to the horizons of social acceptability. These subaltern lives persist as chafing reminders of society's complicity in their subterranean abjection.

But in an adjacent manner the tunnels are the 'in-between' spaces cited by Turner, in which the normative protocols of society are summarily suspended in a 'democracy of darkness'.<sup>20</sup> They are both peripheral and central to the everyday routines of New York; they are 'really the subconscious or unconscious mind of New York City. It contains all that the city above ground chooses not to think about. It is a world apart yet it is also the root.'<sup>21</sup> In Nathan Walker's eyes the tunnels resonate with utility and community in the art



of digging. The work of the tunnels lies athwart the topside social mores, but, simultaneously, it is ultimately pivotal to the functioning of the evolving metropolis. Further, we uncover the sanctuary afforded by the darkness, specifically in the tunnels beneath the East River, which proves central to McCann's portrait of these urban liminal spaces. The torrid emotional and psychological traumas of two generations of the Walker family are satiated by the repose of these tunnels that are 'high and wide and dark and familiar' (TSB, 2). Nathan Walker spends most of his adult life as a sandhog, preparing the underground for New York's burgeoning modernisation. And yet upon retirement the topside world holds little appeal for him. Above ground his mixed-race marriage and progeny, and his own racial ethnicity are exposed to the ravages of mid-century bigotry. Equally, at a physical level, the decades of subterranean digging have crippled his body and the only physical movements available to him are his occasional jaunts on the underground trams, supplemented by his daydream reminiscing about his years spent rhythmically excavating the New York underground. The tunnels facilitate an 'equality of darkness' (TSB, 37), a non-prejudicial space in an acutely divided city and nation. A culture of mutual respect and toleration among the 'sandhogs' is engendered by the immanence of death and the prospect of overwhelming natural violence beneath the East River. The perverse democracy of Nathan's working environment beneath the river persists in Treefrog's dank liminal space a generation later, as he 'feels the darkness, smells it, belongs to it' (TSB, 23). Conventional social contours are dissolved and anonymity provides shelter from judgement, as a muted solidarity is fostered in the tunnels by the equalising proximity of life-threatening violence.

Nathan's vocational digging exhibits the intimacy that existed between the sandhog and his labour, just as it reveals the uncomplicated communality of the harsh occupation. We note Nathan's emotional recollections of his laborious working life as they intertwine with an imaginative digging of childhood memories of Georgia which 'by remembering he invented and by inventing he remembered' (TSB, 82). The natural isolation of his childhood with its rustic physicality echoes in the brutish physicality of his years as a sandhog. Nathan facilitates the liminal experience endured by his grandson, as the tunnels become a cross-generational palliative space. But while Treefrog's experience results in some form of 'resurrection', Nathan's yields only his nostalgic yearning for a return to 'the miasmic dark' (TSB, 2). Nathan's memories are crystallised in the mid-day reveries of his romantic downward glances.<sup>22</sup> His bond with the tunnels is both physically and emotionally satisfying and the temperate sanctuary of damp and darkness measures out Nathan's years in the tunnels until it becomes part of him in every sense; we note 'the river's muck is cool against his skin . . . is good to touch and soon he is filthy from head to toe' (TSB, 9). The rhythm of the tunnels seeps into his very pores and he 'notes the passing of years by the way the tunnel-dust settles down in his lungs' (TSB, 46–7) and by the ever-worsening rheumatic pain that afflicts his every movement. The tunnels are the sole constant in Nathan's working life; he moves from dig to dig as little else impinges on the ritual of his daily descent into the tunnel's 'yellowy darkness' (TSB, 9). Indeed, there is a cryptic symmetry to the manner of Nathan's death in the subway tunnel as both Nathan and Treefrog have been surreptitiously walking through the very tunnel in which the 1916 blow-out occurred, during which Treefrog's great-grandfather was killed. The circuitous closure of the call of the consuming darkness resolves the tedium and enduring liminality of Nathan's convalescent years. In a strange inversion he walks towards and beseeches the assurance of the dark tunnels as a respite, as a grave.

Just as the claustrophobic sanctuary of the tunnels offers Nathan Walker a totemic release from the realities of New York, the act of digging itself becomes a resonant image

within the text. The crossover between contemporary and historical narratives is dependent on the notion of ‘digging’, in a physical sense as well as a metaphorical sense. Through the laborious tunnelling of his grandfather, Treefrog now has the liminal space in which to perform his own torturous emotional digging and to conduct what becomes a solitary vigil of balance and repetition. Nathan Walker spent his life in the rapture of physical digging and subsequent years obsessed with ‘the fluidity of his shovel, wishing to be back down underneath digging’ (TSB, 120), and similarly Treefrog’s existence thrives in the midst of an alternative, underground womb. Order, balance, and darkness are the emotional and physical coordinates of Treefrog’s subterranean liminal milieu. The private tyranny of pathological balance is untenable in the topside world of daily human interaction. But in a liminal space that is replete with ambiguity, menace and estrangement Treefrog’s compulsive neurosis of repetition and equilibrium can flourish. McCann’s descriptions of the tunnels and their vagabond populace capture the disjointed textures of Treefrog’s urban underworld, with the sight of snow swirling through the grill into the underground dark, the sound of an out-of-tune piano in an abandoned subway station, and the smell of a steam-filled room deep below Grand Central Terminal.<sup>23</sup>

Treefrog’s tunnels are occupied by ‘moles’: broken individuals who have forsaken or been discarded by topside life. Treefrog and his fellow moles exist contrary to the day-to-day rituals of topside New York; each possesses a narrative, a story of loss or of trauma that has impelled them to this turgid habitat. The immanence of menace in the shape of physical, sexual or psychological violence demands a keen sense of self-preservation. Similarly, it compromises trust and re-focuses the individual consciousness onto the self and the immediate. The incongruity of the liminal space that resides athwart the topside reality indulges excess but ultimately delivers some form of resolution in the form of death, emotional capitulation or recovery. Yet there is an occasional sense of loose and fragile kinship that is predicated on shared experiences of loneliness, misfortune, and deprivation. Self-justification is at the heart of Treefrog’s liminal experience as he has transgressed in a most obscene manner in a series of acts that have robbed him of his wife and his daughter. The ‘leftovers of human ruin’ (TSB, 56) inhabit Treefrog’s subterranean dwelling, as McCann locates the story of traumatic self-redemption within the detritus of urban humanity. Treefrog’s vistas comprise ‘broken bottles and rat droppings and a baby carriage and a smashed T.V. and squashed cans and cardboard boxes and shattered jars’ (TSB, 24); it is a brutal underground life of simmering violence, destitution and substance abuse. We are confronted with a stark subterranean landscape, a shattered wasteland that mirrors the anxieties and self-loathing of Treefrog. The environment of disarray and of displaced materials provides an essential liminal context.

His search for redemption is tentatively actualised in his assiduous ‘mapping’ of the tunnels and it becomes ‘his most important ritual’ (TSB, 24). The ‘cartography of darkness’ (TSB, 25) is not a guiding light for Treefrog, but an aspirational mode of self-redemption. It constitutes an attempt to seek out restitution in a purgatorial landscape. The maps are, perversely, composed in blindness, and consequentially their parameters are exaggerated and ambiguous. Treefrog’s subterranean retreat represents a cessation of the historical narrative in the text, and his abdication of topside life is a liminal crisis of identity. The certitude of his own identity can no longer be taken for granted as he descends into alcoholism and mental illness. The rich darkness of the tunnels inflicts a blindness in which ‘nothing announces its approach except memory’ (TSB, 24). Treefrog recedes into a state of personal squalor as he permits his body and his attire to decay beyond normal recognition. The darkness and the routine of equilibrium serve as psychological placebo to the torturous emotional confrontations of topside life. And a lifestyle of furtive scavenging, alcohol



dependence, and physical isolation is accommodated within the 'clarifying dark' (TSB, 25) and is symptomatic of his overwhelming guilt. Within the tunnels 'the blackest blackness' (TSB, 237) permits the stealthy and shattering approach of memory or, as he terms it, 'the ancestry of song' (TSB, 242). The two-fold guilt that assails Treefrog is assuaged by this search for ancestry and he legitimates his own redemption by entwining the motive of one failure with the guilt of the other.

Treefrog betrays the anonymity of the tunnels by confessing his guilt to Angela and she becomes a ghost or an angel of absolution through whom he can mediate his burgeoning resurrection to Nathan's ghost and to his absent wife and daughter. Thus Turner argues that 'liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon'.<sup>24</sup> It is an idea that McCann has actually alluded to elsewhere, suggesting that 'the dead are the only family that the tunnel residents have';<sup>25</sup> indeed, the moles themselves resemble a community of subterranean revenants. Treefrog's self-absolution, facilitated through Angela, is realised in the hemmed-in darkness of his confessional-like nest. Angela's presence, her recognisable consciousness, is all that Treefrog requires in order to convince himself of the possibility of resurrection. Her proximity to, and intimacy with, Treefrog fosters a sense of liminal *communitas*, whereby a tenuous mutual recognition of transition or 'otherness' is forged. As Turner concludes, the *communitas* of liminal entities manifests itself in 'a blend of humility and comradeship'.<sup>26</sup>

Equally, the suspension of chronological dependence within 'alternative social arrangements'<sup>27</sup> engenders a feeling of motionlessness. Treefrog's 'ancestry of song' tunnels its way from topside past to underground present during days that are replete with dysfunctional time, and are sundered of chronotopic functionality. Slowness allows memory to percolate through our consciousness, whereas speed or urgency prevents the stealthy approach of memory. Some semblance of re-location is only achieved underground in the thrall of incessant repetition and rhythm. The micro-communities of liminal space, where race, class, sexuality are rendered redundant, and ultimately inconsequential, are attuned to this sense of rhythm and repetition. Simultaneously, however, the stark underground sanctuary acts upon the fatigued and tortured individual. The music of the tunnels, just like the persistent din of passing trains, echoes through generations from Walker's spirituals down to Treefrog's renditions on the harmonica in the ancestry of song. Through a startling imbrication of music, rhythmic digging and balance McCann enhances the idea of a profoundly spiritual as well as physically affective liminal space.

#### IV

McCann prefaces his novel *Songdogs* with the note 'But coyotes aren't as foolish as us, they don't trespass where the dead have been. They move on and sing elsewhere';<sup>28</sup> the ensuing narrative, however, is a painful confrontation with the past. McCann probes the unavoidable pain involved in the ceaseless search for origins, for causes and ultimately for answers. These liminal experiences, then, represent the exploration of desire and of possibility. The disruptions experienced by both Conor and Treefrog are essentially divergent, but nonetheless their liminal searches are demonstrable patterns of an innate hunger for hope. McCann charts the individual's progress through a strangely familiar liminal landscape in search of a more complete personal narrative. In *Songdogs* Conor's narrative indices are his mother's own childhood stories; Cici's half-invented, half-remembered narratives; his father's photography, and his own imaginative fusion of all three. His liminal transition is a conscious retracing of his parent's travels and is

ostensibly a journey to locate his estranged mother. Indeed, the most continuous feature of the Lyons' family unit is the desire for 'elsewheres' that manifests in all of the members – as Eamonn Wall suggests, '[*Songdogs* presents] a critique of settled life: in McCann's vision, people are more content as nomads because the more settled the Lyonses are, the more they are confined and unhappy'.<sup>29</sup> Conor's search for his mother is undoubtedly futile, as the chance of physically re-locating her is virtually non-existent, but that is not to say that the journey is meaningless. The vital physicality of the travel can only ever be imagined to a limited extent through his father's photography, yet in reality it pulses with ambiguity. The expanses and personalities encountered do not really provide the answers that Conor thought he was looking for; it is a liminal experience that allows Conor to blossom as an individual rather than simply living in the footsteps of his parents' former life together. With the experience of exile, Conor's return home, specifically to the taut emotional relationship with his father, is eased – travel tempers his bitterness towards 'the old man'.

Conor has inherited a discontinuous family history. Not only has he been separated from his mother and was too young to realise the forces that precipitated her estrangement, but at the beginning of the novel we learn that his father, Michael, was orphaned as an infant. Michael Lyons was actually raised as Gordon Peters by two benevolent Protestant ladies, who were, in turn, drowned when he was a teenager. Subsequent to their death and the receipt of his inheritance from their estate, Michael departed on several years' travel, taking in the Spanish Civil War, Mexico, and North America, before returning with his Mexican wife to County Mayo. Thus, Conor Lyons' immediate genealogical lineage is profoundly ambiguous, a condition that is not unravelled in any constructive way by his father, with whom he maintains a limited relationship. And it is the maternal absence that has most acutely fostered a profoundly distanced relationship with his father, and, as James Brown argues, constitutes the novel as a prototypical contemporary *Bildungsroman*. His father is an unwilling source of information regarding his mother, and her potential whereabouts. The novel charts both Conor's physical pursuit of his mother and his imaginative rendition of his parents' marriage before he was born on the American continent, and resolving ultimately in the cultivation of what Turner would term post-liminal détente between father and son.

The narrative action of the novel takes place in the present; Conor has returned to Ireland, and to his home in Mayo, for the first time in five years. But he has returned temporarily in order to address his visa requirements for residency in the USA – he now lives a semi-hermetic life, reminiscent of his father's own youth in Wyoming. Thus the dramatic catalyst of the story is centred on the ideas of movement, of emigration and of the adoption of new physical homelands. On one of his first nights at home, Conor reflects on his restless nature and on the ambiguous emotions his return has engendered:

I sat up in the bedroom tonight and looked out the window to the bible-dark of the Mayo night, the stars rioting away. In a strange way it's nice to be back – it's always nice to be back anywhere, anywhere at all, safe in the knowledge that you're getting away again. The law of the river, like he used to say. Bound to move things on. (SD, 26)

In many ways, then, this return to Mayo does not represent a homecoming at all; Conor's attachment to his roots in the west of Ireland is, as his sentiments reveal, quite shallow. Indeed, as Wall further argues, this is likely to do with the fact that Ireland is not really his motherland at all – that role belongs to Mexico and to the western seaboard of the USA. The foundations of identity, as McCann's fluid metaphor embodies, are dissolute in an increasingly hybridised global community. With his orphaned father and Mexican mother,

Conor is, perhaps of necessity, more than willing to subject himself to the fluctuating patterns of 'the law of the river'.

In his late 1974 novel *Lazare*, André Malraux reflects that 'images do not make up a life story; nor do events. It is the narrative illusion, the biographical work, that creates the life story.'<sup>30</sup> Malraux's point consummately expresses the fabricated nature of verbal and visual meanings that are attached to, or are extracted from, literary and imagistic texts. Open-endedness and contingency, then, intrude on the easy patterning of meanings and identities from the raw materials of visual or verbal testimonies. Photographic portraits may superficially impose narrative structure or, perhaps, endow identities and personal histories a sense of anchorage, but as Malraux, among many others, indicates, such identitarian assurances are shallow and unsustainable. In an Irish context, photographic images of 'home' have historically been employed to retail nostalgised versions of 'Ireland' and 'Irishness' to diasporic Irish communities, or to advertise the incorruptible, and alluring, fabric of the Irish nation. In other words, such visual texts fall victim to the conviction that photography imposes a narrative truth to the objects represented within its contours – the photographic image is unquestioningly seen as complete and 'truthful'. In *Songdogs* Michael Lyons has catalogued his own, and his wife's, life of international migration in a range of photographic registers: informal snapshots, individual and group portraits, as well as more intimate and erotic artistic images. But just as these visual texts confound Conor's yearning for clarity and revelation, so too do the physical landscapes through which he travels in imitation of his parents' journeys.

Photography provides an effective symbolic and representative device for McCann, but is not the primary mode through which Conor reconstructs his disjointed identity. Michael Lyons' frozen memories are distilled in Conor's interpretation or re-imagination of their contexts, their tone and their violent stillness. Conor must populate the 'frozen time' of photographic stasis with his own catalogue of incongruous memories and imaginative remembrance. The photographs represent monumental spaces in which his parents' lives are held in stasis and it is part of Conor's task to re-imagine these images. He is charged with transcending the frozen lens through the physical experience of liminality. The stasis of photography embodied in the smiles and the seductive gazes are interrogated in spatial terms as Conor looks beyond the representation. He attempts to identify the interpersonal dynamics and relations, with their motives, betrayals and choices that contextually frame the still representation. He cannot know his mother or the genealogy of his constitution through simple photographic representation but must seek it in the liminal spaces of Mexico, San Francisco, and Wyoming. Conor negotiates a liminal 'threshold, a no-man's-land betwixt and between the structural past and the structural future as anticipated by society's normative control of development'.<sup>31</sup> The dominant images of his father's photography are portraits of his mother, in which she is represented as an object. And we appreciate the incompleteness of photographic representation with its static, mute limitations as Conor's mother is portrayed as a body turned 'temple' (SD, 141). The representation of his mother-as-object forecloses her subjectivity, but equally it silences elements of Conor's own identity. Thus, photography performs as an imaginative and ultimately physical catalyst, and Conor consciously pursues the realities within and behind the inert photographic images.

Conor must go beyond such objectifying representations in order to immerse himself in the heterotrophic physicality of these liminal spaces. A process of cataloguing characterises his sojourn in Mexico, as he digests the kaleidoscopic physicality of the Mexican town: 'graffiti rolled in red on the courthouse walls. Policemen, chameleons in the shadows, flicked in and out between the scrawls. Old men sat outside in cartinas, gesturing.

A labyrinth of laneways . . . a young man sat on the hotel steps' (SD, 67). There is a sense of colour, of light and darkness in McCann's description, combined with the contradictory feelings of hope, threat or revelation in the town. Initially it assumes a menacing and an ambiguous aspect, seemingly populated by figures of potential threat, and even the forces of order are portrayed in an ambivalent manner. The fructile chaos of a liminal Mexican village manifests itself in both the visceral Technicolor of the rural landscape and concurrently in the hapless linguistic incommensurability that obtains between Conor and the liminal indigenes. Conor's labours in the native tongue are met 'with loud guffaws' or alternatively by a woman who 'simply shrugged, a little perplexed, a little amused' (SD, 69–71). He soon realises that the mediated memories of his parents' recollections of Mexican life do not correspond to the ambiguous milieu that he now confronts:

The town was bigger than I had imagined. I wandered for days, through bars and cafés, bills coming crisply from my pockets, ordered up shots of tequila, tried to picture myself here forty years before, in a stetson and boots. But the simple truth of it was that I was leaning drunkenly against a bar counter, wearing a gold earring, red Doc Martens and a baseball hat turned backwards, in a town where I could barely understand what the people were saying. It was only with enough tequila in my system that I could make sense of the stories my parents had told me, their endless incantation of memories. (SD, 68)

McCann's panoramic description accentuates the defamiliarising physicality of the liminal experience, as Conor traverses the nocturnal Mexican desertscape aboard a bus that 'rattles along in darkness, through desert and small towns on the edge of spectacular canyons, and into vast city suburbs' (SD, 71). However, the town slowly emerges as simply a place of colour, of contrasts and of unsophisticated contentment, as Conor muses 'nobody disturbed me . . . the town was quiet among strangers and sunsets' (SD, 71).

In San Francisco, Cici's testimonies to Conor are framed within her own belief in the imaginative fabric of memory. Her recollections are the most intimate anecdotes that he has or is likely to encounter, but her significance within the narrative goes beyond this simple acquaintance. Cici consistently avers to the promiscuity of identity and of memory; not only is memory three quarters invented and the rest a pack of lies, but even people themselves 'just ain't what they seem, sometimes [*sic*] you dream them up for yourself' (SD, 88). Conor's reconciliation, his chance to achieve a state of post-liminality, is dependent upon his appreciation of the fictive elements of narrative and identity as well as the characteristic uncertainty and discontinuity of personal remembrance. Conor's North American experience is coloured by his mother's stories concerning Cici and his parents' journey to San Francisco. Cici's hyper-accentuated powers of description, indicated by her incarnation as a pseudo-beatnik poet, thrill his imaginative recollections of his mother. However, her world is perhaps the most elusive; it is populated by the detritus of a bygone era. Her home is a refuge of bohemian bric-a-brac, a graveyard of defunct beatnik culture. Like her memory, her apartment is cluttered and indistinct 'the shelves lined with amulets, a strange footlong marijuana bong on the coffee table, the mantle-piece full of candles, a few paintings on the wall, a Warhol imitation' (SD, 110) Nonetheless Cici's stories retain a chimerical valency for Conor with her 'lucid memories and threnody of nostalgia' (SD, 112). Latter-day hippies, vagrants, wanderers, and 'people searching for someone' (SD, 116) inhabit Cici's San Francisco. The middle-aged men who lounge on the pavement are conducting a silent vigil of remembrance for the passing of their youths. Their desire is indistinguishable from their despair; they are figures of uncertainty lodged in the present but perpetually divining for some trace of the past.

Conor's movement is an ambiguous undertaking – the very act of mobility rejects the stasis of containment and contentment, and in so doing the action of his investigative

travel scrutinises the narrative authority of his father. If Conor had ignored his urge to move, to escape the constricted emotional and physical bonds of his Mayo home, his father would have retained an autocratic proprietorship of the narratives of remembrance of the Lyons family. But in his inquisitive migrancy, Conor produces a challenge to the rememorative tyranny of Michael. Such movement, then, is an allegorisation of the broader political and cultural recalcitrance of hybrid migrant communities. Political refugees, seasonal workers, economic migrants, the transitory homeless possess the disruptive 'exilic energies' referred to above by Said. Their presence actuates an affective resistance to the immobile assertions of power of the state and its embedded institutional agents. The liminal, accordingly, is not tethered exclusively to the formal strategies of McCann's *Bildungsroman* but intersects with his narration of diasporic consciousness, and underlines the political possibilities of such migrant trajectories. In a more extreme form, the 'moles' of *This Side of Brightness*, many internal migrants within the North American continent, constitute equivalent rebukes to the relentless logic of liberal modernity and its cultural and political homogeneity. The deviancy, the perversion, the mental instability that pervades the subterranean fastnesses of urban metropolises such as New York are not symptoms of weakness in those who are discarded by society, but are indicative of the unforgiving spate of modernity. In McCann's texts trauma is both socially inflicted and a consequence of intimate familial betrayals; but he finds avenues towards redemption and dignity in the process of liminal travel, in the endurance of liminal self-reckoning.

## V

The image of the river, with its incessant flow and latent violence, stalks both narratives. Michael Lyons and the river are intimately connected; as Conor reflects: 'the old man and the water are together in all of this – they have lived out their lives disguised as one another (SD, 5). He has grown old with the votive obsession of landing a prize salmon, and he understands the 'law of water' with its remorseless onward flow that is 'bound to move things on (SD, 5). Conor initially misdiagnoses the contrite ritual as inertia and his lingering misapprehension of his father is evident as he bitterly concludes that his father led a 'life of half-emergence. A consistency of acceptance (SD, 101). Conor's reading of his father's life is confined to a literal perception during his initial period at home; he does not appreciate the totemic aspect to the old man's routine. The catch is a symbolic act. It is an emotional displacement with which he combats the emptiness of solitude. Michael grasps that his abandonment cannot be redressed by any amount of travelling or retrospective questioning. Thus the incongruity of his father's routine coupled with a recrudescence of their emotional distance militates against reconciliation upon Conor's immediate return. The absence of discourse between father and son enjoins Conor to pursue his answers elsewhere. But the experiential ambiguity of liminal space fails to reveal the anticipated narrative gaps of Conor's identity, and instead it fosters his later acceptance of his father's post-liminal conclusions that, firstly, 'you can't change the past' and that ultimately 'some things are not meant to heal' (SD, 205–6).

While Nathan's life is a perpetual liminal state, Michael evolves to a state of post-liminal, meticulous ritual. Despite the connotations of liminality in his religious routine, Michael Lyons has effectively transcended the transitional phase of past-oriented melancholia. His sedulous fishing signals his prevailing love for his absent wife, but the penitent act is framed within the stark understanding that nothing will bring her back. The narrative or sequence of events that led to his marital abandonment cannot and will not be reversed. Mexico, Cici, and his photography are forsaken as tethers to an immutable

past, and just like the coyotes of McCann's prefatory extract, Michael has moved on and learned to sing in a different place and in a different way. Through the devotional act of fishing he has tempered any dependence on desire or fantasy; unlike Conor, Treefrog or Nathan, throughout the narrative Michael understands the poverty of mortgaging one's hopes on possibilities or maybes. Michael broaches the past neither through idealisation nor erasure but by 'sifting for those vital elements that might be adapted in the future'.<sup>32</sup> The votive fishing ritual is an act of love. Michael has taken the very real love that existed between his now absent wife and himself in the past as the structural locus of his daily routine. While the malignant elements of the past remain, the vital element of love is his guiding principle. The narrative's ending, then, is certainly not a conclusive revelation but it does conclude on a note of potential or latent reconciliation. Michael, in two abrupt responses, summarily dismisses Conor's expansive transcontinental experience, and the motives for such a journey. While Michael is fully cognisant of the immutability of past actions, Conor's liminal phase concretises the immutability of his past for him. Likewise, it furnishes him with the necessary knowledge or experience to speak tentatively upon his homecoming with his father. It prompts him to 'accept that the past cannot be changed' and finally to understand 'that there can be no peace if certain cherished illusions are not nurtured'.<sup>33</sup>

Liminality, then, is a fecund 'realm of possibility',<sup>34</sup> and through his liminally structured narratives McCann points to the perpetual possibility of redemption and dignity. McCann's conception of individual identity is founded on the excavation of darker places and alien selves, whereby alternative narrative perspectives are enabled. As Alan Sinfield urges:

The point to stress here is that stories are lived. They are not just outside ourselves, something we hear or read about. They make sense for us – of us – because we have been and are in them ... [a]s the world shapes itself around and through us, certain interpretations strike us as plausible because they fit in with what we have already experienced.<sup>35</sup>

Liminal experience underscores the materiality of such 'lived stories' as the discommoding darkness of the tunnels; the Mexican desertscape or bohemian cityscapes become the indices of this liminal consciousness. Both Treefrog and Conor sustain a solitary liminality and bare witness to the ambiguities of individual identity in order to establish the 'plausibility' of their narrative inheritance. Identity, then, is beholden to interpretation, as remembrance becomes representation and, as Conor concludes, memories become distilled down over time (SD, 73). In a sense both narratives are akin to two tunnels circuitously digging their way towards each other. Just as in Nathan's parable about the S-shaped tunnel, the narratives do not conjoin without diversion, misdirection, or loss of focus and directional misadventure. Liminality enables McCann to engage with the private triumphs, elisions, and regrets that constitute individual identity and family history.

Mobility is a condition of possibility, as well as being a disruptive experience; and declensions of such movements: exile, migrancy, hybridity and liminality are part of the poststructuralist and, later, adjacent postcolonialist interrogation of tendentious identitarian absolutes. Critics such as Bhabha, Said, Chambers, Hall and Appiah have differentially urged the enabling potential of defiantly fluid individual and communal identities, what Bhabha terms 'unhomeliness',<sup>36</sup> or 'differential communality'.<sup>37</sup> Writing in 1982 in an essay entitled 'Imaginary Homelands', Salman Rushdie reflected on the nature of exile or expatriation for the contemporary writer. While mobility granted newly calibrated angles of creative perception for the artist, perhaps even distant clarity of vision, nevertheless it is leavened by a feeling of loss. Yet the weight of that loss is itself



countered by the imaginative impulse, the creative yields that unfold and that seek to compensate for the uncertainty of alienation and exile:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.<sup>38</sup>

This sense of absence is, perhaps, a symptom of all travel – once we have departed from our ‘home’ it can never be experienced as entirely the same place again. Both the traveller and the sanctuary place alter with mobility, distance and absence, or as Stuart Hall suggests with reference to the migrant’s condition: ‘migration is a one way trip. There is no “home” to go back to.’<sup>39</sup> But Hall’s point also alludes to the fact that mobility is not merely a traversing of space/time between fixed locations. Such anchored positions are founded on historically naturalised versions of individual and communal identity – brands of identity that are no longer theoretically sustainable or beyond political challenge. Aggregating Rushdie’s concern with the mechanics of fictive remembrance and Hall’s notion of identitarian fluidity, even contingency, we are not only alerted to the enabling trajectories of liminality, provisionality and transition but also must accept these cultural and political conditions as the most urgent in the contemporary global world. And this is a point alluded to by McCann in his summation of the condition of the contemporary (Irish) writer. Narratives are no longer confined to the lineaments of a geographical polity, just as people never have been, and previously quieted stories of ‘ordinary madness’; tales of everyday displacement are more reflective of a mobile, globalised world.

The old Joycean notion of ‘I want to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race’ doesn’t really work. Certainly not for my generation from Ireland, who basically scattered all around the world. The idea of ‘forming a racial conscience’ or even ‘consciousness’ is an adolescent one in some ways. Stephen Daedalus eventually recognises it as such. As writers we don’t speak for people, we speak with them. That’s where the dignity comes in.<sup>40</sup>

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### Notes

1. See Syndergaard, “‘Wild Irishmen’ and the Alien and Sedition Acts’; and Gibbons, ‘Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory’.
2. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 395.
3. Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, 4.
4. Clifford, ‘Travelling Cultures’, 101.
5. Elsewhere McCann has referred to his generation of writers as ‘the international mongrels – our motherland and fatherland is actually found in story. It’s whatever kind of story grabs you by the scruff of the neck or turns your heart a notch backwards’, <http://www.powells.com/authors/mccann.html>.
6. In his biographical essay on Colum McCann, Joseph Lennon writes on the McCann family history of emigration:

Emigration has had an impact on McCann’s family for generations. Before McCann was born, the McCann family lived in England, where Sean McCann’s father had partly grown

up. Colum McCann's grandfather, Sean 'Jack' McCann, who had taken part in the Easter 1916 Uprising in Dublin, had taken his family to England in the late 1940s, and his family had grown up with a sense of alienation from Ireland. Sean McCann as a younger man had been a football (soccer) player for Charlton Athletic, but after retiring from semi-professional sports, he and his wife Sally McCann returned to Ireland. By this time, the McCanns had three children, Siobhan, Sean, and Oona. Colum McCann became their first child to be born in Ireland in 1965, followed by his brother Ronan. McCann never met any of his grandparents, except for two visits to Jack McCann as he lay dying from gangrene. These visits stood out as very powerful moments for the young McCann, who attributes the decrepit father figure in *Songdogs* to his memory of these meetings.

7. McCann, 'The International Bastards', 38. Cited in Wall, 'Winds Blowing from a Million Directions', 281.
8. During this time McCann worked a number of temporary jobs including as a journalist, fence-builder, ranch hand, bicycle mechanic, house painter, ditch digger, and dishwasher.
9. Wall, 'Winds Blowing from a Million Directions', 282.
10. McCann, 'Writer and Wanderer', 9.
11. Camelio, 'Interview with Colum McCann', 96.
12. Turner, 'Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama', 41.
13. *ibid.*, 42.
14. *ibid.*, 42.
15. Turner, 'Liminality and Community', 153.
16. Perez Firmat, *Literature and Liminality*, xiv.
17. It is not insignificant that Heaney is positioned in the underground in London, which is part of a longer history of Britain's transportation network that was built with the employment of the labour of emigrant Irish populations.
18. McCann, 'This Side of Brightness Interview'.
19. Battersby, 'Coming Up for Air'.
20. McCann, *This Side of Brightness*, 5. All subsequent references to this novel will be made in parentheses within the text as (TSB).
21. McCann, 'This Side of Brightness Interview'.
22. Healy, 'Dancing Cranes and Frozen Birds', 113.
23. See Willis-McCullough's 'Tunnel Vision'.
24. Turner, 'Liminality and Community', 147.
25. McCann, 'The Tunnels under New York City'.
26. Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*, 173.
27. Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors*, 13–14.
28. McCann, *Songdogs*, unpaginated reference. All subsequent references to this novel will be made in parentheses within the text as (SD).
29. Wall, 'Winds Blowing from a Million Directions', 283.
30. Cited in Dow Adams, 'Introduction', 459.
31. Turner, 'Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama', 41.
32. Kiberd, 'White Skins, Black Masks?', 173.
33. Brown, 'Things Not Meant to Heal', 33.
34. Ashley, 'Introduction', xviii.
35. Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 24–5.
36. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.
37. Bhabha, cited in Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, 14.
38. Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', 10.
39. Hall, 'Minimal Selves', 44.
40. McCann, 'There Goes Colum McCann, Telling his Bonfire Stories Again'.

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