English, Irish, both, neither: diaspora and New Interculturalism in Martin McDonagh's plays and films

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Abstract

Martin McDonagh – whose notable works include plays *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and films *In Bruges* and *The Banshees of Inisherin* – is one of the most written-about playwrights and filmmakers of his generation. Yet the overwhelming majority of this criticism frames him as simply Irish or – while criticising his supposed endorsement of stage-Irish stereotypes – as simply English.

Raised in London by Irish parents, he is in truth Irish, English, both and neither. While scholars have frequently gestured towards his membership of the Irish diaspora, my project examines this in depth, using his diasporic status – simultaneous insider and outsider – as a tool of analysis for his work. McDonagh's hybrid nationality complicates and makes ambiguous the traditional binary power divisions between Britain and Ireland: instead of conforming to this binary, his work exists in what New Interculturalism scholar Ric Knowles calls "the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures" (2010, p. 4).

New Interculturalism is a critical approach concerned with these in-between spaces, with hybrid identities and the power dynamics at play in cultural exchange. Applying this to McDonagh's plays and films illuminates an ongoing negotiation with the Irish theatre tradition (Synge, Gregory, O'Casey, Beckett, Tom Murphy), English culture (from Harold Pinter to *Coronation Street*), and American theatre and cinema (including David Mamet and Quentin Tarantino). He particularly revisits and interrogates works from the Irish diaspora, including John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Flannery O'Connor's stories.

McDonagh's thematic interest in intercultural relations – in authenticity and representation after the seismic interruptions of colonialism and migration, in the impossibility of repressing or containing supposed impurities – is made practical in his own alchemic collage of disparate influences.

Declaration

I, Ciara Moloney, declare that this thesis is my own work and has never been previously submitted by me or any other individual for the purpose of obtaining a qualification.

Signed:

Ciara Moloney

7 January 2025

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[1] Sorry for lying, David!

Contents

Introduction

At a key moment in Martin McDonagh's breakthrough play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the main character, Maureen, responds to news of a character's emigration by saying, "That's Ireland, anyways. There's always someone leaving." (1996, p. 21) While a focus on emigration is common in Irish drama – the plays of Tom Murphy, for instance – McDonagh, born in London to Irish parents, views this experience from two different perspectives traditionally defined in opposition to one another. He embodies a simultaneous insider-outsider status in both Irish and English contexts: his Irish plays and films betray both an intimate knowledge and an analytical distance, but so do his works set in the north of England and – in different ways, informed by globalisation and mass media – in the United States, Copenhagen, and imaginary places (and non-places). National identities and cultures, in his work, are undulating, never static but in a constant process of creation and recreation both in themselves and in relationship to perceived outsiders – a category which is inherently unstable. Maureen says that someone is "always … leaving", but she herself is a returned emigrant – a character stuck in a Connemara village who at once dreams of anything else and whose life in England was one of such loneliness and anti-Irish prejudice that she was hospitalised during an acute mental health crisis.

Martin McDonagh is one of the most written-about dramatists of his generation, but his status as a diasporic writer has been largely sidelined. Despite being born and raised in London, he is often described as simply Irish, or – despite having two Irish parents and regularly spending summers in Ireland during his childhood – simply English, typically when critics seek to dismiss his work as essentially colonial stage Irish buffoonery. When his hybrid identity is acknowledged, it is as a quirk of his biography, not a significant factor in his work, even though, as we shall see, McDonagh's position within or outside of national literary traditions is an animating concern in McDonagh studies. But McDonagh is, fundamentally, a diasporic artist: as he told Sean O'Hagan in an interview with *The Guardian*, "I don't feel I have to defend myself for being English or for being Irish, because, in a way, I don't feel either. And, in another way, of course, I'm both. That's exactly what the work arises out of …" (2001) This is evident in everything from the thematic preoccupations throughout his work to his intertextual allusions to Irish diasporic artists, from Alfred Hitchcock to Flannery O'Connor.

There is abundant scholarly commentary on McDonagh's work, including several books, although much more so regarding his early Irish plays than some of his later works. Eamonn Jordan has published two books on McDonagh, *From Leenane to L.A.: The Theatre and Cinema of Martin McDonagh* (2013) and *Justice in the Plays and Films of Martin McDonagh* (2019). *From Leenane to L.A.* is a broad survey of McDonagh's oeuvre up to and including *Seven Psychopaths* (2012), frequently espousing postcolonial readings of the works. It provides many valuable insights, including about the constructedness of Irish identity in McDonagh's work, but often unquestioningly assumes hegemonic perspectives on issues including policing, a hostility towards which, I argue, is a key factor in McDonagh's diasporic perspective. Though *Justice in the Plays and Films* is, in part, an effort to rectify this oversight, it continues to elide the truly radical possibilities in McDonagh's framing of

justice, mercy, revenge and violence, which I consider from a Catholic anarchist perspective. In both books, Jordan covers McDonagh's films as, effectively, an extension of his work for the stage, without incorporating elements of film theory or film history.

This is even more acute in Patrick Lonergan's otherwise excellent book *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh* (2012), which debunks many of the cases against McDonagh – whether perpetuated myths or misinterpretations of his work – and argues for his skill, talent and seriousness as a writer. *As a writer* is explicit in Lonergan's introduction (p. xv), and indeed, despite the book's title, Martin McDonagh's films – for which he serves as screenwriter and director – are something of an afterthought. Despite Lonergan's emphasis, when writing about the plays, on what they are like in *production*, his writing on the films is more concerned with the shooting script than the screen. He repeatedly uses the films as a vehicle to interpret the plays, or vice versa. Lonergan does, however, compellingly argue that McDonagh is constantly questioning the very idea of authenticity or representation, an idea to which I return repeatedly throughout this dissertation.

Regarding his theatre specifically, the collections *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* (Chambers and Jordan, 2006) and *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook* (Rankin Russell, 2007) both offer a representative sample of academic perspectives on McDonagh as a dramatist, with *Savage Stories* also including a selection of contemporary reviews from popular periodicals. The academic perspectives are at once heavily polarised – broadly into "for" and "against" camps – and oddly narrow in scope. Greatly influential on scholarly perceptions of McDonagh are Mary Luckhurst's article "Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*: Selling (-Out) to the English" (2004) and Vic Merriman's "Decolonisation Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash" (1999). Both argue, in their own ways, that McDonagh is an essentially neocolonial writer exploiting Irish stereotypes for the amusement of British and American audiences, or for elite Irish beneficiaries of the Celtic Tiger economic boom – a late-twentieth-century equivalent to a *Punch* cartoonist. (Hilton Als's review of *A Behanding in Spokane* in *The New Yorker* magazine is similarly influential regarding McDonagh's portrayal of the US, and especially of American race relations (2010).) To a great extent, the battlelines set out by Luckhurst and Merriman remain the parameters of arguments about McDonagh, both scholarly and popular. On the release of *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022), many of the same arguments that Luckhurst and Merriman made twenty years or more previously reappeared largely unchanged (e.g. O'Connell, 2023). These parameters are tied to McDonagh's national identity: the argument that he is a neocolonialist rests on the assumption that he is English, while the counterargument that he is an astute postmodern commentator on Irish identity inevitably invokes his own Irish identity.

Savage Stories contains the first significant – albeit brief – examination of McDonagh as a diasporic writer, in Aidan Arrowsmith's essay "Genuinely Inauthentic: McDonagh's Postdiasporic Irishness" (2006). Arrowsmith positions second-generation diasporans as "requir[ing] an awareness of the constructedness and hybridity of identities" (p. 243) and McDonagh's work as an engagement with and legitimisation of this constructedness and hybridity, showing "the impossibility of accessing authentic memory, history or identity" (p.

239). I expand on Arrowsmith's argument throughout this dissertation. Most significantly, Arrowsmith is concerned with how McDonagh's diasporic identity affects his portrayal of Ireland and Irishness, but I place this in the larger context of how different cultures – including Irish, English, and American cultures – interact in his work in all settings, in ways that both reflect and disrupt the forces of globalisation, migration, and colonialism, and how those interactions demonstrate the instability of theoretically separate "cultures".

Casebook, meanwhile, has notable essays on McDonagh's use of on-stage violence (Doyle, 2007), the gothic (Eldred, 2007), and the relationship between Catholicism and anti-Catholicism (Pocock, 2007), all of which I expand on in this dissertation. However, it does not cover diaspora as a lens to interpret McDonagh's work, including in José Lanters's essay about McDonagh and identity politics, which – regarding national identity – focuses on how McDonagh's postmodernism reduces Irishness to "a commodity to be bought and traded" (2007, p. 15). While not untrue, this reduces the complexity of McDonagh's portrayal of national and cultural identities by focusing only on its postmodern aspects.

A central disjunction in McDonagh studies thus far is between postcolonial and postmodern interpretations of his work. The most significant McDonagh scholars, like Jordan and Lonergan, are broadly postcolonial in their approach; Sara Keating argues that this focus is "completely inappropriate to the postmodern politics of his plays" (2006, p. 281). I seek to bridge postcolonial and postmodern readings of McDonagh's plays and films, analysing his representation of the instability, fluidity and impurity of Irish identity in the context of colonialism, migration and globalisation. The bridge I use is New Interculturalism, the theoretical lens concerned with what Ric Knowles calls "rhizomatic (multiple, non-hierarchical, horizontal) intercultural-performance-from-below" that eschews "a west and the rest binary." (2010, p. 50) Particularly relevant to this dissertation is New Interculturalism's approach to diasporic identity, hybridity, and transcending or reifying intercultural power structures.

There are many alternative theories and practices that may frame relationships and encounters between cultures, including what Daphne P. Lei derisively calls hegemonic interculturalism (2011, p. 571), as well as multiculturalism, globalisation, and the related theories of transculturalism and transnationalism. Each, as I will explain, is either conceptually flawed or irrelevant to analysis of McDonagh's work specifically, with New Interculturalism having a contrasting capacity to address the gaps or errors in those models.

New Interculturalism, as Royona Mitra writes regarding dancer Akram Khan, is distinguished by "a reframing of interculturalism in the arts beyond its historic associations of one-way borrowings of non-Western people, traditions and texts by mostly white Western practitioners" (2015, p. 10), which Lei dubs "hegemonic intercultural theatre" that "combines First World capital and brainpower with Third World raw material and labor, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance" (p. 571). New Interculturalism, by contrast, is "driven from below by minority and subaltern voices," Charlotte McIvor writes, "whether gathered in diverse, contemporary urban locations or excavated from the recesses of colonial archives" (2019, p. 1). Mitra highlights that diasporic experience "interrupts" the "one-way flow" (p. 10) of hegemonic intercultural dynamics, and so New Interculturalism

rooted in diasporic experience emerges from "negotiations of multiple identity-positions" (p. 10). Indeed, it is the centring of diasporic experiences that distinguishes New Interculturalism from previous intercultural turns: "Driven by the lived experience of diasporic realities, which necessitates subjects having to simultaneously negotiate multiple cultures, new interculturalism is a life-condition as much as an aesthetic and political intervention." (p. 11) As a diasporic artist, McDonagh centres this negotiation of multiple cultures throughout works set in Ireland, England, the US, and elsewhere: a New Intercultural approach uncovers the impact of his diasporic perspective on plays and films that may not immediately seem obviously postcolonial in content.

In terms of their effectiveness as frameworks, the flaws of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism are teased out by Mikhail Epstein, who frames multiculturalism – in which different cultures are conceived as "independent but also incommensurable, hardly comprehensible and penetrable for each other" (2009, p. 328) – and globalisation – "a global culture" that is "explicitly or implicitly … Pan-Americanism" (p. 328) – as a duopoly of contemporary liberal capitalism. He argues that both are deterministic (p. 329), denying the agency of the individual navigating cultures. He presents transculturalism as a liberatory alternative to both: transculturalism prizes "*the freedom from one's own culture*, in which one was born and educated" (p. 330). He further argues, "As a transcultural being, I make my own choice as to which culinary, artistic, or intellectual traditions to join, and to what degree I make them my own." (p. 343) While this may have some utopian appeal, it risks being completely ahistorical. All cultural interactions are shaped by the history and present of colonialism, migration, displacement, war, globalisation and genocide. The power dynamics produced by these factors mean that "freedom from one's own culture" can in practice be the appropriation and commodification of a culture by exploitative invaders, or the abandonment and destruction of a culture that is maintained only through anticolonial resistance.

New Interculturalism, however, does not take transculturalism's approach of dissolving or attempting to dissolve the power dynamics of cultural exchange. In contrast, it is rooted in "materialist histories … that undergird each and every instance of intercultural exchange and enunciation shared between individuals and amongst groups." (McIvor, 2019, p. 12) McIvor argues that New Interculturalism "does not seek to move *beyond* postcolonialism, racism, or 'the pervasive binary concepts of Self versus Other, East versus West, North versus South, own versus foreign …'" but "stays *with* the challenge of how these very dynamics continue to shape and interrupt … the present" and "not lose sight of the power dynamics and historical genealogies" (p. 5). McIvor further states that New Interculturalism, as both a "revisionist and future-oriented mode of criticism", "drag[s] along the debates and controversies of previous waves of thought and practice." (p. 15) Because of this, I incorporate much traditional critical theory related to postcolonial studies and diaspora studies into my analysis, including the work of figures such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, and Rey Chow, which maintains relevance within a New Interculturalism framework.

Transculturalism is closely related to transnationalism. Indeed, "migration scholars often assume a close association between transnational social practices and transcultural forms of belonging" and even "blur the distinction between transnationalism and transculturalism" altogether (see also Richter and Nollert, 2014, pp. 458-9; Leitner and Ehrkamp, 2006; Westwood and Phizacklea, 2000). Transnationalism, like New Interculturalism, focuses on diasporic experiences and perspectives, analysing migrants whose "lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field" (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, 1992, p. 1). This, as with many aspects of transnationalism, is subject to debate – as Patricia Clavin writes while supporting it as a framework, there is "certainly a degree of woolliness in the current usage of transnationalism." (2005, p. 433) But if we assume that transnationalism *does* focus on diasporic experiences, it is important to note that it does so primarily in relation to globalisation: in their analysis of the contested meanings of transnationalism in the scholarly literature, Miriam Tedeschi, Ekaterina Vorobeva and Jussi S. Jauhiainen find "it was understood as being a component of globalisation, from which it cannot be separated" (2022, p. 605). While globalisation is an important context for McDonagh's work, it is one of many historical, political, cultural and economic forces that shape his depiction of national identity and cultural relations, many of which a transnational lens would ignore or distort.

In Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton's seminal essay proposing transnationalism as an analytical framework, they argue that "transmigrants" represent a new form of migration defined by simultaneous existence across two or more societies (pp. 1-2). If we accept this as a new form of migration, it is not a lens which well illustrates the dynamics of Irish and English identity in the era of globalisation, due in part to the economic changes in both Ireland and England in that period – the Celtic Tiger period of massive economic growth in the former, the ongoing post-imperial and post-industrial decline in the latter – as well as the irrelevance of aspects that Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton centre, like greater ease of international travel. (Geographical proximity meant that Irish migrants living in England had a much greater facility to visit home than, say, Irish migrants in the US throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.) However, the evidence presented that there was a new form of migration occurring in the late twentieth century is weak: they cite migrant organisations funding projects in their country of origin, unlike "associations of earlier immigrants whose main, if not only thrust of activity was to help the newcomers face social welfare issues in the new land" (p. 2), later adding, "remittances are now part of the economies of nations in disparate parts of the world" and not merely Caribbean countries (p. 6). Of course, remittances and other forms of ongoing engagement with one's country of origin has existed in migrant communities for centuries, if not longer – in this dissertation, for example, my analysis of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* will explore diasporans' monetary and political involvement in Ireland in the context of support for Republican paramilitaries. That support predates Schiller et al.'s "transmigrants" by decades, and indeed, the original migrations that created those diaspora communities often predated it by a century or more. A transnational approach, then, would obscure the longer lineage of intercultural relations from which McDonagh draws. Further, transnationalism emphasises movements – whether of populations, cultures, goods, or services – across borders: "transnationalist encounters,"

Clavin notes, “are frequently characterised as 'border crossing’” (p. 423). While Clavin emphasises that this does not necessarily mean *national* borders, this nonetheless assumes a relative stability of distinct cultures which then may be disrupted by border crossing.

New Intercultural theory, in contrast, is centrally concerned with hybridity – both across and *within* the cultures of colonised and colonising peoples. McIvor writes that New Interculturalism “presumes cultural heterogeneity not only between cultures separated by national borders or designation, but within individuals of the same ‘culture,’” (2019, p. 11) which contrasts the assumed underlying, original stability of each “culture” presumed by both multicultural and transnational frameworks. In a New Interculturalism perspective, all cultures are constantly in motion: Leo Cabranes-Grant notes, “Since cultures are constantly migrating and moving – and resisting those impulses too – they are at their core mixed templates, tentative renderings of a processual drive that remains open to unexpected turns and contingencies” (2016, p. 9). Hybridity, Cabranes-Grant argues, is not merely an “*effect* of intercultural encounters” (p. 9). As I will argue, this is a recurring theme throughout McDonagh’s work: that there is no pure, authentic version of culture to which one can return, and that cultural objects that appear to be pure or authentic are always already intercultural.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters – three on McDonagh’s work for the stage, and two on his work for the screen. Chapter one is about the Leenane Trilogy – *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, and *The Lonesome West* – three loosely interconnected plays set in a fictionalised version of the Galway village of Leenane. I explore how these plays depict the impact of colonialism, mass emigration, globalisation and mass media on Irish people and the very concept of Irishness itself, using juxtapositions of past and present coexisting to unsettle audience assumptions. *Beauty Queen* and *Lonesome West* bookend the trilogy by using the imagery of haunting to capture the repressed trauma associated with such seismic shifts in society.

Chapter two looks at the two extant entries in the so-called Aran Islands Trilogy, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. (The third entry in the trilogy, *The Banshees of Inisheer*, was never published or produced; the similarly titled film *The Banshees of Inisherin* may or may not be adapted from the play, and is discussed in chapter four.) I discuss how both plays, set almost a century apart, critique Irish nationalist histography for uncritically mirroring imperialist ideas about national identity and reinforcing the oppression of disabled people, queer people and women that formed a key part of the hegemonic ideology of empire. Both plays engage in the tradition of Ireland being represented as disabled or feminine *and* critique the erasure of such people through use as national metaphor.

In chapter three, I address McDonagh’s plays set outside of Ireland, whether in the US, England, Denmark, or fictional lands: his early radio play, *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter*, which has a fairy-tale setting; his first stage play set outside of Ireland, *The Pillowman*, set in a totalitarian dystopia; *A Behanding in Spokane*, set in small town America; *Hangmen*, set in the North of England; and *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*, a transnational time-travel story about genocide in the Congo that takes place primarily in the Copenhagen

home of Hans Christian Andersen. While most of these plays have less of an overt postcolonial context than McDonagh's Irish plays, I argue that, in these works, McDonagh closely associates violence committed by the state internationally (through colonialism) with state violence committed internally (through totalitarianism, as in *The Pillowman*, but more critically, through the totalitarian aspects of non-totalitarian states, including policing, the carceral system, the death penalty, and institutionalisation). His diasporic perspective is key here, allowing him to both see from the colonial power's point of view and see beyond its propagandising efforts. This comes to the fore in *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*, which both attempts to enact, and appeals for, a broad intersectional solidarity.

I have divided McDonagh's work for the screen into his Irish films – that is, films set in Ireland or with primarily Irish central characters – and his American films, that is, films set in the United States regardless of if they contain a significant Irish character. Chapter four, the Irish films chapter, analyses *Six Shooter*, *In Bruges*, and *The Banshees of Inisherin*, with particular attention paid to how McDonagh's shift in mediums affects his approach to ideas about representation. As much McDonagh scholarship considers him as a writer first and foremost, I instead draw attention to McDonagh-as-director, to explore the constructedness of the image and the power relations in the act of looking. In these films, Catholicism is a major and complex part of Irish diasporic identity, a theme which carries through to his American films.

Chapter five considers *Seven Psychopaths* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* as theological narratives concerning how one can reconcile religious feelings or impulses with one's political and aesthetic commitments. In both cases, the role of religion in diasporic identity formation is central, and the relationship between structures of power and diasporic identity formation is critiqued. Both films also highlight American war crimes and neocolonialism as an unavoidable but largely ignored part of American life – McDonagh again leveraging his dual insider-outsider status to consistently reassert this in spite of a cultivated forgetting amongst Americans.

Repositioning McDonagh as not merely Irish nor merely English, but as a hybrid subject whose diasporic identity centrally informs his theatre and filmmaking, is a major intervention in McDonagh studies. It offers a compelling resolution to the ongoing conflicts that have defined scholarship on McDonagh's work for over two decades, including those about his relationship to Ireland, Irishness and the Irish theatre canon and those about whether he is better understood as a postcolonial or postmodern writer. Most importantly, it opens up new ways of recognising and interpreting intercultural allusions and encounters in his work – contextualised as emerging from, embedded in, and frequently critiquing the power structures inevitably at play. In the final essay in *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, Patrick Lonergan concludes that we must move beyond existing modes like postcolonial or postmodern theory to develop a new framework to bridge local knowledge and global conversations (p. 174). By applying the lens of New Interculturalism and centring McDonagh's national hybridity as an Irish diasporan, I attempt to do so.

Chapter 1: The Leenane Trilogy

When Martin McDonagh wrote the Leenane Trilogy – *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* – in 1994, alone and unemployed in the home he once shared with his family in Camberwell, he "felt almost as though he were taking dictation." (O'Toole, 2006, p. 44) Born in London to Irish parents, his characters' voices came to him in a Hiberno-English that betrays both an intimate knowledge and an analytical – even parodic – distance. While Fintan O'Toole describes the character of Pato Dooley as "speaking in a voice not unlike [McDonagh's] father's," (2006, p. 44) Eamonn Jordan highlights that many critics saw McDonagh as regurgitating "the classic and non-evolved stereotypes of Irishness" (2013, p. 6). McDonagh's hybrid nationality – Irish, English, both and neither (O'Hagan, 2001) – complicates and makes ambiguous the traditional binary power divisions between Britain and Ireland: his writing in Hiberno-English can on one hand be an echo of his own father, and on the other be an offensive stage-Irish stereotype. Instead, McDonagh's so-called "Irish" plays exist in what New Interculturalism scholar Ric Knowles calls "the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures" (2010, p. 4). Considering McDonagh as a diasporic writer, he has what Rey Chow describes as a capacity to disrupt "the production of knowledge" that frames cultures as "objects of inquiry within well-defined geographical domains … hiding the agenda of the inquirers and naturalizing the 'objects' as givens." (1993, p. 115)

Though dubbed the Leenane Trilogy because of their shared setting, the version of the Connemara village in which the plays take place does not correspond to the real Leenane. McDonagh's Leenane, Patrick Lonergan writes, "is an imagined location, bearing little resemblance to the real Galway village" (2012, p. 4): the real Leenane is "difficult to relate … to the dystopic hellhole conjured up by Martin McDonagh" (p. 3). Most obviously, the real Leenane is not, as Fr. Welsh puts it in *The Lonesome West*, "the murder capital of fecking Europe." (p. 38) The inhabitants of McDonagh's Leenane are violent and frequently grotesque: when taken as representative of actual life in Connemara, critics frequently arrive at conclusions much like Victor Merriman's – that the plays are populated by "gross caricatures" that are essentially neo-colonial in nature (1999, p. 273). Sara Keating convincingly argues that Merriman essentially uses McDonagh as a scapegoat for his generalised anxiety about Celtic Tiger Ireland's position in postcolonial discourse (2006, p. 286), but his argument remains representative of a large number of critics. Susan Conley claimed that plays encourage "smug, superior chuckling at those ignorant culchies who haven't got the spunk to get out and make it in the big city" (2006, p. 375) and similarly, Mary Luckhurst asserts that McDonagh "relies on monolithic, prejudicial constructs of rural Ireland" (2004, p. 117). Ondřej Pilný outlines how commentators on McDonagh's plays – much like commentators on Irish theatre in general – "seek for their representational features and interpret McDonagh's work around them." (2004, pp. 225-226) McDonagh's portrayal of Leenane stands in for his portrayal of Ireland as a whole, and his status as a diasporic writer makes him a useful pawn on both sides of this argument: Schrodinger's Irishman, he can be positioned, explicitly or implicitly, as Irish or English depending on the argument one wishes to make. The two most obvious responses to these critiques – that, as

Joseph Feeney emphasises, McDonagh is himself Irish, with close links to Connemara in particular (1998, pp. 24-25), and that, as Lonergan presents it, McDonagh's Leenane is a fictional place – are somewhat in tension with one another. The first appeals to representational authenticity in some form; the latter rejects the idea that McDonagh's Leenane should be understood as in any way representational, undermining the former.

While it is tempting to assert that McDonagh's Leenane is a deliberately inauthentic, non-representational space, it is significant that McDonagh's Leenane shares its name with a real Irish village. "[F]or all its excesses and eccentricities, Leenane is not being presented merely as a vague 'Craggy Island' backdrop to comic iconoclasm," Shaun Richards writes, highlighting how the trilogy's intertextual references ground the plays in a precise location (2003, p. 204). For Richards, this indicates that "this is Ireland, this is now" (p. 204), but this seems at most half-true. Steven Connor calls postmodernism "that condition in which for the first time, and as a result of technologies that allow large-scale storage, access, and reproduction of records of the past, the past appears to be included in the present, or at the present's disposal, and in which the ratio between present and past has therefore changed." (2004, p. 10) McDonagh's postmodern Leenane is simultaneously real and fictional, past and present. Ceren Mert has written about the relationship between New York and Batman's Gotham City as a dual representation of a real place and an imagined space, evoking "the contemporary postindustrial city but stylistically gestur[ing] to other times and spaces. Rather than mirroring reality, it is an imaginary field interwoven … with direct experience and media images." (p. 153) McDonagh's Leenane has a similar relationship to the real village it corresponds to, as the plays create a collage from contemporary Connemara villages, Irish history, existing fictional representations of the west of Ireland, and a global media context. In *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, Robin Cohen positions diaspora and creolisation as trending in opposite directions: "one to a recovery of a past identity in reconstituting an old transnational link, the other to a severance of past identities in the interests of establishing new cultural and social identity" (2010, p. 73). But the Leenane Trilogy upends this dichotomy. By melding the traditions of Irish national theatre – notably JM Synge, Samuel Beckett and Tom Murphy – with the aesthetics of 1990s American independent cinema, splatter films, and a host of English and American theatrical traditions, the Leenane Trilogy both recovers a national identity and represents national identity as necessarily disrupted by the seismic forces of colonialism, migration, globalisation and mass media. Sara Keating argues that focusing on postcolonial readings of McDonagh's work is "completely inappropriate to the postmodern politics of his plays" (2006, p. 281), framing McDonagh's interpolation of Irish theatrical tradition as emptying the originals of cultural signification and significance (p. 290). This oppositional framing ignores links between postmodernism and postcoloniality, from Bhabha's assertion that colonial and postcolonial discourse anticipates postmodernism's concerns (1994, p. 173), to the often overlooked influence of Jacques Derrida's Algerian childhood on his thinking (Kaiser, 2015). Keating presents postmodernism in McDonagh's work as precluding postcolonialism, but his representation of postcolonial Ireland and the plays' postmodernist bent are intimately related. For Keating, the power dynamics of global capitalism "transcend" postcolonial subjectivity (p. 292). By subsuming them into globalised capitalism,

she erases the ongoing cultural, psychological and material reality of postcolonialism and neocolonialism and their centrality to McDonagh's work.

Against this, a New Intercultural approach better illuminates McDonagh's postmodern, postcolonial Leenane, where Irishness is contested and complex, corrupted and bombarded by a global media into which it has not wholly assimilated. Royana Mitra's writing on the potential of "simultaneous insider-outsider status between and across multiple cultural and national contexts" to dismantle "us-them hierarchies, by simultaneously embodying us, them and phases in-between" (2015, pp. 14-15) comes much closer to capturing the dynamic of Irishness in the Leenane Trilogy than Keating's claim that McDonagh empties the Irish theatre canon of meaning. Keating's formulation appears to homogenise distinctions formed by colonial history under the umbrella of global capitalism, but these distinctions have not been anything as simple as homogenised: rather, they remain in new, blurry, thorny and hybridised forms. In the introduction to *Interculturalism and Performance Now: New Directions?*, Charlotte McIvor contrasts New Interculturalism with utopian theories which seek to "move *beyond* postcolonialism, racism, or 'the pervasive binary concepts of Self versus Other, East versus West, North versus South…'"; New Interculturalism is deeply concerned with how these dynamics continue to "shape and interrupt" contemporary performance (2019, p. 5). Similarly, New Interculturalism theory holds space to acknowledge the shifting power dynamics of globalisation which Keating highlights without obliterating traditional postcolonial dynamics. Indeed, McIvor states that New Interculturalism "is directed almost entirely towards investigating culture's individual and collective multiplicities" (p. 2) and "demands that we not lose sight of the power dynamics and historical genealogies" (p. 5).

The Beauty Queen of Leenane

The Beauty Queen of Leenane, which in 1996 was the first of McDonagh's plays to be produced, vividly established McDonagh's voice – blackly comic, sometimes gruesomely violent, alternately reminiscent of Harold Pinter, JM Synge, and Quentin Tarantino – even as the play's particular tone of melancholic tragedy is nearly singular in his career. It follows Maureen Folan, a forty-year-old woman, and her mother Mag, who live together in a cottage in Leenane. Their relationship is one of mutual antagonism, ranging from verbal sparring to personal betrayal to physical torture, culminating in Maureen murdering Mag with a poker. In parallel, Pato, a man around Maureen's age, has returned from England to Leenane for a visit: for Maureen, he represents not just her first and last chance at love, but her only chance of escape. "Sometimes I *dream*…" Maureen says to Mag, "Of anything! *(Pause. Quietly.)* Of anything. Other than this." (1996, p. 16)

Throughout *Beauty Queen of Leenane*, there is a repeated focus on Irish emigration, particularly to England and the United States. Emigration was a central feature of Irish life, and one of the Irish state's central political and economic problems, throughout the twentieth century (Delaney, 1998, p. 35). Though initially produced and ostensibly set in the 1990s, right as Kevin Gardiner coined the term "Celtic Tiger" to refer to the economic boom (Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin, 2002, p. 17) which dramatically changed Ireland's relationship to migration, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* reflects this earlier feature of Irish life. Indeed,

its vision of 1990s Connemara would easily be mistaken for taking place decades earlier: "The 1950s is laid over the 1990s, giving the play's apparent realism the ghostly, dizzying feel of a superimposed photograph." O'Toole writes, "All the elements that make up the picture are real, but their combined effect is one that questions the very idea of reality." (1999, p. xi) There is a framed photograph of Robert and John F. Kennedy on the wall (p. 1) while Australian soap operas, a craze in 1990s Ireland (O'Kane, 1996; Power, 2018), are ubiquitous on television (pp. 8, 53). Early- to mid-twentieth century recordings of traditional Irish songs play on the radio (p. 23) while Ray Dooley worries Pato's wedding "next year" will clash with the 1996 European Championships (p. 57). By juxtaposing these historically displaced images, *Beauty Queen* opens up a space to focus on emigration contemporaneously to its retreat from the centre of Irish politics and culture. Emigration's effects – psychologically, economically, and on one's identity, for emigrants both abroad and returned to Ireland, and, indeed, for those who never left – is *Beauty Queen*'s central thematic concern, alongside the abusive co-dependency of its mother/daughter leads.

Emigration in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is a defining part, perhaps *the* defining part, of the Irish experience. "That's Ireland, anyways," Maureen tells Pato, "There's always someone leaving." (p. 21) Of the four characters that appear in the play, two have emigrated – Maureen Folan and Pato Dooley – and one plans to emigrate in the near future: Ray Dooley, who in the final scene says he wants to go to either London or Manchester, favouring Manchester because they have "more drugs" (p. 53). Emigration is positioned as a near-inevitability, and a core feature of Ireland's ongoing relationship to colonialism and national history. When Mag and Maureen argue about the Irish language, Mag cites emigration in her case against Irish: "…where would Irish get you going for a job in England? Nowhere." Maureen fires back that the reason Irish people need to go to England "begging for jobs and for handouts" is because of "the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what…" (p. 5) Mag continues along the same line: "If it was to America you had to go begging for handouts, it isn't Irish would be any good to you. It would be English!" As Patrick Lonergan points out, the conversation ironically takes place entirely in English (2012, p. 9). Lonergan also notes the agreement that underpins Mag and Maureen's argument: that "it is impossible to make a decent living in Ireland" (p. 9). For Mag this is apparently a neutral fact; for Maureen it is the legacy of Ireland's colonial past, corresponding roughly to "dependency theory," which holds that the economic reality of colonialism, "by establishing colonies as producers of raw materials and foodstuffs for the industrialized metropolitan centres, played a major part in retarding the industrialization and development" of former colonies (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007, p. 60). Indeed, the dynamic Maureen describes leads to a kind of self-reinforcing neo-colonialism, where the scars of Ireland's colonial past ensures that colonial mindsets and structures are maintained: the economic subservience of Ireland ensures that colonial projects like the eradication of the Irish language are further exacerbated.

Maureen and Pato both speak negatively of their experience as Irish people in England, yet neither's feelings are anything as uncomplicated as preferring to stay in Leenane. In Maureen's case, her experience working as a cleaner in Leeds was one of such isolation and anti-Irish racism that it led to her having a nervous breakdown and being admitted to a

"nut-house" (p. 30). She says that her English co-workers called her an "oul backward Paddy" and told her to "Get back to that backward fecking pigsty of yours" (p. 31). Her only solace was a friendship with a Trinidadian woman, the loss of which pushed her over the precipice:

> Half of the swearing I didn't even understand. I had to have a black woman explain it to me. Trinidad she was from. They'd have a go at her too, but she'd just laugh. This big face she had, this big oul smile. And photos of Trinidad she'd show me, and 'What the hell have you left there for?' I'd say. 'To come to this place, cleaning shite?' And a calendar with a picture of Connemara on I showed her one day, and 'What the hell have you left there for?' she said back to me. 'To come to this place… ' *(Pause.)* But she moved to London then, her husband was dying. And after that it all just got to me. (p. 31)

This speech puts forward a postcolonial commonality between Irish and Trinidadian immigrants in England. As a former constituent part of the United Kingdom, Ireland has a more complex and fraught relationship to the colonial power and its own colonial history than colonies in the Caribbean, or those in Africa or Asia. Rather than attempt a specific definition capturing all the nuances of this contentious relationship – so varied across time, class, and geography – which risks getting bogged down in what historian Stephen Howe calls "the typical polarisation and 'totalisation' of 'colony or not' exchanges" (2008, p. 151), it is more useful here to acknowledge the fluidity and inseparability of Ireland's dual role: subject to domination by Britain while participating in and benefitting from Britain's global imperialism. In "Yeats and Decolonisation", Edward Said describes modern European imperialism as experienced by Caribbean, African and Asian colonies as "a constitutively, radically different type of overseas domination from all earlier forms" in not just scale and scope, but disparity in power and the organisation of the power, while positioning Ireland's "dominat[ion] by an alien power" as within "a continuous process for several centuries of overseas conquest, rapacity, and scientific exploration" that both precedes and includes European imperialism (2021, p. 323). But in this scene, *Beauty Queen* presents Ireland's status as a former colony as entirely straightforward, connecting and even equating Ireland to the experience of majority-Black former British colonies in the Caribbean. It is both a touching expression of postcolonial solidarity and an uneasy claim of equal victimhood. It is significant, of course, that Maureen is the only character in the play who was present for what she describes. She is throughout the play an unreliable witness – telling untruths, with varying levels of purposefulness, about burning Mag's hand (p. 27), having sex with Pato (pp. 46-47), and meeting Pato as he leaves Leenane by train (p. 56) – and expresses strong nationalist views, particularly focusing on Ireland's victimisation (pp. 5, 53). This opens up a space for *Beauty Queen*'s audience to consider the realities of Maureen and the unnamed Trinidadian woman's friendship, but the play itself does not call Maureen's account into question.

Despite *Beauty Queen* presenting Ireland's status as straightforward, the status of Irish people is contentious. Maureen is ill at ease in Leeds and in Leenane, and the strain of both locations ultimately leads to mental breakdown. O'Toole describes McDonagh's plays as

populated by people who "live out their lives suspended between Ireland and England, between the real landscape they inhabit and the electronic images – Australian soap opera, American movies – that fill their screens" (1998b, p. 18). *Beauty Queen* suggests that this is the psychological effect of colonialism, mass emigration, and an ongoing, contentious relationship to a colonial power, composed alternately of enthral, subservience and resentment. Homi K. Bhabha theorises that colonialism produces hybrid identities, as subjugation is conditioned on "a process of splitting" in which "what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid" (1994, p. 111). Mass migration, similarly, produces hybrid identities among diaspora. In *Beauty Queen*, this hybridisation ruptures national identity, forcing the characters into a doubled existence that Maureen finds painful and fills Pato with frustrated yearning.

Pato's experience as an emigrant is more successful, although far from happy. A construction worker living in London, he describes his experience in starkly dehumanising terms, comparing himself to cattle (p. 21). While this is similar to how Maureen describes her negative experience in Leeds, Pato's feelings about living in England are ambivalent and contradictory. "In England they don't care if you live or die, and it's funny but it's not altogether a bad thing," he tells Maureen, "Ah, sometimes it is… ah, I don't know." (p. 22) For Maureen and Pato, both Leenane and England are places of discomfort, but where Maureen experiences this as an intolerable pain that pushes her to breaking point in both locations, Pato's feelings about his emigration are centred around an amorphous longing. This is expressed in one of the play's most affecting speeches:

> I do ask meself, if there was good work in Leenane, would I stay in Leenane? I mean, there never will be good work, but hypothetically, I'm saying. Or even bad work. Any work. And when I'm over there in London and working in rain and it's more or less cattle I am, and the young fellas cursing over cards and drunk and sick, and the oul digs over there, all pee-stained mattresses and nothing to do but watch the clock… when it's there I am, it's here I wish I was, of course. Who wouldn't? But when it's here I am… it isn't *there* I want to be, of course not. But I know it isn't here I want to be either. (pp. 21-22)

This mirrors a similar sentiment expressed by John Joe in *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant* (1969) by Tom Murphy: "It isn't a case of staying or going. Forced to stay or forced to go. Never the freedom to decide and make the choice for ourselves. And then we're half-men here, or half-men away, and how can we hope ever to do anything." (1997, p. 163) McDonagh once dubbed Murphy "our greatest living playwright" (Wiegand, 2018) – the "our" left ambiguous in its specificity – and the centrality of emigration to his work is a clear influence on McDonagh and *Beauty Queen* in particular. On his death, Michael D. Higgins stated that Murphy captured "the transience that is at the heart of the emigrant experience" (Wiegand, 2018), a theme that *Beauty Queen* explores through Pato.

The question Pato asks himself – if there was work there, would he want to stay in Leenane? – attempts to frame and understand his longing for place. In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah distinguishes between "home" as a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" to which one cannot truly return, and home as the "lived experience of a

locality" with its own particular sounds, smells and social relations (2005, p. 188). These competing understandings of home do not form a simple dichotomy between past and present, memory and experience, but participate in an ongoing and contentious formation of diasporic identity. Femke Stock warns that a dichotomy between longing for a homeland and trying to belong to the host country cannot capture the complexities of "longing for and belonging to multiple places in various ways" (2010, p. 25). Pato's longing to return when he's in London corresponds to home as this mythic place of desire, with which his real experience of Leenane pales in comparison. But Pato's sense of place has been deeply altered by his emigration, fracturing his identity into a disturbing feeling of belonging nowhere. Brah argues that that diasporic identities are "always plural and in process" within and across "territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries" (p. 194). Pato's sense of place shifts in different environments, his memories of Ireland reconstituted against differing backdrops. As Stock writes, memories of home are not "factual reproductions of a fixed past" but reconstructions shifting against present experience and ideas (p. 24). After his speech quoted above, Pato states, "Of course it's beautiful here… The mountains and the green" (p. 22), a similar sentiment to Maureen's having a "calendar with a picture of Connemara" (p. 31) as an emigrant in Leeds. In both cases, their memories of home are mediated by commercialised idyllic images of Ireland.

Beauty Queen, both within its story and metatextually, positions Ireland as existing within cultural globalisation yet haunted by cultural nationalism. Lonergan describes many of forms of Irish culture in *Beauty Queen* – the Irish language, traditional music, Catholicism, or the Kennedys – as "a zombie-like presence": surviving when they should have died off and exerting influence over a present of which they are no longer part (2012, p. 11). Yet perhaps a more clarifying metaphor is not zombies, but ghosts. These aspects of Irish culture are not dead things unnaturally reanimated, but spectres of the past that continue to cling to and haunt the present. As outlined in Kevin Alexander Boon's chapter in *Monsters and the Monstrous*, a large part of what distinguishes zombies from ghosts is the loss of consciousness and volition: "The reanimated dead are not proper zombies unless they lose some essential quality of self." (2007, p. 36) Ghosts, in contrast, "imply a continuation of human privilege beyond death," and so are not inherently monstrous the way zombies are (p. 34). Lonergan describes the continued presence of the Irish language in Pato and Maureen's Hiberno-English – "in their syntax, vocabulary and pronunciation" – as zombie-like (p. 11), yet in the play, it's not that Irish lives despite losing its essential self, it's that Irish has an ongoing existence in its remoulding of the "living" language of English. In the introduction to his *Dictionary of Hiberno-English*, Terence Patrick Dolan writes that Hiberno-English "is at the core of the language of Ireland, onto which are grafted many different linguistic features characteristic of the area where a given variety is spoken", (2020, p. xviii) incorporating vocabulary and grammar from Irish, Early Modern English, Ulster Scots, and Shelta (pp. xvii, xxii-xxiii). Hiberno-English bears the marks of centuries of Irish history, still haunted by the languages English is supposed to have killed off. Notably, Lonergan describes Pato's deviations from what Dolan calls "standard or British English" as "difficulty with speaking English correctly" (p. 11). This distinguishing between "correct" and incorrect forms of English goes to the heart of the limitations of Lonergan's zombie metaphor. It does

not capture the ongoing half-life it attempts to describe, which is defined by loss of body or form, not loss of consciousness. Though the loss of consciousness captured by Lonergan's zombie metaphor is apparent in later plays in the Leenane Trilogy – in *The Lonesome West*, Valene obsessively collects figurines of saints, yet has no interest in Catholicism, and indeed, is highly antagonistic towards Fr. Welsh (1997b) – in *Beauty Queen*, ghosts abound.

Haunting, as described by Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, is distinguished in part as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (2008, p. xvi). Ghosts, according to Gordon, are manifestations of trouble that it has been attempted to repress, contain or make invisible (p. xvi), forcing a confrontation between past and present (p. xvii). In *Beauty Queen*, Ireland's postcoloniality is expressed through a series of metaphorical hauntings. Returning to O'Toole's assertion that the play resembles a superimposed photograph (1999, p. xi), McDonagh's juxtaposing of historically disparate images creates a portrait of a contemporary, globalised Ireland whose unresolved and frequently traumatic history cannot be wholly repressed, contained or hidden. "There is nothing absent from this present," Connor writes about the presence of the past in postmodernity, "which makes it curiously spectral." (2004, p. 11) Regarding the photograph of Robert and John F. Kennedy hanging on the wall, Lonergan highlights that the Kennedys exist in Irish culture both an Irish success story and ultimately tragedy, as both men were assassinated: they represent the promise of emigration and the knowledge that promise may not be fulfilled (2012, pp. 8-9). Further, in the 1990s, the photograph stands "for a period of political optimism that is long past, and has no bearing on contemporary Ireland." (p. 9) In short, a zombie: a corpse shuffling along without consciousness.

Lonergan is correct that the Kennedy photograph represents a long past political optimism, but he miscontrues the significance of the image in claiming it has no bearing on 1990s Ireland. Jack and Bobby Kennedy haunt *Beauty Queen*'s 1990s Leenane, mirroring their haunting of Irish culture. If Maureen is "about forty" (p. 1) in 1997, she was six years old when John F. Kennedy was killed in 1963 and eleven when Robert was killed five years later. When she talks about the Kennedys directly, it is through a kind of mist, somewhere between childhood memory and knowledge assimilated seemingly from no source in particular, inseparable from the emotions that colour it: "To Boston I'll be going. Isn't that where them two were from, the Kennedys, or was that somewhere else, now? Robert Kennedy I did prefer over Jack Kennedy. He seemed nicer to women. Although I haven't read up on it." (p. 50) This is the tone with which the Kennedys endure in Irish culture: a shifting, multivalent symbol invoked to articulate a range of meanings of Irishness, operating on an almost mythic level disconnected from any grounded political achievement or failure. Mary Burke similarly notes the "Gothicization of the Kennedys" in Irish-American cultural narratives (2022, p. 169).

"Ghosts … are part of a symptomatology of trauma," Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren write, "as they become both the objects of and metaphors for a wounded historical experience." (2013, p. 12) The Kennedy photograph is not just a reminder of the Kennedy era but a spectre emanating from the violent rupture of that era, produced by a

mythologising that represses and conceals violence and trauma, of the assassinations and at a systemic level, of mass emigration. This mythologising began more or less immediately: Fintan O'Toole writes that prior to the bombing of Nelson's Pillar in 1966, the idea to replace Nelson with a statue of President Kennedy was popular – and that after the bombing, it was suggested that the pillar "could have remained and violence would have been averted" if this had taken place (2021, pp. 132-3). By the late 1980s, the mythologised ghost of Kennedy is evoked on "Thousands Are Sailing", a song by The Pogues, who McDonagh has cited in describing his diasporic identity (O'Toole, 2006, p. 42) and whose song "The Body of an American" Pato sings in the play (p. 18). The speaker in "Thousands Are Sailing", seemingly a contemporary migrant to the United States from Ireland, speaks to the ghost of an Irish migrant who died on a "coffin ship" to Ellis Island, and when he gets to New York he raises "a glass to JFK / And a dozen more besides" before returning to his room to cry (1988). Here Kennedy is almost purely a symbol, lacking even the corporeality that accompanied his symbolic function while alive, as a "glowing and tanned and young and glamorous" embodiment of "the dream of what freedom might be for" (O'Toole, 2021, p. 309). A mythologised understanding of Robert and particularly John F. Kennedy is both made possible by their assassinations – consigning them safely to the past – and incongruent with the senseless horror of their deaths: this tension gives the inclusion of the Kennedy photograph a ghostly, funereal quality. Jack Kennedy is the hope, however slim, of what emigration may bring, yet just one among hundreds of thousands of ghosts. "[E]very inch of American soil" and "every inch of Irish soil", Mary Burke writes, "—is haunted." (2022, p. 175)

More overt ghostly images or references in *Beauty Queen* include Delia Murphy, whose recording of "The Spinning Wheel" recurs in the play. The song initially appears when Pato and Maureen return to the house, playing on the radio which Mag left on when she went to bed (pp. 19, 23). In the song, a girl tries to steal away to her lover while her grandmother sleeps, which as Nicholas Grene points out, mirrors the situation on stage as Mag sleeps in the next room (2005, p. 300). Pato and Maureen agree "The Spinning Wheel" is "a creepy oul song", with Pato saying the song "always scared" him as a child (p. 23). Notably, Pato says Murphy sounds "like a ghoul singing." (p. 23) At the very end of the play, the song plays again, as the radio presenter delivers the belated birthday dedication from Mag's two absent daughters (p. 60). Maureen, having killed Mag, learns that Pato is engaged to be married and that the romantic goodbye she described the night of Pato's going away party did not occur. Rather than escape her mother for a new life with Pato in America, Maureen *becomes* her mother: "The exact fecking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name!" Ray says. Chu He links this "ghostly rebirth" to the recurrence of "The Spinning Wheel", writing that "Like the monotonous, spinning wheel in the song, Maureen goes on with the same isolated, deadlocked life", comparing Mag's "prolonged, ghostlike existence" through Maureen to Irish nationalist myths and ideals (2014, p. 14). The song's creepiness Maureen and Pato point out earlier doubles in on itself. The scene is reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) on one hand – like Norman Bates, Maureen "becomes" her late, domineering and sexually repressive mother, unable to escape co-dependency even beyond the grave – and Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby* on the

other: in *Rockaby*, W sits in her late mother's rocking chair to wait for death (2006b, p. 440), and at the end of *Beauty Queen*, Maureen sits in her late mother's rocking chair to implicitly do the same, now that escape with Pato is impossible.

If ghosts interfere, as Gordon writes, with "those always incomplete forms of containment and repression" from which their existence comes (p. xvi), *Beauty Queen*'s spectral images reflect Ireland's colonial and postcolonial history of repression and containment. On one hand, the colonial project was a doomed attempt to wipe the slate clean and create a new, anglicised Ireland: Bhabha contrasts the process envisioned by colonial powers – with "the noisy command of colonialist authority" and "the silent repression of native traditions" – with how, in practice, colonialism produces hybridisation (1994, p. 112). This inability to wipe a colony's slate clean makes Gordon's "always incomplete" containment and repression inevitable. On the other hand, Ireland has a long nationalist tradition of attempting to return to an imagined pre-colonial purity, preceding colonialism's destabilisation of national identity. This sometimes forms an important part of anti-colonial resistance, as in the Gaelic Revival's preserving and revitalising native traditions as an alternative to the imperialist culture (Singleton, 2000, p. 265). Particularly after the establishment of the Irish Free State, however, that desire to create an authentic Ireland necessitated homogenised, essentialist understandings of Irishness as Gaelic, Catholic, white and middle-class. While nominally supporting, say, the revival of the Irish language, the state actively advocated for the eradication of the indigenous culture of Irish Travellers (McVeigh, 2008; Burke, 2009, pp. 202-4). These different tendencies mean efforts to create a blank slate on which the preferred nation can be built have defined Ireland's colonial and postcolonial politics. This continues into the present through the state's embrace of neoliberal free-market ideology (Kitchin *et al.*, 2012), in which the state's narrative of Irish identity is globalised, broadly European, and disengaged from the nation's history. In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein describes the neoliberal turn in capitalism as desirous of "unattainable purity … a clean slate on which to build a reengineered model society" (2007, p. 20). In this context, a repeated pattern emerges of refusing to reconcile with history, and so hide and repress it.

In *Beauty Queen*, there is no clean slate, no authentic past, nothing pure. McDonagh's Leenane is a mutant hybrid produced by colonisation ("the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what" (p. 5)), mass emigration ("That's Ireland, anyways. There's always someone leaving" (p. 21)), and the bombardment of globalised anglophonic mass culture ("Sure that's why I do like it. Who wants to see Ireland on telly?" (p. 53)). That which is repressed bubbles up to the surface, exploding in violence. This violence does not provide resolution; it only renews the cycle. Maureen kills Mag to allow her to escape from her toxic codependency and start a new life, but when escape becomes impossible, Mag remains *through* her. For Heath A. Diehl, this is part of *Beauty Queen*'s interest in identity as fractured, incoherent, and unstable, particularly Irish identity: this "sense of provisionality demonstrates the ways in which national concerns have been impacted and altered by the forces of globalization" and "reflects a world in which Irish identity is systematically undermined and compromised by increasing forms of uneven globalization" (2001, p. 107). Going further, I suggest that, more than being undermined, Irish identity in *Beauty Queen*

lacks a pre-existing coherent identity which globalisation undermines. Irishness, instead, is a shifting, amorphous thing, constantly reproducing itself in flux with the forces which operate upon it, whether colonisation, globalisation, migration, or strictures of state-endorsed nationalist ideology. Denying this to espouse a stable Irish identity – past or present – involves containment and repression. As a member of the Irish diaspora raised in the centre of colonial power in London, McDonagh shows a particularly keen sense of this in his work. Gordon writes that "ghosts are characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place" (p. xix), and so Ireland accumulates the ghosts of her global diaspora.

A Skull in Connemara

A Skull in Connemara builds McDonagh's Leenane out from the apparently singular violence of Maureen and Mag's co-dependency in *Beauty Queen* to reveal a whole village of grotesque, violent and blackly comic characters. As Lonergan writes, each subsequent entry in the Leenane Trilogy expands the previous play's focus – moving from individuals to community to humanity at large – a shift indicated by the use of placenames in the plays' titles: from *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* mentioning a small village in its title, to a whole region in *A Skull in Connemara*, to the implied vastness of *The Lonesome West* (2012, p. 26). Less critically well-received than *Beauty Queen* – *Variety* concluded that theatregoers familiar with McDonagh would find *Skull* hollow (Isherwood, 2001) – *A Skull in Connemara* has been the focus of comparatively little scholarship. Though emigration and diaspora are not a central focus of *Skull*, a New Intercultural lens can nevertheless illuminate the play's approach to death and dying, moral culpability, and the characters' relationships to global mass media.

Every autumn, protagonist Mick Dowd works in the employ of the church, disinterring bodies to make room for fresh burials in the local cemetery. Though he tells busybody Mary – a "heavy-set, white-haired neighbour in her seventies" (1997a, p. 3) – that he seals the remains in a bag and lets them sink to the bottom of the lake while saying "a string of prayers" over them (p. 14), he in fact hammers the bones to dust and throws them in the slurry (p. 43). Mairtin Hanlon, who Father Welsh sends to act as Mick's assistant after he is disruptive in choir practice, finds this thrilling, raving that smashing the bones is "more fun than hamster-cooking!" (p. 45), an activity he found disappointing as "the feck hardly squeals" (p. 45). Eamonn Jordan describes both Mary and Mairtin as viewing the disinterment and disposal as morbid even as they remain "obsessed and voyeuristic" (2013, p. 64). While this captures Mary's conjoined disgust and fascination well, Mairtin is closer to gleeful psychopathy, not a morbidly intrigued voyeur but a joyous participant. Yet he is also a strangely innocent figure: he is gullible, doltish and – unlike the rest of the play's characters – generally happy. His fascination, as Jordan notes, is puerile (p. 65). He lapses into fear and discomfort that he attempts to cover over in order to impress others: "I'm not getting scared at all. All right I'm getting a bit scared. You won't be leaving me on me own more long?" he says to Mick (p. 41). While a surface-level reading of the play may appear to fit within McDonagh's alleged neo-colonial use of stage-Irish caricature, Mairtin, the

stupidest character in the trilogy, has the Irish language version of McDonagh's own first name, as Lonergan notes, upending assumptions about where we might find the author in his work (p. 28). The play takes place about a month after Mag's death in *Beauty Queen* (p. 11) and seven and a half years after the death of Mick's wife, Oona, officially in a drink-driving accident. Mick is widely suspected in Leenane of murdering Oona, including by local garda, Mairtin's brother Thomas Hanlon. *A Skull in Connemara*, Lonergan writes, shows McDonagh's Leenane is a place where "even the dead cannot rest in peace: their graves will be violated, their memory defamed and their remains stripped of all dignity." (2012, p. 20)

The second scene in *A Skull in Connemara* opens with two graves at the centre of the stage, one of which Mick is digging up – standing inside it to waist height – while Mairtin takes a cigarette break from digging up the other (p. 21). This set-up is a clear allusion to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, specifically the scene featuring the gravediggers at the start of Act V. Eamonn Jordan notes, however, that unlike *Hamlet*, Mairtin and Mick's gravedigging "brings no encounter with a metaphysical ephemerality" and no new awareness in the face of death (2013, p. 66). Regarding the gravedigging scene in *Hamlet*, Elizabeth Williamson writes that the iconic image of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull causes audiences to forget that the rest of the scene is consumed by death's fundamental anonymity: "With the face intact, the head is the one body part that should be instantly recognizable, but with the flesh gone, we cannot even tell the skull of a man from that of a woman, as the initial exchange between Hamlet and the gravedigger makes clear." (2011) She notes that there are at least two skulls on stage during Hamlet's speech, justifiably many more; further, the reliability of the gravedigger who identifies Yorick's skull to Hamlet is in question, making the one named skull's actual identity ambiguous. In *A Skull in Connemara*, the skeletal remains are not only anonymous and depersonalised but, as Jordan points out, de-individualised as they are smashed into dust (p. 69). If, as Williamson notes, the idea of human remains as "accurate preservers of memory" is problematised in *Hamlet*'s gravedigging scene (2011), human remains in *A Skull in Connemara* are actively rebuked as accurate preservers of memory, firstly in their glib dehumanisation and in the play's climax, by Tom's botched attempt to treat Oona's skull as evidence of murder.

This opens up a liminal space from which McDonagh mines conjoined humour and horror. When Paul Murphy claims McDonagh's use of "comic mediation" radically de-sentimentalises his characters in order "to neutralise … a traumatic effect on the audience" (2006, p. 66), he is flattening beyond recognition the relationship between humour and horror that *A Skull in Connemara* and the rest of the Leenane Trilogy seeks to probe. Strongly critical of the play and McDonagh's work generally, Murphy is correct when he writes that while the characters' trauma "is quite palpable," it is "rendered farcical by the slapstick quality inherent to such grotesque antics." (p. 71) What he misses, however, is that the simultaneousness of these two apparently oppositional tones does nothing to diminish the effect of either. *A Skull in Connemara* draws from two distinct theatrical and filmic traditions, each of which successfully combine intuitively oppositional tones: horror comedy and tragicomedy. As Noël Carroll points out, humour and horror are intimately connected, and while they seem opposing in concept, in practice shifts between horror and humour are common, successful, and popular (1999). The use of extreme gore for simultaneous horror

and humour effect, which stretches from Elizabethan theatre to Grand Guignol to giallo to splatter films, is evident in *A Skull in Connemara*'s approach to human remains. "In splatter, the blood is too red, the flesh too soft, and bodies don't just puncture – they erupt, explode, and disaggregate," Mark Steven explains in *Splatter Capital*, "There is grim humour in the hyberbole." (2017, p. 18) While violence against living people in *Skull* only occurs off-stage, the on-stage destruction of human skeletons takes a splatter-like approach: it is the destruction of the human body carried to such a grotesque extreme that it becomes blackly funny. Indeed, Ben Bratley notes in his review that pieces of bone landed in the laps of the audience during the production (2006a, p. 407). Steven goes on to note that the grotesque violence of splatter "delights" in a kind of "camp exuberance." (p. 18) It is these contradictory impulses that Murphy misidentifies as defanging trauma through comic mediation.

This tendency towards splatter in *Skull* occurs in the context of the play's use of more mainstream horror-comedy tonal shifts of the kind Carroll discusses, as scenes alternately build fear and tension and puncture it with punchlines. "Skulls do be more scary on your table than they do be in their coffin," Mairtin says when the skeletal remains are laid out in Mick's main room, "Why? I don't know why. Some reason now." (p. 41) The use of Hiberno-English's distinctive "do be" here indicates that the relative scariness of the skulls in different locations is habitual, not a fleeting sensation. The presence of the skulls in Mick's cottage, rather than in their coffins, is a fundamental disturbance of the order of things. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva describes the abject status of corpses, "blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic … A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter" with burial acting as "a means of purification" (1982, p. 109). The skulls are "more scary" on Mick's table than in their coffins because this ritual purification has been maimed, meaning the skulls now exist in a disturbing liminal space: the sacred becomes profane, human subject becomes inanimate object, the dead are removed from their resting place to once more be a part of the world of the living. This liminal status generates fear, reverence, and glib irreverence, even in one person. Mick happily destroys depersonalised human remains but lovingly kisses Oona's skull; he mocks the idea of reverently lowering the smashed bones into the river while praying, yet chastises Mairtin for cursing in the presence of human remains. Comparing its approach to mourning and death to *Hamlet*, a play whose action is driven by ghostly apparitions, Jordan writes that though *Skull*'s dead may haunt, they are not ghosts or procreators of tragedy (p. 71). There is no extension of life beyond death. If *Beauty Queen* is haunted by ghosts – spectres of the unresolved, suppressed past, demanding by their existence that something be done – then the dead in *A Skull in Connemara* make no demands and thus provide no possibility of resolution or closure.

A tragicomic influence, meanwhile, is gestured at the play's title, drawn from Lucky's speech in Samuel Beckett's self-described tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot* (2006c, p. 43). The simultaneous evocation of *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot* is a tangled web of national associations, canonical works from an English playwright and an Irish playwright, respectively, both of whom were writing about an imagined nowhere place sharing features of their homeland and other places – even if Shakespeare called his imagined nowhere place "Denmark" – and both of whom have been to varying degrees internationalised into

universal figures of world literature. The significance of the *Godot* reference is somewhat unclear – while Beckett is a perennial influence on McDonagh's writing, *Godot* is not a major intertext for *Skull* in particular – but in an Irish context, goes some way to evoke the memory of the Great Famine. As many critics have noted, *Waiting for Godot*'s imagery of desolation, hunger and death clearly suggests the Famine which took place from 1845 to 1852 (Sutcliffe, 2011; Roach, 2002; Schultz, 2014), and Andrew Gibson has particularly noted the repetition of "the skull the skull the skull in Connemara" in Lucky's speech as evoking the Famine (2010, p. 191). Gibson frames this evocation of Famine deaths as a "retort … to the inanity and inhumanity of 'improving' voices, whether mid-nineteenth-century English, Anglo-Irish anthropometric, Vichyite, or eugenicist." (p. 192) Within the text of *A Skull in Connemara*, Mick directly mentions the Famine while pulling Mairtin's leg that that Travellers ate human penises during it (p. 27). These oblique or comic references to the Famine establish Connemara's history as a place of death, devastation, horror and tragedy, often in the context of supposed progress in more prosperous, less peripheral places, the benefits of which do not extend to the west of Ireland. This history frames the tragicomic tone of the play, as this death and devastation repeats itself: not first as tragedy and second as farce, but tragedy *as* farce, mixing the two together inseparably. More broadly, the influence of tragicomedy, particularly as employed by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and the Theatre of the Absurd ('Tragicomedy,' 2013), is evident in the play's approach to its characters. Its comedy occurs in the context that Leenane in *Skull* is a desolate place where even the dead cannot remain. Richards writes that in the Leenane Trilogy, "an absence of social purpose, and social significance, produces an often perverse desire for sensation" (2003, p. 205). The play's "grotesque antics", then, do not undermine but emerge directly and are inseparable from its depiction of trauma.

This use of horror comedy and tragicomedy underpins what Jordan describes as McDonagh's engagement with and subversion of the Irish funerary tradition, and in particular, its role in diasporic identity (pp. 64-65, 72). Drawing on the work of Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, Jordan outlines the prevalence death and dying has over the Irish imagination, as expressed in Irish theatre, rituals, folk representations and media, constructing Ireland as a place of fatality (pp. 64, 65). Using both horror comedy and tragicomic modes, *A Skull in Connemara* manages to be both a part of this funerary tradition and a grotesque parody of it. From a New Intercultural standpoint, this is particularly important regarding the Irish diaspora. As Jordan notes, the funerary tradition has a special hold over the diaspora and "how they acknowledge home, exile and return" (p. 72). As Alistair Hunter notes in his study of diasporic "deathscapes", death in diaspora can be either the moment where "the deepest and most permanent foundations for settlement and belonging" for migrants are built, through burial or other funerary practices in their host country, or a moment to re-emphasise belonging to their homeland by opting for posthumous repatriation (2016, pp. 249-250). In addition to these aspects Hunter deals with, there is the diaspora's experience of relatives in their homeland dying. This is perhaps the most significant place the funerary tradition's hold over the Irish diaspora can be felt: for many, return is strongly, sometimes exclusively, associated with funerals. The Pogues' "The Body of an American", which Pato sings in *Beauty Queen of Leenane* (p. 23),

exemplifies this. In the song (written by Irish-English Shane MacGowan and produced by Elvis Costello, who is English of Irish descent), an Irish-American boxer is repatriated "to the shores where his fathers lay" for burial (1986). Despite being called an American in the title and, according to the speaker, "was often heard" calling himself "a free born man of the USA", the boxer's funeral takes place in Ireland: Ireland is, in effect, a funereal place. The "Yanks" inside the house, too, are returning to Ireland for a funeral, cementing the association among the living diaspora.

Although *A Skull in Connemara* is not explicitly about migration and diaspora, its approach to the funerary tradition is rooted in this diasporic context. The Irish funerary tradition in the play is an object of caustic derision. Mick falsely tells Mairtin that it is "illegal in the Catholic faith" to bury a body with the penis attached, and so it is cut off and sold to Travellers for dog food (pp. 26-27). "And during the famine, didn't the tinkers stop feeding them to their dogs at all and start sampling the merchandise themselves?" he adds, mocking Mairtin for not knowing "the first thing about Irish history." (p. 27) The absurdity of Mick's story comedically pokes at the seeming silliness of genuine Irish Catholic funerary practices. This joke reflects deeply embedded prejudice against Travellers, which the play neither counters nor endorses, though it may be parodying the "Famine myth" that Travellers originated as a distinct group in Famine times, a claim which has been used to further assimilationist policies (Hilliard, 2017) and frame Travellers as a "threat to property" (Burke, 2009, p. 195). It also, like the mention of "the tinker boys" scheming to hot-wire the Cadillac in "The Body of an American", reflects a feature of Irish life of which second- or third-generation emigrants are generally ignorant. Like Mary lying to American tourists about *The Quiet Man* being filmed in Leenane so she can sell them photos of John Wayne (p. 7), Irish funerary traditions may have an outsized importance to the diaspora and to Irish self-image, but have little actual resonance for the characters. Jordan describes the gravedigging in *Skull* as "perversely de-ritualistic", with the disinterment acting as a deviant, de-sanctified second wake (p. 67). By interfering with and undoing traditional death rituals, Jordan argues, the disinterment and disposal of the remains disrupts the dichotomies of dead/alive, public/private, and sacred/profane (p. 69). Amidst this disruption, the play can juxtapose its acrid comic critique of the Irish funeral tradition with a range of conflicting, contradictory and deeply felt positions on death.

This interest in disruption and irresolution is brought to the fore through the play's interpolation of a genre for which resolution and closure are ubiquitous and virtually guaranteed: police procedurals. A subgenre of detective story, which itself is a variant of the mystery (Harriss, 2008, p. 43), police procedurals were pioneered on American television by Jack Webb's *Dragnet*, adapted from the radio show of the same name, which, as Michael Arntfield outlines, reinvented the crime drama by focusing on procedure and operational accuracy over the melodrama of film noir (2011, pp. 77-78). This was a rebuff to the values of film noir as well as its style: *Dragnet* was, as Jeff Ousborne writes, an attempt to claim the crime story away "from the corrupt, morally ambiguous, inauthentic, and decadent stylizations and 'claptrap' of Hollywood films, hard-boiled fiction, and radio crime drama; to recuperate it, and domesticate it under the voice of 'constituted authority,' like one of Joe Friday's suspects." (2016, p. 38) Webb explicitly sought for the show's 1967 revival to

restore the public's faith in the police (Ousborne, p. 32). Police procedurals have endured in popularity since, with *NCIS* being the most watched drama in the US and the world over six decades after *Dragnet* debuted (Kissell, 2014; Schneider and Zorrilla, 2021). The genre as a whole is often criticised as acting as propaganda for the police: police officers, usually white and male, are represented as heroes taking down evil criminals in a kind of morality play (Thomas, 2020), largely obscuring the police brutality, racial discrimination and corruption that are endemic in so many real life police forces. These arguments sometimes overstate the influence of fictional media on real life – resting "on a too easy correlation between media representation and social reality," as Ruth McElroy argues (2016, p. 4) – but they are useful indicators of how idealised and unrealistic police procedurals are, even as the genre's emphasis on procedure implicitly makes claims of realism. In *A Skull in Connemara*, police procedurals are a ubiquitous frame of reference, easily engaged with by each of the four characters: the genre is a part of the fabric of the world, both part of the "almost endless listing of products and programmes from Taytos and Kimberley biscuits to *Star Wars* and afternoon soap operas" that Shaun Richards notes adds texture and density to McDonagh's Leenane (2003, p. 204) and signalling the play's broader themes. Further, the character Tom Hanlon seems to believe he is living in a police procedural, or certainly desires to be: he is frustrated and angered by the ways his work as a garda differs from television cop shows, and at the play's climax, contrives to catch a killer in the manner of one.

Notably, although police procedurals are also a staple of British television and would presumably be familiar to the residents of Leenane, only American police procedurals are referenced in the text. British procedurals are significantly different from their US equivalents in tone, style and structure, generally falling into one of three categories: soap opera, serialised drama, and classic murder mystery. In programmes like *The Bill* and *Heartbeat*, British television has often combined police procedural and soap opera, another TV genre whose British incarnations are generally more grounded and mundane: *Coronation Street*'s origins as a working-class kitchen sink drama influenced by the British New Wave is indicative in that respect (Usborne, 2020), sharply contrasting with US soaps. Serialised crime dramas, then – frequently in the form of a miniseries – follow a case over several episodes, rather than the rigid case-of-the-week structure of US procedurals: Deborah Jermyn contrasts *Prime Suspect* and its US remake in this respect, writing that in the former, twenty-five hours of programming across seven seasons dealt with nine storylines, while the latter's nine hours comprised thirteen storylines (2016, p. 192). Finally, there are classic murder mysteries, most frequently adaptations of detective literature, including *Poirot*, *Miss Marple*, and various Sherlock Holmes adaptations. This category can also encompass original programmes which emulate the style and structure of classic detective stories. While this final category is incorporated implicitly into *A Skull in Connemara*, as discussed below, the absence of British procedurals more broadly while American procedurals are frequently referenced by name indicates that *Skull* is in conversation with American police procedurals very particularly.

Intercultural relations in McDonagh's work occur in the context of cultural globalisation, an issue that the interpolation of American police procedurals brings to the fore in *A Skull in Connemara*. By globalisation, here, I refer to the altered structure of the global economy

due to accelerated "opening up of new global … commodity and financial markets" following what Stuart Hall calls the capitalist crisis of the seventies (1997, p. 23). Its emergence following the period of decolonisation after World War II can be seen as a "transmutation" of imperial structures of global power, albeit now centred around the United States rather than Europe (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007, p. 102). In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein discusses the issue global brands and advertising agencies faced in the era of globalisation: "What is the best way to sell identical products across multiple borders? What voice should advertisers use to address the whole world at once?" (2002, p. 115) These "global" corporations were "of course, American corporations" and, she argues, viewed the solution as forcing "the world to speak *your* language and absorb *your* culture." (p. 116) Or, as Hall puts it after outlining British imperialism as a form of globalisation, "The new kind of globalisation is not English, it is American … a new form of global mass culture … dominated by television and by film, and by the image, imagery, and styles of mass advertising." (p. 27) Klein outlines two forms this took: the use of distinctly American images irrespective of cultural context – she cites the image of blonde, blue-eyed children eating Kellogg's cereal on Japanese TV advertisements and the global domination of McDonald's and Coca-Cola (p. 116) – and alternatively, the embrace of a superficially multicultural diversity, "a kinder, gentler packaging for the homogenizing effect" (p. 117). This homogenising, as Hall outlines, does not attempt to replicate Americanness worldwide but to absorb international differences into an overarching "American conception of the world." (p. 28)

In *A Skull in Connemara*, American media form a universally understood point of reference, as or more easily than specific national culture. This is not the effect of mutual cultural exchange – a narrative which, as Marwan M. Kraidy outlines, obscures the power imbalances of transnational cultural exchange by presenting the dominance of American culture as resulting from international audiences' desire (2002, p. 331). But while Kraidy in contrast presents desire as playing little role in American cultural dominance – he repeatedly states that audiences globally prefer "locally produced" media (pp. 327, 331) – in *Skull*, this relationship is altogether thornier: a product of cultural hegemony that does not exclude the possibility of desire. The power dynamics are exemplified in Mary telling American tourists that John Ford's *The Quiet Man* was filmed in Leenane (p. 7), selling them the version of Ireland that exists in what Hall calls the American conception of the world. What makes this interesting is the continued role *The Quiet Man* occupies in the *Irish* imagination, central not to Irish self-conception but to how Irish people understand *Americans'* conception of Irishness. There is a strange doubling effect: Mary sells American tourists not just the version of Irishness they have absorbed through their media, but literally sells them a piece of American iconography in the form of photographs of John Wayne. But this appeal to an inward-looking American imagination itself treats America as the benchmark against which all the world is understood. "Leenane may be part of a post-modern world which is open to all the images of the global economy," Shaun Richards writes, "but it's condition is as a functionary rather than a beneficiary." (2003, p. 208) Whereas in *Beauty Queen* there is an explicit tension between characters like Ray who are desirous of imported programming and Maureen, who wants to see Ireland on screen (p.

53), in *Skull*, this tension remains under the surface, apparently existing within single characters. Police procedurals and other American media are an embedded in the community's culture but are simultaneously foreign or incongruous – less like an intruder than like where a tree meets an object and grows around it: "Because a tree can't move its roots other than by growing new ones, it has no choice but to grow around solid objects. And a tree cannot avoid adding more wood to its stem; it needs to do so to grow taller and older." (All About Trees, 2015)

Tom Hanlon is a character who sees the world through the prism of American television police procedurals, but finds himself trapped in McDonagh's blackly comic Leenane. He wants to advance up the ranks of the Gardaí so he can do "Detective work … You know, like *Quincy*." (p. 29) Mick and Mairtin both mock how Tom's understanding of policework is derived from television, saying respectively "I thought the way you do talk about it, just like *Hill Street Blues* your job is. Bodies flying about everywhere" (p. 29) and that Tom "Thinks he's Starsky and Hutch" (p. 46). If, as O'Toole observes, the characters in McDonagh's Leenane live suspended "between the real landscape they inhabit and the electronic images … that fill their screens" (1998b, p. 18), this is brought to its furthest extent in the character of Tom. While not suggesting that he is incapable of distinguishing fiction from reality, there is a clear sense that Tom sees American police procedurals as representative of policework as it exists *somewhere*, just not in Leenane. *Quincy* is of course not real, but that is how detective work is conducted in the real world. In the context of globalised mass media, the gap between fiction and reality is porous with the gap between Ireland and the United States. Tom claims that during his work as a garda, he saw the dead body of a naked, extremely overweight man with only "a pot of jam and a lettuce" in his fridge (p. 30). As many critics have noted, this is apparently a reference to David Fincher's film *Se7en* (Jordan, 2013, p. 70; Eldred, 2007, p. 115). In *Se7en* (1995), Detective Mills (Brad Pitt) and Detective Lieutenant Somerset (Morgan Freeman) investigate a serial killer who murders people in a manner evoking each of the seven deadly sins. The first case Mills and Somerset is that of an extremely overweight man who has been force-fed to death, corresponding to the sin of gluttony. The incident Tom recounts is not identical to the murder in *Se7en*, as the victim's home in *Se7en* has large amounts of food throughout, and the victim, rather than sitting up naked, is face down in a bowl of spaghetti and wearing an undershirt. Because Tom recounts this as his own experience, it becomes ambiguous whether the reference is diegetic: is Martin McDonagh making a reference to *Se7en* while writing an incident which Tom experienced, or is Tom conflating his own experience with vicarious on-screen policework, tweaking it just enough to feel like the memory is really his?

Laura Eldred further argues that *Se7en* is a consistent intertext throughout *A Skull in Connemara*, particularly highlighting the centrality of the severed head of the protagonist's wife as a prop (p. 115). In *Se7en*, Mills's wife is decapitated, and his horror and grief motivate him to shoot the serial killer dead at the film's climax. In *A Skull in Connemara*, meanwhile, "the disappearance and retrieval of … Oona's head provides the impetus for the plot" (p. 115). This intertext bridges the apparent gap between *Skull*'s drawing from horror comedy on one hand and detective stories on the other. *Se7en*'s plot is that of a detective story with a focus on procedural intrigue, but stylistically, it is a horror-thriller. The murders

– which, like the off-stage violence in *Skull*, occur off-screen – incorporate the aesthetics of gore and what Alan Jones calls its use of "stalk- and-slash iconography" (p. 4). For greed, a man is forced to cut off a pound of his own flesh, and for lust, a sex worker is mutilated when a man is forced to have sex with her using a bladed strap-on. Placing the gore in the context of a procedural detective story, *Se7en* predominantly takes a realist approach to horror, as Reynold Humphries discusses (2002, pp. 75-77). Its keeping gore off-screen allows it to incorporate the horror of splatter without the "camp exuberance" Steven identifies as central to the genuine article. *Skull*, meanwhile, combines similar genre aesthetics in a tonally contrasting combination: where *Se7en* places its gory aspects inside a procedure-driven detective story to give it a realist gloss, Skull treats its police procedural interpolation as absurd, a comic evisceration furthered by its use of gore: the smashing of bones bursts with the camp exuberance of splatter.

Tom becomes fixated on the idea that Mick murdered Oona and that he must bring him to justice. In a series of reveals in the play's final scene, Tom presents Oona's skull with "a large forehead-crack" (p. 55); he demands Mick write a confession; Mick writes a confession for the murder of Mairtin, which has been implied to have occurred off-stage; Mairtin returns, battered and bloody but very much alive – mirroring, as Jordan notes, the return of Christy Mahon's father in JM Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (p. 70); Mairtin reveals that he stole Oona's remains so that Tom could carve a gash into the skull's forehead and frame Mick for murder. Mick then burns his confession, with Mairtin claiming to have received his injuries in a drink-driving accident. The successive reversals of each reveal mirror the structure of, on one hand, the farces of Oscar Wilde or Noël Coward, and on the other, the final section of a classic murder mystery, when the killer is revealed, often through a long monologue of how the detective came to that understanding: parodying the latter through the structure of the former. The sequence encapsulates the anarchic intercultural collage at which McDonagh so excels: alluding to Irish writers like Beckett, Synge and Wilde, to English ones like Shakespeare, Coward and Agatha Christie, and American television, set in a blackly comic and bloodied cottage in rural Ireland, evoking and subverting a traditional Abbey play. Significantly, despite the genre expectations of both murder mystery and farce, nothing is resolved in this scene. In the succession of reveals, the core mystery – whether Mick murdered Oona – remains unsolved. That this mystery is so core to the play is particularly interesting when we know that even in Mick's account of events, he is responsible for her death: he killed her via driving drunk. The mystery at hand, then, is not one of whodunnit but of what degree of moral culpability is assigned. We know Mick killed Oona, but we never learn if he murdered her. The ambiguity leaves the audience productively uneasy about where to place their sympathies: like Harry Caul in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, we are not afraid of death, we're afraid of murder (1974).

Lonergan describes the empty grave at the end of the second scene as the play's key symbol: "The empty space at the centre of *Skull* is the question of Mick's guilt or innocence …" he writes, "The challenge for us as audience members is to consider where we stand, how we fill the empty space ourselves … not accepting passively what we have been told, but instead trying to piece together the evidence for ourselves." (2012, p. 28) History, in *Skull*, is ultimately unstable, incoherent, and in some ways unknowable. Joan Fitzpatrick

Dean writes that McDonagh's plays generally have an anti-*avant-garde* degree of closure, usually in the form of character death, but notes *A Skull in Connemara* as a rare exception (2007, p. 38). That *Skull* is exceptional in this regard is particularly significant because closure is an embedded feature of the television police procedural: Kathleen Donovan notes that the percentage of crimes which lead to an arrest and charge in these shows is 90% or higher, compared to 25% in the average real police force (2016). When Tom initially confronts Mick, he describes his apparent solving of the murder in terms clearly derived from television police procedurals – "Detective work it is, and going hunting down clues, and never letting a case drop no matter what the odds stacked against you, no matter how many years old" (p. 57) – and he embraces comparisons between himself and crime-solvers on American television: "Like Petrocelli is right, Gran, and the first thing I do when they promote me is reopen the case of that lettuce and jam man I was telling you about …" (p. 57) The empty, unknowable space at the heart of the play is incompatible with the media through which Tom understands himself and the world, so into this empty space he pours falsified evidence and desecrated human remains to fill it up. A parallel can be seen here to the play's anarchic approach to intercultural relations: if history is ultimately unstable, incoherent, and in some ways unknowable, then identities and cultures rooted in history – like nations – are themselves unstable and incoherent. But the instability of history is not the non-existence of history: as Lonergan points out, the audience is tasked with piecing it together, even if it is a puzzle with no solution. The same is true, in McDonagh's work, of Irishness.

The Lonesome West

The Lonesome West draws the Leenane Trilogy to an end, rounding out the fullness of Leenane's community with its focus on characters extensively referenced in the first two plays. More substantive than *A Skull in Connemara* and more thematically ambitious than *Beauty Queen*, Lonergan correctly identifies *The Lonesome West* as expanding its focus from individuals and their community to the nature of humanity and God's authority, mirroring the expansiveness of its title (p. 29). Yet simultaneously, part of what makes *The Lonesome West*'s expanded thematic focus effective is the smallness of its story: like the previous plays, it has four characters, and like *Beauty Queen*, its protagonists are frustrated, co-dependent family members – this time, middle-aged brothers Coleman and Valene, whose "festering yin and yang relationship" Ben Brantley compared to Laurel and Hardy and Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple* (2006b, p. 406). Ultimately, *The Lonesome West* explores its big themes through tracing the fate of a single human soul, as the much spoken of Father "Welsh Walsh Welsh" finally appears on stage. As Stephanie Pocock outlines, Father Welsh and his role in *The Lonesome West* exemplifies an ambivalent relationship to Catholicism that will reappear in McDonagh's works for stage and screen: she places McDonagh in a "tradition of Irish writers who, despite rejecting Catholicism, have found themselves repeatedly drawn to its narratives and characters as rich sources for their art." (2007, p. 75) McDonagh is also drawing on a tradition of Irish diasporic artists with a similarly ambivalent relationship to Catholicism, gestured towards by its reference to the Alfred Hitchcock film *I*

Confess. *The Lonesome West* also returns to the spectral imagery that is prevalent in *Beauty Queen*, but reinterprets the nature of haunting into something less uncanny and more hopeful. Simultaneously, the play makes a connection between the west of Ireland and the American West, using the mythology of the American western to explore Connemara as a lawless land at the edge of the world, a place so defined by migration that it feels almost transient, and which moral authorities inevitably fail to tame.

The play opens after the funeral of Coleman and Valene's father, who Coleman shot dead: though he initially claims it was an accident, we later learn he shot him deliberately because he insulted Coleman's hairstyle. Like the other Leenane plays, the action takes place in a rural cottage – and in this case, a "long row of dusty, plastic Catholic figurines, each marked with a black 'V', line a shelf on the back wall, above which hangs a double-barrelled shotgun and above that a large crucifix." (1997b, p. 5) The figurines are Valene's – hence the "V" mark – and he both jealously guards them and regularly buys more, dutifully marking each of them with a "V" for Valene. Yet Valene's Catholicism seems to begin and end here, on a shelf of dusty saint figurines. Lonergan notes that, like in Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* from which *The Lonesome West* takes its title, the lives and language of the characters are "rich in religious allusion" but they have "failed completely to understand and internalise the central tenets of Christianity" (p. 31) – demonstrating how the public appearance of Catholicism is used to disguise a violent reality (p. 41). While this is accurate, *The Lonesome West*'s approach to Catholicism and Christianity is ultimately less clear-cut, juxtaposing Catholic aesthetics and stories with an irreverent, even iconoclastic, sensibility. The play muddies Catholicism and anti-Catholicism together – a self-sacrificial Christ figure shares the stage with stinging swipes about clerical child sex abuse – in ways that should seem incoherent, but instead captures the multiplicity and contradictions of Catholicism in Celtic Tiger Ireland.

From a New Intercultural perspective, the position of Catholicism in Ireland and in the Irish diaspora – and particularly the diaspora in England – is significant in this regard. Royona Mitra writes that "diasporic realities" necessitate "having to simultaneously negotiate multiple cultures" (2015, p. 11), and the relative position of Catholicism in Irish and English culture – dominant in the former, a historically persecuted minority in the latter – require extensive negotiation. Though other instalments of the Leenane Trilogy were rich in religious allusion, from their Christ-soaked Hiberno-English to Mairtin's apparent resurrection in *A Skull in Connemara*, *The Lonesome West* marks McDonagh's deepest and sincerest attempt up to this point to negotiate a path through Catholicism as an Irish diasporic writer. As Aidan Arrowsmith notes, second-generation migrants like McDonagh's "sense of migrant in-betweenness is exacerbated" (2006, p. 236), their hybrid identities viewed as "doubly inauthentic: not quite English, not quite Irish." (p. 237) One's relationship to religion – and to Catholicism or Protestantism specifically – forms a core part of how that in-betweenness is understood. As Oliver P. Rafferty outlines, Catholicism has historically been a central part of Irish identity, defining Irishness in contrast to Protestant Britain (2021, p. 261). Diaspora communities often use religion to "recentre themselves" by "inscribing their portable visions of the sacred in the local landscape," creating their own spaces distinct from their host country's dominant religion (Vásquez, 2010, p. 131). Because of this,

one's relationship to Catholicism acts as a barometer for authenticity that becomes a tool of exclusion and binary categorisation. In contrast, New Interculturalism is, as Charlotte McIvor writes, "directed almost entirely towards investigating culture's individual and collective multiplicities" (2019, p. 2). In *The Lonesome West*, McDonagh navigates Catholicism's multiplicitous role in respect of Irish, English and Irish diaspora cultures primarily through the character of Fr. Welsh.

If Tom Hanlon understands himself as the protagonist of an American police procedural mislocated in McDonagh's blackly comic Leenane, Fr. Welsh is the protagonist of a drama about spiritual crisis – notably Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), or Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light* (1963) – trapped in a play where he is a comic supporting player, in a village where "God has no jurisdiction … No jurisdiction at all." (p. 10) Like the priests in those films, Welsh is harrowed by the silence of God, distressed by his inability to impact his parishioners, and extremely depressed. But the lead roles in the play belong to Valene and Colman, vicious and frequently gruesome brothers who bicker constantly and think little of murdering their father or covering that murder up. This renders Welsh's spiritual crises closer to comic absurdity than existential drama. "He's not having another crisis of faith is he?" Girleen, a teenage girl who sells poteen around the village, says in the play's first scene, "That's twelve this week." (p. 13) Fr. Welsh initially appears to fit within a broader antagonism towards the Catholic Church throughout the Leenane Trilogy, living up "to most of the negative expectations" created by mentions of him in *Beauty Queen* and *A Skull in Connemara*, as Pocock notes, which leads to many critics viewing him as simply a caricature of a drunken, maudlin Irish priest (p. 64). Against this interpretation, Pocock puts Fr. Welsh in a tradition of priest characters written by Catholic-raised Irish writers, including James Joyce and George Moore (p. 62). Fr. Welsh is simultaneously a caricature whose crises of faith are treated as comic, and a character whose arc draws from the Christ story and from hagiographies in its structure and themes, particularly regarding self-sacrifice. He plunges his hands into boiling plastic to stop Valene and Colman from fighting (p. 35), and he presents his ultimate death by suicide as an effort to reconcile the brothers (p. 35). For Pocock, Fr. Welsh is an acknowledgement of the "failure of Catholic belief to alter human behaviour while acknowledging the enduring power of its central narrative" (p. 73). Through Fr. Welsh, *The Lonesome West* explores the relationship between suffering, self-sacrifice, and redemption in a context that blurs the line between self-sacrifice and self-harm, between martyrdom and suicide. Fr. Welsh's suicide is, in part, a recreation of the Crucifixion: he sacrifices his own life to reconcile Valene and Colman, to transfigure them with love. But, as Lonergan outlines, we cannot know how sincerely this motivates Fr. Welsh's suicide – whether his act is self-sacrificial or merely given a self-sacrificial gloss to soothe his conscience (p. 35). Jordan presents the symbolic relevance Welsh's death as "de-substantiated and de-ritualised" by the farce that surrounds it (p. 117). McDonagh himself describes Welsh as "a suicidal Christ figure" and "the savior figure of the Trilogy." In the same interview, he acknowledges that "anti-clerical or anti-Catholic or anti-Christian jokes" occur throughout the Trilogy, stating that the then-recent revelations of child sexual abuse influenced his writing (O'Toole, 1998a). This apparent tension resonates with the changing position of Catholicism in Irish culture in the 1990s.

In addition to the Irish writers Pocock discusses, McDonagh draws on artists of the Irish diaspora in his portrayal of Catholicism. When Fr. Welsh laments that the murderers in his parish only confess to "betting on the horses and impure thoughts", Coleman replies, "Em, only I don't think you should be telling me what people be confessing, Father. You can be excommunicated for that I think. I saw it in a film with Montgomery Clift." (p. 11) That film with Montgomery Clift is *I Confess* (1953), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, in which a priest (Clift) receives confession from a murderer. Despite being under suspicion, and eventually put on trial, for the murder, the priest refuses to break the seal of confession to reveal the true killer. It is, like *The Lonesome West*, a story concerned with the gap between the appearance of goodness and goodness itself, but from the opposite direction: in *The Lonesome West*, the appearance of faith disguises gruesome reality, while in *I Confess*, a genuine faith must remain hidden despite that giving the appearance of violent wrongdoing. Because *I Confess* was banned in Ireland on its initial release (Irish Film Institute, 2012), Coleman's reference to it may indicate that he had emigrated to the UK at some point, since we know Valene lived in England, a fact similarly described in terms of access to different media (p. 30). It also bookends the *Psycho* allusion in *Beauty Queen*, the Trilogy's opening play: moving from possibly Hitchcock's most iconic and successful film to one of his most obscure, that's also the one most reflective of his upbringing. Like McDonagh, Hitchcock was English of Irish descent on both sides – though several generations back – and was raised Catholic: he attended a Jesuit school, St Ignatius College, contemporaneously with IRA London commandant Reginald Dunne (McNally, 2009). The effect of Hitchcock's diasporic background is a largely neglected subject, despite its apparent relationship to what James Morrison, in his discussion of Hitchcock's adaptations of *Juno and the Paycock* and *Under Capricorn*, argues is Hitchcock's attentiveness in his work "to issues of xenophobia, nationalist insularity, and colonialist domination" and sympathy "to the self-determination of nations under British dominion." (2000) *I Confess* is undoubtedly the most explicitly Catholic of Hitchcock's films. Indeed, he told François Truffaut that non-Catholics found *I Confess* alienating and difficult to comprehend: "We Catholics know that a priest cannot disclose the secret of the confessional, but the Protestants, the atheists, and the agnostics say, 'Ridiculous! No man would remain silent and sacrifice his life for such a thing.'" (2017, p. 204) The explicit Catholicism of *I Confess* reveals the implicit Catholicism of many of Hitchcock's other films, making clear the connection between his legion of wrong men to the most famous falsely accused man in history: Christ. Similarly, Fr. Welsh's role as a "suicidal Christ figure" invites us to think more deeply about the religious allusions throughout the Trilogy, understanding even irreverent jokes about paedophile priests as a one element in a complex, ambivalent and frequently self-contradictory relationship to Catholicism in an Irish and diasporic context, not merely the "two-dimensional" flippant humour Paul Murphy denounces them as (p. 70).

As well as returning to a Hitchcockian intertext, *The Lonesome West* also returns to another major aspect of *Beauty Queen*: its spectral imagery. Drawing on Avery Gordon's work on haunting, I have argued that spectral imagery in *Beauty Queen of Leenane* reflects the incomplete repression and containment of unresolved traumatic history, personal and national. While the dead are a major part of *A Skull in Connemara*, ghosts are absent, in line

with the middle play's thematic and structural interest in irresolution. *The Lonesome West* again shifts its attention towards ghosts, but takes a new approach to their meaning. After Tom Hanlon dies by suicide – a dark and unsettling end for a major character from *A Skull in Connemara*, who does not appear on stage in *The Lonesome West* – Fr. Welsh and Girleen have a conversation on a bench beside the lake where Tom drowned. Unbeknownst to Girleen, Welsh plans to kill himself that same night. Girleen mentions that other men drowned themselves here: "Years and years ago this is. Maybe even famine times … This is where they all come." (p. 42)

"We should be scared of their ghosts so but we're not scared." Welsh says, asking, "Why's that?" (p. 42) Girleen says that Welsh isn't scared because he's drunk, but explains why she's unafraid at length:

> It's because… even if you're sad or something, or lonely or something, you're still better off than them lost in the ground or in the lake, because… at least you've got the *chance* of being happy, and even if it's a real little chance, it's more than them dead ones have. And it's not that you're saying 'Hah, I'm better than ye', no, because in the long run it might end up that you have a worse life than ever they had and you'd've been better off as dead as them, there and then. But at least when you're still here there's the *possibility* of happiness, and it's like them dead ones know that, and they're happy for you to have it. They say 'Good luck to ya.' (*Quietly.*) Is the way I see it anyways. (pp. 42-3)

Ghosts, in Girleen's formulation, recognise futurity as the defining difference between their existence and life itself: the living have the possibility of happiness. Like the ghostly forms in *Beauty Queen*, their existence is the product of a traumatic rupture – in this case, multiple suicides – but their interaction with the living world is to offer comfort, rather than demand something be done. In *Beauty Queen*, the ghosts reveal what del Pilar Blanco and Peeren call "the disconsolations and erasures of the past," but *The Lonesome West* shifts the emphasis, however briefly, towards "a tentative hopefulness for future resolutions." (p. 16)

This hopefulness is abruptly soured when Welsh's suicide is revealed. Scene Five consists entirely of Welsh delivering the letter he asked Girleen to give to Coleman and Valene in a rapid monologue: he says that he is "willing to bet me own soul" to restore the brothers' love for one another that he must have had in boyhood (pp. 45-6). In Scene Six, Girleen tells the brothers that Fr. Welsh's body was dragged out of the lake that morning (p. 53). Girleen also reveals that she saved up the money she made selling poteen to buy Welsh a heart pendant on a chain (p. 52). She clearly didn't heed the letter Pato wrote to her from England in *Beauty Queen*, warning her "to stop falling in love with priests." (p. 36) Jordan calls Girleen's despair after Welsh's death "the only grief of apparent substance in the play" (p. 116). She bitterly notes that she goes unmentioned in Welsh's letter: "You notice he never asked me to go saving his soul. I'd've liked to've saved his soul. I'd've been honoured, but no. (*Crying*). Only mad drunken pig-shite feck-brained thicks he goes asking." (p. 53) Welsh's suicide is framed by both the play and Welsh himself as suffering to exert a redemptive power over the brothers, but as Lonergan notes, it has the greatest effect on Girleen, who "has changed utterly … becoming almost ghost-like, haunting the place where Father Welsh

committed suicide" (p. 40). Valene says that "her mam two times has had to drag her screaming from the lake at night, did you hear, there where Father Walsh jumped, and her just standing there, staring." (p. 58) If ghosts are distinguished in *The Lonesome West* by their lack of futurity, Welsh's death transforms Girleen into a kind of living ghost, without hope for any possible future happiness. And while it is generally accepted that the brothers are unchanged by the end of the play (Lonergan, 2012, p. 40; Jordan, 2013, p. 119) – their attempts at apologising for their wrongdoings quickly becomes a game of one-upmanship, culminating in violence – they have the futurity of the living. Valene lights Fr. Welsh's letter on fire, but when it's "barely singed" he puts the flames out and pins the letter and Girleen's chain back up next to the cross (p. 72). His unwillingness to destroy the letter belies Coleman's earlier dismissal of Welsh's sacrifice, saying "a fiver would've been overdoing it on us, let alone his soul." (p. 70) The significance of retaining the letter is emphasised as stage directions indicate that when the lights go down, a spotlight lingers on the letter, chain and cross (p. 72). "The crucifix signifies a kind of self-sacrifice that neither man can achieve, the letter is a call for peace that neither man desires and the chain is a symbol of the love that neither will ever experience," Lonergan writes, "And all three are emblems of the suffering of innocent people." (p. 42) While Valene and Coleman are generally inattentive to the significance of symbols – the centrality of Catholic figurines to the play could, tellingly, be replaced by any objects that encourage collection – the meaning of the cross, chain and letter, particularly in juxtaposition, is unmissable. While critics are right to say the brothers are unchanged by the end, they retain the possibility – however slim, however likely to be squandered – of change: of self-sacrifice, of peace, perhaps even of love. Unlike Maureen, unlike Girleen and Fr. Welsh, they have not become ghosts. Considering this in the postcolonial context outlined earlier in this chapter, the possibility opens up of Ireland to learn to live with her ghosts without attempting to recapture a mythologised pre-colonial past, to recognise that the living nation's futurity is what matters, what we can shape. If ghosts, as Gordon notes, demand that something be done, the living are tasked with doing it.

Though *The Lonesome West*'s title is taken from *Playboy of the Western World*, it also, as Lonergan states, "gesture[s] towards America" (p. 29). In particular, it signposts the play's relationship to Sam Shepherd's *True West*, which is also about two brothers whose relationship veers between hostile rivalry and overt violence. In *True West*, Austin – a screenwriter who lives with his wife and children up north – and Lee – a drifter and burglar who has been living alone in the Mojave Desert – are in their mother's house, with Austin housesitting and Lee arriving and refusing to leave. When Austin has a meeting with a film producer to discuss his script, Lee successfully sells the producer a story idea for a cliché-ridden neo-western, which Lee presents as "true to life" (p. 20). Much like Maureen in *Beauty Queen* remembering Ireland as a migrant through commercialised images, Austin describes life "down here" as "Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember … Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard." (p. 51) As Richard Wattenberg puts it, the title *True West* "suggests a question: Which is the 'true West'— the frontier legend or the settled, suburban present?" (1989, p. 225) Accordingly, both Lonergan and Maria Isabel Seguro present *True West* and *The Lonesome*

West as interrogating national myths, with Seguro writing that *True West* deals with the American mythology of the frontier and the cowboy as *The Lonesome West* deconstructs the nationalist mythology of the Irish peasantry (2017, p. 74), while Lonergan writes that *Lonesome West* deconstructs Irish Catholicism (2012, p. 30). It is only in a brief parenthetical that Lonergan notes that *The Lonesome West* also deconstructs the idea of the West (p. 30). But *Lonesome West*'s relationship to Shepherd's play is one of several points of contact between the play and the American western, drawing the mythology of the American West and the Irish West into conversation with one another.

The mythology of the Irish West and the American West have been tied together many times. Seán Keating's Irish nationalist paintings incorporated imagery of the American West, with the "largely urban, lower middle- and working-class rebels of Easter 1916 … transposed into frontier figures oddly reminiscent of cowboys in the American west." (Marshall and O'Toole, 2014) The Irish-American film director John Ford tied them together from both sides, interpolating Irish cultural artefacts in his westerns to address the place of Irish immigrants in the US (Kalinak, 2007, pp. 122-3) and using the aesthetics, structures and themes of a western in an Irish context for *The Quiet Man* (González, 2016). Both the American West and the West of Ireland have heavily mythologised in ways deeply tied to national identity: manifest destiny and rugged individualism in the former, the noble simplicity of the Irish peasantry in the latter. These mythologies both attempt to reckon with – or *avoid* reckoning with – colonial history: for the American West, by justifying and romanticising conquest of Native American land, and for the West of Ireland, to claim peripheral communities as an untouched pre-colonial Eden.

Though the western film genre emerges from that mythologised history of the American West, it would be a mistake to reduce the western to propagandising the colonialisation of the West: Kent Jones writes that while the western was "the story that the culture was telling itself through paintings and dime novels and traveling shows and, finally, movies", the genre was "always more a matter of solitude and space and the balance between individualism and community than a matter of conquest." (2013) This point is easily illustrated by the many alternate settings in which the structures and themes of the western have been used, from samurai films (Kaminsky, 1972) to space operas (*Star Wars*) to, as recent Irish films *Black '47* and *Arracht* have shown, the Great Famine. "[T]he Western is ultimately a stripped down moral universe that is, whatever the dramatic problems are, beyond the normal avenues of social control and social alleviation of the problem," director Walter Hill stated, adding that films in contemporary settings retain the essential quality of the western when "you're away from the normal recourse of civil relief to the problem and the characters have to work it out for themselves." (Axmaker, 2005) This sense of an edge of the world setting beyond the scope of the law is clearly invoked in *The Lonesome West*, whose position as the final instalment of the trilogy establishes murder as the norm and legal consequences non-existent in Leenane, "the murder capital of fecking Europe." (p. 38) It is, like a western, a society defined by violence. Welsh, a lone authority figure attempting to enforce some kind of moral order, is analogous to a western sheriff – though closer to the drunken and useless sheriff Dean Jagger plays in *Bad Day at Black Rock* (Sturges, 1955) than the heroic stars of *Rio Bravo* (Hawks, 1959) or *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952). The explicit

gestures towards the western – the title, its relationship to *True West*, the repeated references to western television programme *Alias Smith and Jones* – signpost the play's use of the American western framework.

Through the American western, *The Lonesome West* also deals with "solitude and space and the balance between individualism and community". While Valene and Coleman are myopically individualist, Fr. Welsh attempts to build some kind of community, as Pocock outlines, a "humanitarian ... concerned with community-building activities on the level of bingo and team sports … moved to despair by his love for a town full of human beings who insist on destroying themselves and each other." (p. 73) But the differences the comparison to the western highlight are significant. Both the American West and the West of Ireland are places defined by colonialism and migration, but in fundamentally different ways. Where the American West is mythologised as a new frontier to be conquered, the West of Ireland is the economically and socially marginalised periphery of a postcolonial nation. Where the American West is a place to go to, the West of Ireland is a place to leave. Valene previously emigrated to England, where he saw *Alias Smith and Jones* (p. 30). Characters who stay in Leenane frequently die by suicide, like Welsh or Tom Hanlon, or by murder, like Coleman and Valene's father, Mag, or Oona, or lose their mind, like Girleen or Maureen.

Because of this, it is easy to interpret McDonagh's Leenane – and by extension, his representation of Ireland – as bleak, desolate and unliveable, shoring up claims that he takes a colonial perspective that depicts Irish people as savages, a late-capitalist equivalent of a *Punch* cartoon. But the Leenane trilogy is ultimately most concerned with how international political, social, cultural and economic shifts affect both the material experiences of Irish people and the very nature of Irishness. Colonialism and neocolonialism, mass emigration and mass media, globalisation and nationalism: all of these haunt Irish experience through their ability to generate and repress trauma. But the Leenane Trilogy does not, ultimately, frame this as a hopeless condition which necessitates fleeing Ireland. The living, as Girleen tells us, have an unwritten future ahead of them.

Chapter 2: Aran Island plays

McDonagh followed the Leenane Trilogy with the Aran Island plays: though conceived as and often referred to as a trilogy (Dening, 2001), this is in a much looser sense than the Leenane Trilogy's tightly interconnected plots. Rather, the plays are set on each of the three Aran Islands, across different time periods and each wholly self-contained: *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1999), a comedy-cum-tragicomedy set alongside the production of the 1934 film *Man of Aran*; *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), a blackly comic story of a Republican paramilitary seeking revenge for the apparent death of his beloved cat, taking place in the contemporaneous 1990s; and *The Banshees of Inisheer*, which remains unpublished and unproduced because, according to McDonagh, it "isn't any good." (O'Toole, 2006, p. 44) McDonagh would, however, later appropriate the title for his 2022 film *Banshees of Inisherin*, discussed in Chapter Four. Ireland's postcolonial status is ever-present in the Leenane Trilogy, but it is primarily the context in which the plays take place. The Aran Island plays go further, foregrounding postcolonial concerns in their central narratives. *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* are centrally about the construction and dismantling of Irish nationalist beliefs, within Ireland and among the Irish diaspora. In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, that is at the site of the representation, perception and authenticity of the Irish rural poor, and in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, it's regarding understanding of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and republican paramilitary violence. Both plays engage with the "relentless back-and-forth" that Royona Mitra identifies as the "new" in "New Interculturalism" (2015, p. 15). McDonagh's "doubly inauthentic" (Arrowsmith, 2006, p. 237) diasporic Irishness gives his interrogation of authenticity and representation in *Cripple* a self-reflexive quality, given all the more bite in *Lieutenant*'s focus on the relationship between nationalism, masculinity and violence. Karen O'Brien notes that the Aran Islands "occupy a unique and dual position of marginality and liminality" off the west coast of Ireland, in a literal geographical sense inhabiting "an indeterminate space between America and Europe." (2006, p. 169) This marginality has often been used to claim that the islands represent a more authentic Irishness, untouched by a colonial rule whose centre of operations was on the other side of the country. But McDonagh flips this on its head: the Aran Islands' liminality becomes a geographical representation of the mess of intercultural relations inevitably caused by colonialism, migration and globalisation, and a site to interrogate a national mythos that at once valorises, distorts and disregards the area's population.

The Cripple of Inishmaan

Taking a step westward on the map and several steps backwards in time, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, the second of McDonagh's plays to be staged, takes place on the island of its title in 1934 (p. 5). *The Cripple of Inishmaan*'s titular character, Billy, is a seventeen-year-old boy who has "one arm and one leg crippled" (p. 9), apparently congenitally: when Billy asks the local doctor if his disability was caused by his father punching his pregnant mother in the belly, the doctor gives the vague yet apparently definitive answer, "Disease caused you to turn out the way you did, Billy … Don't go romanticising it." (p. 60) Jordan notes that though his disability is not specified in the text, "in performance all actors playing the part

display apparent deformities." (p. 52) Billy lives with his aunts, Kate and Eileen, who run a "small country shop" on the island (p. 5), and is in love with the pretty, brash and often violent Helen. Where each of the entries in the Leenane Trilogy have four characters, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* sprawls out to include an ensemble of nine, and though Billy is nominally the protagonist, it takes what Caridad Svich calls a "de-centred" approach, with characters effectively taking turns as lead (1998, p. 76). Its setting, too, goes from claustrophobic cottage kitchens to, as Joan FitzPatrick Dean outlines, include a busy shop, the shore, Mammy O'Dougal's bedroom, a church hall, and a Hollywood hotel room (2007, pp. 28-9). Christopher Murray notes that *The Cripple of Inishmaan* is a play about gossip (2006, p. 82) – but more than that, the play *consists* of gossip: almost none of the plot's events take place on stage, and instead are narrated to us by characters who witnessed or heard what happened. Exposition becomes the body of the work: Svich describes characters throughout the play as "enter[ing] and exit[ing] scenes with 'news'… subsequently repeated to every other character" (1998, p. 77). The most substantial bit of news, of course – "the biggest piece of news" Billy has ever heard (p. 11) – is that the film *Man of Aran* is being made on the neighbouring island of Inishmore.

Through its interpolation and critique of *Man of Aran*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* explores Irish identity in terms of representation and authenticity. *Man of Aran* was the third of director Robert J. Flaherty's ethnographic features, following *Nanook of the North* (1922), often called the first documentary feature film (MacKay, 2017, p. 249), and *Moana* (1926). Documentary, always a thorny term to define – "perhaps the oldest and slipperiest concept," as Jonathan Kahana writes, "in the history of cinema's public and commercial modes and genres" (2006, p. 1) – was in its infancy in this period: as Dean W. Duncan outlines, the genre as we know it had not yet been defined, with non-fiction film dominated by short travelogues or industrial-life portraits (1999). Flaherty's work is often criticised as falling so short of the standards of authenticity associated with documentaries as to hardly meet the definition (Aitken, 2013, p. 254). This slipperiness allows for an apparent contradiction to exist: the term "documentary" was first used to describe Flaherty's work (Gunning, 2006, p. 53), and his films are perhaps more accurately described as fictional documentaries or docufiction. For *Nanook of the North*, *Moana* and *Man of Aran*, Flaherty constructed fictional scenarios and cast individuals in various roles: as Robin MacKay writes regarding *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty attempted to recreate a traditional Inuit life untouched by interaction with outsiders or technology, casting unrelated Inuit people as a family, filming them hunting with harpoons instead of guns, and anachronistically portraying Nanook (real name Allakariallak) being "amazed" by a gramophone record (p. 253). Flaherty employed the same approach for *Moana*, filmed in Samoa, and – despite his own Irish background – for *Man of Aran*. Flaherty, Lance Pettitt writes, "was an Irish-American adventurer … who unconsciously deployed a colonial discourse in representing native Irish people, undifferentiated from Inuits and Polynesians." (2000, p. 80) Pettitt's position on Flaherty rhymes with critiques, like those of Victor Merriman (1999) or Mary Luckhurst (2004), of McDonagh's portrayal of the west of Ireland as essentially neo-colonial: McDonagh, similarly, could be dubbed an Irish-English adventurer unconsciously deploying a colonial discourse in representing native Irish people. Though *Cripple of Inishmaan* was

written in 1994 in the same period as the Leenane Trilogy, this parallel lends the play a self-reflexive, almost metatheatrical quality – McDonagh's evisceration of *Man of Aran* becomes a vehicle for laying out his own diasporic, postcolonial representation.

Like Flaherty's previous documentaries, *Man of Aran* portrays its subjects as a remote, traditional community surviving in extreme conditions – and, indeed, stages events to this end. The film's major set piece, depicting the islanders hunting sharks, "portrayed an activity that had disappeared so long ago that the islanders knew neither how to make nor use harpoons and had to be taught the skills of the hunt" (Kimball, 1977). If the film's characters have any interiority, it is, as Patrick Russell notes in *Sight and Sound*, inaccessible and irrelevant, "their relationships to one another as archetypal as their relationships to land and to sea." (2011, p. 87) Though the film precedes the US's emergence as a superpower after World War II – the impendence of which is driven home in the play by an off-hand reference to Adolf Hitler coming to power in Germany (p. 34) – in *Cripple*, it presages the American cultural hegemony endemic throughout the twentieth century and beyond: the seeds of what is to come are here, most especially, how national identity is constructed in the context of the US-based transnational culture industry. In his essay on the "trope" of authenticity in Irish culture (2001), Colin Graham positions authenticity as playing key but opposing ideological roles in colonisation and post-colonial independence: in the former, the culture of the colonised is framed as inauthentic, illegitimate and even, in the words of David Lloyd, "falling short of the concept of the human" (1993, p. 112) in order to justify colonisation (p. 59); in the latter context, a reversal takes place, with claims to authenticity underpinning "the conceptual and cultural denial of dominance" (p. 60). Set closer to the establishment of the Irish Free State than any of McDonagh's works prior to *Banshees of Inisherin*, Irishness – and attendant notions of authenticity – in *Cripple* is in a delicate stage of postcolonial identity formation. The running gag of characters saying "Ireland mustn't be such a bad place, so…" if Yanks (p. 11), French fellas (p. 15), coloured fellas (p. 25), German fellas (p. 34), or sharks (p. 50) want to come to Ireland – an oppositional, defensive framing, arguing against an unseen, unheard but implicitly present belief in Irish inferiority – reflects an insecurity internalised from Ireland's historical subjugation, the scars of which are still fresh in the early years of the Free State: behind the joke, as Christopher Murray notes, lies "an age-old, colonialist shame and lack of self-esteem which McDonagh mocks and defuses." (2006, p. 90) Into this delicate moment, *Man of Aran* feeds an essentially American conception of Ireland back to Ireland through cinema, the key medium in the US's developing cultural hegemony. Simultaneous to its claim to representing an untouched authentic Irishness, *Man of Aran*, as Lonergan points out, places itself in a lineage with Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, self-consciously appealing to American myth (p. 63). As outlined in chapter one with reference to Stuart Hall and Naomi Klein, one of the forms US cultural hegemony can take, rather than replicating Americanness globally, is the absorption of international differences into an overarching American conception of the world. *Man of Aran* exemplifies this in an Irish context: it presents an American view as a universal perspective on the specificities of the west of Ireland.

The Cripple of Inishmaan attacks this, deconstructing the film's presentation of the Aran Islands through the characters criticising its misrepresentation of their lives. *Cripple* stages its ensemble watching *Man of Aran*, which as Lonergan notes, "uses the islanders' critical distance from the film" (p. 64) to direct the audience not to uncritically accept what they see. "It's rare off Ireland you get sharks," Bartley says during the shark-hunting scene, "This is the first shark I've ever seen off Ireland." (p. 50) Shortly after, Helen throws eggs at the screen (p. 51). But, similar to the tension between the imposition of global hegemonic culture and desire for that culture in the Leenane Trilogy, *Cripple*'s characters criticise the inauthenticity of *Man of Aran* even as they speak about the film's very falsity as a glossy, exotic thrill elsewhere in the play. The USA is talked about as a kind of faraway fairy-tale land, the kind of place that has sweets and technology and advancement far beyond Ireland's, whether that's Mintios, Yallow-mallows (p. 13) or telescopes (p. 17). When Billy returns from America, Bartley asks Billy to tell him "all about how great America is" (p. 56). All this lends an air of excitement and even flattery to receiving American attention. The characters are aware of the fictionality of Flaherty's documentary, talking about islanders being cast in acting roles. This is discussed casually and as self-evident, without any pretence of the film simply recording reality. The filmmakers will "make film stars of whosoever should be chose to take part in it and will take them back to Hollywood then and be giving them a life free from work, or anyways only acting work which couldn't be called work at all, it's only talking", according to Johnnypateenmike (p. 10), ruling himself out despite his "famed oratory skills [which] could outdo any beggar on the Dublin stage" (p. 11). This framing of acting as "talking" is notable, because *Man of Aran* is only nominally a sound film: as Russell notes, like most 1930s documentaries, it was shot silent (p. 87). It features intertitles – standard in the silent film era – and the dialogue added in post-production is largely unintelligible mumbling in English and unsubtitled Irish. This fits within the film's broader colonial discourse: the subaltern, in *Man of Aran*, may not speak (Spivak, 2010). *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, in contrast, is almost exclusively dialogue-driven – consisting of gossip about off-stage events – exemplifying McDonagh's ability to capture the distinct rhythms of Hiberno-English. It is tempting to read this as McDonagh granting a voice to a people silenced or made unintelligible by Flaherty, positioning himself as authentic and legitimate in contrast to a Flaherty's unconscious colonialism: the good and worthy member of the Irish diaspora against the neo-colonial "Irish-American adventurer".

But McDonagh's critique is double-edged. Rather than staking claim to authenticity by critiquing Flaherty's inauthenticity, he takes apart the very idea of an authentic Irish identity. Despite its misrepresentation of its subjects, *Man of Aran*, as James Carney convincingly argues, nonetheless acted as a foundation myth for the nascent Irish Free State: "the general consensus" among prominent nationalists on the film's premiere was "that Flaherty's work offered an appreciation of 'authentic' Irishness that was untainted by the reductive stereotypes of traditional literature, drama and film", contrasting the noble perseverance of the Man of Aran with the comic drunken Paddy archetype (2012, p. 73). The contrast is illuminating: both sets of images are, in essence, colonial discourses, substituting Paddywhackery with the noble savage, "an idealized rather than a debased stereotype." (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007, pp. 192-3) The appeal this colonial imagery

had to the Irish imagination is bound up in postcolonial claims of authenticity. The film fit within broader cultural nationalist projects, part of what Graham calls "a process of reclamation, restaking the grounds for Irishness, 'proving' Irish authenticities" (p. 66). Lonergan writes that Gaelic Revival figures like WB Yeats viewed the Aran Islands as "a site where an authentic Irish identity might be retrieved and then re-transmitted, first to Ireland and then to the world." (p. 58) *Cripple of Inishmaan* is in stark opposition to this valorisation of the Irish peasantry, taking, as O'Toole writes, "a sardonic view of the gap between the filmmaker's heroic imagery and the pettiness of the natives." (2006, p. 40) Its characters are stupid, cruel and crass. They casually talk about clerical sex abuse, with Helen claiming that Billy is too unattractive to be assaulted by a priest (p. 16). As Mária Kurdi notes, Helen – sexually promiscuous, mean-spirited, egg-throwing – is a subversion of "the kind-hearted, bashful while vigorous, yet certainly virginal Irish country colleen" of nineteenth century sentimental literature (2006, p. 111). In subverting ideas and images that themselves were constructed in opposition to colonial de-authentication of Irish culture, McDonagh risks reinscribing that colonial de-authentication, of which Victor Merriman, Susan Conley or Mary Luckhurst have accused him (1999; 2006; 2004). This tension inverts the tension at play in *Man of Aran*: the film both appeals to this romantic nationalism and reinscribes a colonial, outsider perspective on the Irish rural poor. This apparent contradiction rings true with Flaherty's membership of the Irish diaspora, prefiguring John Ford's *The Quiet Man* albeit with, as Pettitt notes, an emphasis on austerity and self-reliance over idyllic communal life (p. 80). All of this makes *Man of Aran* an obvious target for McDonagh's derision: a romantic nationalist epic built on knowingly false conceptions of isolationist national purity.

In addition to its allegedly being untainted by anti-Irish stereotypes in literature and film, *Man of Aran* presents life on the islands as untainted by British colonialism: much as *Nanook of the North* relied on the fiction that the Inuit people had no interaction with outside technology, *Man of Aran* relies on the islands as an untouched, pre-colonial – even pre-modern – Eden. Graham argues that appeals for authenticity are generally set against postmodernity and mass media (p. 71). *Man of Aran*, however, attempts to appeal to authenticity *through* globalised mass media representation. Its very existence contradicts itself: it claims to represent a pure, unmediated pre-coloniality while being part of what its own perspective presents as impurifying modernity. Ultimately *Cripple*'s criticism of the film's authenticity becomes a vehicle for a broader critique. *Cripple* is "a damning critique of Flaherty's documentary, which is attacked for misrepresenting life on the Aran Islands", Lonergan writes, "Yet rather than presenting an alternative vision of that life – rather than revealing 'the truth' – McDonagh instead criticises *all* forms of representation that lay claim to authenticity." (p. 61) *Cripple of Inishmaan* marks McDonagh's most complete refutation of the idea of the retrieval of pre-colonial existence, that somewhere out on Ireland's periphery there is a purer, truer yet monolithic national identity, untouched by colonialism, migration and globalisation. "Distinctions between pure and impure practices are not produced by intercultural relations," as Leo Cabranes-Grant writes in the context of colonial Mexico, "they are already there as part of a complex chain of networking operations that flow through, against, and because of them" (2016, p. 5). *Cripple of Inishmaan* argues that

representation of Ireland is always already intercultural. In this place and time romanticised as exemplifying authentic Irishness – immortalised as such in *Man of Aran* – the characters exclusively speak English; Bartley has an aunt in Boston, Massachusetts who sent him "seven mintios in a package" (p. 13); and, of course, Yanks (p. 11), French fellas (p. 15), coloured fellas (p. 25), German fellas (p. 34), and sharks (p. 50) come to stay. The character names are a hodgepodge of Gaelic, British and European origin: Kate is an English name that could be a shortened form of the Irish name Caitlín; Eileen is an Irish name, anglicised from Eibhlín; Johnnypateenmike combines names of predominantly non-Irish origin is a distinctly Irish way, using the diminutive "-een" derived from the Irish "-ín", a suffix meaning small. The naming of the character Helen, as Kurdi notes, evokes both Helen of Troy – her beauty and the corresponding war and destruction – and Yeats's writings about Maude Gonne, whom he compared to Helen of Troy (p. 110). And, of course, there is Billy, whose name naturally calls to mind the Protestant unionist community. What McIvor calls New Interculturalism's "assumption of permanent unfixity" (2019, p. 12) is brought to life in opposition to both nationalist and neo-colonial conceptions of a pure, authentic Irishness.

This is further clarified when read alongside another axis on which the play explores ideas of authenticity and representation: disability. *Cripple* is the first of several McDonagh works to feature physically or mentally disabled characters,[2] followed by *The Pillowman* (2003), *In Bruges* (2008), *A Behanding in Spokane* (2011), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri* (2017), and *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (2018). As David J. Connor notes, *Cripple of Inishmaan*'s title alone "is so disability-in-your-face." (2009, p. 1) Billy's disability, though unspecified, is central to both his character and the play: a constant target of demeaning insults and, from his aunts, patronising sentimentality, Jordan notes that the community collectively maintain Billy's marginalisation and discomfort in his body (p. 52). It is important to locate this within the long, complex history of disability imagery in Irish culture and representations of Ireland. In her journal article on disability in early twentieth-century Irish drama, Emma Creedon outlines the history of colonial imagery associating Irishness and the disabled, deviant or non-normative body, exacerbated by the aesthetic uses of "starvation and bodily degeneration" during the Great Famine (2020, p. 59). "Cartoons, such as those produced in *Punch* magazine depicted the Irish 'Fenian' male as physically stunted and underdeveloped, animalistic and anarchic," Creedon writes, "while Britain is often personified as a paternalistic middle-class gentleman who physically dominates the seditious Fenian." (p. 60) Partially in response to this, Gaelic revivalists espoused a "disciplined hegemonic masculinity" that countered both feminised and disabled imagery of Ireland: Creedon notes the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association as key to this

[2] I am primarily using identity-first, rather than person-first, language throughout this dissertation (i.e. "disabled person" rather than "person with a disability"). As Best, Mortenson, Lauzière-Fitzgerald and Smith outline, identity-first language is the preference of the majority in the disability rights movement, particularly outside the United States (2022, p. 127). While person-first language is a well-intentioned attempt to reduce disability stigma, it "may have overcorrected to the point of further stigmatizing disability as a part of human identity", as Andrew Jenks argues, adding that "No other diverse groups are described using people-first language" (2013, p. 237). As Morton Ann Gernsbacher notes, person-first language is very rarely used for non-disabled people, and is most often used for the most stigmatised disabilities (2017). In contrast to this, identity-first language, as Best et al. write, adheres to the social model of disability (i.e. that it is society which is disabling, rather than an innate individual characteristic), to disability pride, and to disability culture (p. 127).

campaign (p. 60), as well as how disability was depicted in Abbey Theatre productions such as those of Yeats and Lady Gregory, generally functioning as national metaphor (p. 61). She goes on to frame Seán O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* as a response to this tendency in the Gaelic Revival, with Johnny's war wounds challenging nationalist assumptions about male bodies even as they are a result of that same ideology: his disability, too, "operates as a metaphor … for a crippled nation – his broken body highlights Ireland's fragmentation and inability to self-govern." (p. 63) *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, with its central interest in Irish authenticity and its "disability-in-your-face" title, demands consideration within this long and varied association between Ireland and disability, in the form of either the fitness of its people or the health of its body politic.

Creedon mentions *The Cripple of Inishmaan* as continuing, in the character of Cripple Billy, the tradition in Irish theatre of identifying disabled characters by their physical impairments (p. 56). Yet the play and its treatment of Billy do not fit neatly into any of the trends she outlines. He is funny but not "the Comic Relief"; he is more capable than people assume but not "the Inspirational Overcomer"; he is kind-hearted but not "the Sweet Innocent" (p. 64) – indeed, his sexual desire for Helen is a core part of the play's plot. He is not, as Svich dismisses him, a "shy Dickensian waif" (p. 77): Connor describes it as "satisfying" to see a disabled protagonist who is not presented as pitiful (p. 1). Though characters refer to Billy as "Cripple Billy," he objects, wanting to be known as simply Billy (p. 28). Critics have attempted to interpret Billy's disability as, if not national allegory, then certainly metaphorically significant. Jordan, while emphasising the importance of not regarding Billy's disability "as an easy form of enfreakment," nevertheless argues that it makes "prominent the grotesque" (p. 52), highlighting the grotesquery in the community and by extension in Ireland generally. There is a certain merit to this – on his return, Billy says, "there are plenty round here just as crippled as me, only it isn't on the outside it shows" (p. 58), associating his physical impairment with the emotional, intellectual and moral impairment of the community. Karen O'Brien argues that Billy's "disfigured body" represents Ireland's unrepresentable "trauma excluded from *Man of Aran*." (2006, p. 176) This, too, is convincing, positioning Billy's disability as outside of the pre-colonial Eden as Flaherty's film represents the Aran Islands. But rather than treating the play's representation of disability as pointing outside itself towards national identity, I would like to consider disability as an axis on which the play explores similar themes of authenticity and representation as it does in relation to nationality: not close enough to be directly allegorical or interdependent, but interwoven and mutually illuminating, each sharpening the other.

The Cripple of Inishmaan, Laura Eldred observes (2007, p. 115), contains a direct, somewhat historically implausible reference to Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932): Bobby tells Billy regarding taking him to the filming of *Man of Aran*, "I did see a film there one time with a fella who not only had he no arms and no legs but he was a coloured fella too." (pp. 24-5) *Freaks*, set backstage at a circus with a sharp social delineation between disabled "freaks" and abled-bodied performers, centres on a dwarf who aspires to marry an able-bodied trapeze artist who finds his "freakishness" disgusting. It was a box office bomb and critical failure on release – with *The Hollywood Reporter* dubbing it an "outrageous onslaught upon the feelings, the senses, the brains and the stomachs of an audience" (Smith, 2012, p. 209) –

but underwent a major reassessment beginning in the 1960s, both for its masterful filmmaking and its sympathetic, humanising depiction of people with disabilities. Jon Towlson argues that the negative reaction to *Freaks* was rooted in the then-popular eugenics movement, which the film rejects in part through its disruption of the voyeuristic impulse of the freak show by portraying the disabled characters in the activities of everyday life, "dispelling the initial shock and revulsion, and encouraging the viewer to see the freaks as individuals … rather than objects on display." (2014, p. 25) In 1968, Andrew Sarris wrote that *Freaks* "may be one of the most compassionate movies ever made." (1996, p. 229) Eldred argues that *Cripple of Inishmaan*'s reference to *Freaks* exists "in order to alert viewers to extensive thematic parallels" between the two (p. 115). If *Man of Aran* is the key reference in considering representation and authenticity for Irishness in *Cripple of Inishmaan*, *Freaks* acts as its mirror for disability. While *Man of Aran* was exalted at the time as an authentic representation, from the present it appears distinctly neo-colonial; *Freaks* was viewed as outrageous and revolting at its time, but from the present, appears deeply compassionate to the marginalised and the oppressed. Genre is a key aspect, here: if the play criticises the misrepresentation at play in Flaherty's documentary, it appeals to a once-disreputable shock horror like *Freaks* as, if not authentic, then truthful – a defense of storytelling in general and horror in particular that is expanded on in *The Pillowman*.

Authenticity and representation in terms of Irishness and disability are most directly addressed by Billy's experience in Hollywood. In Act 2, Scene 2, Billy delivers a monologue, apparently close to death, addressing his late mother – a monologue which is subsequently revealed to be for a screen test for a Hollywood film. Generally, this monologue is presented so as the audience assumes it to be true within the world of the play – an assumption which McDonagh turns on its head when Billy complains that monologue was a stage-Irish "rake of shite", mockingly saying, "An Irishman I am, begora! With a heart and a spirit on me not crushed be a hundred years of oppression. I'll be getting me fecking shillelagh next..." (p. 56) As Lonergan writes, "what we have taken for 'the real' was … a rehearsal for an audition for a performance of a script that would be made into a film that would mediate the real world through art." (p. 65) Elsewhere, Lonergan notes that this reversal encourages the audience to be critical while viewing mediated images of Ireland, a interpretative perspective vital to McDonagh's own plays (2007, p. 165). It makes clear that McDonagh's critique of *Man of Aran*'s inauthenticity rejects all representational authenticity, disrupting any audience attempt to interpret *Cripple of Inishmaan* as authentic by duping the audience into interpreting "begora" stage Irishness as part of the play's reality and pulling the rug out from under them.

This same reversal constitutes the play's most direct engagement with disability politics. On Billy's return to Inishmaan, he explains that the Hollywood filmmakers didn't want him, instead casting "a blonde lad from Fort Lauderdale" who "wasn't crippled at all." (p. 58) According to Billy, they said a ruder variation of "Ah, better to get a normal fella who can act crippled than a crippled fella who can't fecking act at all." (p. 58) The fact that the audience most likely took Billy's monologue as true calls into question the idea that Billy's acting was bad, or indeed, that the blonde lad from Fort Lauderdale was superior, planting the possibility that Billy was passed over primarily due to ableism. Creedon argues that the

practice of casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles places the emphasis of their performance on "the actor's competency in imitating the physical disability" rather than the character, while reinforcing the non-disabled body as "the embodied habitual norm" to which the actor returns (p. 65). While Creedon is perhaps too definitive in her condemnation of non-disabled actors in disabled roles, her point is generally sound: disabled roles appeal to non-disabled actors as demonstrations of their skill, and the assumption of the abled body as normative underpins discrimination against disabled actors. Though the play seemingly critiques this in its script, this has rarely carried over to performance. Connor notes the irony that while Billy "laments his loss of the intended part as a cripple in a film to a non-disabled actor", the actor playing Billy at the production he is reviewing "walked effortlessly onto the stage" during curtain call (p. 1). But while Creedon describes non-disabled actors in disabled roles as not "committing to accurate representations of reality" (p. 64), *Cripple of Inishmaan*'s interest in disability reflects the play's broader scepticism of authentic representation. Billy's mocking of the stage-Irishness of the film he auditioned for is implicitly a mocking of its stereotypical disabled representation, too: amongst the Irish stereotypes, the monologue refers to Billy's body as "broken" and asks, "I do wonder would they let cripple boys into Heaven at all. Sure, wouldn't we only go uglifying the place?" (p. 48) If the filmmakers cast Billy, they would no doubt have presented this as an authentic representation of disability. But as with national identity, disability is a socially constructed category whose boundaries are unfixed and fluid. Disability is "an unstable category", as Lennard J. Davis writes, that does not "really have internal coherence" due to the ambiguous number of conditions that can be classed as disabilities (2013, p. 271). When Billy says that others in the community are "just as crippled" as he is, "only it isn't on the outside it shows" (p. 58), it is in part a nod to how simultaneously arbitrary and unstable the divide between disabled and abled is. Ed Gonzalez writes that *Freaks* is distinguished by its "blistering humanity and the audacious aesthetic and philosophical lengths to which Browning goes to challenge the way we define beauty and abnormality." (2003) Just as *Cripple* challenges perceptions of "authentic" Irishness, it, like *Freaks*, challenges societal definitions of abnormality. As with national identity, there is no singular, pure, authentic experience of disability.

Davis further argues that "the instability of the category of disability" is "a subset of the instability of identity in a postmodern era" (p. 272) – opening up the possibility of "a malleable view of the human body and identity." (p. 273) This resonates with *The Cripple of Inishmaan*'s approach to identity – and McDonagh's approach to identity throughout his work – and illuminates how disability in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* clarifies Irishness in the play. While Sara Keating positions postcolonial and postmodern readings of McDonagh's plays as oppositional (2006, p. 281), McDonagh's interest in the instability, fluidity and impurity of Irish identity in the context of colonialism, migration and globalisation both engages in a tradition of postcolonial literature and postmodern instability in identity. Irishness is not just malleable, but constantly reconfigured, reformed, and reconstituted in different contexts. There is no truly authentic representation, and indeed, the goal of authentic representation is cast with suspicion. There is only a cultural palimpsest onto which to scratch a new layer.

The Lieutenant of Inishmore

The Lieutenant of Inishmore, though written in the same period in 1994 as the Leenane Trilogy, the other Aran Island plays and *The Pillowman*, remained unproduced until 2001. In the play, seventeen-year-old Davey appears to find dead Wee Thomas, a cat belonging to republican paramilitary Padraic, setting off a chain of events that result in copious bloodshed – exemplifying what McDonagh called a desire to get "as much John Woo and Sam Peckinpah into the theatre as possible" (Lonergan, 2007, p. 154). McDonagh claims the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Court rejected the play on the grounds that its portrayal of Irish republican paramilitaries made it "too dangerous to be done", though they deny this, saying it was simply an issue of quality control (Lonergan, 2006, p. 65). Lonergan casts doubt on both these accounts, citing on one hand the Royal Court and the Royal National Theatre's penchant for controversy and, on the other, how its quality compares to McDonagh works produced by those companies (2006, p. 69). The *Irish Times* report that McDonagh also initially offered the play to Druid, who had staged the Leenane Trilogy's premieres, but that Garry Hynes passed possibly because of its political sensitivity (Keating, 2020). In part because of this contentious origin, scholarship on *Lieutenant* has predominantly analysed the play in the context of its controversy or, indeed, analysed the controversy above the play itself. Alongside these debates, Mary Luckhurst's influential argument that *Lieutenant of Inishmore* marks McDonagh as "a thoroughly establishment figure" catering to English prejudices about Ireland (2004) has emerged as a pillar of *Lieutenant* scholarship, whether to cite straightforwardly or, as Catherine Rees has done (2006), to deconstruct and counter Luckhurst's argument. Despite being one of McDonagh's most written-about works, surprisingly little has moved beyond this foundational critical dichotomy. The play's contemporary politics – or lack thereof – and McDonagh's right – or lack thereof – to write it has dominated over its portrayal of masculinity's relationship to violence, its perspective on the construction of history, or the interest in queerness and gender non-conformity running throughout. Not only has the neglect of these themes limited the scope of *Lieutenant* scholarship, it has failed to deepen the debates that the controversy of the play's inception, and Luckhurst, sparked.

Much of Luckhurst's critique consists of intellectualisation of her distrust and distaste for McDonagh's black comic sensibilities: she pre-empts criticism that she "need[s] to work on [her] sense of humour" by arguing that farce should not preclude the presence of serious political debate (p. 36). This trope in McDonagh scholarship reached its nadir with Paul Murphy arguing that there needs to be an apparent underlying "message" to justify *A Skull in Connemara*'s brutality (2006, p. 62), a theory he takes far enough to assert that any defence of Mel Brooks' *The Producers* as anti-Nazi satire is untenable (p. 75). In Luckhurst's case, this is combined with an anxiety about English perceptions of the play, regardless of whether these perceptions are justified by the play itself: "At the Barbican I was chilled by the raucous laughter of the audience, who were baying for blood. 'How typically Irish!' was not an uncommon exclamation in the interval and it was not attached to specific

condemnation of the INLA but a judgement about the madcap antics of the characters." (p. 40) Here, she attributes the anti-Irish prejudice of English theatre audiences to McDonagh pandering to that prejudice. Further, she presents McDonagh's frank desire to make an income from his plays as a sinister scheme to exploit that prejudice for money (pp. 34-5), rather than as a working-class playwright wanting to be paid fairly for his work in a sector dogged both with the exploitation of unpaid and underpaid labour and the expectation that exploited artists feel grateful for the opportunity (Gardner, 2016). Though Luckhurst is foremost concerned with English reaction to the play, she makes little effort to analyse how McDonagh's work is received by those who are not – or, like McDonagh, not solely – English, within England or internationally. Her brief aside claiming that McDonagh is "regarded with uneasy distaste by the majority of Irish critics and academics" is supported only by the examples of Fintan O'Toole's "strangely extreme" romanticism and Christopher Morash's argument lacking his "usual conviction" (p. 41). The Irish diaspora's reaction to the play is unmentioned.

Yet *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is birthed from its diasporic context. As Eamonn Jordan outlines, there is a tendency within diaspora communities to reinforce historical injustices and "passionately, if somewhat inaccurately" see them as being repeated in the present, leading to simplistic understanding of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the global Irish diaspora (2013, p. 122). They engage in what Benedict Anderson calls "long-distance nationalism" (1992). The 1972 Wings single "Give Ireland Back to the Irish", written by Englishman of Irish descent Paul McCartney (Spitz, 2005, p. 75), is a typical example: written in response to the killing of civil rights protesters on Bloody Sunday, its lyrics put forward the naïve, simplistic solution of the title (McCartney and McCartney, 1993). McCartney is briefly mentioned in the play when drug dealer James cites his support for cannabis legalisation while Padraic tortures him (p. 14). As I will discuss below, for the Irish diaspora in England particularly, understanding of the Troubles is potentially coloured by the interplay between British and Irish identity in their own, very different context. A "tiny minority" within the Irish diaspora, Jordan notes, financially and militaristically supported Irish republican paramilitaries during the Troubles (p. 122). *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is most clearly understood as a response to this tendency in Irish diasporic communities: exposing the falsity of a romantic nationalism that relies on an ignorance that is easy to maintain from afar, what Henry McDonald calls the "'Brits Out' bar ballad culture that used to exist in north London and south Boston" (2008). Rees describes McDonagh's London Irish background as perfectly positioning him to "interrogate the mythology of Irish drama, while simultaneously able to claim this heritage as his own" (p. 130) – or, as former literary manager of the Royal Court Theatre Graham Whybrow writes, he "writes both within a tradition and against a mythology." (2001, p. x) But this conjoined insider/outsider status also positions McDonagh to both claim and interrogate the distinct mythology of the Irish diaspora, exposing the blood-soaked underbelly of its misty-eyed romanticism. McDonagh himself cites the IRA's 1993 Warrington bombings as an inspiration for the play: "Hang on, this is being done in my name [and] I just felt like exploding in rage." (Jordan, 2013, p. 123) Using "in yer face" theatre tactics, Rees argues, McDonagh savagely attacks the sentimentality underpinning terrorism (p. 133). What Christopher Murray dismisses as

Lieutenant "belatedly … slag[ging] off the IRA" (2006, p. 92) is, firstly, not belated, since the play was written in 1994 shortly after the Warrington bombings, and further, gains newfound urgency and relevance when placed in its diasporic context.

The play presents three distinct forms of Irish identity, all within the nationalist tradition: that found in the Republic of Ireland, that found in Northern Ireland, and, implicitly, that found in the diaspora. Monolithic assumptions about Irish nationalist identity are destabilised in their juxtaposition, exposing the hybridity that exists in all forms of Irishness. The play's main characters – Padraic, the title character, his father Donny, Davey, a local seventeen-year-old, and Davey's sister Mairead – are from Inishmore, though Padraic, who joins the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) after being deemed "too mad" for the IRA, has "been travelling" in the North when the play starts (p. 8). His fellow INLA members Christy, Brendan and Joey are described as "Northern Irish", as is James, the Belfast drug dealer Padraic tortures (p. 2). The identity "Northern Irish," as outlined by Kevin McNicholl, Clifford Stevenson and John Garry, is associated with the post-conflict generation, and has an ambiguity that gives it cross-community appeal, being used by equivalent numbers of Catholics and Protestants (2019, p. 488). Notably, McNicholl et al. refer to "Northern Irish" as a "new" identity while writing in 2019, twenty-five years after *Lieutenant* was written and nearly a century after Northern Ireland's creation (p. 488). It is significant that McDonagh describes these characters as Northern Irish – rather than, for example, being "from Belfast" or similar, as the other characters are described as "from Inishmore" – because this implicitly makes a claim of separateness that goes beyond geography and into the realm of identity. In *Lieutenant*, different forms of Irishness are not more or less legitimate than each other, but there exists a largely unarticulated – and, for nationalists, politically inarticulable – sense of difference between Irish identity on either side of the border. This difference is at its sharpest in how the Troubles are understood: simultaneously visceral, immediate and almost mundane for the Northern Irish characters, while the Inishmore characters either see the conflict as an opportunity for adventuring (Padraic, Mairead) or hold it ambivalently at arm's length (Donny, Davy). Simultaneously, each form of nationalist identity – that found in the Republic, in Northern Ireland, and in the diaspora – is founded upon a distortion of history that the play's matrix of intercultural allusions works to belie.

The Northern Irish characters in *Lieutenant* are, rather than noble freedom fighters, gangsters with a nationalist gloss. This is made clearest regarding the subject that drives a wedge between them and Padraic, what Christy calls "the last straw" (p. 46): the targeting of high-level drug dealers. Christy tells Padraic that "fellas like poor Skank Toby" do a service to the community, adding,

> And don't they pay us a pound on every bag they push to go freeing Ireland for them? Isn't it for everybody we're out freeing Ireland? That's what Padraic doesn't understand, is it isn't only for the schoolkids and the oul fellas and the babes unborn we're out freeing Ireland. No. It's for the junkies, the thieves and the drug pushers too! (p. 30)

Christy allows Padraic to "teas[e] his marijuana gobshites" – such as James, whose toenails Padraic removes for selling marijuana to students at the Tech (p. 13) – but not "the big-time

boys" like Skank Toby (p. 46). This is intuitively backward: a small time drug dealer like James, who sells only marijuana and "at fair rates" (p. 13), has much more of a case for compassion and appeasement than "the big boys" like Skank Toby, who presumably runs a large criminal enterprise. Padraic's inability or refusal to distinguish between James and Toby, Jordan writes, is why he needs to be eliminated (p. 132). For Padraic, drug dealers keep Irish nationalist "youngsters in a drugged-up and idle haze, when it's out on the streets pegging bottles at coppers they should be." (p. 13) For Christy, major drug dealers form a key part of the wider criminal network from which he profits, nominally in the name of "freeing Ireland." Because the INLA receives substantial kickbacks from Toby – effectively incorporating the INLA into the wider criminal organisation – he is not to be touched.

This representation of Irish paramilitaries particularly undermines a romantic perspective on republican paramilitaries within the Irish diaspora. This romanticisation is tied to a diasporic tendency to simplistically view historical injustices replaying in the present, and to hence equate action against those historical injustices and contemporary terrorist action. For instance, as Brian Hanley writes, the Irish-American organisation Noraid, which primarily raised funds for the Provisional IRA, directly linked the treatment of nationalists in Northern Ireland to the historical discrimination against Irish Catholic immigrants in the United States (2004, p. 5). Noraid also continually stressed the military contribution made by the Irish to the United States (p. 5), and linked this directly to supporting contemporary Provisional IRA activities: in 1975, Noraid described its supporters as the direct "descendants" of those who faced the same enemy – the British – at the "Bridge at Concord 200 years ago." (pp. 5-6) In this rhetoric, US military action, civil rights protests in the US and Northern Ireland and Irish terrorism are equivalised, blurring and bleeding together into a valorised fight against injustice. *Lieutenant* deflates this by presenting the INLA as a normative criminal organisation. The references to freeing Ireland, as Rees writes, are "shown to be, in the hands of terrorists, a worthless ideal." (p. 136)

Because of his breach of Toby's immunity, over and above his creation of a splinter group, Christy and Brendan kill what they believe to be Padraic's cat to lure him to Inishmore and execute him. Rachel Monaghan outlines that the IRA began operating an informal justice system in the early years of the Troubles both out of "a need to ensure the organization's own security and survival" and in response to community concerns about crime in nationalist areas (2002, p. 44). She divides the activities for which punishment would be meted out into "political crime" – such as informing or collaborating with the "enemy" – and "normal crime," which encompasses serious offenses like rape as well as trivial "anti-social behaviour" like youths gathering on street corners or playing loud music (pp. 44-45). Jordan writes about republican paramilitary punishment beatings as being conceived of as a substitute for policing – made necessary as the prejudice and violence of the RUC delegitimised their authority in Catholic communities – but that, on the other hand, the system lacks presumption of innocence or the ability to mount a defence, with the presumed-guilty party frequently being killed or disabled (p. 132). Padraic's torture of James (on-stage) and Toby (off-stage) parallels the torture of a police officer in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). As Lonergan notes, Padraic, like *Reservoir Dogs*' Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen), uses a cut-throat razor to torture James in a warehouse (p. 74). His cutting off of

Toby's nose (p. 46) parallels Blonde cutting off his victim's ear. As with the *Se7en* reference in *A Skull in Connemara*, it is unclear if this is McDonagh referencing Tarantino or the character of Padraic emulating the film, with this slipperiness illustrating the dense intercultural matrix McDonagh both creates on stage and highlights in the real world. In *Reservoir Dogs* a psychopathic gangster tortures a police officer, and in *Lieutenant*, Padraic plays the role of legal enforcer to James' and Toby's criminals. But the roles are not reversed so much as shifted: Padraic is both the police officer and psychopathic gangster, the latter undermining the former even as he embodies the latter in order to act out the role of the former. In Martin Scorsese's gangster epic *GoodFellas* (1990), Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) describes the mafia as the police department for people who couldn't go to the police, over the image of child-Henry carrying out orders to petrol-bomb cars: similarly in *Lieutenant*, the legitimising rhetoric of acting as a community police force is ironised by the in-practice brutality. Indeed, as Lonergan (p. 76) and Jordan (p. 130) both note, their legitimising rhetoric is internally incoherent, arbitrarily changing what is considered a legitimate target and incorrectly attributing quotations to Karl Marx (p. 28) or the Jesuits (p. 30), suggesting Christy "doesn't think very deeply about the source of his ideas" (Lonergan, 2012, p. 76).

Lieutenant's characters from the Republic of Ireland have a different relationship to Irish identity, nationalism and the Troubles than the play's Northern Irish characters. Jordan writes that *Lieutenant* seeks to "expose ambivalence and the conspiracy of tacit approval … towards paramilitary actions" in Ireland (p. 139). In addition to Padraic, Mairead is a staunch republican, and arguably the title character (Knox, 2013, p. 372). Prior to the action of the play, she shoots ten cows' eyes out as a political protest against the "meat trade." (p. 19) Though her commitment to political violence may seem similar to Northern Irish republicans, there is a distance baked into that dynamic: she attempts to emulate republican paramilitary action in a radically different context, resulting in farcical terrorist acts like blinding cows. Lonergan writes that she idealises "the culture of Irish republicanism as it exists in Northern Ireland" (p. 75). While not as distinct as that within the diaspora, this idealisation underscores a less visceral, more voyeuristic aspect of contemporary nationalism in the Republic. Setting the play in the Republic "retracts the immediacy of the situation," Rees notes, arguing that the environment of Inishmore says "very little to the audience in terms of justifying terrorism" (p. 136). Mairead's brother Davey and Padraic's father Donny, though clearly of nationalist sympathies, are largely disinterested in violence in Northern Ireland. When Davey asks Donny if the IRA wouldn't admit Padraic "because he was *too* mad" (p. 8), the underlying assumption between the two men is that the IRA are "mad" and that Padraic being deemed "too mad" for the organisation is absurd. Although this contrasts Mairead's attitude, both are made possible through distance, distinction, and an unarticulated and politically inarticulable sense of foreignness: for Mairead, this comes in a voyeuristic idealisation of republicanism in the North, and for her brother, this comes in disengagement, dismissal and scepticism.

While Irish national identity in Northern Ireland and the Republic are "nominally identical" and "with common historical roots" (Todd, 2015, p. 21), the establishment of separate polities has also caused divergence, what Jennifer Todd describes as "creativity and contest exist[ing] within loosely knit symbolic structures that differ in Northern Ireland and in the

Irish state." (p. 37) Nationality in each jurisdiction, Todd argues, is "at once the same … *and* different" (p. 23). Regarding Southerners specifically, Todd finds "historic unease and guilt" towards the North manifests in an attitude that emphasises "ambiguity and negotiability" (p. 35). In *Lieutenant*, the us/them binaries of postcolonial nationhood blur. Southern attitudes to the North are mired in unease, ambiguity and ambivalence, manifesting alternately as voyeuristic fascination and aloofness. Implied in Luckhurst's critique of McDonagh pandering to English critics and audiences who take Lieutenant's characters as representative of Ireland (p. 124) – letting English audiences "off the hook" by reinforcing stereotypes invented to "brutalise a nation and justify colonisation" (p. 121) – and explicit in Mark O'Connell's focus on McDonagh's London upbringing (2023) is a criticism of his distance from the material as a diasporic writer. His background means that he lacks the visceral understanding of the Troubles necessary for a sensitive portrayal, that his Irish plays are a "them" masquerading as an "us." His own diasporic identity blurs the same us/them binaries in a different context, being Irish and British in a way distinct from individuals in Northern Ireland who have elected to identify as both Irish and British.[3] The dialectic between the different backgrounds of *Lieutenant*'s characters undermines that binary and, further, implies that Irish people in the Republic too lack a visceral, intimate understanding of the North, making for a conjoined critique of diasporic romanticism and Republic of Ireland ambivalence.

The three forms of Irish identity at play in *Lieutenant* – that found in the Republic, in Northern Ireland, and in the diaspora – are all marked by hybridity. But the differing relationship between British and Irish identity in Northern Ireland and among the Irish diaspora in Britain is particularly illustrative in how the postcolonial us/them binaries are bent and blurred in the play. Whereas diasporic romanticism frames the Troubles as a battle between the Irish and the British – the "same enemy" that was faced historically, in Noraid's framing – hybridity is an inextricable part of both nationalist and unionist identity in the North. F.C. McGrath describes the unionist community in Northern Ireland as neither the kind of hegemonic settler-colonialists of the US, Canada and Australia nor fully-fledged equal participants in the UK's democracy (2012, p. 464). For McGrath, "Ulster unionists today are neither colonisers nor colonised, but instruments of a colonial power that has lost interest in them, or at least that has become ambivalent about them" – directly comparing this to the Republic of Ireland's ambivalence towards the nationalist community in the North (p. 464). No unionist characters appear in *Lieutenant*, but us/them binaries of British and Irishness are still undermined. McDonagh uses the very hybridity inextricable from Northern Ireland to mediate the relationship between British- and Irishness more broadly, within communities and within individuals. I noted previously that Henry McDonald praises McDonagh for eliding the "'Brits Out' bar ballad culture that used to exist in north London and south Boston" (2008), but of course, there is an inherent tension in how this culture

[3] According to the 2021 census, 31.9% of the population in Northern Ireland identity as British only, 29.1% as Irish only, and 19.8% as Northern Irish only. There was an increase in individuals identifying as British and Northern Irish (to 8.0%), Irish and Northern Irish (1.8%), or British, Irish and Northern Irish (1.5%). Another 0.6% identified as British and Irish only, and 0.7% as some combination of British/Irish/Northern Irish/English/Scottish/Welsh and another national identity. *Census 2021: Main statistics for Northern Ireland Statistical bulletin National identity*, (NISRA), N.I.S.a.R.A. (2022).

exists in London, Britain's imperial power centre. The Irish diaspora in Britain, like many in Northern Ireland, have a hybrid British-Irish nationality, but it is of a fundamentally different character – enabling that self-contradictory "Brits Out" culture. In both cases, a partial disavowal is often made: for unionists, Irishness is disavowed in favour of Britishness, and for the Irish diaspora in Britain, their adopted homeland is disavowed, externalising "Brits" even in the heart of London. Despite the existence of a variety of long-standing hybridised British-Irish identities – in Northern Ireland, among migrants in Liverpool (Belchem, 2007), in Catholic communities in Glasgow and other parts of Scotland (McMenemy and Poulter, 2007) – Britishness and Irishness are often framed as oppositional and even mutually exclusive. In *Lieutenant*, McDonagh's ongoing critique of the notion of a pure, authentic Irishness is sharpened by a multiplicity of Irishnesses, all the same and all different to one another, all hybridised as a consequence of colonialism, migration and globalisation.

Each form of Irishness in *Lieutenant* is shown to distort history for ideological purposes, whether in the form of claiming a history of which you are mostly ignorant or the erasure of the parts of history which are ideologically inconvenient. When Joey expresses misgivings about battering a cat, Christy asks him "how many cats Oliver Cromwell killed in his time": "Lots of cats. And burned them alive. We have a way to go before we're in that bastard's league." (p. 31) The re-conquest of Ireland by Cromwell's forces included land confiscation, forced migration of the native population (Bottigheimer, 1967, p. 12), the transportation of indentured labourers (Maxwell, 2008), and massacres during the 1649 siege of Drogheda (Morrill, 2007). Although Cromwell's personal involvement in the actions of his forces is a subject of historical debate, Cromwell's individual responsibility is a resilient part of folk history in Irish culture, so much so that historian John Cunningham dubbed Cromwell the "bogeyman-in-chief of Irish history." (2010, p. 921) As referred to in *Lieutenant*, he fulfils the role of nationalism's secular Satan, invoked as synonymous with, and responsible for, all evil. When asked how many cats Cromwell killed, Joey immediately says "Lots of cats", though this is clearly not based in actual history – but his bogeyman status means any evil act may be attributed to him without evidence. The play here is not trivialising the crimes committed under Cromwell, but presenting the bogeyman-ising of Cromwell in Irish culture as trivialising, claiming a historical injury without any depth of knowledge or understanding of that history. As Jordan writes, McDonagh does not seek to "efface the role of imperialism or to excuse it" but to "contest the fundamental justification of paramilitary violence and 'freedom fighting' ... which McDonagh sees as clever and fatalistic propaganda." (p. 140) This claiming of historical injury regardless of ignorance of the relevant historical facts enables the wilful distortion of that history for political or ideological purposes: the INLA's killing of a cat is justified by comparison to alleged imperial crimes against cats, regardless of whether those crimes took place. A republican ideological gloss allows the paramilitary's "evad[ing of] its own distinctive barbarism." (Jordan, 2013, p. 135) "And like the fella said," Christy says, "'Don't the ends justify the means?'" (p. 28) In *Lieutenant*, the "treatment of Irish history is not simply riddled with misinformation," Joan Fitzpatrick Dean writes, "but systematically ridicules the cherished pieties of Irish republicanism … This co-option of republican rhetoric is deployed to advance any argument from tolerating drug dealers to loving cats." (p. 32)

More broadly, this misinformation about Irish history is juxtaposed against the characters' intimate familiarity with popular culture: their lives, Lonergan writes, "are so saturated in pop culture that they behave like characters in Hollywood blockbusters." (p. 73) Lonergan particularly notes how Padraic's use of two guns is similar to both *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) and *Face/Off* (Woo, 1997), the torture scene's similarity to *Reservoir Dogs*, and that, like a character from a western, Padraic "confronts his enemies at high noon" (p. 74). Implicit in much republican rhetoric, and in *Lieutenant*'s frequent references to "freeing Ireland", is a desire to return to an untouched pre-colonial Eden, as discussed earlier regarding *Cripple of Inishmaan*. The matrix of allusions in *Lieutenant* undermines the possibility of a pure, untainted or even unitary Irishness. AJ Knox employs the image of "a bricolage" to describe the play, constructed from the Irish drama tradition, folklore, and Tarantino and Woo films (2013, p. 367), to which I would add English theatre, from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* to the work of Joe Orton. Confusingly, Lonergan frames these allusions as part of "a series of jarring contrasts" between the beautification of violence in culture – "by Irish rebel songs, by Motörhead, by spaghetti westerns, by *The Matrix*" (p. 84) – and "reality" (p. 77). "By covering his stage in blood, gore and human body parts," he concludes, "McDonagh is showing us what happens to human bodies when people are killed." (p. 85) But *Lieutenant*, of course, is itself a fictional cultural work that does not depict reality. Further, the violent on-stage acts that Lonergan positions as "reality" are not presented as realist, but as over-the-top, excessive and highly stylised gore, building on a variety of theatrical and cinematic forms including Jacobean and Elizabethan theatre, Grand Guignol (Jordan, 2012), *giallo*, and splatter. Juxtaposed with the characters' ignorance and misunderstanding of Irish history, this web of allusions frames the characters as, like a bricolage, making use of whatever is available in their justification of their actions. While Lonergan writes that Christy's references to both Karl Marx and the Jesuits exposes his ideological incoherence (p. 76), ultimately, even this is too generous: the INLA in *Lieutenant* are not merely ideological incoherent, but hardly ideological at all. Quotations are misattributed to Marx or Ignatius of Loyola to bolster Christy's or the INLA's legitimacy in the moment, not to further even an incoherent political project. Like the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik warns in *Angels in America*, they lack a theory through which to understand the world (Kushner, 2013, p. 137).

Another key aspect of how this ideological and cultural bricolage is assembled is the erasure of the parts of republican history which are ideologically inconvenient – in particular, which contradict a hegemonically masculine conception of Irish history. This erasure of the ideologically inconvenient does not contradict the INLA's fundamental lack of ideology in *Lieutenant*. Rather, the INLA's non-ideological nature underpins the characters' unquestioning reassertion of hegemonic masculinity. In *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (2005, p. 77). She emphasises "currently accepted"' as a fundamental part of this definition, explaining that when "conditions for the defence of patriarchy" are altered by other social forces, the basis for hegemony begins to erode and a new hegemony emerges (p. 77). Hegemonic masculinity, then, is an ever-changing strategy to resist change, a defining feature of the social order that goes unseen. In *Lieutenant*, it is precisely the

absence of a theory through which to understand the world that allows a certain form of masculinity to appear natural, unquestioned, and retain its hegemony.

The particular postcolonial context in which these masculine ideals have formed is key. *Lieutenant*, José Lanters notes, satirises "Irish nationalist identity politics by foregrounding and problematizing the gender and sexual identity of its characters, and by interrogating the republican exclusionary attitude toward women and homosexuals." (2007, p. 18) Though not universal, part of the colonial project in Ireland and elsewhere – notably India – is the feminisation of the native population, contrary to the superior masculinity of the imperial power. Similar to the representations of Irishness as disabled discussed regarding *Cripple*, Ireland has, as Ioana Mohor-Ivan outlines, been represented as feminine since the seventeenth century and – in part due to the influence of Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) – especially from the nineteenth century on (2018, p. 95). This ranges from depicting the Irish nation as feminine, such as Hibernia in *Punch* cartoons, to attributing supposedly feminine qualities like "emotion, irrationality, and lack of self-reliance" to the Irish people, often as part of broader race science claims (pp. 96-7). Building upon political philosopher Ashis Nandy's writings on India, Gerardine Meaney argues that colonial powers "identify their subject peoples as passive, in need of guidance, incapable of self-government, romantic, passionate, unruly, barbarous", all qualities for which both women and Irish people have "been traditionally praised and scorned." (1991, p. 6) Though some of Meaney's specific examples of these qualities associated with the feminine and the colonised subject are weak – barbarousness particularly, though associated with colonised peoples, does not have any apparent relationship to femininity – her analysis rings broadly true. Reacting to this feminisation can frame gender relations in the colonised country long after independence is gained: "Anxiety about one's fitness for a (masculine) role of authority, deriving from a history of defeat or helplessness," Meaney writes, "is assuaged by the assumption of sexual dominance", citing fundamentalist Islam in Muslim-majority former colonies and "sexual conservatism" in post-independence Ireland (p. 7). In this postcolonial context, the "currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy", as Connell puts it, is shaped by how the gender order was configured by empire. For Meaney, the tendency in postcolonial societies "to observe or impose strictly differentiated gender roles" enables the male subjects' assertion of "masculinity and right to power" (p. 7). Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Louise Ryan link this to the desire to recover a pre-colonial Eden, noting that women are "seen as the keepers of the traditional culture" which "has the effect of circumscribing women in specific roles and 'protecting' them from outside influences", while men are positioned as the "guardian[s] of the traditional order" (2002, p. 305). It is in this context that masculine authority is prized in the republican movement – a prizing which McDonagh ridicules for its homophobia and misogyny, revealing it as contemporary hypocrisy and historical falsity.

In *Lieutenant*, Jordan writes, patriotism is aligned with hegemonic heteronomativity, underpinned by homophobic anxieties about male intimacy in conflict situations (p. 131). When Mairead asks if Padraic "prefer[s] boys", he replies, "I do not prefer boys! There's no boy-preferers involved in Irish terrorism, I'll tell you that! They stipulate when you join." (p. 34) While Lonergan reads this as a reference to Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1993) (2007,

p. 165), it is more pointedly a self-conscious erasure of the many important LGBT figures in Irish republican history, including Padraig Pearse, Elizabeth O'Farrell and, most overtly, Roger Casement, after whom Mairead's cat is named, thereby ensuring Casement is forefront in the audience's mind. Padraic's reaction to the idea that he might be attracted to the same gender is the most explicit of many references in the play to anxiety around queerness and gender non-conformity. Both Mairead and Davey have androgynous traits which attract comment and ridicule from other characters. Donny insults Davey, who is described as "long-haired" in the stage directions (p. 3), as having a "girl's mop o' hair" (p. 4). Later, Christy says of Davey, "I remember your girly hair." (p. 21) Davey rides a woman's bicycle, seemingly belonging to his mother (p. 4); it is "pink, with small wheels and a basket." (p. 5) He tells Mairead that although he has "as much concern for the cats of this world" as she does, he keeps quiet about it because otherwise "they'd call me an outright gayboy, and they do enough of that with me hairstyle." (p. 19) Homophobic anxieties are so fraught on Inishmore that even minor deviations from strict gender norms, like a man wearing his hair long, are deemed as threats to hegemonic heteronormativity and so worthy of censure. The apparent allusion to *Reservoir Dogs* in the warehouse torture scene, too, is part of this strain within the play: as Robert Hilferty outlines in his review of the film, *Reservoir Dogs* has an overt if too often ignored gay subtext, noting the "strongly affectionate, even sexual, bond" shared by Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) and Mr. Orange (Tim Roth). "I have never seen such tenderness between two men," he writes, "in an ostensibly straight crime film." (1993) Though *Lieutenant* lacks this kind of intimate same-gender partnership, Hilferty's perspective on the position of homosexuality in the hypermasculine world of *Reservoir Dogs* is instructive in *Lieutenant*'s context: "Because of its insidious latency, and the irrational fear of its expression, homosexuality unyieldingly emerges as a recurrent, structural anxiety for macho sexuality, a thorn in the side of institutionalized heterosexism." In *Lieutenant*, the apparent absence of gay characters does not remove the spectre of homosexuality. Rather, a constant anxiety about, and watchful guard for, queerness upholds its heteronormative world: the erasure of historical queerness and the policing of even minor gender non-conformity both perform this function. But where this anxiety and guardedness is usually the invisible subtext of heterosexist texts, in *Lieutenant*, it is explicit, exposing the intersection of strict gender roles, homophobia and misogyny at play in republican rhetoric.

Mairead is subject to this more so than any character in the play. She has her hair cropped short, which, combined with her slim figure (p. 17), causes Padraic to mistake her for a boy: when she says she's grown up since they last saw each other, he replies, "You have. Upwards if not outwards. From a distance I thought 'What's a boy doing sitting there with lipstick on?', then as I got closer I realised it was a lass, just with shocking hair." (p. 33) Mairead's lipstick is out of character for her: indeed, she is introduced in this scene as being "in lipstick and a little make-up for once." (p. 32) She has feminised her appearance to become a viable romantic prospect for Padraic, asking him to the dance that Friday or to see a film about the Guildford Four – presumably *In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan, 1993) – with her (p. 33). This underscores that, consistent with Meaney's analysis of post-independence Ireland, republican paramilitaries impose strict gender roles and that –

despite her skills as a marksman – Mairead will be evaluated and judged based on her adherence to these gender codes. Padraic says as much explicitly when he tells her they "don't be letting girls in the INLA. … Unless pretty girls." (p. 36) As with Padraic's insistence that there are no "boy preferers" in the republican movement, this erases the role of women in republican history, including Countess Markievicz, Rosie Hackett, or, once again, Elizabeth O'Farrell, as well as the organisation Cumann na mBan. Without explicitly relating the two, Mairead's admiration of Roger Casement is significant in this regard, especially in contrast to Padraic's calling Casement an "oul poof" (p. 65). Much as Padraic reduces Casement to his homosexuality, Padraic reduces women's role to ornament, to "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey, 1999, p. 837). The other INLA members in the play, similarly, are confused by Mairead's gender non-conformity and imagine women as unskilled:

> Christy: Was it a boy or was it a girl?
>
> Brendan: It was a boy with lipstick.
>
> Joey: It was a girl with no boobs, sure.
>
> Brendan: Oh, don't let me be killed by a girl, Sweet Jesus! I'll never live it down. (p. 51)

Considering these anxieties in a diasporic context, there is a clear relationship between the destabilisation of gender and sexuality binaries – through same-gender desire and gender non-conformity – and postcolonial binaries, through hybridity, diaspora and interculturalism. These destabilisations are not merely parallel but interrelated. If imperial discourse cast the Irish as feminine and the English as masculine, and nationalist discourse simply inverted this by laying claim to Irish masculinity, Hilferty's "recurrent, structural anxiety" around queerness is a simultaneous recurrent, structural anxiety about national identity, authority and authenticity. Read or watched this way, Luckhurst's assertion that *Lieutenant* reinforces stereotypes invented to "brutalise a nation and justify colonisation" (p. 121) begins to turn in on itself. Rather than McDonagh's critique of republican paramilitaries being neo-colonial, he exposes the republican movement as reifying imperial structures and ideologies: unquestioningly reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, heterosexism, and misogyny, operating an uneven, violent and hypocritical justice system, justifying their own crimes by comparison with the empire's. They do not seek to rid the world of the power structures created by colonialism but, as he would later depict in *The Banshees of Inisherin*, to paint red post boxes green – and make a profit along the way. The play is interested in both what Knowles' "contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures" (2010, p. 4) and between strictly enforced gender roles. In *Lieutenant*, the INLA's hostility to one is its hostility to the other.

The Aran Island plays do not form a meaningful trilogy in the way the Leenane plays do – and not just because they have only two instalments. But juxtaposing *Lieutenant* and *Cripple* is a useful tool of analysis because, at either ends of a century, both plays attack a nationalist ideology that uncritically mirrors imperialist or neocolonial ideas and social structures: in *Cripple*, a neocolonial American perspective like *Man of Aran* is be taken for representational authenticity, and in *Lieutenant*, Irish history is rewritten to erase women

and queer people. Both interrogate forms of colonial imagery that associate Irishness with marginalised groups: respectively, women and disabled people. But where so much of Irish theatre returns to these images as means to reframe conceptions of Irishness – to assert Irish masculinity and physicality or criticise nationalist failures along the same lines – both *Lieutenant* and *Cripple* are concerned with the broader effects upon those whose identities have been treated as national metaphor, rather than people who exist as part of the nation.

Chapter 3: non-Irish plays

McDonagh's plays set outside of Ireland – *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* excepted – do not invite a postcolonial reading as readily as his Irish plays. But they remain deeply rooted in his Irish diasporic perspective, focusing attention on the intercultural aspects of a variety of presumed-homogeneous environments. McDonagh frequently uses his dual insider/outsider frame of reference to critique imperial mindsets, similar to his anti-nationalist critiques in the Irish plays. Most urgently, he frames the imperial imagination as beholden to the erasure, justification and active forgetting of imperial crimes, which itself allows violence by the state to become normalised, even when targeted internally. Throughout these non-Irish plays, McDonagh repeatedly raises the issue of complicity in group action and its dynamic and fraught relationship with group identification.

The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter and The Pillowman

Prior to his shift into writing in Hiberno-English that marked his intense period of productivity in 1994, Martin McDonagh spent his late teens writing hundreds of short stories, many of them twisted fairy tales (Jordan, 2013, p. 195). While some of these appear in different forms in *The Pillowman* (2003), his first produced play not set in Ireland, this playing with the fairy tale form is evident in his earliest produced, and most critically neglected, work: *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter* (1994), a radio play produced by IDRP and broadcast on LBC (*IDRP Plays*, 2007). *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter* is generally erased from McDonagh's body of work, with his early radio plays either mentioned in passing or not acknowledged at all. Indeed, he expressed a degree of shock when an interviewer mentioned it: "Oh my god, you can hear that?? … That's terrible, I was 21 when I wrote that!" (Appel, 2022)

While *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter* is evidently the work of a less developed writer than the Leenane or Aran Island plays – its humour feels that bit cheaper and more obvious, its social commentary that bit more on the nose – it both occupies an illuminating position within McDonagh's body of work and is worthwhile in its own right. *Wolf and the Woodcutter* is a satirical postmodern retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood*, in which the Writer (Rupert Degas) dictates the actions of the displeased Wolf (Peter Guinness) and other characters. The Writer is less a cruel god than an abusive film director, with his cast of characters complaining about bad writing, stereotypical roles, and narrative contrivance. The Wolf finds the idea of swallowing Red Riding Hood (Liza McLean) or her grandmother (Angela Rooks) whole, so they stay alive in his stomach, absurd. The Grandmother bemoans her character's passivity. When the Writer and the Wolf mock Red Riding Hood for her weight, the Writer promises that she'll be written as thin and pretty in the story. Ultimately, the Writer kills the Wolf in a prolonged and bloody altercation. At this point, the background birdsong has been replaced by the insistent ticking of a clock. When the Grandmother notes that's not a nice ending, the Writer states that this won't be in the story: instead, the Wolf will "drop down dead" instantly after the Woodcutter saves the Grandmother and Red

Riding Hood. The bird chirps return as the Writer announces, “And so they all lived happily ever after.”

The radio play’s general attention to narrowly prescribed roles is at its sharpest concerning how narratives reinscribe patriarchal violence and hegemonic masculinity. Regardless of what really happens, either in the scenario that the characters act out or in the wider reality of the radio play, the Writer will present a narrative where men are heroes and women are victims. When Red Riding Hood leaves with the Woodcutter, the Wolf worries for her safety, saying to the Writer, “If you were a little girl going home through the woods on your own, who would you be most scared of meeting? Some little wolf, or some bloke with an axe in his hand?” The focus on wolves or bears as threats – the latter as in Goldilocks and the Three Bears, whose father bear character appears in the play – obscures the greater threat of masculine violence, which is associated with heroism and safety in the character of the Woodcutter. The Writer dismisses the Wolf’s concerns with “Blahdy blahdy blah.” Its overtly meta approach prefigures much later McDonagh works, like the film *Seven Psychopaths* (2012). However, *Wolf and the Woodcutter* is most obviously in dialogue with *The Pillowman*. As I will discuss, much of *The Pillowman* consists of readings or re-enactments of Katurian’s darkly twisted fairy tales, and it also echoes a similar interest in authorial responsibility.

Wolf and the Woodcutter repositions *The Pillowman* in McDonagh’s body of work. *The Pillowman* concerns a writer, Katurian, being interrogated by police about the meaning of his stories, which appear to have inspired a series of child murders – despite his only reader being his brother Michal. It is often viewed as a response to critics of McDonagh’s early plays. This is wrong, according to Lonergan, since *The Pillowman* was written in the same period as the Leenane and Aran Island plays (2012, p. 102). Lonergan’s dismissal of this possibility is perhaps too definitive, as we don’t have a detailed timeline of any subsequent edits between the 1994 draft and 2003 premiere. But when read alongside *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter*, *The Pillowman* seems like a bridge between McDonagh’s early writing and his plays written in the 1994 period – in other words, and most importantly for this dissertation, between his pre-Irish writing and the Irish plays. Though less overtly evoking an intercultural context than McDonagh’s Irish plays, *The Pillowman*’s stylistic and thematic similarity to those plays supports a New Intercultural reading of his plays regardless of setting.

The Leenane and Aran Island plays take place in specific real locations in Ireland and, in the case of the Aran Island plays, specific times in history. But, as discussed in previous chapters, the use of real settings is belied by a complex web of clashing period detail, spectral memories, and intercultural references. As Fintan O’Toole notes, while all the elements may be real, their combined effect “questions the very idea of reality.” (1999, p. xi) In contrast, *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter*, is set in a space-time encapsulated in the phrases “once upon a time” and “happily ever after”: like the traditional fairy tale, as analysed by Maria Nikolajeva, it takes place in a “magical world, detached from our own”, in a time both eternal and “beyond reach” of the audience (2003, p. 141). *The Pillowman*’s setting is more concrete than *Wolf and the Woodcutter*’s fairy tale world, but more unreal than

McDonagh's Leenane: a "totalitarian fucking dictatorship", as police officer Tupolski says (p. 18), but in no specific country or time period. Even as it is distinctly unreal, *The Pillowman*'s spatiotemporal world is neither eternal nor beyond the audience's reach, neither recognisably our own nor obviously detached from it. Ondřej Pilný describes the setting as mid-twentieth century (2006, p. 214), while Eamonn Jordan assumes it's contemporary (2006, p. 176). Like the Leenane trilogy, the mid-century and the contemporary co-exist, the former haunting the latter. Charlotte McIvor proposes that New Interculturalism understands cultural identities "as a constant process of negotiation that drags the past along with it into the performative present" (2019, p. 22), and while the Leenane trilogy "drags the past" into the present in a specifically postcolonial culture, *The Pillowman* uses similar dramaturgical techniques in a more amorphous context.

The setting's ambiguities derive not from vagueness but an abundance of contradictory specificities. Where the Leenane trilogy overlays past and present in a specific Irish location, *The Pillowman* simultaneously overlays different locations, nations and histories in the same way. Pilný notes the "linguistic mélange" of character names: Katurian is Armenian in origin; Michal is Czech, Slovak or Polish; the police officers Tupolski and Ariel mix Polish and William Shakespeare (2006, p. 215). Ariel is also a Hebrew name that has been gendered male and female in different contexts. Other names mentioned in dialogue, like Andrea Jovanovic or Aaron Goldberg, are respectively Serbian/Croatian/Slovenian and German-Jewish (p. 215). For Lisa Fitzpatrick, the combination of these names is "familiar from the multi-ethnic world of American television" (2006, p. 151), but the predominantly Eastern European mixture does not reflect a typical American programme, which even among white characters is likely to include Irish, Italian and British names. While Aaron Goldberg is, as I will discuss, explicitly half-Irish (p. 65), the names overall do not reflect the ethnic mix of American television. The effect, then, is not the familiarity of American television but the destabilisation of a clashing collection of cultural signifiers. The effect is similar to that Samuel Beckett employs in *Waiting for Godot* (2006c), in which the characters' names – Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky – are, respectively, French, Russian, Italian and Anglophone. For Khalid J. Oudah Alogaili and Ali G. Khalaf, the names' varied origins assure the audience that *Godot* does not occur in an isolated corner of a specific nation, but is about a universal human condition (2018, p. 43). While *The Pillowman*'s use of geographically disparate names also appeal to human universality over national specificity, the names are less varied than *Godot*'s, remaining primarily within Eastern Europe and so overlaying (perceptions of) that region's history into *The Pillowman*'s world. In particular, it evokes the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and other communist states of the Cold War period, which is likely why Pilný assumes a mid-twentieth-century setting. The play also evokes fictional, allegorical representations of Eastern European communism of the twentieth century by Irish and English writers, including Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* (2006a) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2003). These references form part of an intercultural matrix spiralling out from Cold War Eastern Europe across Irish, English and American intertexts. *Catastrophe*, which is dedicated to Czech dissident Václav Havel, depicts a director and his assistant arranging the Protagonist like an object on stage, tweaking his posture and clothing. The Protagonist becomes, John Calder writes, "a living

statue portraying, from the director's point of view, the quiescent, unprotesting victim, a symbol of the ideal citizen of a totalitarian regime" (1989, p. 220) before defiantly looking up at the audience in the play's final moments. *The Pillowman* also has two agents of a totalitarian state harassing an implicit dissident: but where in *Catastrophe*, performance acts as a form of interrogation, in *The Pillowman*, as Lonergan notes, interrogation is a kind of performance (p. 103). However, *The Pillowman*'s juxtaposition of totalitarianism's "ideal citizen" and writerly defiance is more ambiguous than in *Catastrophe*: as Lonergan further observes, Katurian both offers to burn his stories and is the only character shown burning a story on stage (p. 107). Orwell's influence on *The Pillowman*, meanwhile, is a frequent aside in reviews of the play (Anon., 2008; Crawley, 2015; Morrow, 2023), but rarely considered in any detail. In the opening scene of *The Pillowman*, Tupolski and Ariel interrogate Katurian for unknown reasons. The officers' interest in his stories, combined with Katurian's fear of and deference towards the police – "I've never done any anti-police thing, I've never done any anti-state thing..." (p. 7) – lead the audience to assume he is being investigated for perceived deviation from the orthodoxy of the regime: the central issue of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which this is called "thoughtcrime" (p. 22). This assumption is validated by the euphemistic language Tupolski uses around censorship: "It isn't a crime, you write a story. … Given certain restrictions ... The security of the state, the security of the general whatever-you-call-it. I wouldn't even call them restrictions." (p. 7) Euphemistic or misleading language around repressions is another central feature of the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* regime, in which "The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation." (p. 246) After McDonagh sets up an apparently Orwellian interrogation by state forces, he upends audience expectations and sympathies by revealing that this is not an investigation into "thoughtcrime" but into murder (p. 21).

Pilný's assumption of a mid-century setting, however, ignores the way McDonagh overlays his clear allusion to communist dictatorship in Eastern Europe with references that precede or follow that period. Christian stories and primarily European fairy tale traditions are of course pre-communist, but form part of the centuries-ongoing backdrop of western culture. More specifically, Fitzpatrick notes that McDonagh is drawing from Franz Kafka (p. 151), and Noël Carroll highlights that Katurian's K initials are similar to Josef K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, another story of a man arrested for an unknown crime (2011, p. 169). Indeed, the play appears to reference Kafka directly when Katurian says, "That's something-esque. What kind of 'esque' is it? I can't remember." (p. 15) Post- or late Cold War references in *The Pillowman* include explicit mention of the tropes of modern American police procedurals: "Oh, I almost forgot to mention…" Tupolski tells Katurian, "I'm the good cop, he's the bad cop." (p. 11) The play's central theme of media-motivated murder evokes *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994) or indeed, popular narratives about the Columbine High School Massacre, primarily driven by media speculation (Caldwell, 1999). Harold Pinter's play *One for the Road* (1985), which also dramatises an interrogation by a totalitarian police force and similarly has torture occur off-stage, is a key intertext and was inspired by abuses under Turkey and Argentina's military dictatorships (Fraser, 2011, p. 167; Pinter, 2001). Jordan notes the Iraq War and the War on Terror, contemporary to *The Pillowman*'s first

production, as a key context (2006, p. 175). Echoes of Kafka or Orwell rhyme with evocations of the War on Terror in *The Pillowman*, stretching its critique across disparate periods. Jordan also highlights – and arguably overstates – parallels between the events of the play and the US Army and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)'s torture and abuse of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison (p. 175), which became public knowledge in 2004, the year after *The Pillowman* debuted (*The Road to Abu Ghraib*, 2004). While McDonagh's Irish plays are framed in an intercultural context due to the legacy of colonialism, migration and globalisation, *The Pillowman*'s ambiguous setting is inherently intercultural: constantly negotiating multiple cultures across multiple periods without the stabilising anchor of a named real location. If the intercultural collage of the Leenane and Aran Island plays denies the possibility of retreat into a pre-colonial Eden, the possibility of such purity having once existed in some long forgotten past remains: a sure foundation to the palimpsest that colonialism, migration and globalisation write over. But the intercultural setting of *The Pillowman* denies the assumption of anything pure having once existed. Instead, the audience is presented with a space without any history or context to organically explain its interculturalism.

It is likely in part because of this that Jordan describes *The Pillowman*'s setting as "a truncated totalitarianism writ small" (2006, p. 178) in which the "socio-political realities of totalitarianism" are absent (2013, p. 199). But as I will discuss – though the political world of the play is not built out in any way – *The Pillowman* is fundamentally concerned with the socio-political realities of totalitarianism, in its representation of policing, censorship and the connection between imperialism, totalitarianism and masculinity. For Jordan, totalitarianism in the play is an open metaphor for "anything from imperialism, state oppression, repressions … [or] academic/critical interrogation of theatre" (2006, p. 179). However, apart from the final example, this is less the operation of an open metaphor than a discursive linking of related concepts. Molly E. Ferguson links imperialism to hypermasculinity and male violence: comparing McDonagh and Salman Rushdie, she argues, "Their positions as diasporic writers allow both … to identify global trends towards violence form a vantage point that cites colonial hierarchies as a model for male domination in postcolonial nations." (p. 715) In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt theorises totalitarianism in Europe – with particular reference to the Nazi and Stalinist regimes – as fundamentally linked to overseas imperialism, positioning totalitarian regimes as deploying the techniques of imperial repression on the citizens of the imperial power, in what she dubs a "boomerang" effect (1985, p. 206). Arendt further distinguishes overseas imperialism from continental imperialism, such as the pan-German and pan-Slavic movements, which formed the ideological backbone of Nazism and Stalinism (pp. 222-3). Continental imperialism necessitates a flattening of national and regional differences: Arendt notes that the 1945 Pan-Slav Congress in Sofia, Bulgaria declared it a "political necessity" and "a moral necessity" for Russian to be the official language of all Slavic countries (p. 222). Within Arendt's schema, British rule in Ireland can be understood as "continental imperialism," including the suppression of national differences in language, culture and identity. In a fictional analogue, the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seek to replace existing natural languages with the constructed language "Newspeak", which deliberately pares language

down to the least number of words possible in order to impede heretical thought (p. 343). In this context, *The Pillowman*'s intercultural setting, rather than evading the sociopolitical specificities of totalitarianism, critiques totalitarian regimes' prizing of cultural and political purity or uniformity. This goal is not just evil, but absurd: in *The Pillowman*, the purity totalitarians value is always already intercultural. This is best exemplified by the play's use of Hiberno-English. Fitzpatrick attributes reversals like "*The Libertad* it was published" (p. 15) to McDonagh "forc[ing] certain rhythms of dialogue … heightening the atmosphere" of absurdity (p. 152). She argues that this clarifies the use of similar dialogue techniques in the Leenane Trilogy, where they "suggest Irish-English" (p. 152). While Fitzpatrick's observations are astute, we can equally interpret the use of these techniques in the Leenane Trilogy to clarify their use in *The Pillowman*. As in the Leenane Trilogy, the rhythms of *The Pillowman*'s dialogue reflect Hiberno-English, an imperial language haunted by the remnants of the indigenous language it was set out to destroy. For an anglophonic audience, this acts as a shorthand for the failure of imperialist and totalitarian attempts to destroy languages and enforce linguistic uniformity. The same effect would be achieved in German translation by incorporating elements of Yiddish, for example. In terms of Irishness specifically, the use of Hiberno-English in *The Pillowman* raises the possibility that Irishness and *Ireland* are not intrinsically related: this way of speaking English is, in *The Pillowman*, both recognisably Irish and is totally unrelated to Ireland as a setting, which resonates with his diasporic concerns.

Understanding totalitarianism as deeply intertwined with imperialism – whether overseas or continental – clarifies a postcolonial reading of *The Pillowman*, specifically in terms of Irish and diaspora issues. Despite its ambiguous setting, Irishness is, as Lonergan observes, the only nationality mentioned in the play (p. 102). Trying to prove that Katurian is falsely confessing to the child murders, Ariel asks what colour hair the "little Jewish boy" killed had:

> KATURIAN: What?
>
> ARIEL: What colour was his hair?
>
> KATURIAN: Browny-black. It was a browny-black sort of colour.
>
> ARIEL: "It was a browny-black sort of colour." Pretty good. Considering he was a little Jew boy, "It was a browny-black sort of colour." Pretty good. It's a shame his mum was fucking Irish, and her son closely resembled a red fucking setter. (p. 65)

Lonergan argues that this exchange is about how it "is foolish to make assumptions about a person based on national and ethnic identities" (p. 102). For Lonergan, the red-haired Irish-Jewish boy evidences the idea that "there are many ways to be Jewish and thus many ways to be Irish also." (p. 102) In this respect, it is notable that both of these groups have significant diaspora communities (Cohen, 1996). However, a key factor Lonergan does not mention is that, historically, red hair is an antisemitic stereotype: in his account of the idea of Jewish people in European imagination and Russian literature in particular, Leonid Livak notes that a folkloric association of red hair with "the fires of hell and the demons stoking

them" led to red hair and freckles being designated as "peculiar to Judas and 'the jews'"[4] in English, German, French, Polish and east Slavic cultures (2010, p. 90). This stereotype was powerful enough for red hair to be viewed as Jewish "by default" during the Spanish Inquisition (p. 90). In Livak's analysis, dark hair overtook red hair in the stereotypical image of Jewish people in the late eighteenth century, as part of a secular and Orientalist "recoding" that associated Jews with Arabs and Africans: from the nineteenth century on, antisemitic stereotypes included "dark curly hair" (p. 90). Though the red hair stereotype no longer has a strong hold on the European imagination, it retains enough cultural cache that we can assume McDonagh was aware of it in writing the above exchange: it appears in Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist*, in which the villain Fagin is Jewish and explicitly red haired (1975, p. 63), and is played on in Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), in which the heroic Judas (Harvey Keitel) has bright red hair. Red hair is, of course, a much more current stereotype about Irish people. Stereotypes about hair colour, in Ariel and Katurian's conversation, are subverted and propagated at once: Katurian guesses that the "little Jewish boy" had dark hair, a stereotype that is refuted by the boy in fact having red hair, another, older stereotype. Ariel attributes his red hair to his Irish mother, eliding this old antisemitic trope by appealing to an Irish stereotype. Further, as red hair is a recessive gene, both parents would have to carry that gene in order for their son to be red haired (Starr, 2004). Assuming that the boy had an Irish mother and a Jewish father, this undermines Ariel's appeal to the Irish stereotype of red hair even as it reasserts a stereotype about Jewish red hair. This juxtaposition of hair colour stereotypes ties together the history of Irish and Jewish oppression, marking similarities in their underlying reasoning and their enforcement mechanisms – the association of red hair with the devil that Livak describes also plays into anti-Irish discrimination – as well as positioning them as part of the same larger supremacist project. Of course, it should be noted that "Irish" and "Jewish" are not mutually exclusive, nor is it only possible to be both through having a mixed ethnic background: Ireland has had Jewish communities for centuries.[5] The references to both Irishness and Jewishness in *The Pillowman* are somewhat ambiguous in terms of whether each is mentioned as a nationality (in Irishness's case), a religion (in Judaism's case), an ethnicity, or some mix of these. Rather, McDonagh productively positions them in some ambiguous space between definitions: both Irishness and Jewishness, in part due to their large diasporic communities, are always already intercultural.

There has been some effort to interpret the play, or the stories within it, as an Irish allegory. One of Katurian's stories, which he tells to Michal in Act 2, Scene 1, is about a green pig: though the little pig likes being green – "he thought pink was nice too, but what he liked was, he liked being a little bit different" (p. 44) – he is bullied by the other pigs (p. 44). The farmer paints the green pig pink, with "special" paint which "could never be washed off and

[4] Livak uses "the jews" in lowercase to indicate that this "does not refer to real people or groups in any historical period" but is an invention of gentile cultures (p. 4).

[5] William Annyas became the first Jewish person to hold public office in Ireland when he was elected mayor of Youghal, Co. Cork in 1555. Notable members of the Ireland's Jewish community include Chaim Herzog, the sixth president of Israel, who was born in Belfast and raised in Dublin; Irish fiction editor David Marcus, whose novel *A Land Not Theirs* is a fictionalised account of Cork's Jewish community during the War of Independence; film director Lenny Abrahamson; and Ireland's most famous, albeit fictional, Jewish resident, Leopold Bloom.

it could never be painted over." (p. 45) The pig prays that he will remain different from the other pigs, and that night, "a very special *green* rain" falls and turns all the pigs green except "the old little green pig, who was now the little pink pig" (p. 45). Jordan argues that green has "a fundamental association with Irishness, and … classical British stereotypes have long associated the Irish with pigs." (2006, p. 191) He cites Victorian illustrations of Irish families living with pigs to support this (p. 191), but does not address what the implications of such an association might be. The story reflects the play's broader interest in how totalitarianism mandates uniformity, and given the connection between totalitarianism and imperialism, there is room to interpret the green pig as representing Ireland or Irishness, with the farmer, and, despite the Irish association, the other pigs standing for British imperialism. However, this begins to fall apart when considering how the story plays out: if the "Irish" pig is forcibly – and successfully – made British, then do the "British" pigs become Irish through an act of God? Perhaps this could be read as the effect of Irish emigration to Britain – making Britain "green" – but juxtaposed with the inalterable pinkening of the original green pig, this seems unlikely. Rather, the story seems to gesture at the play's broader themes – totalitarianism, conformity, identity – without having a specific allegorical function.

The green pig story, unlike Katurian's other stories in the play, is decidedly wholesome. There is no guts or gore, simply an ode to non-conformity typical of children's stories: it has notable parallels to the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling", as a story about an animal bullied for a difference in appearance. Katurian's other stories involve frequently grotesque violence against children. Yet they, too, are written in the style and tone of fairy tales. Katurian's stories each begin "Once upon a time" (pp. 16, 22, 26, 30, 44, 46), as does Tupolski's "The Story of the Little Deaf Boy on the Big Long Railroad Tracks. In China" (p. 58). Some contain variations on the "in a land far, far away": the story of the little green pig is set "in a strange land, far away" (p. 44) and the Little Jesus story is set "Once upon a time in a land not so very far away" (p. 46). Violence, including against children, is a traditional feature of fairy tales which, as JRR Tolkien observed, is often downplayed or removed in modern retellings, which, he argues, undermines the stories' power (1965, pp. 31-2). The stories in *The Pillowman* centre and exaggerate this violent undercurrent in traditional folk and fairy tales.

Katurian's only published story is a retelling of the Pied Piper of Hamelin which, like *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter*, shifts perspective and reassigns villainy or heroism accordingly. In Katurian's story, a little boy, who is poor, bullied, and friendless, shares his sandwich with a passing traveller. The traveller repays his kindness with "something … the worth of which today [the boy] may not realise": he chops off the boy's toes (p. 17). The story's twist ending reveals that the traveller was the Pied Piper. "The little boy is the little crippled boy who can't keep up when the Pied Piper comes back to take all the children away. That's how he was crippled …" Katurian explains, "It's the children the Pied Piper was after. […] He *brought* the rats. He knew the townspeople wouldn't pay. It was the children he was after in the first place." (p. 17) As it is the only folk or fairy tale directly rewritten in *The Pillowman*, it is notable that the Pied Piper story has been historicised as an allegory for emigration and colonial expansion. In this regard, Wolfgang Mieder notes an effort in the thirteenth century to recruit young Germans to settle in Transylvania: "Since Hamelin at

that time was quite overpopulated as a walled-in town, it can well be imagined that there was […] a definite interest in emigration to a better existence in the East." (2007, p. 10) Mieder further speculates that young people may have "been sold off to rid Hamelin not of rats but of superfluous and most likely poor youths." (p. 10) For many generations, Irish people – including McDonagh's parents – also emigrated to seek "a better existence in the East," in their case, moving to the Britain for economic reasons. While not functioning as a direct allegory, this parallel gives significance in a postcolonial reading to Katurian's decision to portray the Pied Piper as bringing the rats *to* Hamelin. This can be read as the negative economic effects of imperialism on colonies, juxtaposed with the children of the colony then emigrating to the imperial power.

Katurian's other stories include elements of fairy tale without directly referencing specific fairy tales. "The Writer and the Writer's Brother" presents Katurian and Michal's backstory in a fairy tale register. Katurian narrates while the action is reenacted on stage. A little boy (Katurian) lives in a house "in the middle of a pretty forest" (pp. 22-3), showered with love by his parents, who encourage his creative writing. From his seventh birthday, he begins to hear torture sounds from the always-padlocked adjoining room: drills, electrical noises, and a child's muffled screams (p. 23). At fourteen, he finds a note pushed under the door of the locked room, which says that the parents who loved Katurian tortured the boy inside the locked room for seven years, as part of an artistic experiment to make Katurian a great writer (pp. 23-4). In Katurian's story, he enters the locked room years later to find his brother dead. In his hand is a story he wrote in own blood: "it was the sweetest, gentlest thing [Katurian had] ever come across, but, what was even worse, it was better than anything he himself had ever written." (p. 24) On stage, Katurian sets it alight. This twist ending introduces an ambiguity in the story's title: who is the writer, and who is the writer's brother? But in reality, Katurian reveals, he had broken into the padlocked room at fourteen to find his brother alive "but brain-damaged beyond repair," and, that night, Katurian murdered their mother and father (p. 25). At this point in the play, Michal has not yet appeared as a character on stage, and as such, his disability has only been established in euphemistic or insulting language (by Katurian and the police officers, respectively):

> ARIEL. He's backward, your brother, yeah?
>
> KATURIAN. He's not backward, no. He's slow to get things sometimes. (p. 9)

Because of this, the nature of Michal's disability is most clearly established for the first time in "The Writer and the Writer's Brother" – adjacent to, but erased from, the fairy tale narrative. Disability, Ann Schmiesing outlines, appears in dozens of Grimms' fairy tales (p. 1). In Schmiesing's analysis, villains are frequently disabled or deformed, either from the outset or as punishment for evildoing (p. 1). Disabled heroes, when portrayed, triumph over their disability and typically are rewarded with the magical removal of disability (pp. 1-2). Michal's intellectual disability does not neatly fit within either of these paradigms, though has elements of both. In Katurian's story, he makes his fictional Michal intellectually gifted as a writer – metatextually having Michal triumph over his disability which is magically removed. In the reality of the play, Michal is a serial killer targeting children, arguably because his disability has impeded his ability to interpret Katurian's stories – essentially

positioning him as a disabled villain. Michal's disability, though stated to be the result of brain damage (p. 25), corresponds less to any clinical diagnosis than to a mental and intellectual Other: alternately frightening and pitiful, animalistic amorality and childlike innocence. He juxtaposes the contradictorily infantilising and dehumanising stereotypes of disability in one character. This at once reinforces those stereotypes and subverts them, exposing their incoherence.

Though Katurian explicitly states that Michal is brain damaged (p. 25), Jordan argues that Michal is on the autism spectrum (2013). Jordan bases much of his case on the work of Simon Baron-Cohen, the clinical psychologist who developed the "mindblindness" theory of autism – that is, that "most children with autism … are unaware of the appearance-reality distinction, as well as being blind to their own past thoughts and to other people's possibly different thoughts" (1995, p. 82). Both the facts of Baron-Cohen's theory and its ethical implications have been disputed. Cordelia Fine points out that empathy can be "cognitive (mind reading) or affective (sympathy)", and while Baron-Cohen makes a case that autistic people may have deficits in cognitive empathy, there are no such deficits in affective empathy (2010, p. 262). Further, Damian E.M. Milton argues that autistic people's seeming deficit in cognitive empathy reflect what he calls the "double empathy problem" (2012): within contemporary constructed social reality, there is a mutual failure to empathise and understand during social communication across neurotypes – that is, autistic people fail to empathise with and understand neurotypical individuals *and* neurotypicals fail to empathise with and understand autistic individuals. The mindblindness theory has also been criticised as profoundly dehumanising autistic people: as Melanie Yergeau argues, "Repeatedly, we are told that [theory of mind] is a human capacity; storytelling is how humans construct lives; verbal ability, and pretense, and imagination, and on and on—these are all framed as uniquely human capacities. And, overwhelmingly, these are the capacities which the autistic is claimed to lack." (Yergeau and Huebner, 2017, p. 277)

Jordan uses Baron-Cohen's theory uncritically to argue that Michal has zero empathy and is therefore autistic (pp. 207-8). Michal's empathy does appear to be impaired in the play: his cognitive empathy is impaired, unable to reason motivations other than instructional for Katurian's writing stories, and his affective empathy is more severely impaired, as evidenced by both his killings and his lack of remorse or guilt for the killings. But Michal is also a character whose mental state is frequently ambiguous: most ideas and emotions he expresses are quickly contradicted, in ways that may reflect his own quickly changing mental state or which reflect his inconsistent lies. This makes it difficult to discern how sincere anything Michal says is, making his characterisation malleable in performance. Though he claims to "feel bad now" about killing Aaron, he calls the girl he murdered "a pain in the arse" because she wouldn't stop crying (p. 34). Though he attempts to use Katurian's story of the Pillowman to claim a sympathetic motivation – saving children "the hassle" of leading horrible lives (p. 36) – he has already told Katurian that he killed the children to "[test] out how far-fetched" the stories Katurian wrote were (p. 35). Michal is written with an ambiguous, almost generic form of intellectual disability that reflects fairy tale conventions of disability representation and is textually attributed to his parents' abuse. Jordan's

application of Baron-Cohen's autism research reflects the most damaging, dangerous implications of Baron-Cohen's theory.

The play's portrayal of police appears to be rooted in McDonagh's background as a working-class Londoner from an Irish migrant background, and has been misinterpreted by some Irish-born critics. Jordan writes that democratic societies are based around certain rights and freedoms, especially regarding arrest and detention, arguing that these rights "do not seem to apply" to the world of *The Pillowman* because "threats, intimidation and torture occur during the process" (p. 199). But, of course, there is ample evidence of police in democratic states employing threats, intimidation and even torture. In 1979, Blair Peach was killed by a police officer while protesting a National Front demonstration in London; no officer faced prosecution (Stubbs, 2009). In 1989, the Black and Latino teenagers known as the Central Park Five falsely confessed to a rape following intimidation, coercion and force from the police (Schanberg, 2002). Four years later, an intellectually disabled teenager was coerced into confessing to a satanic ritual killing in West Memphis, Arkansas (Berlinger and Sinofsky, 1996). In the Republic of Ireland, Joanne Hayes was threatened and coerced into falsely confessing to murder in the Kerry Babies case (Hutton, 2020), and decades later, Maurice McCabe was intimidated and harassed by An Garda Síochána for his whistleblower reports, including being falsely reported for child sex abuse (Clifford, 2017). Of course, in Northern Ireland, police brutality and torture were practically *de rigueur* for decades, most famously in the Hooded Men case (O'Reilly, 2021). Against Jordan's blanket assertion of the rights afforded in democratic societies regarding arrest and detention, all of these examples took place in modern liberal democracies, with only Northern Ireland having subsequently reconstituted its police as part of the wider peace process. Indeed, the European Court of Human Rights ruling that the Hooded Men were not tortured was used to justify those same techniques being employed by UK and US agents during the War on Terror (Corrigan, 2014). As Alex S. Vitale notes in *The End of Policing*, police officers "often think of themselves as soldiers in a battle with the public rather than guardians of public safety." (2017, p. 9) Tupolski and Ariel reflect this "warrior mentality" (p. 9): "There was never a question, 'You will answer everything we want you to.'" Ariel tells Katurian, "There *was* a question, 'How much are you going to make us fuck you up in the meantime?' was what the question was." (p. 6) Jordan seemingly views the police in *The Pillowman* as deviating from police in democracies in totalitarian ways, but they are more clearly understood as the empowered face of totalitarianism: not a difference in kind, but degree. As Arendt claims much more modestly, "a nontotalitarian police" is restrained "by a few rudimentary ethical considerations" (p. 284).

Lonergan goes further than Jordan, arguing that the play challenges audience expectations by putting them on the side of murderers over people "whose job is to protect the weak and uphold the law" (p. 111). Yet Vitale argues, tracing the history of policing in America, but with application to many police forces worldwide, that the "basic nature" of policing "is to be a tool for managing inequality and maintaining the status quo" (p. 20), with even "racially neutral enforcement" landing disproportionately on minorities and the poor (p. 21). This is often felt keenly by members of these communities, across races: Dean Martin, son of Italian immigrants to the US, refused outright to play a police officer on film (Lewis and

Kaplan, 2006, p. 272). For the Irish community in Britain specifically, they became especial targets for over-policing during IRA bombing campaigns: in Sarah O'Brien's study of the Irish in Birmingham in 1973-74, she notes that the police "concentrated their investigations and surveillance" in working-class Irish neighbourhoods (2017, p. 376), including stationing police officers at GAA matches – "a foreboding reminder of the mistrust that now existed around Irish associationalism." (p. 386) More broadly, O'Brien argues that the Prevention of Terrorism Act that followed the Birmingham Bombings legitimised the targeting of Irish immigrants for stop and search, "allow[ing] for the capricious detention of any Irish citizen in Britain." (p. 380) McDonagh, born in 1970, is a child of this era, and this animosity and mistrust between the police and Irish community in Britain would have pervaded both his formative years and, indeed, the period in which he wrote *The Pillowman*. As late as 2000, in a report for Irish National Committee of the European Cultural Foundation, Nessa Winston found a tendency among emigrants in England across age groups to play down one's Irishness while interacting with police (p. 31). The "lived experience of diasporic realities …" Mitra notes, "necessitates subjects having to simultaneously negotiate multiple cultures" (2015, p. 11). Perhaps the most fraught point in this negotiation is in interacting with state authorities, when how different cultural signifiers are perceived can result in arrest, intimidation or violence.

Tom, the garda in *A Skull in Connemara*, is a pathetic and ultimately tragic figure, failing to live up to the images of policing he sees on screen. Ariel and Tupolski, by contrast, simultaneously are brutal – "I would torture you to death just for *writing* a story like that, let alone acting it out! So, y'know what? *(Takes out from the cabinet a large, grim-looking battery and electrodes.)*" (p. 53) – and occupy the typically idealised roles of television cops: "I'm the good cop, he's the bad cop." (p. 11) Rather than reversing audience sympathies as Lonergan argues, *The Pillowman* jarringly juxtaposes contrasting assumptions of policing: "I admit it, sometimes I use excessive force. And sometimes I use excessive force on an entirely innocent individual," Ariel tells Katurian, before fantasising that as an old man, "Little kids are gonna follow me around and they're gonna know my name and what I stood for, and they're gonna give me some of their sweets in thanks, and I'm gonna take those sweets and thank them and tell them to get home safe, and I'm gonna be happy." (p. 53) In a single speech, he admits almost proudly to brutalising innocent people, imagines children being grateful to him for this for the rest of his life, and claims to be "a good policeman … Not necessarily good in the sense of being able to solve lots of stuff, because I'm not, but good in the sense of I stand for something." (p. 53) The effect is that Tupolski and Ariel represent both the horror of a totalitarian regime and the often-valorised fascistic elements of democratic societies. While the world of *The Pillowman* is explicitly totalitarian, its police force is, in some senses, normative, positioning policing as in and of itself *inherently* totalitarian.

In this respect, *The Pillowman* establishes a thematic thread that spans across McDonagh's non-Irish plays: that is, systemic violence and the nature of complicity. In *The Pillowman*, we are initially presented with the problem of violent storytelling as complicit in the actions of the audience – but what ultimately drives much of the narrative is the question of complicity in state violence. Katurian is not a freedom fighter: he offers to burn his stories,

after all. The Pillowman is set in a totalitarian dictatorship, but it depicts the seeds of totalitarianism as endemic in apparently democratic societies. His next play, too, considers the nature of violence and complicity – this time, focusing on race as a system of seeing and categorising the world.

A Behanding in Spokane

"A common criticism of Martin McDonagh," according to Patrick Lonergan, "is that he is uninterested in theatre: that he wrote plays only as a way of breaking into the movie business." (2012, p. 114) McDonagh himself has claimed to have "always thought theatre was the least interesting of the art forms" (O'Toole, 1997), preferring cinema and television. Yet he did not abandon playwriting after writing and directing *In Bruges* (2008), his debut feature film. Premiering in 2010, *A Behanding in Spokane* (2011) was McDonagh's first play since those first written in the 1994 spree. It centres on Carmichael, played by Christopher Walken in the original Broadway production, who seeks the return of his missing left hand. Toby – "a black guy about 27" (p. 7) – and his girlfriend Marilyn – "a pretty 22-year-old" (p. 5) claim to have it, looking to receive five hundred dollars in exchange for its return (p. 8). Mervyn, who works at the hotel's reception but doesn't consider himself a receptionist (p. 2), butts into proceedings with comic effect. Jordan describes *Behanding* as "part thriller, part caper comedy and part horror Farce" (2013, p. 141), but these genre impulses, like the play's title, are misdirection. Like a Greek tragedy, the major events of the play – including the titular "behanding" – occur before the curtain rises: as Lonergan outlines, "several exciting events happen" but all "offstage or before the action has begun." (p. 116) Further, it takes place not in the city of Spokane, Washington, but, according to the stage directions, in "small town America", specifically, Carmichael says in a phone call to his mother, "someplace called Tarlington" (p. 1). It is, notably, McDonagh's first play set in a named location outside of Ireland, and his first work of any kind set in the United States.

Behanding is, as Lonergan notes, probably McDonagh's "least admired" work for the stage (p. 131). To naysayers, it is irredeemably racist and vile (Als, 2010) or, at the very least, a listless, ill-plotted misfire (O'Reilly, 2010). Even to its defenders, *Behanding* may be funny and enjoyable, but is nevertheless ultimately insubstantial (Rooney, 2010, p. 2), and "wildly uneven" (Sheward, 2010, p. 9). It has received minimal critical analysis in the decade or so since, especially compared to McDonagh's previous plays. Yet – while certainly weaker than his 1994 plays – *Behanding* is not merely an amusing throwaway: rather, it is a knotty, complex, and frequently frustrating work which has yet to be fully untangled. It occupies an interesting place in McDonagh's body of work, both expanding the horizon of his real-unreal, pop cultural spaces and exploring themes that point forward to some of his later work, including American race relations. The critical response to *Behanding*, however, has been often glibly dismissive. "There are no hidden messages about racism, homophobia, or violence in America" in the play, David Sheward concludes in his review, "any more than there are in your average episode of *Cops*", dubbing both McDonagh's play and the TV show *Cops* "guilty pleasures" (2010, p. 9).

Sheward's rhetorical use of *Cops* as an example of a work without meaning is striking, because *Cops* – a ride-along reality programme depicting police work, including searches of private homes – has been criticised for functioning as pro-police propaganda (Frazer-Carroll, 2020). As Howard Rosenberg observed, such programmes incentivise collusion between the police and television producers, with the police "getting to choreograph themselves as heroes for the lens" and the makers of the programme "airing nothing they believe puts their partner subjects in a bad light." (1999) "Doing so would cut off access," Rosenberg writes, "No access, no show." This perception of police ride-along reality programmes as pro-police propaganda is sufficiently widespread that in 2020, both *Cops* and the similar *Live PD* were pulled from television schedules following the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests (Schneider, 2020). Sheward views *Cops* as superficial entertainment, an approach that enables its propagandistic function to operate on the unconscious mind of the audience. This is to say, there are "messages", hidden or otherwise, in "your average episode of *Cops*", about police and attendant issues of race, class, homophobia and violence, specifically in American society. Likewise, *Behanding* says much about these same issues: efforts, in favour or against, to write the play off as an amusing confection exist in a continuum with all dismissal of meaning in allegedly superficial entertainment.

But where *Cops* is an American programme which presents itself as objective reality – while valorising American police – *Behanding* approaches America with an outsider's perspective. This was both noted and criticised at the play's premiere: indeed, some of the initial American reviews seem to rhyme with Irish reactions to the Leenane and Aran Island plays. In the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley wrote that McDonagh "seems to have lost his hitherto unerring sense of direction in the busy, open country of the United States", speculating that McDonagh's characters may need "the insularity of a small, isolated, self-mythologising world to flourish and self-destruct credibly" as in *Behanding*'s American setting "these prototypes start to seem alarmingly like figures from a conventional Hollywood caper comedy." (2010) Brantley presents *Behanding* as seeing McDonagh waver unknowingly into inauthenticity, rather than continuing to deliberately cultivate it. In Brantley's reviews of McDonagh's Irish plays, meanwhile, he trades on stereotypical Irish imagery when describing a performance as being "as substantial, earthy, and moldy as a sprouting potato" (2006a, p. 410), as well as strangely calling McDonagh's "anarchic streak" "as wide and twisting as the River Liffey" (p. 408). Read alongside each other, Brantley's review of *Behanding* seems to negatively respond to tactics he praised in the Leenane trilogy being deployed towards his country – which he does not conceive of as insular, small, isolated or self-mythologising, but as "busy" and "open". The United States is, of course, much larger than Ireland, but its size ensures that parts of it *are* small and isolated: *Behanding* is explicitly set in "small town America", not a major city, just as Leenane, Inishmaan and Inishmore are small, isolated enclaves in the west of Ireland. More importantly, the United States is a self-mythologising world, even as its cultural hegemony has rendered its mythology invisible to itself – like the heroic police officers on *Cops*, American hegemony is perceived as a neutral default. While McDonagh's Irish plays deconstruct the mythologisation – self- and otherwise – of a postcolonial nation, *Behanding* examines the

mythologisation of a global superpower that at once erases its own colonial founding (Smiles, 2021) and engages in neocolonial activity across the world (Immerwahr, 2019). This reflects an essential contradiction within the discourse of colonial powers: "To be authoritative, its rules of recognition must reflect consensual knowledge or opinion," Bhabha writes, "to be powerful, these rules of recognition must be reached in order to represent the exorbitant objects of discrimination that lie beyond its purview." (1994, p. 111)

Cultural hegemony, Byungju Shin and Gon Namkung note, "is not easily recognized" because culture "is typically disseminated with relatively less resistance and opposition than other forms of hegemony" (2008, p. 116). American cultural hegemony is, Reinhold Wagnleitner writes, "often overlooked, as if it were a natural part of the international environment … while in reality it rests on economic, commercial, military, and financial power." (2001, p. 454) As Rey Chow notes regarding the lack of reflexivity in American critics of Chinese poetry, there is a "definite form of power" in "not drawing attention to itself and thus not subjecting itself to … judgement" (1993, p. 2). But Wagnleitner further argues that European relationships, in particular, to American cultural hegemony are more complex and contingent than a simple binary of power. Firstly, the United States' hegemony, and indeed its very existence, is a product of preceding European hegemony through colonialism (p. 460). Wagnleitner also highlights the role played, on the European side of this uneven cultural exchange, by *desire*: after World War II, "the United States signified the codes of modernity and promised the pursuit of happiness in its most updated version, as the pursuit of consumption" (p. 452) producing an ambivalence in the European consumer expressed by "breathing 'Yankee go home (and take me with you)' simultaneously." (p. 448) On the American side, much of the US culture consumed in Europe was not that sanctioned by American cultural elites but products of Black culture, like jazz and rock 'n' roll (pp. 447-8). The power dynamics at play in US cultural hegemony in Europe therefore involve a navigation of the multiplicities within and across cultures on both sides of the Atlantic. Wagnleitner illuminates this using The Beatles as an example: "The Liverpudlians were exposed to large numbers of American sailors and soldiers – many of them African-American – and to their music precisely because of the global extension of the American empire," further noting the irony that Liverpool had been a major centre of the transatlantic slave trade (p. 494). Liverpool was also, of course, a major centre of Irish immigration (Belchem, 2007), with three of the four Beatles being of Irish descent (Spitz, 2005, pp. 18, 75, 118). This illuminates an aspect of these dynamics missing from Wagnleitner's analysis, that is, hegemonies that exist within and between European countries: what Wagnleitner calls of the colonial "*Europeanization* of the world" is really a process of Anglicisation, Francisation, Hispanicization, Russification, or other specific European cultures being exported to or imposed upon other cultures, within Europe or outside of it. These processes are fraught and partial, as is contemporary Americanisation: as Wagnleitner notes, "one of the keys to understanding the transfer of American culture is to realize that non-Americans alter its initial meaning to suit their own purposes." (p. 452)

McDonagh's Irish plays collage past, present, real and fictional images of Ireland and Irishness with British, American, and Irish diasporic cultures, while *The Pillowman* takes

place in an unreal dystopia that, despite prominent Eastern European elements, is an intercultural alchemy. But McDonagh's America – like his Ireland – is weaved from a multilayered intercultural web that upends the cultural binaries of colonial discourse, and so doing, questions the very idea of nation, and of reality. *Behanding* takes place within an imperial power – the United States – but in a peripheral location within that power, as McDonagh would later do again in a British context with *Hangmen* (2015), set in the north of England. McDonagh's America is constructed from across the Atlantic Ocean, a more potent reflection of the place of the United States in Irish, British and global cultural consciousness than a reflection of, as Brah puts it regarding diasporic conceptions of place, the "lived experience of a locality" (2005, p. 188). Like his Irish plays do, *Behanding* combines real elements of its national setting into a synthesis outside of reality. American influences in his Irish plays reflect and disrupt the US's transnational cultural hegemony, talking back to a global loudspeaker in a distinctly localised voice. In *Behanding*, he traces the loudspeaker's cord back to the wall. *Behanding*, like the Leenane and Aran Island plays, occupies "the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures" (Knowles, 2010, p. 4). In his Irish plays, this reflects the operation of colonial structures upon Ireland, but in *Behanding*, it reflects the United States's operation upon the world. *Behanding* is concerned with a photonegative of the diasporic relationship to their country of origin that McDonagh deconstructs in his Irish plays: here, it is the imperial power as mythic place of desire. "America *itself* has now become an object of consumption," Wagnleitner writes, "the symbol of a new form of entertainment." (p. 460) Bhabha writes that colonial subjection is defined by "a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards" (1994, p. 111). In McDonagh's America, a bastard reconstitutes its mother as grasped through its projections of itself: "by television and by film, and by the image, imagery, and styles of mass advertising … in all those forms of mass communication" (Hall, 1997, p. 27).

The most potent critique, and most illuminating example, of McDonagh's outsider construction of America is regarding race and racism in the play. As Lonergan points out, only Toby's race is mentioned in the play, while the whiteness of the other characters "goes without saying." (p. 122) Jordan argues that the play challenges "simple binary perspectives that might suggest all white people are racist" (p. 143), but all of the white characters exhibit racist tendencies in different guises. While Jordan juxtaposes this with Toby's willingness to exploit anti-Black prejudice for his own ends as evidence of Black people not being "free of racist practices" (p. 143), this seems to negate the power dynamics both across races generally and in the characters' on-stage relationships. Toby tries to put off Mervyn's accusation that Toby cheated him in a drug deal by accusing him of being unable to distinguish Black people from one another (p. 32), but this reflects neither internalised anti-Black prejudice on Toby's part nor Black participation in white supremacy: it is, ultimately, a desperate and humorous attempt to use white people's fear of being *perceived* as racist to prevent harm. This gap between perceived and actual racism is a recurring issue in the play: Lonergan writes that race in *Behanding* "is not an essence, but rather a way of looking at or seeing the world – and thus of judging people in it." (p. 122) Carmichael is an avowed white supremacist who extensively uses racial slurs but secretly fetishises Black women (p. 41). Mervyn both recognises systemic racism in the police force and is willing to

exploit that racism to target Toby for personal vengeance (p. 50). Marilyn, though nominally liberal, is willing to engage in anti-Black racism not alone for personal material benefit, but simply to hurt Toby: she taunts him when he cries by saying "Where's all your Black Panther shit *now*, cry-baby?" (p. 14). The play mocks her political correctness for being superficial, ultimately concerned with not being perceived as racist rather than not participating in racist action. Her political correctness is, as Lonergan notes, empty (p. 124).

Hilton Als's influential review of *Behanding* eviscerates its handling of race relations, writing that Black actors would both feel shame and fury at the play and would not have the luxury of turning down the role of Toby, who he describes as a "caricature … the young black male as shucking, jiving thief" (2010). Als calls Anthony Mackie's performance in the role reminiscent of Stepin Fetchit, the Black vaudevillian and 1930s film actor known for his "laziest man in the world" character to which the NAACP strongly objected as an anti-Black stereotype (Hurst, 2006). Als's criticism, as Lonergan notes, reads like attacks on the Leenane trilogy "if we substitute the word 'Irish' for 'black'" (p. 131). In particular, it is very similar to Mary Luckhurst's critique of *Lieutenant*, where she argues that McDonagh uses "prejudicial constructs of the Irish as little more than bone-headed buffoons … they rely on the worst aspects of rural stereotyping." (2004, p. 38) Als is particularly critical of the play's use of racial slurs, especially the n-word, in combination with what he sees as the stereotypical representation of Black men in the play: "While Carmichael's 'nigger' talk could be put down to an attempt of McDonagh's to expose the nastiness of a segment of the population—many writers have used ugly language to paint an honest portrait of racism in this country—the caricature he presents in Toby … can't be excused on those grounds". The play's interest in the gap between perception of and actuality of racism is most directly addressed around the use of racial slurs, though with uneasy ambiguities. Marilyn says that Toby "didn't even *call* [Carmichael] on" his use of the n-word, to which Toby counters that both he and Marilyn were in imminent danger from "an amputee goddamn racist motherfucking cracker motherfucking HAND-PSYCHO!" (p. 17) Here, McDonagh seems to suggest that focus on language or symbol as sites for the fight against racism, devoid of broader context, is shallow, or even silly. On one hand, this is similar to leftist critiques, such as Emma Dabiri's, who argues that "liberal antiracism … on a representational level looks diverse, but doesn't go far enough in actually looking at the sources and systems of different forms of exploitation that affects people of certain races and certain socio-economic backgrounds." (Haynes, 2021) On the other, it can be interpreted as a kind of self-justification for the extensive use of racial slurs in *Behanding*: a Get Out of Jail Free card on any racism that occurs on the level of language and symbol. It is notable that when Toby justifies not objecting to Carmichael's use of racial slurs, he says that Carmichael was waving the severed hand around "like it's a motherfucking Kentucky motherfucking *chicken-wing*" (p. 17), potentially feeding into the stereotype of Black Americans eating fried chicken, as famously deployed in *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) and deeply embedded in US culture more broadly.

Even as Als critiques *Behanding* for upholding white supremacy, there are details in his review that betray that its perspective remains rooted in American cultural hegemony. He writes that, since *Beauty Queen*, "American audiences have been struck by [McDonagh's]

universality, despite the fact that Ireland is home to most of his characters." Ireland, here, is assumed to be *outside* of the universal, which is associated with the United States, operating as neutral default as a product of its apparently natural hegemony. More strikingly, Als concludes his argument by writing, "Like any smart immigrant, McDonagh knows that by going after Toby's otherness he becomes less of an outsider himself. This is how many people, certainly in the Republic's past, have first defined themselves as Americans." This apparently implies that McDonagh is an immigrant to the US: that he is personally aspiring to Americanness by engaging in anti-Black racism. But McDonagh has never been an immigrant: he was born in and lived his whole life in London, despite regular travel (Sawyer, 2022). Als notes earlier in this piece that McDonagh was born in London to Irish parents, so this is not a mistake about McDonagh's background. Rather, it seems to reflect an assumption of the United States as the epicentre of world culture: that, as American cultural hegemony appears natural, a successful playwright and filmmaker would naturally, inevitably migrate to the US. It reflects just how ingrained the assumptions of American hegemony are that this appears in an article critiquing the white supremacist implications of the play as well as the structural white supremacy of the US as a country.

Behanding, however, places American white supremacy in a transnational context. This is done most strikingly in the origin of the hand Toby and Marilyn deliver to Carmichael: the hand of an Aboriginal Australian stolen from the town's museum of natural history (p. 30). Firstly, this hand has been removed from its original place and context – Australia – and transported across the world to be displayed. Secondly, it is a human hand displayed in a museum of natural history, which usually display animal and plant exhibitions. The hand has therefore been both turned into an object for consumption and contextualised as a non-human object. As David Clare notes, the stealing of this hand resonates with the theft of an embalmed, shrunken body from a museum in Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* and John Huston's 1979 film adaptation of the same name, both O'Connor and Huston being Irish-American (2015, p. 348). Lonergan attempts to connect the Aboriginal hand to critiques of McDonagh's relationship to Ireland, noting that "McDonagh was himself accused of taking an 'aboriginal' culture (that of the Irish) and putting it on display for an audience of outsiders" (p. 123). This connection seems weak, not least because it relies on Lonergan using the word aboriginal to mean native: while aboriginal can mean indigenous more broadly, in contemporary usage it is used primarily to refer specifically to the indigenous people of Australia. Lonergan is correct, however, that the "treatment (or mistreatment) of race and racism [in *Behanding*] contextualises the debate about McDonagh's representation (or misrepresentation) of the Irish." (p. 115) Equally, vice versa: McDonagh's (mis)representation of the Irish contextualises his (mis)treatment of race and racism. *Behanding* ties race into the postcolonial but predominantly white dynamics of the Irish plays, positioning race as a product of the same global imperial systems as operating in an Irish context. Rather than the Aboriginal Australian hand operating as a metaphor for Irish culture, the use of an Aboriginal Australian hand situates the US amongst other settler colonial states, rather than, as in hegemonic discourse, positioning the US as unique, separate, and superior. This helps the play to expose the incoherence of American white supremacist beliefs. Carmichael assumes that the hand is that of an African-American

person, repeatedly using racial slurs to refer to the hand: "You, of all people, should know better," Carmichael says to Toby, "The hand off of one of your own people …" (p. 9) Marilyn, attempting to convince Carmichael that they brought his own severed hand, says, "It's *your* hand, gone dark! Hands *go* that way when they've been off a person long." (p. 10) Toby then claims it is an African-American person's hand – Tyrone Dixon's, specifically (p. 10). The hand's race is therefore made ambiguous in multiple ways – plausibly viewed as from a person of Australian, African or European descent – disrupting the assumed coherence of racial categorisation. This builds upon the apparent interpolation of *Wise Blood* that Clare notes: Susan Edmunds highlights that "racial comparisons based on skin tone" are unstable in O'Connor's novel, with the stolen body being "first described as 'yellow' and later described as 'dark'" (1996, p. 564). In *Behanding*, too, racial categorisation based on skin tone is unstable. In particular, racial categorisation of dead bodies or body parts – in this case, the severed hand – is undermined. This returns us to Lonergan's argument that race in *Behanding* is primarily a way of seeing (p. 122): although dead bodies, or parts severed from the living body, rot and decay in ways that leave them impossible to racialise even when they remain identifiably human, this occurs when the body or body part is no longer observed by the living. Within the transnational diasporic context established by interpolating *Wise Blood*, racial categorisation and national categorisation are both unstable, but one is understood as external and visual – a way of seeing, albeit an incoherent one – while national identity is internal: a way of being, albeit an incoherent one.

Discussion of alleged racism in *Behanding* mirror critiques of one of McDonagh's greatest influences, Quentin Tarantino. Spike Lee criticised Tarantino's "excessive use of the n-word" in *Jackie Brown* (1997) and condemned *Django Unchained* (2012) as "disrespectful" to the victims of American slavery (Walker, 2012). Quentin Tarantino's influence on *Behanding* is even more explicit than in McDonagh's other plays, but has been partially misconstrued. David Rooney in *Daily Variety* describes *Behanding* as a bulked up version of the "hidden-wristwatch tale" (2010, p. 2) from *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), also featuring Christopher Walken. More relevant, however, is Tarantino's segment from the anthology film *Four Rooms* (Anders *et al.*, 1995), a riff on "Man from the South" – misnamed "Man from Rio" in dialogue in *Four Rooms* – the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode (Lloyd, 1960), itself adapted from the Roald Dahl short story of the same title (2013). This short story was also adapted into an episode of Dahl's programme *Tales of the Unexpected* for British television (Tuchner, 1979). In *Four Rooms*, a Hollywood film director (Quentin Tarantino) and his friend (Paul Calderón), inspired by the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode, place a bet on Calderón successfully igniting his lighter ten times in succession. If Calderón's lighter does not fail, he will win the director's sportscar; otherwise, his little finger will be chopped off. Ted (Tim Roth), the bellboy who appears in all segments of the film, is tasked with chopping off the finger. In the *Four Rooms* segment, the lighter fails on the first try, Ted chops off the finger immediately, and happily sweeps up the money he was offered for his participation, sauntering out of the hotel suite. In the short story "Man from the South", which the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode adapts faithfully, the lighter has been successfully lit eight times when a woman enters, stopping the game (p. 65). She explains that Carlos, the man with the lighter, has done this so many times that they left their home country to avoid his being

institutionalised (pp. 65-66). She says that Carlos has "taken altogether forty-seven fingers from different people, and has lost eleven cars." (p. 65) She is finally revealed to have only one finger and a thumb left on her hand (p. 66).

Four Rooms is a direct influence on *Behanding*, but in a manner that reinserts elements from "Man from the South". In this respect, Behanding does not merely mimic Tarantino as a simulacrum of Americanness, but forefronts the intercultural web that *Four Room* elides. Hitchcock, as discussed previously, is a frequent source of intertexts in McDonagh's work, significantly as an English Catholic of Irish descent. Roald Dahl, meanwhile, like McDonagh, was born in Britain to immigrant parents: in Dahl's case, in Wales to Norwegian parents (Howard, 2017). Indeed, Dahl's first language was Norwegian (Rosen, 2012). Despite Dahl's British nationalism, "Man from the South" has been interpreted as using the tropes of colonial literature – by presenting an encounter between the first and third world – to critique the violence underpinning neocolonialism and consumer capitalism (De Juan, 2017). Dahl is entirely erased from Tarantino's account of "Man from the South" which foregrounds its being an *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* episode. *Behanding*, like *Four Rooms*, takes place in a hotel room. It prominently features an eccentric hotel worker in a supporting role that is at once peripheral to the play's apparent action and central to the play's construction: *Behanding*'s Mervyn, similar to Ted in *Four Rooms*, reluctantly occupies his position, even as it defines his on-stage presence in the form of a "hotel uniform [and] nametag" (p. 2). Like "Man from the South", *Behanding*'s protagonist has amassed a collection of severed appendages: where Carlos acquired dozens of fingers, Carmichael has "about a hundred human hands" stuffed in a suitcase (p. 19). Like Carlos is revealed to be, Carmichael is implied to be mentally disturbed: Mervyn calls into question his story of being behanded and raises the probability that Carmichael cut off his own hand (p. 45). (Toby suggests that Carmichael's account of the behanding is from a TV movie, possibly starring Lee Majors (p. 32).) This extensive interpolation of *Four Rooms* and "Man from the South" is, in itself, a web of intercultural illusions. Simultaneously, it ties together disparate parts of McDonagh's body of work. Carmichael's account of his behanding – held down by hillbillies as a train runs over his arm, and the hillbillies waving at him with his own severed hand – is reminiscent of Katurian's stories in *The Pillowman*. The severed hands – especially the possibility that Carmichael cut off his own hand – calls ahead to the severed fingers in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022).

Despite being, as Lonergan writes, "one of the few McDonagh plays *not* to feature a murder or a suicide, or even a particularly bad beating" (pp. 116-7), *Behanding* is especially thematically concerned with violence – and its role in American society. Scene Two consists of a monologue in which Mervyn fantasises about violence: "But that's why I'd always hope something exciting would happen, y'know? Maybe a prostitute would get stabbed and I'd have to go rescue her? Or some lesbians would get stabbed? … Maybe I'd get some kinda medal from some kinda Lesbian Association." (p. 21) Though this is ostensibly a fantasy about his own heroism, Mervyn exclusively imagines direct personal violence as giving him this pretext to act heroically: he does not imagine rescuing people from a fire, for example. Most vividly, he describes his fantasy of a school shooting:

> "I'd always kinda daydream that a couple of the more perturbed kids would come in and, y'know, start shooting up the place … and then I'd, y'know, do something brave and save everybody. Well, not *everybody*, else it wouldn't be a high school massacre, but maybe after they got, say, twelve? … But I definitely wouldn't wanna be one of the ones just got shot in the head at the outset and didn't know *what* was going on. … Waste of being in a high school massacre." (pp. 21-2)

This is even more explicitly a fantasy not of heroism itself, but foremost of violence. Mervyn does not "daydream" of becoming a school shooter, but he both desires a school shooting to take place and is blasé about the deaths involved. He presents this not as a shameful secret, but as a commonplace, relatable anecdote: "Yeah, I always used to hope they'd have one of those shooting massacres at my high school, didn't you? I did." (p. 21) Mervyn therefore displays, in his heroic narrative, many characteristics of a typical school shooter profile, including narcissism, antisocial behaviour, and desire for fame, admiration or credit (Haeney, Ash and Galletly, 2018). Though school shooters are typically perceived as "bullied, loner outcasts," this is largely a result of misreporting around the 1999 Columbine Massacre: "a powerful story," Dave Cullen writes, "but entirely fictional. Every element of that narrative would turn out to be false." (2019) This myth of Columbine, Cullen argues, remains lodged in the public consciousness. It is also a myth that enables a degree of sympathy for the killers, framing their motivation as understandable, even natural. Mervyn frames these mythic motivations this way in his monologue, acknowledging that being bad at sports "*can* get you down" (p. 21). Yet Mervyn himself, despite sharing characteristics with the school shooter profile, does not reflect any of these more sympathetic traits. McDonagh frames his desire for heroism as psychologically indistinguishable from a school shooter even as he removes any sympathetic myths from this psychology. In this way, heroic acts of violence are similar to, and reliant upon, senseless acts of violence, forming two sides of the same coin. Mervyn calls the stabbing of a prostitute or "some lesbians" at the hotel "something exciting" that could "happen" at the hotel (p. 21): the socially sanctioned violence that he dreams of getting him a medal is dependent on unsanctioned violence, which renders both sanctioned and unsanctioned violence thrilling.

School shootings are an overwhelmingly American phenomenon. Although exact figures are difficult to quantify due to a variety of political and logistical roadblocks – the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is effectively banned from studying deaths due to gun violence, for example – an investigation by the *Washington Post* found on average ten school shootings had occurred annually since the Columbine Massacre (Woodrow Cox and Rich, 2018). According to CNN, the US had fifty-seven times as many school shootings as the other G7 nations combined between 2009 and 2018 (Grabow and Rose, 2018). If senseless violence and violence perceived as heroic are mutually entangled, it must be noted that violence perceived as heroic is also peculiarly endemic in American society, from police violence to US military interventions worldwide. Comparing the violence presented in McDonagh's Irish plays to that in *Behanding*, the plays present on-stage violence in a similar exaggerated, comical manner, which I earlier associated with splatter cinema and Grand Guignol theatre. Carmichael's hundreds of severed hands spilling across the stage, or the story of his behanding, operate within this tone. However, the psychological role of violence

in *Behanding* is different from McDonagh's Irish plays. Though both present characters who are blasé about death – Valene and Colman in *The Lonesome West*, say – in *Behanding*, the violence to which Mervyn not only underreacts but fantasises about is reflective of a real violence in American society which is, for many, psychologically close at hand. American children not directly exposed to violence at school are nonetheless exposed to the threat of violence at school: "Thousands of schools," John Woodrow Cox and Steven Rich write, "conduct active-shooter drills in which kids as young as four hide in darkened closets and bathrooms from imaginary murderers." (2018) And yet many Americans remain unwilling to prevent this peculiarly American phenomenon from occurring. This reflects the outsider view of the US that McDonagh presents and interrogates in *Behanding*: though reflecting European entrancement by violent American *media*, he presents American reaction to its own real violence as psychopathic. This extends the themes of *The Pillowman*, questioning why this type of violence remains peculiarly American in a world saturated in American media. And it subverts the propagandistic impulse of TV shows like *Cops*, where violence is heroic, glamourous and good – as long as it is committed by the right person, against those who deserve it, both constructs reliant on a web of white supremacist, colonial and hegemonic associations.

All of this reflects McDonagh's status as a diasporic writer because, as an Irish-English person living in a period of US cultural hegemony, he has both knowledge of and distance from American culture. *Behanding* reflects the potent mixture of enthral and rage that defines this relationship. He places the US in a world context, an act that inherently subverts its apparent natural state of cultural hegemony, and uses the work of Irish diaspora artists like Flannery O'Connor and Alfred Hitchcock to destabilise other conditions supposed to be natural in the American imagination, including the very idea of racial categorisation. In *Behanding*, he expands on his critique of both colonialism and nationalism in his Irish plays, and links it to his critique of state violence in *The Pillowman* – laying the groundwork to turn both barrels back at his birthplace in the more potent, more successful *Hangmen*.

Hangmen

To date, *Hangmen* (2015) is McDonagh's only work for stage or screen set in England, the country in which he was raised and continues to live. Following a prologue depicting the execution of James Hennessy by Harry Wade, Britain's second-best hangman, the bulk of the play is set in Wade's pub in Oldham in 1965, as the death penalty is being abolished. Mooney, a mysterious figure reminiscent of Hennessy, arrives at Harry's pub, and shows interest in Harry's daughter, Shirley, beginning a chain of events that lead to another hanging. It is, as Joan Fitzpatrick Dean writes, a close cousin to Harold Pinter's comedy of menace (2018, p. 106). The Oldham setting, as José Lanters outlines, is drawn in part from true events of the period: chief hangman Albert Pierrepoint, who has a brief but pivotal appearance in *Hangmen*, ran the pub Help the Poor Struggler, near Oldham (2018, p. 316). But this north of England setting also enables McDonagh to mimic the simultaneous insider and outsider dynamic of his Irish plays in an English context. In the case of *Hangmen*, this is achieved by the emphasis on two elements in particular: the north/south divide within

English culture, society and economy, and the inclusion of Irish or Catholic references that particularly mark apparent outsiders.

Though England is, conceptually, a single nation, the north/south divide is extremely potent in English consciousness, splintering Englishness as an identity. Alan RH Baker and Mark Billinge address the north/south divide both in terms of concrete regional differences – in economic, demographic, social, political, cultural, linguistic and religious materialities – and in the geographical imagination, as found in "both popular and elitist culture" (2004b, p. 3). In Baker and Billinge's analysis, the former corresponds to "the broad geographical structures which have underpinned England's history during the last one thousand years" (p. 3); the latter has been "deeply embedded" in national popular and political culture since the industrial revolution (2004a, p. 179) – they cite Elizabeth Gaskell's 1855 novel *North and South* as a cultural example (p. 1) – and especially significant since World War II (p. 4). Baker and Billinge contrast this with the metropolitan/provincial divisions in other nations, like Paris and the French provinces (2004a, p. 179). This is not to suggest that a north/south divide is peculiar to England, as there is a comparative divide in Italy (González, 2010). Ireland, however, is primarily divided along metropolitan/provincial lines, between Dublin and regional Ireland. The north/south divide in Ireland is distinct from that in England due to its roots in complex colonial, religious and political differences that both led to, and have been intensified by, partition: national identity on the island of Ireland is split into distinct identities.

In England, even as the north/south division is so deeply embedded both discursively and materially, the national identity of Englishness is conceptually united by being defined against other national identities. Writing about the medieval period, Bruce MS Campbell acknowledges the north's subordinate position within England, describing it as the inevitable product of "the North's status as periphery and the South's status as core within the nation state that was England" (2004, p. 174). But he nonetheless argues that the "political, cultural and economic fortunes of North and South" were bound together, and that to both northern and southern English, "it was the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish who always remained the 'significant others'" (p. 174). Baker and Billinge further note that the stereotype of the southern English – that of the imperial core – "set itself" against "the non-English 'heathen' (meaning Catholic) Irish and the 'uncivilised natives' of overseas colonies", rather than against northern English people (2004a, p. 179). As with the remote small town in *A Behanding in Spokane*, the north of England is both unambiguously within an imperial power but in a peripheral location within that power. This is unlike the shifting, ambiguous, or "concentric loyalties" Silke Stroh describes (2011, p. 13) in Scottish, and by extension, Welsh or Northern Irish, people, who occupy "an uneasy position as both intra-British 'colonised' and overseas colonisers." (p. 13) Rather, the north of England is at once subject to deprivation – inequalities between north and south have led to decades of "severe and persistent" mortality disparities between the regions (Hacking, Muller and Buchan, 2011, p. 423) – and its interests have been historically bound to English-centred British imperialism. Further complicating this picture is the significant Irish populations in the north of England: E.D. Steele notes that the 1851 census – that is, in the period immediately following the Great Famine – over forty-one percent of Irish-born people in Britain lived in the seven

counties of the north of England, amounting to over five percent of the region's total population (1976, p. 220).

The north/south divide, and its centrality to the geographical imagination of England, is a consistent undercurrent throughout *Hangmen*. Even simply juxtaposing Northern and Londoner characters continually reemphasises the north/south divide throughout the play. McDonagh exploits this conception within the English geographical imagination to again position himself as both outsider and insider to the culture he is depicting. Born and raised in London, the north of England is both foreign and not, and so he writes about it, as he did the west of Ireland, with both intimate knowledge and analytical or parodic distance. Ondřej Pilný writes that McDonagh again "demonstrates his talent for work with dialects", comparing the "unabashed synthetic Hiberno-English" of McDonagh's earlier plays with the "vernacular … of Northern England" in *Hangmen* (2018, p. 91). Joan Fitzpatrick Dean contrasts the reception of McDonagh's use of Hiberno-English and his use of "the Oldham dialect", noting "Much of the critical controversy over the Irish plays in particular struggle with their mimetic representation of the West of Ireland, but critics celebrated the accuracy of McDonagh's parochial Oldham." (2018, p. 104) Authenticity is once again used as the frame of reference to judge McDonagh's work, though this time, as a point of praise. Yet McDonagh's Oldham, too, is unabashedly synthetic and mimetic, with its northern pub setting clearly interpolating *Coronation Street*, for example. It has been widely reported that McDonagh had little familiarity with Oldham (Pilný, 2018, p. 92). If McDonagh's Irishness has been viewed with critical suspicion – framing him as an interloping, even imperialist outsider – his Englishness has been assumed to be comprehensive, a generic sweeping national identity easily triumphing over deeply embedded regional difference. This juxtaposition unwittingly mirrors colonial discourses about Ireland and England, framing Irishness as weak, frail and narrowly conceived compared to Englishness's power, homogeneity and assumed universality. In *Hangmen*, McDonagh disrupts Englishness's very coherence, undermining its cultural dominance of the Atlantic archipelago and the world by calling into question what Englishness consists of.

McDonagh positions himself as both insider and outsider to the north of England most clearly in his framing of Londoner characters within the play as outsiders, sharply distinct from the northern milieu. Pilný notes that the northern vernacular in the play "is contrasted with the speech of a London 'spiv'" (p. 91). In the opening scene, James Hennessy is noted as having a "London accent" (p. 11). The only other character from London, Mooney, is also noted as such in the stage directions (p. 20), while northern accents are treated as default – effectively reversing *Behanding*'s assumption of whiteness (unless otherwise noted) by here denaturalising the imperial core, albeit in a context with ambivalent power dynamics. The northern and southern characters are attentive to each other's differences in a manner that reinforces them for the audience. Broadly, the southern characters treat the north with condescension and contempt; the northern characters view southerners with antagonistic suspicion. In the opening scene, Hennessy promises Harry Wade and his assistant hangman Syd that he will "come back to whatever northern shithole you live in and I will fucking haunt you." (p. 13) He also calls Harry a "northern bastard!" (p. 12) This contempt towards northerners follows through to Mooney, who adds to it condescension: he questions if

alcoholic drinks are not "all the same up north" (p. 29) and, later in a moment that could be played with a mixture of condescension and aggression, he asks if his pint of beer having "a little bit the hint of piss about it" is "a northern thing" (p. 86). The northern characters, while less overtly contemptuous, regard southerners with a bafflement and mistrust that spills over into acts of violence. The two hangings that occur on stage are of characters from London: Hennessy and Mooney. When a journalist questions if Hennessy's execution was a miscarriage of justice, Harry folds "he was very anti-northern" (p. 40) into his defence of the execution. Mooney's aim of projecting a "*vaguely* menacing" (p. 70) aura is furthered in no small part by his being from London: he is made suspect, out of place, in a way that could explain away or amplify his odd behaviour. "Maybe they do it different down south," Harry's wife Alice wonders about his strange and aggressive reaction to her checking his references, "but I can't see how." (p. 54)

The Londoner character as outsider is further tied to McDonagh's own background by Hennessy and Mooney's apparent Irish or Catholic backgrounds. James Hennessy is, as José Lanters outlines, based at least in part on James Hanratty, who was controversially executed for the A6 murder (2018, p. 317), with the fictional analogue in *Hangmen* having a more obviously Irish surname. Mooney also has an Irish surname, tying him to both Hennessy and McDonagh, as well as having the overtly Catholic middle name Aloysius (p. 89). The name Aloysius possibly points towards John Patrick Shanley's play *Doubt* (2005) and its film adaptation (2008), the main character in which is called Sister Aloysius. *Doubt* is set in 1964 (2005, p. 6), the year before the main events of *Hangmen*, and deals with the "epistemological instability" that Joan Fitzpatrick Dean highlights as the central theme of *Hangmen* (2018). Like McDonagh, Shanley is an Irish diasporic playwright and filmmaker (Witchel, 2004). Due to his London origins and physical description, Lanters argues that Mooney is in part a projection of McDonagh himself into the play (p. 320), which is further supported by these Irish or Catholic details. When ordering a drink at the bar, Mooney allows Shirley to choose for him. Her "children's picking game" (p. 29) lands on Guinness, and as she goes to pour it, Mooney says, "Oh, actually, I don't like Guinness. I meant any of the other ones. … It's quite specific, isn't it, Guinness?" (p. 29) Shirley agrees: "Yes, it's quite Irish, isn't it?" (p. 29) Reading Mooney as partially a projection of McDonagh, Lanters interprets this exchange as "the author's tongue-in-cheek commentary on being labelled an 'Irish' writer, a label he sought to shed by setting his subsequent plays in eastern Europe, the USA, and northern England." (p. 321) By bisecting McDonagh's work for stage and screen, Lanters ignores that in the same period, McDonagh wrote and directed *Six Shooter* (2004), set in Ireland, *In Bruges* (2008), the main characters in which are Irish, and *Seven Psychopaths* (2012), in which Colin Farrell plays, as Irish, a projection of Martin McDonagh. Subsequent to Lanters's article, he also wrote and directed *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022), also set in Ireland. As such, this exchange cannot be reasonably interpreted as McDonagh attempting to "shed" Irishness as a label. Indeed, Irish theatre provides intertexts here as in McDonagh's other plays. As Lanters points out, the opening execution scene is clearly alluding to JM Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, particularly that in both characters "struggle against their imminent execution by clinging to furniture" and are told to go easy (p. 317). Pilný notes echoes of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* in *Hangmen*, broadly in its

approach to capital punishment, and in specific lines, including the repetition of "hanging's too good for 'em" (p. 97). He compares Hennessy saying about his guards, "Where'd they get you two? Window at fucking Debenhams?!" and the Chief Warder in *The Quare Fellow* saying about his subordinates that you would "get better in Woolworths." (p. 97) In this context, the discussion about Guinness highlights a sense of Irishness as different or undesirable within English discourse, even among English people of Irish descent. Mooney describes Guinness as "specific", and later, contrasts his desire to appear "*vaguely* menacing" with appearing "*specifically* menacing" due to Syd sharing additional information about him (p. 70). The repetition of the word specific indicates that if Mooney's being a Londoner appears vaguely menacing, hinting at his Irish background makes him specifically menacing: at once providing additional information about himself that he wants to keep mysterious, and reflecting Irishness as itself menacing in the English imagination.

The association between London and Irishness, particularly in the context of being falsely accused of, and becoming the victims of, violence, threatens to reverse roles in cultural and political dominance within England. As outlined, the north of England is the periphery, while the south of England is the imperial core, with associated disparities in economic and quality of life outcomes. The north of England has also historically been associated with Irish migration, with noted forms of Irish identity developing among Irish communities in Liverpool, for example (Belchem, 2007). In *Hangmen*, characters from the south of England are more likely to be from an Irish background, are viewed discriminatorily, and are victims of a prejudicial judicial and extrajudicial justice system. The imperial core is represented as a social, political and geographical periphery. This dynamic is partially a result of McDonagh's projection of himself as insider/outsider into the play. It is made less troubling by being set in a time of northern cultural ascendency: the 1960s not only precedes deindustrialisation and the neoliberal turn in Britain, but was a period in which the north of England was a force in national and international popular culture, in film (*Kes*), television (*Coronation Street*, *The Likely Lads*), and, of course, music (The Beatles and Merseybeat generally). Further, as I will discuss later, the play contains references to northern characters with Irish backgrounds: Phyllis Keane, who is subjected to social violence.

Hangmen is about the English relationship to structural violence. Pilný questions why McDonagh would write a play about capital punishment "long after the reintroduction of the death penalty was last seriously discussed in Britain" (p. 97). One could object that the death penalty remains in place in many countries, including the USA, where all of McDonagh's previous plays had been performed. The reintroduction of the death penalty also enjoys wide support in Britain, with particular spikes after high profile murder cases and terrorist incidents, including during the Troubles (Welch, 2011). But more broadly, *Hangmen* places support for the death penalty in a continuum of state violence within the English consciousness that includes not just executions, but mental institutions, police violence, war, and empire. Harry proudly describes hanging as English, contrasted with the American electric chair and the French guillotine (p. 36), thereby framing state violence as a part of English heritage. The dramatic irony of this is that Harry is proud, even boastful, of hanging being distinctly English, while the play positions it as a matter of national culpability. Fitzpatrick Dean writes that *Hangmen* is concerned with widespread societal

culpability, since the hangings depend on "the action and inaction of the many, not just the few" (p. 107) – noting that apart from Shirley and the men hanged, the characters "are all hangmen." (p. 108) In this exchange, that widespread culpability is framed as specifically English in character, thereby extending a specific critique of capital punishment to the role of systematic violence in English heritage. The many, and not the few, of English people hold some responsibility for the crimes committed by the state through the carceral system at home and the imperial system abroad. McDonagh's diasporic perspective allows both these systems to be kept in focus, and further, the ways they function as part of the same larger system. The dramatic irony is furthered when Harry is questioned about morality: he frames his executions as being done by the courts, and the state (p. 36), while attributing all controversial executions and miscarriages of justice to Pierrepoint (p. 39). Though he's more than willing to accept credit, he doesn't accept blame – mirroring English attitudes towards Empire. Conservative historian Robert Tombs, for instance, writes for *The Spectator* that most colonised peoples of the British Empire "were willing, and sometimes eager, to acquiesce in a system that offered (though could not always deliver) peace, order and access to trade" lending it "unusual legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects, millions of whom fought for it." In a perfect mirror of Harry's efforts to accept credit but eschew blame, he argues that "Where the British Empire's relationship with slavery was unique was in *combatting* it." (2020) As Trinidadian scholar Eric Williams observed, "British historians wrote almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it." (1966, p. 233)

Like *Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *Hangmen* uses ghostly imagery to address repression and containment of social violence, but in an English context. Ghosts have been theorised as related to trauma, with Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren writing that they "become both the objects of and metaphors for a wounded historical experience." (2013, p. 12) This is part of why, as Anthony Roche (2004), Christopher Morash (2004) and Emilie Pine (2010) have noted, ghosts and hauntings are a recurrent feature in Irish theatre, from Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* to Conor McPherson's *The Weir* to Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats* (Morash, 2004, p. 267). If ghosts are the result of wounded historical experience, then Ireland's colonial and postcolonial history naturally produces them. This may seem inapplicable to an English context: as a colonial power, as the imperial core, Englishness has a radically different relationship to wounded experience. But Avery Gordon positions ghosts, at once more broadly and more specifically, as produced through "always incomplete forms of containment and repression" (2008, p. xvi), with haunting being "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely." (p. xvi) Recent centuries of English history are replete with repressed or unresolved social violence. This violence appears safely confined to the past, but unreckoned with, makes itself known through haunting. Ghosts are "characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place," Avery Gordon writes (p. xix). As both and neither an Irish (n)or English playwright, McDonagh uses ghosts as they are so often used in Irish theatre – as objects of and metaphors for wounded historical experience – to highlights how the same underlying postcolonial concerns operate

in an English context. And so in *Hangmen*, the systemic violence of the British Empire produces ghosts that return to the motherland.

The primary spectre in *Hangmen* emanates from a singular act of violence that acts as a simulacrum of many acts of violence: Hennessy's hanging. Hennessy promised to haunt Harry Wade, and Mooney is, as Lanters observes, the form that haunting takes (p. 320), similar to how Mag's ghost takes the form of Maureen's ongoing half-life in *Beauty Queen*. Though Mooney is a distinct character who claims to have briefly met Hennessy (p. 71), the ghost is, as del Pilar Blanco and Peeren note, "a figure of surprise that does not necessarily reappear in exactly the same manner or guise." (2013, p. 13) Hennessy's execution is an act of direct violence but, more damningly, an act of social violence for which all or most of British society is culpable. Harry instinctively identifies this social culpability, but uses it for unjustified absolution. The "epistemological instability" that Fitzpatrick Dean highlights in Hennessy and Mooney's executions and, by extension, associated with all death penalty cases, is connected to Mooney as Hennessy's ghost. Capital punishment's finality demands an epistemological stability that, as Julian Wolfreys observes, depends "on the apparent finality and closure of identification [that] cannot account for the idea of the spectral." (2013, p. 70) Equally, the spectral undermines finality, closure, and epistemological stability.

Gordon writes that the ghost in essence "has a real presence and demands its due, your attention", whose appearance occurs "when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done." (p. xvi) Though Gordon argues that haunting makes it *seem* like something different must be done, in *Hangmen*, the haunting is navigated through repetition. In theatre, particularly English theatre, ghosts frequently return to seek revenge, inciting a living character to take vengeance on their behalf: Hamlet's father asks Hamlet to take his revenge on Claudius for murdering him. David Edgar notes that "the main dramatic function of ghosts" in theatre is and has always been "to exhort the living to exact revenge." (2009, p. 189) *Hangmen* toys with this convention by having Mooney apparently take revenge on Harry, hinting that he has killed Shirley, Harry's daughter (p. 94). But as Shirley arrives unharmed, Mooney/Hennessy's revenge is not the something different done, and does not resolve the opening act of violence. Indeed, the haunting prompts no resolution to repressed and unresolved social violence, and instead leads to its reenactment: Harry hangs Mooney, with the assistance or passive compliance of everyone in the pub. During his extrajudicial execution, Mooney's words echo Hennessy's, including stating that he has a bad wrist (pp. 14, 91) and calling his executioners "nincompoops" (pp. 13, 93), and Harry is specified in the stage directions to hit Mooney with "the same billyclub" as he hits Hennessy in the opening scene (p. 89). Interpreted through the lens of national culpability for social violence, this reenactment in place of resolution highlights how the end of the British Empire did not resolve or even end the social violence of imperialism, but allowed it to be reenacted in a new manner or guise as American-centric neocolonialism.

Hangmen includes the names and stories of specific, real hanging victims, pointing to how their ghosts haunt British society and its institutions just as Hennessy haunts Harry. These include: Derek Bentley, a teenage boy who upon testing after his arrest, was classed as

"borderline feeble-minded," and was convicted based on the principle of joint enterprise when his accomplice in a burglary killed someone (Tuft and Nakken, 2017, p. 137). His case was quashed in 1998, after a posthumous pardon (Tuft and Nakken, p. 138). Timothy Evans was convicted of murdering his wife and daughter, largely on the evidence of John Christie, a witness who subsequently was found to be a serial killer, whose victims included Evans's wife and daughter; he was posthumously pardoned in 1966 (Wheatcroft, 2009). Ruth Ellis was the last woman executed in Britain, and though she was guilty, her case, and the decision not to commute her sentence, was highly controversial and contributed to the subsequent abolition of the death penalty (Campbell, 2018). As previously noted, Hennessy is based on James Hanratty, executed for the A6 murders. Pierrepoint also describes the execution of "an anarchist lad" he and Harry "did in Pentonville in the forties": a "doomed Frenchman" who pointed skyward while counting down to his execution (p. 97). Lanters identifies the substance of this story as corresponding to Michel Faugeron, who protested his innocence (p. 326). "In the historical version of the story, then, the man's guilt is open to question," Lanters argues, "and the heaven-pointing is more accusatory and ironic than sentimental and authentic" (p. 326). The inclusion of these real hanging victims extends Hennessy's promised haunting of Wade into a broader haunting of British society, and critiques the refusal of British society to resolve that violence.

Notably, some of these cases have been subjects for Irish and Irish-British artists before. Elvis Costello, real name Declan MacManus, is Liverpool Irish, with biographer Graeme Thomson attributing the traditionally Scottish spelling of his surname to "an attempt to escape anti-Irish prejudice" (2005, pp. 9-11). He wrote "Let Him Dangle", a song about Derek Bentley, for his album *Spike*, on which he specifically critiques the ongoing appetite to reintroduce the death penalty:

> Well it's hard to imagine it's the times that have changed
> (String him up)
> When there's a murder in the kitchen that is brutal and strange
> (String him up)
> If killing anybody is a terrible crime
> (String him up)
> Why does this bloodthirsty chorus come 'round from time to time? (1989)

Folk singer Ewan MacColl, born in England to Scottish parents, wrote "Go Down Ye Murderers (The Ballad of Tim Evans)" about the execution of Evans. Though not Irish himself, MacColl – and, indeed, his daughter Kirsty MacColl – had strong ties to the Irish music scene in London, including working with Dominic Behan and writing "Dirty Old Town", famously covered by The Pogues and The Dubliners. Irish artists have covered "Go Down Ye Murderers", including Christy Moore and Paddy Reilly. This song, too, condemns the execution as part of a broader societal culpability: "They sent Tim Evans to the drop for a crime he did not do / It was Christy was the murderer and the judge and jury too." (MacColl, 2014) McDonagh, then, is tapping into a tradition of Irish and Irish-British artists positioning these executions as part of broader social violence in Britain, rather than individual miscarriages of justice. Their ghosts, in *Hangmen*, do not have the simple cause-and-effect

existence of exacting revenge, but exist to reframe audience attitudes to violence and repression in Britain and British history.

But the ghosts in *Hangmen* aren't only produced by hanging. Off-stage, but pivotal to the story as it unfolds, a friend of Shirley – Phyllis Keane – is put in a "mental home." As Esmé Weijun Wang notes in her book about schizophrenia, asylums, psychiatric hospitals or "mental homes" are one of the places mostly frequently imagined to be "haunted" in popular culture and folklore (2019, p. 85). They align with Gordon's theories of ghosts produced through repressed or contained trauma, as institutions frequently enacting trauma – the abuse and mistreatment of patients – and that, by their nature, exist to repress and contain trauma, sealing the mentally ill or neurodivergent away from mainstream, neurotypical society. Phyllis Keane has an Irish surname, linking the positioning of the mentally ill or neurodivergent as menacing or dangerous to the positioning of Irish or Irish-descended people as menacing or dangerous. She is also, significantly, a girl, reflecting both the similar but distinct form of fear that women and girls are subject to, and the different forms of repression, containment and violence that are targeted at them. The only characters who defend Phyllis are the play's only on-stage female characters: Harry's wife, Alice, half-heartedly says that "we all have" "quirks" and calls Phyllis a "poor girl," and Shirley is deeply upset by the news. At fifteen, Phyllis Keane is involuntarily institutionalised for reading car number plates out loud, either stepping or not stepping on paving stones, and walking clockwise around bodies of water. Shirley cryptically says that it's Phyllis's dad who "wants putting in a home, not Phyllis" (p. 34), indicating possible abuse. This largely invisible abuse remains unresolved, but Phyllis's behavioural differences, though benign, are visible, and so lead to her physical containment. The community at large, as with the hangings, either participates – Fry, the police officer, was personally involved (p. 21) – or passively supports Phyllis being put in an institution. In the play, Phyllis functions as a ghost: she does not appear on stage, but like Hamlet's father, pivotally shapes the story. Mooney, overhearing the adult characters in the pub talking about Phyllis, uses her to manipulate Shirley, promising to take her to visit her friend in the mental home – setting off a chain of events that leads to his murder.

More broadly, the play's specific period setting evokes the ghost of the north of England, in the same way that McDonagh's Irish plays are haunted by an image of rural Ireland of which only the image remains. As I outlined earlier, the 1960s was a period of northern cultural ascendency that has since been undercut by the decline of industry, mining and post-war social democracy – and the decline of the British Empire. The domination of neoliberalism in British politics, starting with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979, exacerbated existing social and economic disparities between the north and south of England. *Hangmen*, in representing the north/south division in this earlier period, haunts the contemporary deindustrialised north with a historic vision of the north. This historic vision of the north parallels the historic, idyllic vision of rural Ireland that McDonagh satirises in his Irish plays, but also has particular resonances for the consciousness of the Irish diaspora in England, since it is the historical context of a great deal of the migration that created Irish communities in England – and so is deeply bound up in the complex

emotional reality of mass emigration, discrimination, surveillance and fractured identity on one hand, and on the other, economic opportunity, community, and multiplicity of identity.

A Very Very Very Dark Matter

A Very Very Very Dark Matter (2018), McDonagh's most recent play, is the culmination – and, at times, refutation – of multiple thematic strands that I have examined in his work thus far. Like his Irish plays, it is concerned with the ongoing legacy of colonialism. Like *Beauty Queen*, it has a spikey, complex female character at its centre. Like *Cripple*, it is about disability and the politics of representation. Like *Lieutenant*, it is about violent resistance to colonial rule. Like *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter* and *The Pillowman*, it is concerned with the fairy tale as a form, as well as dealing with authorship and the moral implications of creative work. Like *Behanding*, it is a play about race. Like *Hangmen*, it is about state violence and the ignorance or denial of moral responsibility in the imperial imagination. It alludes to these thematic links by directly referencing images, ideas and plot points from his existing works, from *Behanding*'s severed hands to *In Bruges*'s Belgian setting to the characters of short stature that recur throughout his oeuvre. The basic premise of *Dark Matter* is drawn from one of Katurian's stories in *The Pillowman*. However, this is not to suggest that *Dark Matter* is simply a metacommentary on McDonagh's stage career. Beyond its interpolating of direct reference to his plays, *Dark Matter* contemplates the political implications of his previous works, re-examining and clarifying his existing themes. In *Dark Matter*, his Irish plays and other works for the stage become part of an inseparable thematic tapestry: racial, gender and disability hierarchies are framed within global colonial experiences, of both coloniser and colonised. McDonagh's diasporic background enables this panoramic critique, overlaying national blind spots in a way that illuminates the total picture. In this international, historical and ongoing context, McDonagh analyses the value and utility of creative imagination.

McDonagh's previous non-Irish plays were set in a totalitarian dictatorship outside a particular time or location (*Pillowman*), a fictional town in the contemporary United States (*Behanding*), and 1960s north of England (*Hangmen*). *Dark Matter* takes place primarily in nineteenth-century Copenhagen (p. 1). Unlike the settings of his other plays, this is both specific and outside of McDonagh's typical intercultural triangle of national influences, that is, Ireland, Britain and the US. Though he wrote and directed *In Bruges* years prior to *Dark Matter*'s premiere, that film's characters are predominantly Irish or English despite its Belgian setting. But *Dark Matter*'s Danish setting is far from arbitrary: one of the play's central characters is Hans Christian Andersen, the Danish writer best remembered for his fairy tales. In *Dark Matter*, Andersen keeps a Congolese pygmy woman locked in a box in his attic who is the true writer of his stories. This concept has been previously mentioned in *The Pillowman*, in which Michal says that one of Katurian's stories featured William Shakespeare keeping a "little black pygmy lady in the box" to whom he would give "a stab with a stick every time he wants a new play wrote" (p. 43). For Jordan, this image literalises what underlies "accusations of racism, imperialism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, xenophobia and class objectivizations" made about Shakespeare's plays (pp. 94-5), because in the form of

the pygmy woman writer, Shakespeare's work is quite literally the product of racist, sexist and ableist exploitation and violence (p. 95). This image, however, does not alone function as a critique of the oppressive potentialities in Shakespeare's work. As Jordan notes, Shakespeare's work has been "co-opted as part of the colonial message, to reinforce the rank of British … cultures, intent on affirming the seeming inferiority of those colonised." (2019, p. 95) The image of Shakespeare's plays being written by a Black pygmy woman supposes that his brilliance, so often used as evidence of British (and particularly English) cultural supremacy, could be products of a creative imagination totally outside the social elite of the imperial core. It calls into question how authors' identities inform the meaning of the literary canon. Jordan writes that this story invokes "divisive academic arguments as to who wrote Shakespeare's body of work, with many unwilling to attribute the full canon to a single author." (2019, p. 94) But while these arguments typically reassign Shakespeare's literary achievements to the titled upper classes – resting upon a "deep-seated need to believe that Shakespeare was an aristocrat" (Marino, 2011) – McDonagh reverses the animating impulse, moving the true author further from, not closer to, the ruling class. This twin critique means that, most challengingly, the uncomfortable or disquieting aspects of Shakespeare's work are attributed to the Black pygmy woman writer. She therefore embodies both the subversive potential and potential horror of mimicry.

Dark Matter focusing on Andersen and, to a lesser extent, Charles Dickens, rather than Shakespeare, has broad-ranging effects on the play. By focusing on Andersen and Dickens in *Dark Matter*, McDonagh resituates this incendiary, multivalent image at the height of New Imperialism, circa the Berlin Conference and the attendant Scramble for Africa. While Shakespeare's colonial co-option is well known, *Dark Matter* positions Andersen and his seemingly universal fairy tales as equally culpable in the imperial project. Though Desiree Baptiste frames this as cruel misrepresentation, countering that Andersen "was a public objector of slavery" (2018), Lanters notes that the pygmy woman arrives in the 1840s, "around the time when Andersen … was writing his 'African' plays" like *The Mulatto* and *The Moorish Maid* (2020, p. 257). *The Mulatto* is defined, as Pernille Ipsen outlines, by a kind of anxious ambivalence about race and colonialism: "Andersen clearly sought to tell a story about mind, spirit, and nobility winning over slavery and transcending race," Ipsen writes, "but he simultaneously tells a story about a Copenhagen haunted by colonial fear, specifically linked to interracial desire and sexuality." (2016, p. 155) Lanters also highlights Dickens's racism against both Africans and Irish people, contrasting this with his more well known championing of the poor in England (p. 263). As such, the historical figures of Andersen and Dickens become representative of a broader milieu in nineteenth-century Europe, rather than the singular figure that Shakespeare casts. Indeed, Lanters suggests Andersen's referring to Charles Dickens as Charles Darwin is a Freudian slip criticising the scientific racism of the period (p. 263).

In *Dark Matter*, the pygmy woman writer in question is named Mbute, though Andersen calls her Marjory because he claims her African name is "too hard to remember" (p. 10). This has obvious resonances with the renaming of Africans enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade, which though varying across locations and time periods, included the use of animal naming conventions, dissonance between slaves' official and self-identified names,

African names being used pejoratively, and "humorous" ironic names for slaves perceived as unintelligent (Álvarez López, 2015, p. 168). Álvarez López notes that Anglophonic Americans frequently gave slaves names in "foreign" languages such as French or Spanish (p. 164), and in *Dark Matter*'s Danish setting, the French-derived English name Marjory fits this convention. The renaming is also reminiscent of other forcible renaming practices, including those associated with emigration and colonisation, with Jordan noting the similarity to Brian Friel's *Translations* (2019, p. 96). But it must be noted that the character is referred to as Marjory throughout the play text – making the discussion about naming within the play somewhat discomfiting. Those who "cite the play are thus forced into the realisation that, if they follow the authority of the script", Lanters writes, "… they, too, are guilty of privileging the European narrative." (p. 264) The play, as published, adopts the same attitude to her name that it mocks in Andersen. But this is in tension with the play in production. On the stage, the authoritative use of Marjory in stage directions and character indications for dialogue are absent. What remains is that her preference for the name Mbute is made entirely clear, repeatedly stating that is her name in the final scene: in their final interaction, Andersen uses her African name and she responds, "It wasn't *that* fucking hard, was it?" (p. 59) In this tension, the use of Marjory in the play text can also be interpreted as a double-edged critique: when she asks to be called Mbute, the character is not just rebelling against the imperialist attitudes of the characters in the play, but against the play's very framing of her, tying this to a Eurocentric prizing of the written word over oral tradition. The division between written and oral or performed works is associated with hierarchies of gender, nation and disability in the play: Mbute/Marjory[6] has written over a thousand stories often without paper, storing them in her head (p. 45). Andersen, on the other hand, received acclaim while, Lanters argues, appropriating folk tales as his original work, including "The Emperor's New Clothes" from a traditional Spanish story (p. 258). In this context, McDonagh is stuck between two worlds: his works may be read or seen and heard performed. He is an appropriating scavenger and a bold innovator. He is both the coloniser and the colonised. This lends itself to biting self-critique: Andersen changes Mbute's story "The Little Black Mermaid" to simply "The Little Mermaid", stating, "No colour specified. Which means she's white, so suck it up." (p. 10) This directly critiques McDonagh's own approach in *Behanding*, in which whiteness is so assumed that it "goes without saying." (Lonergan, 2012, p. 122) But *Dark Matter*, seems, too, uneasy equating dichotomies of oral/written, colonised/coloniser, and leaves open possibilities in performance: in the text, one of Mbute/Marjory's stories is recited by her "or the Narrator" (p. 22), who, in the original production, was played by Tom Waits.

Mbute/Marjory has travelled back in time to prevent the killing of ten million Congolese people, including her family, under the rule of King Leopold II of Belgium. The death toll in the Congo in this period is a subject of historical dispute in both directions, but *Dark Matter* consistently repeats the figure of ten million, likely drawn from Adam Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost* (2006, p. 280), which Lanters notes was made available at the box

[6] I am primarily referring to the character using both names, that is, as "Mbute/Marjory", in order to acknowledge how the character is presented in the play as both written and performed and maintain the tension over naming practices.

office during the play's debut run at the Bridge Theatre (2020, p. 259). The genocidal violence of Leopold II's reign in the Congo is the play's central thematic concern, and marks McDonagh's most thorough examination of colonialism outside an Irish context. Mbute/Marjory is followed back in time by the red men, two time-travelling blood-splattered Belgians called Dirk and Barry, who seek to stop her. This is, as Lanters notes, a variant on the premise of James Cameron's *The Terminator* (p. 265). In Scene Four, they directly explain the historical events to the audience, in McDonagh's typical comic style:

> *Dirk*: Everybody else had a colony in Africa! Why shouldn't Belgium have a colony in Africa?!
>
> *Barry*: Hard to argue with that logic.
>
> *Dirk*: So we'd go into the villages where the rubber quotas weren't met…
>
> *Barry*: And you'd lop a few hands off, it made sense at the start …
>
> *Dirk*: You'd've thought it would've concentrated their minds! […] In retrospect we can see it's harder to work the less hands you have.
>
> *Barry*: Also, you would usually die. (pp. 19-20)

Baptiste argues that this scene fails as satire because it does not exaggerate; "the shocking historical content" and the "callous indifference of the blood-soaked killers" are completely true. She further states that as many audience members will be unaware of this history, they have no method to distinguish fact from fiction within the play's fantastical narrative. Baptiste's critique, here, relies on overly specific and narrow understandings of satire's function, referencing centuries- or millennia-old writers (she quotes Linda M. Shires citing "Horace or Juvenal or Swift and Pope" as examples) without engaging with McDonagh's postmodern context. McDonagh routinely blends history and fantasy in similar fashion – notably in *Cripple* and *Hangmen* – and for similar purposes: *Dark Matter*, like those plays, is an act of remembering, reminding and reasserting history that sits uncomfortably with contemporary sensibilities, and simultaneously, an irreverent satire of the mindsets that enabled those actions and represses their history. To the latter end, McDonagh repeatedly mocks the wilful ignorance of those in the imperial core throughout *Dark Matter*, including the Belgians, Andersen and Charles Dickens, who are portrayed as both bigots and fools. Andersen and Dickens arguing over who was a better master to their enslaved pygmy captive is a blackly comic evisceration of, as discussed regarding *Hangmen*, Britain's ongoing attempts to frame the British Empire as a kinder, gentler oppressor than their European neighbours. Amel Mohammed Hassan Abbady writes that through McDonagh's use of the grotesque, he both mocks the colonial history of Europe and prompts anti-colonial sentiment in his audience (2023, p. 826). It also evokes the large numbers of severed hands in *Behanding*, recontextualising Carmichael's collecting of hands – relating it to his avowed white supremacy – as well as the displaying of human hands and their ambiguous racialisation in a global imperial context. The hands in *Behanding* are treated by many characters as non-human objects, particularly the hands of people of colour, even as the racial categorisation of severed hands is inherently unstable. *Dark Matter* traces that

dehumanisation back to, and beyond, the severing itself: severed human hands are evidence of a colonial regime that dehumanised and murdered its subjects. The exhibition of an Aboriginal hand in *Behanding* is, in *Dark Matter*, placed in the tradition of people of colour being put on exhibition that Lanters highlights as playing a "veiled but central role" (p. 263) in the latter. Equally, *Behanding* presents human exhibitions as not simply historical but ongoing, albeit in more veiled forms. Regarding this scene in which the Belgians explain what happened, Abbady writes that McDonagh "destabilises the colonial history of Europe by situating his play in a historical yet anti-realist context to satirise the arrogance and brutality of both Belgium and Britain … in Africa." (p. 833) This historical anti-realism once again betrays Tarantino's influence, in this case, his alternate history revenge fantasies, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), in which a troop of Jewish soldiers successfully assassinate Adolf Hitler, and *Django Unchained* (2012), in which a freed slave rescues his wife and destroys the plantation on which she was enslaved. In both films, close attention is paid to the ideological underpinnings of Nazism and the slave trade respectively – of particular note are the scenes with Joseph Goebbels in *Basterds* and the slave owner's discussion of phrenology in *Django* – before exploding in a catharsis of ahistorical violence. McDonagh, too, juxtaposes the horrifying true events of history with the possibility of violent, restorative catharsis, but denies us the catharsis on stage, ending with Mbute/Marjory leaving to get to the Congo before the slaughter begins. As such, we are left on a more ambiguous note that forces the audience to dwell all the more on the true historical atrocities. Lanters positions *Dark Matter* as framing revenge as more desirable and more accessible than redemption "for those disqualified from participating in society's grand narratives about justice and equality" (p. 266), but due to the ambiguous nature of the ending, this is not wholly clear. The majority of McDonagh's works are more overtly pacifist in outlook, but as Jordan points out, Mbute/Marjory's violent resistance "has necessity, purpose and passion, without the attendant stupidity, illogicality and incoherence" of the INLA members in *Lieutenant* (2019, p. 103). But returning to *The Terminator* as an intertext, it must be noted that in that film, time travellers cannot effect change: anything they might do has already happened, and so they do not alter history, merely relive it.

Baptiste diminishes McDonagh's Irish identity on the grounds that he is ignorant of colonial history: she asks "How is it that McDonagh doesn't know this history?" while saying he "styles himself as an Irish writer … I have yet to meet an Irish writer whose race memory isn't tuned in to the 19th century caricatures of the Irish in British publications and on stage, representations of the race as sub-human and dangerous." But *Dark Matter* is a historically dense text, reflecting the interconnected systems of colonialism, white supremacy and capitalism forged in the nineteenth century and still ricocheting in the twenty-first. The addressing of colonial violence in the Congo connects to McDonagh's concerns with Ireland's postcoloniality in ways that lead to broader claims about imperial systems across Europe and the world. Though not referenced by name in the text, the play is overtly engaging with the Casement Report on the Congo. Roger Casement – the Irish nationalist after whom Mairead named her cat in *Lieutenant* – famously conducted an investigation into human rights abuses under Leopold II. "The information in Casement's report was largely familiar to people like E.D. Morel [founder of the Congo Reform Association] and his

small group of supporters, but for the first time it was to be laid out with the authority of His Britannic Majesty's Consul," Hochschild writes, adding, "The report was all the more authoritative because Casement was a veteran of Africa who made frequent comparisons between the Congo he had once known and the same territory under the rubber terror." (p. 203) Casement "was so distressed by what he had seen in the Congo" that he made it difficult for the Foreign Office to censor or delay publication of his report by giving press interviews on the subject (p. 204). By having Mbute/Marjory travel back to the 1840s and 50s, scenes take place contemporaneously with the Famine, thus juxtaposing time-displaced deaths in Belgian and British colonies. Andersen receives a fan letter from a girl in Ireland – or, as he pronounces it, "Oireland" (p. 15) – which he reads mockingly in his "Irish voice" (p. 16). He is simultaneously aware of negative stereotypes of Irish people and totally ignorant of reality: "Appalling handwriting, but I suppose it *is* Ireland … Perhaps Maureen was using a little potato, dipped in ink?!" (p. 15)

"If she's writing from Ireland in the 1850s," Mbute/Marjory counters, "and if she could find a potato, I doubt if she'd be dipping it in ink." (p. 16) Andersen is unaware of the Famine, and when Mbute/Marjory explains that "They don't have any potatoes there now", he calls this "sad" when it is what the Irish are "famous for." (p. 16) Andersen fails to connect the Irish being famous for eating potatoes to any underlying socioeconomic causes or effects. He fails to connect the absence of potatoes to the possibility of mass starvation. Mbute/Marjory's awareness is not foreknowledge due to time travel, as the Famine began in 1845 and Mbute/Marjory establishes that it is the 1850s. "What's that, current affairs?" Andersen responds, "Way over my head." (p. 18) Andersen's ignorance is cultivated – that is to say, he has chosen not to learn about "current affairs" or concern himself with the hardships experienced in other parts of the world, even when he is directly connected to them via fan letters. Mbute/Marjory has acquired knowledge of what is happening in Ireland despite – or perhaps in conjunction with – her more immediate concern of violence in the Congo. Reminiscent of Maureen bonding with a Trinidadian woman in Leeds as recalled in *Beauty Queen*, this portrays a greater similarity and possibility of solidarity between white European people in Ireland and people of colour in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. Mbute/Marjory's knowledge, contrasted with Andersen's cultivated ignorance, is an act of solidarity: as McDonagh does for the genocide in the Congo through writing the play, Mbute/Marjory within the play is participating in a transnational act of remembering, reminding and reasserting postcolonial history. Casement acts as the unseen bridge enabling this connection. Baptiste attempts to reduce McDonagh's national identity to Britishness by framing him as uninterested in or forgetful of colonial history. In *Dark Matter*, McDonagh also associates forgetting with colonial powers and remembering with colonies and former colonies – but through his diasporic identity, he at once foregrounds that remembering *while* depicting with intimate knowledge and active scorn what Lanters calls the "active deed of forgetting" (p. 268) in colonial powers.

Other references to Ireland and Irishness in *Dark Matter* make clear how similar forms of colonial domination occur in different contexts. When Andersen gets to the end of the fan letter from an Irish girl, he cannot read her surname: "'Yours sincerely, Maureen … Currflurrrgghh …' I'm not even going to *try* to pronounce that!" About the name, he adds to

Mbute/Marjory, "It's worse than yours!" (p. 16) Here, McDonagh ties together disparate coercive renaming practices – including slave names, emigrants changing their names due to pressure to assimilate, and linguistic colonial domination as occurred with anglicisation in Ireland or japanisation in Korea – as undergirded by the same hostility to cultural difference in the imperial imagination. "At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism," Edward Said writes, "This accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories … but above all, it subordinated them by banishing their identities, except as a lower order of being, from the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe." (2021, p. 323) I argued in the context of *Behanding* that what Wagnleitner calls of the colonial "*Europeanization* of the world" is more clearly understood as a process of specific European cultures being exported to or imposed upon other cultures, whether in the form of Anglicisation, Francisation, Hispanicisation, or others, and whether within or without Europe.[7] Similarly, the process of "banishing their identities … from the culture" that Said describes is, as he outlines, Eurocentric, but also Anglocentric, Francocentric, Hispanocentric, and so on. As such, similar processes of "banishing", erasing or denigrating cultural identities can be seen for colonies within Europe and transnational minority groups across Europe. Said's understanding of Eurocentrism and Hannah Arendt's understanding of continental imperialism that flattens national and regional differences are different expressions, or different contexts, for the same ideological project. This link, and its historically contingent nature, is telegraphed when Mbute/Marjory poses in "a Goya-like tableau" (p. 47), which, as Lanters notes, is a reference to Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808*, which depicts Spanish civilians facing a firing squad for resisting Napoleon's invading forces (p. 265). By showing Andersen react with the same hostility to unfamiliar names, whether Irish or African in origin, McDonagh links Eurocentrism and hostility towards non-dominant cultures within Europe. Romani people also play a key role in *Dark Matter*, with Charles Dickens explaining that "gypsies are from the future come back in time to tell us that work is pointless and we should all get out in the fresh air a lot more" (p. 51). The term "gypsy" is often considered a slur, but is embraced by many Romani in Britain (Tate, 2022). Andersen, however, refers to them as "gypos" (p. 50), a slur that removes ambiguity regarding his hostility towards the ethnic group. Although not clear in the play's elliptical narrative, the Romani characters presumably enabled both Mbute/Marjory and her sister – the pygmy woman writer responsible for Dickens's work – to travel back in time. They get both Andersen and Dickens to buy a "haunted concertina" (p. 51), thereby providing both sisters with machine guns hidden inside. This enables Mbute/Marjory to kill both Dirk and Barry. In this way, *Dark Matter* not only ties together the oppression of colonies in Africa, colonies within Europe, and transnational minority groups within Europe as different expressions of what Said describes in terms of Eurocentrism, but builds his alternate history fantasy on the possibility of solidarity between these peoples.

[7] The same practices can also be seen in non-European history in the same period, including Japanese imperialism in east Asia and the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as parts of Europe. This further suggests that "Eurocentrism" is a slight misnomer for the imperial cultural practices Said describes, which correspond to imperial practices at a greater global scale.

For Said, this "cultural process has to be seen as a vital, informing, and invigorating counterpoint to the economic and political machinery" of imperialism (2021, p. 323). The economic machinery of colonialism also links Ireland and the Congo in *Dark Matter*. Dirk and Barry attribute the violence in the Congo to "Market forces": they argue they needed rubber for bicycle tyres, and "didn't have any rubber in Belgium" (p. 19). This is immediately after the scene where Mbute/Marjory and Andersen discuss the Famine, which, as George L. Bernstein outlines even while criticising Irish nationalist mythology about the Famine, was exacerbated by British ideological commitment to laissez-faire economics and Whig resistance to market interference (1995, p. 513). In both cases, capitalism is both part of the machinery of imperialism and a dispassionate reasoning to justify imperial violence. Mbute/Marjory and her sister, kept as slaves, highlight a fundamental Marxist critique of capital: as Abbady argues, "Despite their physical captivity, Marjory and Pamela do not need their masters, it is the other way around." (p. 835) In conjunction, the unseen Romani characters are framed as anti-capitalist, being anti-work not due to some stereotypical character deficit but to foreknowledge unknown to other peoples that motivates alternate values: time travellers who, according to Dickens, have returned to "tell us that work is pointless and we should all get out in the fresh air a lot more" (p. 51). As such, McDonagh identifies disparate forms of exploitation and oppression as functioning under one overarching, intersectional system.

Within this overarching system, *Dark Matter* examines the value or utility of creative imagination. In the opening scene, the Narrator describes Mbute/Marjory's situation – "born in the Congo in 1869, the worst time for anybody to be born anywhere ever, let alone a black dwarf" (p. 4) – and concludes that, rather than suicide, Mbute/Marjory is "going to write [her] way out of it." (p. 5) This goal transfers from Mbute/Marjory to McDonagh as playwright by the play's end. The alternate history narrative has Mbute/Marjory pursue violent retribution, while McDonagh in writing *Dark Matter* is attempting to write his "way out of it" – "it" being the coil of history, and systemic exploitation and oppression along colonial, racial, gendered and disability lines. In this sense, Mbute/Marjory is – almost as much as Mooney in *Hangmen* – a projection of McDonagh into the play. But where Mooney identifies McDonagh with the imperial core – London – Mbute/Marjory identifies McDonagh with the colonised, and further, with creative expression. The "it" McDonagh attempts to write his way out of could be the complexities and complicities of his diasporic national identity: that *Dark Matter*'s gestures towards postcolonial solidarity between Ireland and African colonies could be an uneasy claim of equal victimhood and, therefore, absolution. When he writes Mooney as, in part, a self-projection, it is still with a status of victim of state violence. But ultimately McDonagh's plays set outside of Ireland retain a consistent interest in the dynamic, complex nature of complicity in group action, at the level of nation, race, and other identities. McDonagh gives one of the Belgian soldiers the Irish name "Barry", associating both himself and the groups identified with victimhood in the play with guilt and atrocity. Mbute/Marjory talks about African monarchs who once ruled her people with zero starry-eyed nostalgia: "We had kings and queens in Africa," she tells Andersen, "… They were cunts there too." (p. 15) In *Dark Matter*, exploitation and oppression that occurs along national, racial, class, gender or disability lines cannot be reduced to the identity lines on

which it occurs; the implication is that overarching system will draw lines on which to function, and so the system itself must be dismantled.

But if McDonagh's work for the stage builds towards the conclusion that existing systems must be dismantled – is imbued with a punkish anger that, despite ideological consistency, can seem to point in all directions – his work for the screen takes a different arc. He retains his taste for black comedy, but many of his films result in extended meditations on religious imagery and ideas that are less common in his plays. To understand why, it is important to consider McDonagh as a *filmmaker*, and not merely, as some critics tend to, as a screenwriter.

Chapter 4: Irish films

Martin McDonagh's early career as a playwright was replete with references to cinema, both within his work and in the press. His pop culture-saturated plays reflect his cine-literate sensibilities, not just in their intertextual density but in their use of film and television's generic and stylistic devices. McDonagh described his goal as a dramatist as getting "as much John Woo and Sam Peckinpah into the theatre as possible" (Lonergan, 2007, p. 154), film directors best known for, respectively, Hong Kong action movies and blood-splattered revisionist westerns. Theatre audiences and scholars have thus sometimes regarded McDonagh suspiciously, as an interloper; this was driven in part by his public criticism of much contemporary theatre and his stated preference for film (Lonergan, 2012, p. xix). Conversely, the origins of McDonagh scholarship in drama and theatre departments has meant that his film directing and screenwriting is too often treated as a mere outgrowth of his work for theatre, rather than analysed as films per se. I hope to both recognise the significance of McDonagh's shift in mediums – from theatre to cinema and back, and back again – and analyse both his films and his plays as part of a larger body of work, much as one writing about Samuel Beckett's fiction and drama would neither attempt to treat fiction as a form of drama nor treat Beckett's work in different mediums as fracturing his oeuvre into incoherence.

Patrick Lonergan argues that McDonagh's shift in mediums relates to a tonal shift in his attitude regarding being placed in Irish or theatrical traditions, seemingly freeing him of some burden: "he seemed keen to describe *In Bruges* as an Irish film …" Lonergan writes, adding, "the move to film allowed McDonagh to acknowledge much more openly his indebtedness to Pinter and Beckett." (2012, pp. 36-7) This supposed shift seems overstated: the titles of *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* – drawn from *Waiting for Godot* and *Playboy of the Western World*, respectively –signal McDonagh's Irish and theatrical influences in unmistakeable and unambiguous terms. By contrast, fellow Irish and British theatre practitioner and filmmaker, the actor/writer/director Kenneth Branagh, used the style of a film à clef in *Peter's Friends* (1992) to fabricate a life as an implicitly English alum of Cambridge Footlights thirty years before directing *Belfast* (2021), an authentic film à clef about his Belfast childhood. I make this comparison to highlight that claims of McDonagh's reluctance to be considered an "Irish" writer seem somewhat exaggerated. What Lonergan is gesturing towards is better understood not as a binary flick of a switch, but parts of an undulating negotiation between oppositional yet amorphous forces – a negotiation defined by its irresolution, whose push and pull make it alive. In McDonagh's plays and films, Irishness is now near and now further away, now weak and now strong, now cartoonishly exaggerated and now painfully realistic. This is true regardless of if Ireland acts as the setting. For McDonagh, theatre and film – as intertexts and influences, certainly, but indeed as mediums – also resist any form of totalising dichotomy. Cinema was born from theatre; theatre has lived, for more than century, in the shadow cinema has cast over popular culture. McDonagh does not collapse them into an indistinguishable mush, but his work openly engages with how cinema and theatre feed off of and into one another. *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, in addition to being about filmmaking, includes the projection of the film *Man*

of Aran on screen on the stage (1999, p. 49), transforming the characters on stage *and* the theatre audience itself into a cinema audience. Natalie Wynn's distinction between binary and duality is instructive in this regard: in a duality, apparent opposites "constitute each other … consume each other … transform into each other … split into two, into three, into many." (2024)

Six Shooter

In 2004, McDonagh made his directorial debut with the short film *Six Shooter*, which went on to win the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film (Anon., 2006). Despite this, McDonagh was unhappy with the short, regretting not becoming more involved with various aspects of production such as costuming and cinematography (Lonergan, 2012, p. 135). *Six Shooter* acted, as many modern short films do, in part as a training ground for his subsequent feature film, *In Bruges*, with Jordan calling it an "apprentice piece", writing that McDonagh made *Six Shooter* "so that he could learn about filmmaking." (2013, p. 181) Lonergan describes it as both McDonagh's "most playful and least substantial work" (p. 138). It remains, however, an interesting and successful work in its own right: McDonagh's signature black comedy is on full display, and any amateurish qualities are fully offset by stellar central performances from Brendan Gleeson and Rúaidhrí Conroy. Even with its limited locations, *Six Shooter* is clearly not merely a filmed playscript. Most significantly for this dissertation, it marks his first work set in Ireland outside of the plays drafted in the 1994 period. Like his Irish plays, *Six Shooter* combines a rich intercultural intertextuality with an iconoclastic sensibility towards Ireland, Irishness and representations thereof. Befitting McDonagh's first work for the screen, it is a film self-reflexively about the metatextual preoccupations of cinema: images, looking, and voyeurism.

Brendan Gleeson plays Donnelly, whose wife has just died. Jordan describes *Six Shooter* as a tragicomedy (2019, p. 47), and Gleeson plays Donnelly with a grounded realism that makes his understated grief all the more affecting and his deadpan oddities – such as giving his late wife a photograph of their pet rabbit when you anticipate a picture of a child – all the funnier. As Donnelly sits at his wife's bedside, the doctor (David Murray) mentions that two "cot deaths" (McDonagh, 2004)[8] as well as a woman murdered by her son – who "shot the poor head off her" – were dealt with at the hospital that night. The bulk of the film takes place on Donnelly's train ride home, on which, the audience slowly learns, individuals associated with these other incidents are also passengers. Donnelly sits across from a young man, played by Rúaidhrí Conroy and listed in the credits as "Kid", a title which Caryn James observes evokes "an old western movie" (2006). The Kid is brash, loud and cruel, with Conroy's vivid performance not so much incorporating both comic and sinister tones as refusing to distinguish between them. Jordan argues that the Kid is a psychopath, citing his "non-conformity" and "inability to either feign or demonstrate empathy", once again drawing on the work of Baron-Cohen previously discussed regarding *The Pillowman* (2013, p. 182). He contrasts the Kid with Maureen in *Beauty Queen* or Coleman in *The Lonesome West* who "could make some form of polite conversation" (p. 184), elevating adherence to

[8] Subsequent quotations from the film take this same citation.

social mores to demonstration of empathy despite all three characters' violent actions. More compellingly, Jordan notes the cymbal-banging monkey toy which the Kid carries, describing it as a "trickster figure" who "seems to serve as a kind of guiding spirit" for him (p. 182). This kind of monkey toy appears in the opening credits of *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955), where James Dean's character drunkenly plays with one, and in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977), when it and other toys begin to operate on their own due to approaching aliens. The Kid exists at the crossroads of these uses of the monkey toy: like *Rebel Without a Cause*, this "grown boy with a toy" reflects the transitionary and lonely existence of the "emerging adult" (Fulmer, 2017, p. 668); like the aliens in *Close Encounters*, he evokes the uncanny, and contains within him the possibility of both terror and delight.

Across the aisle from Donnelly and the Kid sit Man (David Wilmot) – who, as I will discuss, is referred to as Pato in dialogue – and Woman (Aisling O'Sullivan), a couple whose infant son died the night before. The Man and Woman are angered and upset by the Kid's verbal antics, which include shouting, swearing and insults. While Donnelly and the Man are in the buffet carriage, the Kid taunts the Woman about her dead son, including saying that a photograph of him looks like "your man off of Bronski Beat" – a potential explanation for why she must have, he supposes, "banged it on something." The Woman, distressed, trips when she gets up to leave and accidentally tears the photograph. She then jumps from the train, taking her own life. Donnelly pulls the emergency stop when he returns and realises this has happened. A garda speaks to the three men about the death, recognising the Kid but unable to place from where. After the train departs again, the garda realises why he recognises the Kid – he is on the run after murdering his mother the night before – and sends an armed response unit to meet the train at the next stop. Meanwhile, the Kid tells Donnelly a bizarre but allegedly true story about a cow with trapped wind exploding. When the train arrives at the next station, the Kid produces two revolvers and fires at the gardaí, who return fire and kill him. Donnelly holds the Kid as he dies, in a kind of perverse Pietà, or perhaps like Mr. White holding a dying Mr. Orange in *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992). Gleeson's performance here is at "its most touching and realistic … Without words, he conveys a sense of too much death and violence all around him." (James, 2006) When Donnelly returns home, he has one of the Kid's guns hidden inside his coat. With two bullets remaining, Donnelly shoots his pet rabbit. He plans to shoot himself next, but he drops the gun and it misfires, leaving him without a bullet. The film ends with him sighing, "Oh Jesus. What a fuckin' day!"

Lonergan notes that the Man is referred to in dialogue as Pato, which he describes as "an obvious nod to the character of Pato Dooley in *Beauty Queen*" (p. 140). He speculates that they are the same character at different points in his life: "If so, poor Pato's life takes a rather unfortunate turn after his departure from Leenane, since, in addition to losing a child, he will lose his wife too" (p. 140). This is possible but somewhat strained. The observation, however, reflects Lonergan's broader tendency to interpret *Six Shooter* through McDonagh's plays, ultimately concluding that the film "end[ing] inconclusively", having a character use two guns or having jokes about Tayto crisps are direct looks back at McDonagh's Irish plays (p. 142), rather than motifs and tropes recurring in his work across

mediums. Though Lonergan argues that *Six Shooter* is conceptually about the image and about looking, he does not explore this to its farthest extent. He discusses the train window as a kind of screen, with traditional, pastoral imagery of Ireland gradually replaced with *Bonnie and Clyde* or "a particularly violent Western" (p. 139). "In *Six Shooter*," he writes, "images appear to have agency: it's as if their function is to see instead of being seen." (p. 139) Images are not just representational but "*construct* reality" and can "seem more real than reality" (p. 139). As examples, he cites the tearing of the baby's photograph, which is presented as "almost as tragic as the death of the child", and Donnelly's "illogical" turning an image of Jesus face down prior to his planned suicide (p. 139). Lonergan does not situate these ideas in the context of the role that voyeurism, scopophilia and the very act of looking have played in film history and film theory.

Unlike in theatre, where, even if guided to look in certain ways, the audience may direct their gaze as they wish, in cinema, the camera and the edit largely dictate how and at what the audience looks. In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey argues that mainstream films "portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy." (1999, pp. 835-6) For Mulvey, the social roles of looking and pleasure are split between the one who looks, and is coded male, and the one who is looked at, coded female – and so the scopophilic tendencies of cinema constitute a male gaze that treats women as passive objects (p. 837). Though Mulvey is concerned with the gendered aspects of cinema as voyeurism, it has broader and more malleable applications. Alfred Hitchcock's films frequently play with the audience as voyeur to both seduce and unsettle, most notably in *Psycho* (1960) and *Rear Window* (1954). Perhaps most relevant to the role of looking in *Six Shooter* is Alison Horbury's analysis of Australian national cinema, which, she argues, is "caught between an Imaginary gaze of an aestheticized national project and a traumatic 'Real' gaze that disturbs the field of cultural vision." (2020, p. 195) A tension is produced between "an explicit national Imaginary" and "a repressed Real trauma upon which this Imaginary is forged." (p. 195) Horbury is drawing from Jacques Lacan's theory of the Imaginary, Real and Symbolic as well as Todd McGowan's application of psychoanalytic theory to film, contrasting the Imaginary gaze – that is, where the audience (mis)identifies with the screen "mirror" (p. 198) as well as voyeuristically observing the screen – with a Real gaze, wherein identification with the screen is ruptured, threatening the viewer's "mastery over the image", or where "signification breaks down and we cannot 'see' the object" due, for example, to visual distortion (p. 201). In the context of Australian cinema, Horbury shows that the use of different kinds of gaze "can both animate and shatter points of Imaginary identification" with the screen, meaning that that "which remains occluded or uncertain in the stories told through this medium can trouble something of the unconscious dimension to the nation's public dreaming." (p. 210) Noting the "internationally infused creative team" behind Australian New Wave milestone *Wake in Fright*, she suggests that it is "perhaps necessary for an outsider … to first prompt the nation to re-imagine the story being told." (pp. 210-1)

Following Horbury's example, *Six Shooter*'s preoccupation with looking and the image as identified by Lonergan functions as part of McDonagh's subversion and disruption of Irish

national narratives. Lonergan's analysis of the train window as screen – it is "as if *Man of Aran* has been intercut with Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*" (p. 139) – reflects the tension between the explicit performance and construction of Ireland or Irishness and the traumas of colonialism, migration, social violence, and neoliberalism. Through the train window, the "Imaginary gaze of an aestheticized national project" is ruptured by a traumatic gaze that troubles the nation's self-conception. Ironically, that which Horbury identifies with the Real – disrupting our identification with the screen – is, in McDonagh's films, self-consciously artificial: what replaces the sanctioned imagery of Ireland through the window is not what has been excluded or repressed, but a descent further into inauthenticity, absurdity, and madness. The violence on-screen does not reflect repressed social violence, as in the use of ghosts in *Hangmen* or *Beauty Queen*, but absurd, comic exaggeration. "When someone is shot, blood spurts out of the bulletholes in obviously fake streams …" James writes, "The falseness may be deliberate … But the approach is jarring because the film is not cartoonish." (2006) Yet it is because it jars that it works: it undermines the normalised aestheticisation of Ireland through the hyper-aestheticisation of violence. McDonagh, too, is "an outsider … prompt[ing] the nation to re-imagine the story being told." His status as an Irish diaspora artist allows him to "trouble … the nation's public dreaming", refusing to straightforwardly participate in identification with an idealised conception of Ireland into which many Irish-born people have been inculcated through state-sanctioned cultural nationalism. If the final shootout is cartoonish where the rest of the film appears not to be, McDonagh's juxtaposition of these two modes highlights the aestheticised, even cartoonish, nature of normative depictions of Ireland.

Lonergan further claims that in *Six Shooter*, images appear to "see instead of being seen." (p. 139) This, too, reflects *Six Shooter*'s engagement with the hermetically sealed film world as voyeuristic object and identificatory mirror. Expanding on Lonergan's analysis of the role of images within the film world, it must be noted that the film is itself a series of images. The tearing of the baby's photograph is "almost as tragic as the death of the child himself" (p. 139) in part because both are nothing more than representational images, but the photograph is the one to which the audience has access. As such, the sensation that Lonergan describes of images like the baby's photograph or the icon of the Sacred Heart seeing the characters also implicates the film audience in being seen by the images that construct the film. This, too, disrupts the identification process that underpins the "Imaginary gaze of an aestheticized national project": McDonagh pokes holes in the seal around the film world. In particular, *Six Shooter* is interested in images as moral judge. Pictures of the pet rabbit, the baby and of Jesus are at once associated with innocence and act as portents of death: the pet rabbit photograph is laid on the body of Donnelly's dead wife, the tearing of the baby photograph leads to the Woman's suicide, and the Jesus image is the would-be witness to Donnelly's would-be suicide. This doubled inflection is not contradictory. Rather, innocence is tied to an unrecoverable past, a moral perfection made possible through death. The Woman is a mother who has lost a son, and the Kid is a boy who has lost his mother – but where the dead baby is morally pure, the Kid is morally repulsive, and so the photograph is a more compelling surrogate for her late son than the Kid is. The relationship between innocence and death in *Six Shooter* is placed in the context

of Christianity, in which Jesus Christ's moral perfection and his death on the cross are inextricably linked. McDonagh's Catholic background is a large part of his diasporic identity, and becomes especially prominent in his work for the screen. However, this idea of the intertwining of death and innocence – or the preservation of images of innocence that portend death – is a recurring one in McDonagh's work, even when not evoking a religious connotation. The Kennedy photograph in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* occupies a similar role by depicting an era of optimism that at once evokes and hides the trauma and violence that ended that era. In *Six Shooter*, tying innocence, beauty or goodness to an unrecoverable past and to death both evokes and critiques nationalist longing for a pre-colonial purity.

Like McDonagh's plays, *Six Shooter* builds a complex web of intertexts that stretches across Irish, British, Irish diasporic and US cultures, reflecting McDonagh's intercultural background and Ireland's permeable cultural position in a globalised economy. *Six Shooter*'s Irish intertexts include the Irish-language short film *Cáca Milis* (Keegan, 2001), which also features Brendan Gleeson on a train ride with a violent, apparent psychopath. In *Cáca Milis*, Gleeson is both the one eager to chat, and the one who dies by the end – roles fulfilled by the Kid in *Six Shooter*. Catherine (Charlotte Bradley) is caring for her elderly mother, which is superficially the inverse of the Kid, who murders his mother, but combined with her killing Pól (Gleeson), it is hinted that Catherine may kill her mother in the future. Both echo Maureen in *Beauty Queen*, whose abusive, codependent relationship with her mother ended in murdering her, and by extension, Norman Bates in *Psycho*. Despite Catherine being a totally unsympathetic character, the intertextual presence of *Cáca Milis* makes the Kid more sympathetic by raising the spectre of abuse, repression and co-dependency. Other Irish intertexts include Samuel Beckett's radio play *All That Fall*, as outlined by David Clare, particularly in the presence of train rides and child deaths (2015, pp. 5, 8), while "disputing Beckett's (relatively) sympathetic portrait of greater Dublin" (p. 3) with an "antipathy to Dublin … stem[ming] from his West of Ireland and Irish Diasporic backgrounds." (p. 20) Joan Dean detects echoes of JM Synge and Flann O'Brien (2009, p. 166), while Lonergan writes that *Six Shooter*'s ending, in which Donnelly's suicide fails, is reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot* (p. 142). The train setting, meanwhile, recalls works by English artists of Irish descent like Alfred Hitchcock – *The 39 Steps* (1935), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *North by Northwest* (1959) – and Agatha Christie – *Murder on the Orient Express* (1985), *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1991), *4.50 from Paddington* (2016), adapted to film as *Murder She Said* (Pollock, 1961) – who used trains as devices for driving tension: trapping strangers together in confined space and tabled time while moving at high speed. *Six Shooter*, too, drives tension by trapping strangers in a confined space, but the train also becomes a kind of liminal space. For an Irish viewer, the question must be asked: where is this train going? Where is it coming from?

The Kid states that he is heading to Dublin. He appears to be from Cork, but is, explicitly, not from Dublin: "Dublin, aye. The city that never sweeps," he tells Donnelly, sarcastically adding, "See, I needed some heroin and a shite accent, so I thought I'd head straight to the source, like." But Donnelly is going home after sitting at his wife's bedside in hospital, as, presumably, are the Man and Woman. As I mentioned when discussing *Hangmen*, Ireland is

primarily divided along metropolitan/provincial lines, between Dublin and regional Ireland: this is extremely evident in the rail network, which provides intercity services between Dublin and regional towns and cities, but paltry services *between* regional towns and cities. Massive rail closures occurred across Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s, exacerbating the metropolitan/provincial divide. As James E. Killen noted in 1973, only 55 per cent of the route length open to regular passenger traffic twenty years previously remained in use, with train stations open declining from 580 to 195 (1973, p. 630). Hospitals in Ireland are also concentrated in Dublin. As such, that not alone Donnelly, but also the Man and Woman, would be *going home to Dublin by train* after having been in a hospital *outside of* Dublin, is strange indeed. One could attribute this to a mistake, as McDonagh has not lived in Ireland, but his perspective seems deeply attuned to the metropolitan/provincial divide that exists in the Irish economy, public services and culture. Responding to Dublin-born Conor McPherson's claim that his plays were "stage Irish", McDonagh told the *New York Times* that "Dublin people think they are the center of the world and the center of Ireland. And they don't realize that people have to leave Ireland to get work, and they look down on people who do." (Zinoman, 2010) Instead of a mistake, then, this gives the train journey an uncanny quality, capturing a gap between aesthetic representations of Ireland and the unequal reality: running counter to the train ride that opens that most idyllic diasporic vision of Ireland, *The Quiet Man*. I have argued elsewhere that *The Quiet Man* operates "less like a period piece and more like the Irish diaspora's dreamy imaginings of Ireland" (Moloney, 2023). *Six Shooter*, too, evokes dreamy imaginings of a past, but in a way more self-conscious of their unreality. Just as Irish nationalism generally longs for a pre-colonial Eden, regional Ireland's self-identity longs for a period before Dublin's political and economic dominance – whether that is imagined to have been before the Great Recession, before the railway closures of the 1950s and 1960s, or, perhaps unconsciously, before the Famine: during the Famine there was a "huge influx of people" into Dublin and Belfast from the midlands and west (McGreevy, 2018). But as McDonagh so often critiques the idea of a pure, untainted pre-colonial Irishness, in *Six Shooter*, he makes the mish-mash vision of an Ireland before Dublin's dominance an uncanny, unsettling state that presages the film's violent outcome. At the same time, any kind of linear assumptions about Ireland in different time periods or Irish people of different generations are shown to be absurd: when Donnelly says he doesn't believe in God, the Kid incredulously responds, "Of course you believe in God! You're an auld fella!"

Six Shooter is also deeply steeped in American culture, but at the simultaneous nearness and remove created by being exposed to American cultural hegemony. Caryn James notes that as "Deaths and accounts of deaths accumulate on the brief journey" in *Six Shooter*, the setting comes to resemble a "*Twilight Zone* train of death" (2006). Most explicitly, *Six Shooter* draws upon westerns and film noir, distinctly American genres whose iconography has been replicated in increasingly stylised forms in world cinema: Jean-Pierre Melville's French noirs that disconnect noir stylisation from an American context, which in turn inspired John Woo's hyperstylised Hong Kong noirs, say, or the transformative, looping journey of the western from America to Japan (as samurai films) to Italy (spaghetti westerns) and back to America (Tarantino's westerns). The film's title evokes the western

gunslinger or a noir's hardboiled detective, and its final shootout is formally identical to that of a western but for one key aspect: the Kid fails to hit any of his assailants. Like Tom in *A Skull in Connemara*'s failed attempts to solve the case like a television cop, this creates a comic gap between an idealised American image and the attempted recreation of it in McDonagh's feigned "reality" – which is, itself, a stylised image, just one that reflects malleability of meaning, recontextualised and remixed to serve new purposes alien from its once intended meaning.

In Bruges

McDonagh followed *Six Shooter* with *In Bruges* (2008), his first feature film: it is an assured, stylish and emotionally involving work that marks the emergence of a bright filmmaking talent. McDonagh was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and won the BAFTA Award in the same category. Filmed in Belgium and co-funded by US and UK companies, *In Bruges*'s transnational creation has sparked a level of debate – prompting Joan Dean to question "What is an Irish film?" (2009, p. 166) – rivalled only by its genre hybridity: Estelle Epinoux argues it can be classified as a comedy, a detective movie, a drama, a thriller, or a noir (2016, p. 130). Lonergan has argued that McDonagh "goes to some trouble" to root *In Bruges* in a specific time period (2012, p. 145) while Dean suggests the opposite: "nothing in the costuming or sets" sets the film in "a specific time" (p. 168). "*In Bruges* seems to be an enigma," Epinoux writes, "a sort of singular object impregnated with Irish, American and European references, as the geographical spaces and aesthetic frontiers become blurred" (p. 127), calling it a work "at the crossroads between Ireland and the rest of the world." (p. 132) This collection of juxtapositions and contradictions befits McDonagh's first work with explicitly Irish diasporic protagonists. Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell play two Irish hitmen who live in London, which it is made clear they consider home even as the film itself is set in neither Ireland nor England, but a third space: Bruges, a town which is, Margitta Rouse writes, "without contours in the cultural imaginary" (2011, p. 174) – a "blank canvas", as Sarah Martindale and Catherine Rees put it (2014, p. 126). "There's never been a classic movie made in Bruges," Chloë (Clémence Poésy) says in a clearly metatextual moment, "until now."

Ken (Gleeson) and Ray (Farrell) are two hitmen who hole up in Bruges, Belgium at the order of their boss, Harry (Ralph Fiennes), after a job gone wrong. The basic premise is influenced by Harold Pinter's play *The Dumb Waiter* (1991), which is also about two hitmen holed up awaiting their boss's instructions. Ken and Ray's dynamic is also reminiscent of the Lee Marvin and Clu Gulager characters in *The Killers* (Siegel, 1964). In *In Bruges*, Ken is charmed by Bruges and interested in sight-seeing; Ray is bored and restless. These polarised reactions, according to McDonagh, reflect his own reactions upon visiting Bruges for the first time (Lonergan, 2012, p. 143). Ray does, however, take a romantic interest in Chloë, a woman working on a film which is, according to her, a pastiche, homage or "nod of the head" to *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973). Just as *Don't Look Now* concerns a couple in Venice

after the death of their child, the characters in *In Bruges* are also in a European city following a child's death. Through flashback, we learn that Ray – on his first hit – killed a priest and then accidentally shot and killed a little boy who was waiting outside the confessional. Harry tells Ken to kill Ray as punishment. When Ken goes to kill Ray, he instead ends up stopping a tormented and suicidal Ray from killing himself. Harry later comes to Bruges to carry out the execution himself, with Ken martyring himself in order to warn Ray. The film culminates in a shootout between Harry and Ray, during which Harry mistakenly believes himself to have killed a child and so kills himself. It ends with Ray being put in an ambulance, saying in voiceover that he "really, really hoped [he] wouldn't die."

The tendency to treat McDonagh's films as a derivative of his playwrighting is common in *In Bruges* scholarship, as is a broader, more subtle tendency to divorce *In Bruges* from film culture despite its self-conscious situating of itself in cinema history. The latter can be seen in Geoff King's positioning *In Bruges* as "a hybrid work" combining "quality" cinema with popular appeal by juxtaposing visual beauty with violence, swearing, and the gangster genre (2011, p. 132), praising the film for overcoming a dichotomy that, if not manifestly false from the outset, was surely overcome by *The Godfather* forty years earlier. Jordan, meanwhile, asserts that *In Bruges* breaks from Hollywood convention because cinematic killers are almost always subject to narrative punishment, usually death, but does not periodise the relative ubiquity of narrative punishment in the context of the Hays Code – enforced from 1935 into the 1950s and 60s, which mandated narrative punishment in Hollywood films – instead giving the 2006 film *Blood Diamond* as his only example (2013, p. 191). The former is most overt when Lonergan explicitly guides his reader to "think of the film in relation to [McDonagh's] plays" (2012, p. 143). When he highlights Harold Pinter's influence on *In Bruges*, it is as "the most important link between the film and the plays", even as he describes Pinter's influence as being "only hinted at" in those plays (p. 146). Less overtly, many scholars quote directions in the published screenplay, sometimes in place of descriptions of shot composition, editing, or performances, including Joan Dean (2009, p. 167), Charles Hampton (2010, p. 306), and Eamonn Jordan (2000, p. 186). While there is, of course, nothing wrong with quoting from the screenplay as published, it appears at times to reflect an instinct towards treating the screenplay, rather than the film itself, as the object of analysis. Defaulting to the script is common in theatre studies, in part because it is the seemingly stable artefact of a medium that is by nature live, ephemeral and in a constant process of creation. While theatre scholars should remain mindful of how a play is affected by its staging, performances, and context, the play script functions as a gold standard when live performance may be unavailable, inaccessible, impractical or impossible. But a screenplay is, in essence, a functional document used in film production, itself subject to flux, with the film itself being the cultural work produced – and unlike theatre, forming a stable artefact that can be accessed as desired.[9] It would be strange indeed to write about *When Harry Met Sally…* (Reiner, 1989) as if Harry and Sally do not end up together, because that is what happens in the original screenplay (Piña, 2024). Further, this tends towards

[9] In keeping with this, quotations from *In Bruges* will be transcribed from the film, rather than taken from the screenplay, and cited accordingly.

treating McDonagh as a writer only, not a writer-director, and so erases key aspects of his oeuvre from apparently comprehensive analyses.

But as Irina Melnikova outlines, *In Bruges* is centrally about "the problem of visual perception" (2013, p. 48) and conflict between the verbal and visual, or hearing and sight (p. 49). This thematic thread is rendered through the language of cinema and *about* the medium of cinema, which combines the verbal and visual in distinct ways and, as discussed, controls the audience's gaze. It is the most significant way that *In Bruges* engages with *Don't Look Now*, itself a film about blindness, sight, and second sight that in its very title highlights the contradictory scopophilic imperatives of cinema. Melnikova notes that Harry's suicide is "self-punishment for his blindness", while Ken's suicide is "a self-sacrificial attempt to make the danger of death visible" (p. 48). Melnikova outlines a series of oppositions within *In Bruges*, such as birth/death – Marie's pregnancy against the death that pervades the story (p. 48) – day/night or light/dark – the story begins in the daytime and ends at night, while visually, the film "begins with shots of the city at night and ends with the brightly lit shots in the ambulance" (p. 48) – and verbal/visual. While the opening of the film alternates between verbal and visual sequences, the final scenes "unite the characters in the common space of 'speaking and (un)seeing'" (p. 49). The juxtaposition of Ray blinding Eirik in one eye and the phone call between Harry and Ken "creates a conflict of hearing and sight" in the filmic discourse (p. 49). Regarding the use of paintings in *In Bruges*, Melnikova notes that the paintings featured are diptychs or triptychs but the audience is shown only one panel of each (p. 50). Further, we are predominantly shown close-ups of specific sections, mirroring the direction of Ray's gaze. As such, "the visual field of the character is much wider than that of the spectator" (p. 50) even as the visual field of the spectator is designed to mimic the attention of the character. It seems no coincidence that Ken draws attention to the name for his and Ray's tourist activities – "It's called sight-seeing" – when *sight* and *seeing* are such built-in motifs of the film, and perhaps of film in general.

We are directed towards primacy of the screen above the screenplay even in how *In Bruges* incorporates its most theatrical allusion. While the plot of *The Dumb Waiter* is a clear influence on *In Bruge*s, it is most explicitly referenced through the pseudonyms that Ken and Ray use to check into their hotel: Cranham and Blakely, which, as Lonergan notes, are drawn from the 1985 BBC television production of *The Dumb Waiter*, starring Kenneth Cranham and Colin Blakely (p. 147). This theatre allusion, then, is simultaneously an explicit *television* allusion. Further, Cranham is Scottish and Blakely was Northern Irish, and so the interpolation of a play written by a Londoner becomes, simultaneously, associated with the nations of the Celtic Fringe. Blakely performs his role in the BBC *Dumb Waiter* with a Northern Irish accent. Because of this, and contrary to the play text, his character becomes an Irish hitman based in England – just like the main characters in *In Bruges*.

Both Ken and Ray are from Ireland, something which is directly mentioned in dialogue: when explaining why he dislikes Bruges, Ray says, "I grew up in Dublin. I love Dublin. If I grew up on a farm, and was retarded, Bruges might impress me. But I didn't, so it doesn't." At another point, they visit an Irish pub. When Ray is arrested on the train, he is identified when the police officer asks him if he's Irish. When Ken throws himself from the tower to

warn Ray that Harry is coming, “Raglan Road” by the Dubliners plays, a brief break from the Carter Burwell score that, as Dean notes, mirrors the use of “Danny Boy” in the Coen brothers’ film *Miller’s Crossing* (p. 167). The film also speaks to a recurring tendency in McDonagh’s work to portray some kind of kinship between Irish people and those of other postcolonial nations, with Ray immediately criticising someone he perceives as American for the Vietnam War decades after it ended, and instinctively wanting to side with “the Blacks” and other people of colour in Jimmy’s predicted race war. Melnikova reads the latter as a reference to the “Irish are the blacks of Europe” speech in *The Commitments* (p. 53). Comparing the two, it is notable that Ray does not lay claim to Blackness or equate Irish and Black experiences, but expresses a natural allegiance to Black and Vietnamese people above Europeans, categories that, though not perfectly overlapped, roughly correspond to colonised above coloniser. In the same scene, Ken reveals that his wife was Black and murdered by a white man, implicitly a white supremacist, further aligning the Irish characters against imperialism and white supremacy. Yet McDonagh stated in an interview that the characters were not originally written as Irish, changing “from London working class to Dublin working class” upon casting Gleeson and Farrell in the lead roles – dubbing this change “minimal” (Jordan, 2013, p. 232). Indeed, as well as being from Ireland, both Ken and Ray are Londoners – of a kind. In the opening voiceover, Ray says that Harry told him and Ken to “Get the fuck out of London” and to Bruges. Later, he suggests to Ken that if the botched hit does not appear in the newspapers within a day or two, they call Harry and tell him “thank you for the trip to Bruges, it's been very nice, but we're coming back to London now” so they can “hide out in a proper country where it isn't all just fucking chocolate.” Ken, meanwhile, says his wife was murdered in 1976. As this crime was avenged by Harry, this implies that Ken has lived in England for over thirty years. Despite the film being set in neither their country of origin or country of residence, and their migration being uncommented upon throughout, both characters are clearly legible as Irish emigrants to London whose sense of home, if not national identity, has been altered by their experience. When Chloë’s ex-boyfriend Eirik asks where Ray is from, he answers, “Ireland, originally.” Though he identifies immediately and easily as Irish, including when asked by a police officer, the addendum “originally” implies that the question of where he is “from” is more complex than it appears. When he punches the Canadian man who he believes to be American, he claims to do so as retribution for the murder of John Lennon – who, as previously outlined, was English of Irish descent, Liverpool Irish rather than Ray’s London Irish, which perhaps clarifies why Ray considers Lennon’s murder in national terms by holding Americans writ large to account for it. This is, in part, surely why McDonagh perceived the shift from “London working class to Dublin working class” as minimal: Ray and Ken are both Dubliners and Londoners, and though they do not appear to identify with Englishness, they do seem to identify London as home. This makes their national background much more similar to McDonagh’s own than many characters more commonly viewed as projections of McDonagh into the text.

By centring these characters with legible diasporic identities, the historical and cultural associations of both Dublin and London are overlayed on Bruges, which acts as a cross-cultural space, and, indeed, functions as a purgatory (Clare, 2012) or liminal space (O'Brien,

2012, p. 101). Bruges is framed as "a mysterious place in a 'faraway land'" (Rouse, 2011, p. 173) with "a sense of disorientated elsewhere." (2019, p. 57). The film emphasises the city as both historically preserved and economically globalised, juxtaposing travelogue imagery of medieval architecture with, as Erica Stein observes, Bruges as a working city, networked with international legitimate and criminal enterprises that involve dynamics between customers and employees and buyers and sellers (2014, p. 359). This is part of how, as Margitta Rouse writes, *In Bruges* "destabilises the binary opposition between the medieval past and the postmodern present" (p. 172). This is all the more true when considering Catherine O'Brien's point that some of the apparently medieval architecture showcased is in fact "deceptive" modern imitation (2012, p. 95). Bruges as a globalised, working city includes people of a variety of nationalities and cultural backgrounds being in Bruges as workers or consumers. Epinoux notes the "multiplicity of languages spoken" in the film, interpreting this – as well as the repeated focus on the belfry – as a reference to the tower of Babel (p. 130). Despite this, Ray says that something he likes about Europe is "You don't have to learn any of their languages," that is, that he can successfully navigate Bruges with English alone. Multiple languages are spoken in *In Bruges*, but unlike in *Don't Look Now*, our English-speaking protagonists do not face barriers due to language. This reflects that although Bruges is presented as an international, cross-cultural space, globalisation here remains rooted in anglophone American hegemony. Amongst Bruges's "fairy tale" medievalism – its "canals, cobble-stoned streets, bell towers, museums, quaint parks and imposing, gothic churches," as Jordan writes (2019, p. 57) – is the presence of global conglomerates, simultaneously nationless and American: When Harry asks Ken if his pizza was nice, he replies, "it was all right. … It was Pizza Hut. The same as in England." Harry then says, "Well, that's globalisation, isn't it?" An American company sells Italian food that is identical in Belgium as to Britain.

On this already multicultural context overlaps Irish imagery and resonances. "Ireland appears transparent, a sort of mirror image of Bruges," Epinoux writes, finding parallels between the imagery of Bruges and common Irish imagery, including the similarity between the Bruges belfry and Irish round towers (p. 133), water imagery, and romantic tourist preconceptions (p. 133). She notes that Ireland and Belgium are both "small and divided countries" with "two cultures and two languages" (p. 134). Sarah Martindale and Catherine Rees argue that images of Ireland "seem to haunt" *In Bruges*, "despite, or perhaps because of, its European setting." (p. 123) Because of this, "A hybrid space is created" (p. 123). This hybridity goes further since, as Melnikova points out, via the interpolation of *Don't Look Now*, *In Bruges* creates a relationship between its Bruges and the literary and cinematic Venice (p. 46). In literature and cinema, Venice frequently operates as a "city-museum", associated with death (p. 46), as does Bruges in *In Bruges*. Melnikova argues that the "syntactic structure of the title *In Bruges*" evokes *Death in Venice*, the Thomas Mann novella and Luchino Visconti's film adaptation (p. 55). Relatedly, she notes that Ken is shown reading a book whose title is framed by the camera as *Death of*, with the rest outside the frame (p. 54). The "blank canvas" of Bruges "can be populated with both national and international images," Martindale and Rees note, prompting the audience "to consider the meaning of national distinctiveness." (p. 126) However, when discussing Catholicism in the

film, they argue that its "meditation on sin, death and hell creates a connection between Ireland and Belgium which must bypass Protestant London." (p. 123) I argue that the film does not bypass London, nor does it conceive of London as Protestant, but instead interested in Catholicism as part of London Irish identity.

In Bruges is not merely a film focusing on diasporic characters, it is itself a diasporic work, existing at a cross-section of, and blurring the definition of, multiple national cinemas. This unequivocally includes British cinema. The interpolation of *Don't Look Now* gestures towards a film that, like *In Bruges*, exists at a cross-section of multiple national cinemas, including British: like *In Bruges*, the main characters are ordinarily resident in England, and England acts as a secondary but pivotal setting. *Don't Look Now*'s director, Nicolas Roeg, was English, but, like McDonagh, of other ancestry (in his case, Dutch), and it was adapted from a story by Daphne du Maurier (English, of partial French Huguenot descent). Further, *In Bruges* is part of the British gangster film boom kicked off by Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrells* (1998), which includes films like *Sexy Beast* (Glazer, 2000), *Layer Cake* (Vaughn, 2004), and *RocknRolla* (Ritchie, 2008). Jamie Hannigan's review in *Film Ireland* notes that *In Bruges* was "marketed as a darker, more twisted version of your average British gangland caper" (2008, p. 40). Dean attempts to distance *In Bruges* from these films by describing the "British 'new-laddism' crime films" as full of "misogyny, Social Darwinism, sadism, amorality and insufferable hipness" (p. 168), featuring "fashionista gangsters" (p. 169), "austere" or "high-tech" mise-en-scène and "flashy, rapid-cut editing" (p. 168). She contrasts *In Bruges* with this cycle of films in part by citing the film's attentiveness to Ray and Ken's emotional lives (p. 169). This is both ungenerous to the better films of the British gangster boom – whose characters are not devoid of interiority – and ignores the aspects of this cycle that Dean finds unpalatable that are also present in *In Bruges*, particularly the politically incorrect bent of its black comedy. Regardless, what contrasts do exist reflect *In Bruges*'s status as a late, and resultingly revisionist and self-reflective, entry in the cycle, coming a decade after *Lock, Stock*. It may seem strange to go out of my way to assert that a film produced and funded by UK bodies, written and directed by a man born and raised in London, and nominated for Best British Film at the BAFTAs is part of British cinema, but as with McDonagh's plays, scholars have neglected *In Bruges*'s national and cultural hybridity in favour of simpler narratives. Even in Epinoux's examination of *In Bruges* as a transcultural mosaic, she highlights "Irish, American and European references" (p. 127), not English or British ones.[10]

But *In Bruges* is also, of course, an Irish film. Patricia Danaher, interviewing McDonagh for the *Sunday Times*, notes, "Although the film was made in Belgium, without any funding from Ireland, McDonagh contends - not entirely persuasively - that *In Bruges* is very much an Irish film" (2008, p. 4). The focus on funding is ubiquitous on the question of if *In Bruges* is an Irish film, despite its evident inadequacy for defining the thorny, complex concept of a

[10] Although the quotation from Epinoux could be read to include "British" under the broader "European", the inclusion of Irish as a separate category implies she is referring to mainland Europe, excluding the Atlantic archipelago.

national cinema. Danaher quotes McDonagh's argument for *In Bruges* as an Irish film as follows:

> The writer and director - ie, me - is Irish … The two leads, Colin and Brendan, are Irish, as is Ciaran Hinds. I don't think Ireland has ever made a really great film yet, and I'm not saying my film is it either. But I think it's a few baby steps towards it, and towards not caring about the American market - saying, you know, in an Irish anarchistic way, 'I don't care about government or nationalism,' splurging with a kind of Pogues-like anger, using, then subverting the form. (p. 4)

I find this more convincing than Danaher does, despite the apparent implication that McDonagh has never seen *The Crying Game*. For Danaher, McDonagh's mention of the Pogues is "telling", as "*In Bruges*'s Irishness is the south London variety … punky and suspicious, not least of the spiritual homeland." (p. 4) *In Bruges* does reflect Irish diasporic sensibilities, and it is not, as Danaher implies, any less Irish for it. As Jordan notes, it operates "within a culturally and diasporically-aware Irish tradition" (2013, p. 186). The passage of time seems to have assured *In Bruges*'s position in Irish culture: in 2022, RTE named it one of the films that "define 21st century Irish cinema" (Murphy, 2022).

One of the primary ways that Irish identity is constructed in the film is through Catholicism. "Whatever Irish dimension exists in *In Bruges* is inextricably linked," Dean writes, "to its moral, specifically Catholic, dimension of guilt, forgiveness and redemption." (p. 167) This has essentialist or sectarian potentialities, but also reflects a key element of how diasporic Irish identity is formed: religion often functions as the most identifiable barrier to assimilation for white, Catholic migrants to majority Protestant countries like Britain and the US. In many British cities – most famously Liverpool and Glasgow – religious difference acts as a marker delineating national identity amongst people whose ancestors may have lived in Britain for generations. Since most people are the same religion as their parents, religious affiliation can act as a proxy for a complex web of cultural, linguistic and national associations. Manuel A. Vásquez writes that for many diasporas, religion is "translocative, because it links the diaspora with the imagined homeland across space and time", giving Cuban Americans as an example (2010, p. 131). In *In Bruges*, Catholicism plays a central role in the conception of Irish identity, especially outside of Ireland. Notably, the priest that Ray kills in London is Irish, played by Ciarán Hinds. Further, the priest repeatedly calls Ray by his name – "Who did you murder for money, Raymond?" – implying that he knows him personally prior to this scene, as it is not customary for names to be disclosed during confession. Catholicism in the film is presented not simply as a matter of belief, but as something imprinted in childhood that, regardless of belief, continues to shape a person in adulthood. When Ray asks Ken if he believes in "The Last Judgment and the afterlife, guilt and sins and Hell and all that", Ken says that he doesn't know what he believes, but that "The things you're taught as a child, they never really leave you, do they? So, like, I believe in trying to lead a good life." This parallels a similar exchange in *Don't Look Now*, when a bishop asks Laura (Julie Christie) if she is a Christian. Like Ken, she pauses, surprised by the question, and expresses doubt and a desire for kindness: "I don't know. I'm kind to animals and children." But where Laura later laughs, baffled, asking her husband why the bishop

would ask that, Ken treats Ray's question very seriously – despite their theological discussion soon devolving into an argument about if a middle-aged lollipop man might know karate. Where Laura's laughter in *Don't Look Now* reflects an apathy towards formal religion – which some viewers may connect to her Englishness, contrasted with her Catholic, Italian surroundings – Ken's answer reflects the shifting influence of Catholicism on Irish society and individuals. While the Kid in *Six Shooter* assumes that "an auld fella" like Donnelly must believe in God, *In Bruges* reflects a move across generations of Irish people away from strict Catholic orthodoxy while often retaining some connection, whether cultural or spiritual, to Catholicism.

In Bruges approaches Catholic themes and aesthetics in ways that combine the iconoclastic and the transcendent, both in parallel to and a constituent part of McDonagh's love of, say, the rhythms of Hiberno-English and irreverence for Irish nationalist orthodoxy. Epinoux argues that *In Bruges* "is part of a more general context which questions the impact of the Catholic Church on Irish people's lives" (p. 132), comparing it to *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Song for a Raggy Boy* (p. 133). She interprets Ray's killing of the priest as "a way of unshackling Ray from the Catholic Church and its teachings" (p. 133). But where those films document oppression at the hands of the institutions of the Church, *In Bruges* does not especially engage with the institutional Church, instead mining imagery, concepts and storytelling devices from Catholic tradition and placing them in a profane black comedy gangster film. Because of its setting in a preserved medieval city-museum, *In Bruges* is full of churches and Catholic art and artefacts. "Medieval religious art," Rouse observes, "is represented as affecting contemporary concerns" (p. 179), not as historical curiosities in a secular age. As David Clare outlines, Ken's death, throwing himself from the tower to protect Ray, is framed as a Christ-like self-sacrifice (2012, p. 50), with Ken dragging his bloody body up the stairs paralleling the Passion (p. 52) and Ray's dialogue signalling "Ken's Christological identity" by exclaiming "Jesus!" (p. 53). Marie also has a clear Christian resonance, as a woman with a name derivative of Mary who is heavily pregnant shortly before Christmas. Rouse notes that Ken and Ray's "apparently *secular* quests … constitute a form of *sacred* pilgrimage" (p. 175) – another way, perhaps an overarching way, to conceptualise travel in the film, pilgrims along with tourists, fugitives, and workers. Catherine O'Brien argues that *In Bruges* has "the dimensions of an Augustinian drama" (p. 93), noting especial parallels between Augustine's conversion in a garden, hearing a child's voice, and Ray's conversion of a kind, around the same age, at a children's playground in a park (p. 102). Rather than, as Epinoux argues, Ray dismantling the "shackles" of Catholic teaching by killing a priest in the confessional, in O'Brien's reading, Bruges "becomes an open-air confessional conducted on public benches" (p. 102). Bruges as "open-air confessional" is a visual rendering of McDonagh's engagement with Catholicism as an intellectual, artistic and moral tradition while maintaining disinterest or hostility towards the institutional Church.

Although Charles Hampton warns the reader not to allow the film's "foul language and violence" to "obscure the fact that McDonagh is a sensitive theological writer" (2010, p. 306), this juxtaposition is commonplace in the gangster films of Italian-American directors

like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola or Abel Ferrera. Indeed, these filmmakers often incorporate on-screen violence *into* the theological element, evoking Christ's Passion or saintly martyrdom, or using violence to visually express the transformative power of Grace. This is also seen in the works of Christian directors of other denominations, like John Woo, a frequent reference point for McDonagh. Outside of cinema, violence is used in similar ways in the work of Catholic writers like Flannery O'Connor, Anthony Burgess or Graham Greene. This tradition is a clear influence on McDonagh. Catherine O'Brien notes that the use of "red curtains and candles" in bars and restaurants in *In Bruges* is similar to the "hellish ambience" created with red lighting in Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (p. 99). McDonagh's innovation is using this approach in Irish/Irish-diasporic cinema. Though, of course, this can arguably be first attributed to a Catholic, English director of Irish descent whose influence looms large on this cinematic tradition of entwining violence and theology, on cinema at large, and on *In Bruges* specifically: Alfred Hitchcock. Though comparatively restrained by both legal and corporate censorship, Hitchcock constantly pushed the boundaries of what kinds of on-screen violence were possible in British and later Hollywood cinema, most famously in *Psycho* (1960). His work was also deeply informed by Catholic theology, morality and aesthetics, most explicitly in a film directly referenced in *The Lonesome West*, and then again here in *In Bruges*: *I Confess* (1953).

Chloë's surname, as appears on her business card, is "Villette". Catherine O'Brien notes that Villette is also the name of the murder victim in Hitchcock's *I Confess* (pp. 101-2). In the Hitchcock film, Father Logan (Montgomery Clift) hears the confession of Otto (O. E. Hasse), who murdered Villette. Though Fr. Logan comes under suspicion for the murder, he refuses to break the seal of the confessional and reveal Otto as the killer. *In Bruges* also hinges on confessing a murder to a priest: Ray's killing of the priest takes place *during* the sacrament of confession. "Murder, Father," he says in voiceover over scenes of present-day Bruges, transitioning to the film's visual flashback to the event. When asked why he murdered someone, Ray tells the priest, "For money, Father." When the priest asks who Ray murdered, he says, "You, Father." Ray shoots the priest through the wall of the confessional. Ray's confession here is a kind of double signifier. It is overtly ironic on Ray's part, seemingly an attempt to recreate the kind of cool, fun violence common in action movies, complete with a one-liner, which is undercut when confronted with the little boy's death. Yet it is at once sincere, whether Ray is conscious of this in the moment or not. He confesses a real sin whose weight on his conscience will be the primary driver of the remainder of the film. This potentially unwitting sincerity reflects *In Bruges*'s discordant Catholicism, which, according to Ken, remains within someone regardless of the direction of their adult life. This sincere element becomes more and more prominent as the film progresses and, as O'Brien outlines, Bruges becomes an open-air confessional. In *I Confess*, the act of confessing is, as Amy Lawrence outlines, ambiguous in motive (2023), but functionally, it is a trap. It is for a priest – an agent of the institutional church – to recognise its sacredness regardless, in some sense bringing about its sacredness so doing. "Logan is Christ," Timothy Penner puts it, "bearing the sins of another on himself." (2024, p. 7) In *In Bruges*, the act of confession appears ironic at the outset – reinforced when Ray jokingly but truthfully tells Chloë he kills priests and children – but is ultimately framed as worthwhile,

not as sanctioned through agents of the church, but as part of what humans owe to one another. In Ray's final voiceover monologue, in an apparent moment of clarity, he states that if he survives, he will go to the house of the boy he killed, "apologize to the mother there, and accept whatever punishment she chose …"

As well as referencing *I Confess*, Chloë's surname being Villette has been used by Molly Ferguson (2019, p. 41) to highlight the intertextual presence of Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette* in *In Bruges*. Brontë, like McDonagh, was English of Irish parentage: her father Patrick Brontë – born Brunty – was Irish, born to an Anglican father and Catholic mother in Down (Chitham, 2003, p. 9). *Villette* is set in a fictional Francophone kingdom based on Brontë's experience in Belgium (Donovan, 2014, p. 220). Julie Donovan outlines the complex role of Catholicism in Brontë's novel, with English Protestant protagonist Lucy vacillating between disgust, hated and prejudice against Catholicism and Catholics on one hand, and an engagement with its allure on the other: "In Lucy Snowe's oscillation between attraction and repulsion for Roman Catholicism, Brontë melds English fears of Catholicism with consciousness of her Irish heritage and Lucy's love for a continental, Catholic, nationalist man …" (2014, p. 223) For Donovan, this is also expressed in Lucy's attitude to her own national identity: when confronting Irish characters like Mrs Sweeny, who has been passing for English, she furiously defends her own English from pretenders, but, Donovan argues, after this "lofty and unequivocal assertion of Englishness", Lucy "backtracks, evading any sort of certain identification for the rest of the novel. She becomes increasingly elusive and certainly not solidly English." (p. 218) In contrast to McDonagh, the possible hybridity of diasporic identity becomes an object of fear – yet like the limited field of vision used in key moments in *In Bruges*, Lucy "refus[es] to be entirely seen." (p. 218) The novel, and Lucy, battle between "complicated, marginal, and heterogeneous identities" and "those claiming centrality, uniformity, and unadulterated Englishness." (p. 219) Both *Villette* and *In Bruges*, then, navigate a triangular cultural, national and religious relationship between Ireland, England and Belgium, but where *Villette* both plays into and subverts English, Protestant supremacy, *In Bruges* reveals the falsity of central, uniform, unadulterated Englishness, centring hybridity and heterogeneity in the nations it concerns without erasing or dismissing national distinctiveness. That is to say, *Villette* approaches interculturalism from a conflicted but ultimately hegemonic perspective of the kind Charlotte McIvor describes as "primarily mediated through elite international exchanges." (2019, p. 2) *In Bruges*, in contrast, hews closer to McIvor's New Interculturalism, which "presumes cultural heterogeneity not only between cultures separated by national borders or designation, but within individuals of the same 'culture,'" (p. 11) seeks to "disrupt and reshape rather than confirm binaries of us/them … here/there, and East/West," (p. 11) while "stay[ing] *with* the challenge" of how postcolonial dynamics "continue to shape and interrupt … the present." (p. 5)

If *In Bruges* marks McDonagh's emergence as an important filmmaker, it does so in part by taking on different stylistic and thematic preoccupations than his work on stage: his approach to diaspora issues here is mediated much more through religion than in his plays, for example. His next Irish film, however, seems much more organically related to his Irish plays, right from its title: *The Banshees of Inisherin*. But rather than a belated retread of his stage origins, it represents the synthesis of his interrelated but largely distinct approaches to

stage and screen storytelling. Released nearly thirty years after those plays were first written, it has, I have argued elsewhere, "an air of triumphant return about it, like Alfred Hitchcock coming back to the U.K. to make *Frenzy* (1972)." (2022, p. 41)

The Banshees of Inisherin

In the 1994 period, McDonagh wrote seven plays: standalone *The Pillowman*, the Leenane trilogy – *Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* – and three plays set on each of the Aran Islands. *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* were produced and published, but the final Aran Islands play, *The Banshees of Inisheer*, was not. Nearly thirty years later, he wrote and directed *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022), a film set on the eponymous island in 1923, about a decade before *Cripple of Inishmaan*. It is unknown whether this film is adapted from the unproduced play, or may simply adopt a similar title: like the film's character Colm (Brendan Gleeson) says, when asked about titling a song "The Banshees of Inisherin", McDonagh may "just like the double S-H sounds."[11] But more important than the titles' similarity is their difference: where *The Banshees of Inisheer* would complete McDonagh's trilogy of plays set on the Aran Islands, *The Banshees of Inisherin* is set on a fictional island – one whose name translates literally as "island of Ireland". Like Brian Friel's Ballybeg – literally "small town", the fictional setting of several Friel plays, including *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* – "Inisherin" is a placename that overtly taps into allegory, positioning the work as engaging with archetypes of place. Both use an anglicised form that makes it sound plausible as a placename, not only to those with no knowledge of the Irish language, but to Irish people for whom the meaning of placenames has faded into background noise as a result of the anglicisation process.

The Banshees of Inisherin reunites *In Bruges* stars Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson, and is his first feature film set in Ireland, coming after two films set in the US and three plays set in the US, England and Denmark respectively. This return to Ireland as a setting prompted criticism that, as Tony Tracy observes, are repetitive of those made about his Irish plays (2023, p. 341). But the comparison should also prompt consideration for how McDonagh uses Ireland as a setting on screen compared to stage. Though *Six Shooter* is largely set in a single space – the train – the emphasis on the carriage window points to McDonagh's incorporation of the landscape into his cinematic representations of Ireland, which is, by nature, largely absent from his plays. This is brought to the fore in *Banshees of Inisherin*, which was filmed on location on Inishmore and Achill Island, and opens with aerial shots of green fields on a cliffside, crookedly divided by low stone walls and dotted with white thatched cottages. The first shot of Farrell has a backdrop of flat cap-wearing men tending to their pony and traps, and behind them, cliffs, mountains, the Atlantic Ocean, and a rainbow. Mark O'Connell compares this imagery to the paintings of Paul Henry, the plays of J.M. Synge, and tourism advertising (2023), while Tony Tracy references *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* (1959), *Finian's Rainbow* (1968) (2023, p. 341), and English photographer John

[11] As previously, this quotation is transcribed from the film, which appears in the Works Cited.

Hinde's 1950s postcard images (p. 342). O'Connell describes these shots as "at once beautiful, unique, and irredeemably cliché." (2023) Some critics have taken this imagery at face value: Lind Grant-Oyeye describes *Banshees* as "unfold[ing] on a background of rugged pathways, greenery, sea and rock fences" (2023, p. 136) and goes on to write that the film as a whole evokes "the Irish pastoral literary era in the creative use of mundane rural life to tell a powerful story." (p. 137) Tracy, however, argues that they have "an exaggerated, heightened quality, a folkloric rather than simply romantic flavour" (p. 341): rather than furthering a "tourist gaze", "their excess distances us from any simplistic social reading." (p. 342) As a feature film, *Banshees* enables McDonagh to vividly render stereotypical Irish imagery on a vast scale, yet as in his Irish plays, use of apparent clichés are undercut by both a parodic or heightened unreality, and intercultural juxtaposition. Regarding the former, I have argued elsewhere Eimer Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh's costume designs evoke historical or romantic imagery of twentieth-century Ireland without being naturalistic, thanks to their use of colour: "rather than dark, muted colo[u]rs, she dresses the characters in bright yellows, reds, and blues, making the big, black overcoat worn by Colm … cut an even more striking silhouette." (2022, p. 41) This dark overcoat could be an allusion to Antonin Artaud's visit to Ireland: Artaud, like McDonagh, worked across mediums, particularly theatre and cinema, and interpolated a variety of world cultures. Like McDonagh, Artaud was from an imperial power – France – with a migrant background with a complex, multifaceted relationship to colonialism: his maternal family were Greek, originating from the Ottoman Empire in what is modern day Turkey, where Artaud spent boyhood summers (Shafer, 2016, p. 14).[12] n 1937, he visited the Aran Islands, citing a "'personal need' to reach the 'living sources' of the country" of Synge, and locals in Galway noted his dark trench coat among his peculiarities (Collier, 1997). Regarding more overt intercultural allusions, Tracy notes the use of Bulgarian choral music in the opening sequence – the most visually stereotypical in the film – creates a "disassociation between the visual imagery and its soundtrack" (p. 342). Throughout, traditional Irish music only appears diegetically, while the film's original score is self-consciously *un*-Irish: composer Carter Burwell recalled suggesting incorporating Irish music in the score, but that McDonagh "*hated* that idea … Everything else in the movie steeps you in Irishness: the landscape, the clothes, you name it. But he wanted something to take you a bit away, and that ended up being what I concentrated on." (Pond, 2022) Colm's cottage is decorated with masks from a variety of cultures. Kieran Keohane, Carmen Kuhling, and John O'Brien cite these masks as evidence of the film's "sociological and anthropological generali[s]ability", arguing that the film could be set amongst a "peasant community" in any time or place (2023, p. 272). However, these intercultural allusions are more clearly understood not as generalisability, but a juxtaposition of legible and sometimes oppositional *specificities*.

[12] Although Artaud's family originated from a major port city within the imperial centre, between 1913 and 1923 genocide was perpetrated against Ottoman Greeks, as well as Armenians and Assyrians, as part of a policy of Turkification. This is often regarded, along with the Holocaust, as having "shaped the internationally recognized perceptions, understandings, and legal definitions of crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide." (p. 104)

Farrell and Gleeson play Pádraic Súilleabháin and Colm Doherty (sometimes called Colm Sonny Larry) respectively, two old friends living on Inisherin. Colm suddenly decides that he no longer wants to be friends with Pádraic, explaining "I just don't like you no more." Conscious of his own mortality, Colm wishes to concentrate on his fiddle playing over "aimless chatting" with Pádraic. He tells Pádraic that music "lasts" in a way niceness does not. Pádraic doesn't accept Colm's ending of their friendship, and their conflict escalates when Colm threatens to cut off his own fingers if Pádraic talks to him again. Though this appears contradictory – cutting the fingers off of his fiddle playing hand will impede or outright destroy Colm's stated desire to focus on his fiddle playing – Meghna Sharma argues that cutting off his fingers absolves Colm of following through on creating his musical legacy, "allow[ing] him to externalise this failure onto Pádraic." (2023, p. 552) Colm does cut his fingers off, ending up conducting a small group of musicians with a bloodied stump. But Pádraic's pet donkey Jenny chokes to death on Colm's severed fingers, and as revenge, he burns down Colm's cottage. Along the way, Pádraic's sister Siobhán (Kerry Condon) leaves Inisherin to work in a library on the mainland, and Dominic (Barry Keoghan), a young man living in Inisherin with whom Pádraic becomes friends during the feud, dies by suicide.

All of this plays out in April and May of 1923, with the Irish Civil War raging across the water on the mainland. This is a period of transition, when the nature of the new Irish state has yet to be established. It is a moment when, as Keohane, Kuhling and O'Brien argue, the utopian ideological possiblities conceived of during the movement for independence give way to an authoritarian nostalgia for an imagined pre-colonial existence which would come to dominate Irish politics and society in the twentieth century (p. 277). *Banshees* counters the latter by using the aesthetics of that nostalgia – a rural landscape of greenery and thatched cottages, where humans live in harmony with animals and the land – in a way that combines sincere and ironic modes. This Ireland is "an idealized lost loved object … what we imagine to have been beautiful, true and good, a form of life that we have lost and sacrificed for modernization and individuality" (Keohane, Kuhling and O'Brien, 2023, p. 275) which McDonagh deconstructs, portraying a society that is not an idyllic pre-colonial Eden but a harsh, violent world whose characters are lonely and isolated. It is "a barren place in which we meet no young couples" (Keohane, Kuhling and O'Brien, 2023, p. 276). The only viable options are escape – like Siobhán – or death. Dominic, the film's youngest character, is physically and sexually abused by his father, a policeman: the indifference or hostility that he experiences, including from those aware of his father's abuse, is a miniature case study in the blind eye turning and deference to power that enabled the crimes committed by or in collusion with the independent Irish state in the guise of that authoritarian nostalgia. This is not a comment on something inherent to Ireland, but a more precise critique of the failure of independence to deliver a better future for the people of Ireland. Mrs. O'Riordan (Bríd Ní Neachtain), the postmistress, is shown painting the red post box outside her shop green. This at once emphasises the sheer newness of independence and critiques the form of that independence: literally painting over imperialist institutions with nationalist colours, rather than creating new, liberatory social structures. An impossible desire to return to an imagined precolonial obscured the boundless possibilities of the postcolonial.

The Civil War setting invites an allegorical reading that some viewers found lacking: "As a metaphor it's both vague and clumsy;" O'Connell writes, "for it to work, you'd have to think of the Irish Civil War as some kind of basically unfathomable squabble between former best friends, as opposed to a conflict over a treaty with the British government that granted only partial independence and divided Ireland into two political entities, to disastrous results." But this is a mischaracterisation of the Civil War, and indeed, of Colm and Pádraic's miniature civil war. Though the Anglo-Irish Treaty was seen, as John M. Regan outlines, as making partition "a fait accompli" (1997, p. 543), partition had already been installed under the Government of Ireland Act 1920, prior to the Anglo-Irish Treaty (Gibbons, 2013, p. 508). Other objections to the Treaty included the UK retaining control of some important ports, and that the Irish Free State would not be a Republic but a dominion of the British Empire with the King as head of state, to whom TDs would be required to take an oath of allegiance (Regan, 1997, p. 543). Colm and Pádraic's feud, meanwhile, is not a "basically unfathomable squabble", but a sincere clash of both values and personalities, which needlessly escalates to violent extremes.

Banshees was made a century after the Civil War, and so the arc of that century informs its understanding of the worth or fathomability of that war. Regan describes the oath of allegiance as the anti-Treaty side's "central criticism" (p. 545), but subsequent to the Civil War, Éamon de Valera would found Fianna Fáil and agree to take the oath, dubbing it "mere 'empty formula'" (Ó Beacháin, 2010, p. 380). The Free State regained the Treaty ports in the 1930s, and officially became a Republic in 1949. When *The Banshees of Inisherin* was released, the parties created from the pro- and anti-Treaty sides of the Civil War were in coalition government together. O'Connell focuses on partition as a consequence of the Treaty because, despite its relative tangentiality, partition remains a live issue in both global geopolitics and Irish national identity. In *Banshees*, McDonagh uses his temporal distance to do the effective opposite: Colm and Pádraic's disintegrating relationship, read as an allegory for the Civil War, casts attention on the reasons for the war that are no longer live or sensitive issues. A century on, these seem, like Colm and Pádraic's fighting, understandable disagreements that spiral into gruesome and wasteful bloodshed. Once again, McDonagh critiques nationalist histography, not in a way that reinscribes imperialist narratives but in a way that objects to the reification of violence for any cause. Like Seán O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, *Banshees* operates on tragicomic "juxtaposition of human realities in conflict with the grandiose illusions of Irish Romanticism and the meaningless abstractions of politics and war" (Durbach, 1972, p. 20), opposing "Romance, Heroism, Religion and Nationalism" insofar as they "constitute those sentimental principles for which men are prepared to sacrifice themselves" (p. 21). Within *Banshees*'s Civil War allegory, music and art are the sentimental principles for which Colm is willing to sacrifice his very ability to create those things. He frames his music as an attempt to live beyond himself in memory: "Do you know who we remember for how nice they was in the 17th century? … Yet we all remember the music of the time. Everyone, to a man, knows Mozart's name." This argument resonates with nationalistic appeals to the glory of dying for one's country. As such, the allegory works both as a generalised allegory for war and a specific allegory for the Civil War. "It might be hasty to say that the conflict between the two men was meaningless

or trivial," Bryant W. Sculos writes, "but it was certainly avoidable – not unlike most wars in human history." (2023) That certainly applies to the Civil War, too.

Banshees, like McDonagh's works, has a web of allusions that span various cultures, but has a particularly sustained engagement with both Irish and Irish diasporic art from or about the 1920s period. Pádraic is seen shaving in a cracked mirror that hangs on the wall of the cottage, which O'Connell compares to the broken mirror in *Ulysses*: "'It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant.'[13] … it encapsulates Stephen's (and Joyce's) desire to break free of colonialism's disfiguring influence on representations of Ireland and Irishness." (2023) O'Connell interprets the "cracked lookingglass" as particularly targeting the work of the Abbey Theatre, "which promoted a bleakly idealized image of Irish peasant life". He cites Synge as an example, oddly discounting the humour and irony of Synge's representation of rural Ireland. He contrasts this "cracked lookingglass" art with the "defiant cosmopolitanism of Joyce's novel—with its urban setting, its relentless ridicule of narrow nationalism …" In O'Connell's view, McDonagh's work skews closer to stereotype-ridden images of Irish peasant life from the early Abbey than the defiance of *Ulysses*. But this troublingly associates rural settings with inauthentic stereotypes that reinscribe imperialist assumptions about Irishness, and urban – specifically Dublin – settings as authentic, modern and pushing at the boundaries of how Ireland is represented. If we interpret the broken mirror in *Banshees* as a reference to *Ulysses*, it reads as a counter to this dichotomy. As I have outlined, Dublin already occupies a dominant position in Ireland's cultural, political and economic life. The problem, then, is how does one represent rural Irish life in a way that does not reinscribe imperialist stereotypes? Though Pádraic would never contemplate the metaphorical implications of his cracked mirror, placing it in this new context declares that "bleakly idealized image of Irish peasant life" are not just restricting upon Dubliners, but also upon those whose lives *superficially resemble* that image. "The most difficult stereotypes to uproot are not those that falsify reality but those that are grounded in truth," Luke Gibbons writes, "and which also go one step further in purporting to show the 'essence' of things … cast as aspects of 'national character', or attributed to racial characteristics." (2020, p. 96) As such, deliberately avoiding stereotypes can simply invert the existing paradigm while fantasising that it is being dismantled.

It should be noted that O'Connell's interpretation of the cracked lookingglass metaphor is somewhat reductive: Robert Tracy describes the cracked lookingglass as representative of the fraught and ambiguous state of the Irish writer writing in the imposed, colonial language of English, with the image itself borrowed from the preface to Oscar Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the rage of Caliban seeing, or not seeing, his face reflected (1998, p. 10). Tracy argues that *Ulysses* builds on an existing tendency in Irish literature in the English language to prove "the colonized could challenge the colonizer artistically, that the imitative and flawed nature of the subject people's art could be a strength rather than a weakness." (p. 10) For O'Connell, the mirror is some true, essential Irishness that has been cracked by colonialism; for Tracy, the cracked mirror is a broken imitation of some purer or more authentic relationship that English people have – or are imagined to have – to

[13] Joyce, J. (1922) *Ulysses.* Egoist Press. p. 7.

anglophonic culture, which to Irish people is both foreign and familiar. In Tracy's formulation, the cracked mirror is to be embraced as a valuable artistic perspective in its own right. In O'Connell's, the cracked mirror should be destroyed, allowing for an authentic Irish representation to take its place. *Banshees*' use of the mirror is closer to the former, but goes further. As an English person, McDonagh's relationship to the English language and anglophonic culture is not without disfigurement or alienation; rather, as both an English and Irish person, disfigurement and alienation is present and has been further compounded by intercultural complexity – reflecting that for second-generation diasporans, as Royona Mitra notes, "destabilising confusion is about embodying a permanent state of transience and volatility that is not just a figurative experience but a fleshly lived reality." (2015, p. 105) Though O'Connell describes McDonagh's diasporic Irishness as "a kind of choice, in the same way that it is a choice to work in a particular genre," in *Ulysses*, Joyce illustrates the complexities of Irish identity that O'Connell claims are missing in McDonagh's work by pointing to the persistence of Irish identity in diaspora populations, linking it implicitly to the complexity of Jewish diasporic identity:

> — But do you know what a nation means? says John Wyse.
>
> — Yes, says Bloom.
>
> — What is it? says John Wyse.
>
> — A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.
>
> — By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.
>
> So of course everyone had a laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:
>
> — Or also living in different places. (p. 317)

These views of (or through) the lookingglass can be roughly mapped onto Frantz Fanon's three phases of postcolonial development, as outlined in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004) and later applied to Ireland by Declan Kiberd (1996): the assimilationist phase, in which the colonised artist mimics their colonisers; the national phase, in which the colonised artist rejects the coloniser culture and embraces indigenous culture as superior; the liberationist phase, in which acknowledged hybridity dismantles binaries and revitalises and reshapes national culture. The second, nationalist phase "is not liberation, since it still persists in defining itself in categories imposed by the colonizer", Kiberd writes, "… it is only by breaking out of the binaries, through to a third point of transcendence, that freedom can be won." (p. 184) The phases form a "dialectical progression, culminating in a solid synthesis where previous contradictions are resolved for the time being, with no indications of the need for further dialectical revolutions." (Pauwels, 2018, p. 81) O'Connell seems to interpret the early Abbey plays as part of the first (assimilationist) phase, uncritically mimicking British stereotypical representations of Irishness, rather than, as is more typical, the second phase, as in Tracy's analysis. Tracy's use of the cracked mirror as metaphor rhymes with Fanon's third phase, in which the flawed imitation of coloniser culture is synthesised into a complete national consciousness.

Because Fanon's phases are structured as a dialectical progression, Matthias Pauwels argues that he espouses a linear temporal logic that diminishes prior artistic responses to colonial rule as mere stepping stones towards the culmination of the liberatory third phase (2018, p. 93), which is positioned as both the most culturally authentic and politically effective contribution to decolonisation (p. 80). Writing while fighting in the Algerian War, Fanon ties his third phase to armed, popular struggle for national liberation and decolonisation: he calls the third phase "combat literature in the true sense of the word, in the sense that it calls upon a whole people to join in the struggle for the existence of the nation." (2004, p. 173) As Pauwels explains, "the popular struggle for national liberation is said to resuscitate [the national culture of a colonised people], to restore its dynamism, its ability to change and reinvent itself." (p. 80) But much of McDonagh's work, and *Banshees* most of all, is concerned with violence and art after the colonial power has been overthrown – when the struggle for national existence is, while not over, no longer an urgent, existential concern. His work suggests that "further dialectical revolutions" (Pauwels, p. 81) *are* required beyond the cultural synthesis and national liberation of the third phase, calling into question the third phase's apparent finality and the theory's linear temporality. On one hand, the cultural hybridity embraced in the third phase is repressed or denied post-revolution, retreating into a curdled version of the second phase: as Kiberd notes, the early decades of an independent Irish state were defined by "the new leaders sooth[ing] a frustrated people with endless recollections of the sacred struggle for independence." (p. 552) On the other hand, *Banshees* depicts a violence that, once normalised, becomes habitual, turning inward if necessary for its own perpetuation. McDonagh's use of the mirror, then, ultimately reaches towards some kind of post-revolutionary national literature and art. After the death of Jenny the donkey, before going to tell Colm that he will burn his cottage down as revenge, Pádraic smashes the mirror even more, hitting it with his lantern. Pádraic's face is now reflected in a multiplicity of fractures and distortions. Though Farrell's face is still recognisable, the mirror no longer provides a naturalistic approximation of his appearance, either cracked or whole. Whether a cracked mirror reflects "colonialism's disfiguring influence on representations of Ireland and Irishness", as O'Connell writes, or that "the imitative and flawed nature of the subject people's art could be a strength rather than a weakness", as Tracy does, Pádraic's smashing of the mirror is a rejection of representation, of the *mirror*, as an aesthetic goal. Instead, we glimpse the possible kaleidoscope of "Irish" art.

In the earlier scene of Pádraic shaving in the cracked mirror, the camera dollies out so that Siobhán is also reflected in the mirror, sitting at the table, reading a "sad" book. "Do you never get lonely, Pádraic?" she asks. He reacts with bafflement. The framing of a female character in a cracked mirror combined with this dialogue recalls Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960), in which Shirley MacLaine's character carries a cracked compact mirror. When Jack Lemmon's character points out the broken mirror, she says, "Yes, I know. I like it that way. Makes me look the way I feel." *The Apartment* is about loneliness and isolation in the large urban environment of New York City. Its characters are emotionally alone in sprawling but rigid office spaces and anonymous apartment blocks, their main interpersonal interactions are directly or indirectly transactional. As Siegfried Kracauer wrote about hotel

lobbies, these are urban spaces "of unrelatedness" (1999, p. 293) where "togetherness … has no meaning." (p. 291) Siobhán in *Banshees* is lonely and isolated in a totally contrasting environment, that is, an open rural vista – the lonesome west, as McDonagh dubbed it in the play of that title (1997b), a phrase borrowed from Synge in *Playboy of the Western World* (1966, p. 20). Though her interactions are mostly not transactional, neither are they intellectually stimulating or meaningful. This is, in some ways, a classic trope: the countryside as isolated and, often, maddening, due to the limited interpersonal interaction available. But this connection to *The Apartment* undermines assumptions about rural and urban life, framing loneliness, isolation and lack of human connection as endemic in both. This also undercuts the film's apparent embrace of escape as solution. We do not see Siobhán's new life on the mainland; we hear the contents of a letter she writes to Pádraic, but as Pádraic's reply contains lies, the veracity of Siobhán's letter is unclear. Since Inisherin is "island of Ireland", Siobhán's departure is not merely about rural and urban life, but in part a commentary on emigration. Emigration typically involves "transition between the rural homeland and the urban host land" (Beswick, 2010, p. 134), as it does for Siobhán. But her leaving is not portrayed as tragic, but as necessary, even empowering. While many representations of Irish emigration, including *Beauty Queen*, depict it as a sad fate young people are forced into due to economic or social desolation, in *Banshees*, Siobhán's leaving is the only happy ending for any of the film's characters. As McDonagh is a child of emigrants, this has a self-justifying quality, defending his parents' emigration and by extension his own Irish identity – that life can only be truly lived by leaving Inisherin. But there is greater ambiguity at play than this might suggest. Although it may seem superficially to be presenting emigration as an all-purpose solution to unhappy lives in Ireland, the allusion to *The Apartment* and the ambiguities of Siobhán's letter complicate this. Like so many Irish emigrants, there is little for Siobhán on the "island of Ireland", making leaving the only apparent path forward. But like so many emigrants, there is no guarantee that what is on the other side will be a true escape from the problems that she faces here. The audience is left without a glimpse at that other side, making emigration a leap of faith with an unknown payoff. Like Maureen or Pato in *Beauty Queen*, her new life may be one of Othering, discrimination, and declining mental health.

Because the life of the emigrant has its own hardships, it is common for diasporic imaginings of Ireland to take the form of idealisation, rooted in those romantic precolonial dreams. Perhaps the most prominent filmic version of this is John Ford's *The Quiet Man*. As Tony Tracy has written (p. 342) and I have noted elsewhere (2022, p. 42), the frequent use of shots framed by windows or doors in *Banshees* is a signature of Ford's style, most famously in the ending of *The Searchers*. The juxtaposition of rugged landscapes with dark, low-ceilinged indoor spaces also echoes Ford: in *Stagecoach* (1939), as David Cairns writes, Monument Valley shares the screen with interior shots that, though shot in a studio, had "low ceilings press[ing] down on the cast, floorboards resound[ing] with sonorous thuds." (2010) The ceilings "forced naturalism on cinematographer Bert Glennon, who had to blast light in through the doors and windows," Cairns further notes, "But Glennon makes realism painterly, with the lambent glow as [John] Wayne ignites his cheroot with a lantern, or the dawn blazing through a far doorway." The indoor spaces in *Banshees* habitually have low

ceilings, lit dimly by light through doors and windows, lanterns, and open fireplaces. In relation to *The Quiet Man* specifically, *Banshees* appears as a kind of evil twin. Both are set in the 1920s; both use picturesque, idealised rural imagery; both are set in fictional locations with names of clear derivation: *Quiet Man* is set in Inisfree, taken from the WB Yeats poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", itself about longing for rural tranquillity while residing in an urban setting, written by Yeats while in London. Both *Banshees* and *Quiet Man* are products of a diasporic imagination. But where *The Quiet Man* hints towards darkness while overtly centring romanticism, *Banshees* centres violence, both personal and political. *Banshees* unearths the darkness that is a subtle undercurrent in *The Quiet Man*. When John Ford visited Ireland in the early 1920s – claiming to be on the same boat from Liverpool to Ireland as the Irish delegates negotiating the Anglo-Irish Treaty – he found his cousin's cottage burned down by British forces (Gibbons, 2020, pp. 42-3). This kind of violence is absent from the idyllic country life portrayed in *The Quiet Man*, where fist fights take prominence over shootouts. The inclusion, then, of a cottage being burned down in *Banshees* can be understood as a reassertion of the violent realities of 1920s Ireland that are erased or sidelined in *The Quiet Man*'s nostalgic narrative.

In both its replication and critique of what is typically regarded as inauthentic Irish art, *Banshees* consistently highlights that, as Leo Cabranes-Grant writes in the context of colonial Mexico, "Distinctions between pure and impure practices are not produced by intercultural relations – they are *already* there as part of a complex chain of networking operations that flow through, against, and because of them" (2016, p. 5). McDonagh employs the imagery of authoritarian nationalist nostalgia and of colonial stereotyping in a narrative that counters both the idealisation of rural life endemic in the former and the dehumanisation of the latter. As Tony Tracy observes, the apparently idyllic opening aerial shots can be re-read as marred by the boundary walls "carving up what would have been otherwise open fields" (p. 341). As such, nostalgic, pastoral imagery is presented from the outset as conjured in a colonial and postcolonial context: this is not an organic society of people living in harmony with the land and animals, but one that exists in the context of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland that, as Edward Said writes, "was to anglicize the names, redraw the land boundaries to permit valuation of property (and further expropriation of land in favor of English and 'seignorial' families), and permanently, subjugate the population." (2021, p. 328) Said notes that a "great deal of romantic mythmaking went into these nationalist versions of how imperialism alienated the land" (p. 328). McDonagh critiques both this romantic mythmaking and the real imperial violence that underpins it by, from *Banshees*' opening shots, showing that the pure, authentic Irishness imagined by either nationalists or imperialists is based on a society already transformed by colonialism. This is neither a precolonial Eden nor a savage pre-civilisation. Charlotte McIvor describes New Interculturalism as "both a revisionist and future-oriented mode" (2019, p. 15), and it is in this mode that *Banshees* operates in its approach to history, national identity, and violence. McDonagh rewrites the Civil War as a wasteful conflict, independence as insufficient, and reaches towards a truly post-revolutionary Irish art – rejecting the mirror as an aesthetic goal.

Though McDonagh tends to stylistically mix mediums, the origins of McDonagh studies and, indeed, McDonagh's career, in theatre has tended to limit the range of analysis given to his films, which are too often reduced to their published screenplays rather than treated as works of audiovisual art. But it is a mistake to treat McDonagh as a writer in essence, who directs out of happenstance: he has never written a screenplay to be directed by anyone else. So much of the meaning in his Irish films is in shot composition and combination – the fragments of paintings we are shown in the museum in *In Bruges* frame our understanding of Ray's spiritual and moral journey, and the cracked and then smashed mirror in *Banshees* interpolates a swathe of ideas about representation, both of a nation and of an individual. From *Six Shooter* on, McDonagh's Irish films are, as befits the medium, deeply concerned with the image and the act of looking: as such, they have a capacity to interrogate the images of a people or a nation that have been cultivated by imperial ideology or nationalist histography, or through the mist of emigrant memories. Simultaneously, they recognise the power of images upon the spectator: in *In Bruges*, medieval art is an active agent in the contemporary lives of the characters. Images that fail to represent reality are neither easily dismissed nor deemed evil misrepresentation. They have the power to shape our understanding of the world, and to shape the world itself, and it is for this very reason that they necessitate interrogation: evaluating them for their representational authenticity is not a form of this necessary work, but a barrier to it.

Chapter 5: American films

Though McDonagh has written and directed only one film without Irish characters – *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* – in this chapter I consider it alongside *Seven Psychopaths*, his other film set in, and thematically about, the United States. Both films use McDonagh's perspective as an informed outsider to consider the American relationship to violence, both retributive and self-sacrificial, with particular attention to the role of religious violence in shaping the imagination of the Irish diasporic artist. These films represent a complex negotiation between different forms of Irish diasporic identity: Irish-English McDonagh represents himself as an Irish man in America in *Seven Psychopaths*, and in *Three Billboards*, he actively rejects Irish-Americans willingness to collude with power rather than pursue postcolonial solidarity. In both films, McDonagh's depiction of America remains consistently rooted in the awareness of American war crimes and neocolonial projects, which are reasserted as an act of postcolonial solidarity in defiance of the US's active deed of forgetting.

Seven Psychopaths

Seven Psychopaths (2012), McDonagh's first film set in the US, is, as Joan Dean notes, "a film set in Los Angeles and immersed in American culture but hardly devoid of things Irish." (2013, p. 207). It premiered two years after his first US-set work for the stage, *A Behanding in Spokane*, and shares cast members with the Broadway production of that play: Sam Rockwell plays Billy Bickle, who, as Eamonn Jordan (2013, p. 215) and Dean (2013, p. 207) have noted, is named for Travis Bickle, the protagonist of *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), while Christopher Walken plays Hans Kieslowski, presumably named for the Polish director of *Dekalog* (1989) and the *Three Colours* trilogy (1993; 1994). These references hint at the film's disparate, and potentially contradictory, ambitions. Like *Taxi Driver*, it is a film about psychopathic violence; like *Dekalog*, it explores religious themes with a mixture of comic cynicism and searching awe; like the *Three Colours* trilogy, named for the colours of the French flag, it represents a national culture and its limitations from an outsider's perspective. In the case of *Seven Psychopaths*, McDonagh represents and critiques Hollywood narratives through a series of overlaying metatextual gambits. Most overtly, the protagonist of *Seven Psychopaths* is Marty (Colin Farrell), who, as Dean notes, is "a character who has much in common with his creator" (p. 207). Marty, is, like McDonagh, a screenwriter – one who is writing a screenplay titled *Seven Psychopaths*. Marty and McDonagh of course share a first name, and further, Marty's surname as it appears on the first page of his screenplay is "Faranan",[14] McDonagh's middle name (Knibbs, 2023). More obliquely, as David Clare notes, Marty is a reflection of Martin Scorsese – famously nicknamed Marty – references to whose works are sprinkled throughout (2015, p. 24), particularly *The Departed* (2006), set amongst the Irish mob in Boston. The Scorsese allusions intersect with *Seven Psychopaths*' meditation of film, violence and religion in

[14] As previously, this is transcribed from the film, which appears in the Works Cited. Quotations take the same citation.

multiple ways. As Rory Cashin notes for *Film Ireland*, the film's protagonist writing the screenplay for a variant on the film we're watching is "not unlike *Adaptation*" (2012, p. 45), directed by Spike Jonze and written by Charlie Kaufman (2002). In *Adaptation*, Nicolas Cage plays a fictional version of Kaufman struggling to write a screenplay, as well as his fictional twin brother, Donald, who wants to be a writer like Charlie despite his clichéd ideas. Similarly in *Seven Psychopaths*, Colin Farrell is playing a fictional version of Martin McDonagh struggling to write a screenplay, and his friend Billy wants to write it with him despite only being capable of recycling Hollywood tropes. The plot of Sam Shepherd's *True West*, a key intertext to McDonagh's *The Lonesome West*, deals with a similar dynamic. Similar to *Adaptation*, *Seven Psychopaths* reflects a critique of and anxiety about McDonagh's own work: like *Adaptation*, part of this is a concern about formulaic storytelling structures in screenwriting, but as I will outline, McDonagh ties this to a concern about the relationship between his aesthetic and political commitments.

Most significant for the purposes of this dissertation is that Marty, as a projection of McDonagh into the film, is Irish. Billy explicitly states that Marty is "from Ireland", and Farrell performs the role with his own Irish accent. In real life, McDonagh himself speaks with an English accent, having grown up in London. Both the dialogue and Farrell's performance centre Marty's Irishness, uncomplicated by the hybridity of McDonagh's national identity. Marty is an emigrant, as he lives in Los Angeles, but is not presented as having developed any kind of Irish-American identity: his diasporic status is framed as situational, perhaps temporary, not, as McDonagh's is, inherent. However, as Jordan emphasises, Farrell's is specifically a suburban *Dublin* accent, familiar from Farrell's roles in *In Bruges* and *Intermission* (p. 215). This may be surprising for McDonagh's fictional counterpart, since as well as his own Irish origins being in the west, he has expressed, as I noted in my discussion of *Six Shooter*, overt hostility towards Dublin and Dublin-centrism. Dublin, however, here functions as a perhaps unlikely proxy for the London Irish experience: Farrell's Dublin accent indicates an urban Irish space that has long existed under greater English influence, but remains legible to any viewer as authentically Irish. As McDonagh found it easy to change London working class to Dublin working class while revising the screenplay for *In Bruges*, McDonagh's Dubliner self-insert provocatively implies that Dublin and London Irish experiences are fundamentally similar: while rural Ireland is imagined as the container of a pure, authentic, ancient Irishness, both Dublin and London are sites of eastward migration *from* that imagined rural purity, and so each is, in a distinct way, uncomfortably (or productively) positioned between cultures. Brendan Behan makes a similar connection between these experiences in *Borstal Boy*, writing that he and the working-class English boys had "the same rearing": "Dublin, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, London. … We all knew the chip shop and the picture house and the fourpenny rush of a Saturday afternoon, and the summer swimming in the canal and being chased along the railway by the cops." (1990, p. 232) Behan was highlighting the similarity in urban working-class experiences of childhood in disparate geographical locations, in contrast to a middle-class Englishness perceived as more intrinsically foreign by even the English working-class boys. But McDonagh implicitly goes further, connecting urban working-class experiences of *Irishness* in a manner that transcends national borders: Dublin and London

Irish working-class lives are positioned as sufficiently similar that a Dubliner character is a more effective avatar of London Irish identity, particularly in a US context, in which the idea of being both British and Irish is likely illegible to a general population.

Marty being established as Irish means the film alternately perpetuates and critiques several Irish stereotypes. Notably, Marty drinks frequently and to excess, so much so that his girlfriend breaks up with him over it. “I don't have a drinking problem,” he insists, “I just like drinking.” Billy however frames his drinking as part of his heritage as both a writer and an Irishman: “You were fucked from birth. Spanish have got bullfighting. The French got cheese. And the Irish have got alcoholism.” Billy positions alcoholism as a cultural or even biological fact of Irish identity. As Liam Greenslade, Maggie Pearson and Moss Madden note, the drunken Irish stereotype is centuries old and endures into the present, with particular effects on Irish diasporic communities: “The image of the Irish as a nation of inebriates was not confined to the island of Ireland itself”, they write, “Wherever the Irish migrated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the stereotype was sure to follow.” (1995, p. 408) Marty’s drinking could be read as a simple expression of this stereotype, which is how Billy invokes it in dialogue. However, Greenslade, Pearson and Madden also note that sensitivity to “the stereotypical association of Irish people with alcohol” can impede attempts to study, analyse and address alcohol problems among Irish people, due to “an unwillingness to draw attention to its effects as a widespread social phenomenon.” (p. 409) Mary Tilki writes that Ireland has an ambivalent attitude to alcohol consumption, with both high levels of consumption and high levels of abstinence compared to other countries, while culturally, alcohol is simultaneously condemned and central to sociality and society (2006, p. 257). In this context, it is important to assert that despite the power of the drunken Irish stereotype, cultural depictions of alcoholic Irish people are not *inherently* stereotypical. Marty does not conform to the typical variants of the trope: he is neither a comic nor a hostile drunk, and his drinking is unrelated to cycles of emasculation and masculine reassertion. Instead, Marty’s alcohol dependence is depicted in a way common to characters of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with memory loss, regrettable non-violent actions, and denial. Marty’s alcoholism, melancholy, and his status as a writer are tied together in the film and each associated with his Irishness, but in a manner that is concerned with how those associations, positive or negative, affect Irish individuals and their relationship to those qualities. The drunken Irish stereotype hangs over Marty in a way that both normalises his behaviour – “It's part of your heritage”, Billy tells him – and makes identifying his drinking problem fraught with anxiety around national identity. On top of this, Marty’s drinking is romanticised through his self-conception as a writer: drinking places him in a lineage of notable alcoholic writers, both Irish and not, more so than his actual writing does – he conspicuously spends almost the entire film *not* writing. It is notable that Marty is represented only as a writer, and not, as McDonagh acts in the creation of *Seven Psychopaths*, a writer-director. Writing is more associated with Irishness than directing due to the nation’s long and acclaimed literary tradition, while the near absence of an indigenous film industry for most of the twentieth century means that the most significant Irish film directors in world cinema are largely from diasporic backgrounds, like Ford, Hitchcock or John Huston. The location of the film’s final shootout, as Dean notes, is from

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (p. 207), the 1948 film directed by John Huston.[15] McDonagh, as writer-director, spans both these traditions, but Marty, his fictional analogue, is only Irish and only represented as a writer: implicitly, writing is associated with Irishness, and directing with diaspora. In a film so concerned about the nature of cinema itself, this means transforming the positive stereotype of Irish literariness into a limiting one.

McDonagh uses Marty's alcoholism and "funerary negativity", Jordan argues, "sometimes to reinforce the stereotype, sometimes to deconstruct it, and on other occasions to undermine its simplistic presence within popular cultural representations." (p. 215) This representation or deconstruction of Irish stereotypes is one of the axes on which McDonagh critiques and exhibits anxiety around his own work throughout *Seven Psychopaths*. The film, Dean writes, "ventures into a self-referentiality that explores McDonagh's weaknesses as a writer and a filmmaker." (p. 207) She particularly highlights the film's self-critique of shallowly written female characters (p. 208). "Your women characters are awful," Hans says when he reads Marty's script, "None of them have anything to say for themselves. And most of them get either shot or stabbed to death within five minutes. And the ones that don't probably will later on." Marty says in his defence that he was trying to say that "it's a hard world for women", to which Hans replies, "Yeah, it's a hard world for women, but most of the ones I know can string a sentence together." In some ways, this is more the performance of self-critique than anything meaningful: it allows McDonagh to have his cake and eat it, simultaneously mocking and perpetuating tropes. It is especially easy for McDonagh to critique how he writes female characters in some of his works since he has a history of writing complex female characters who he places at the narrative centre – including his breakthrough play, *Beauty Queen of Leenane*. The film does not make significant points about his much more controversial handling of race or disability, for example: the closest is that Marty says that he doesn't want a psychopath in his screenplay to target the Yakuza to save himself "doing Jap dialogue", which, despite the epithet, is more a demonstration of Marty's laziness than his racism, since he is already writing a Vietnamese speaker as a major character. As such, the self-critiques of McDonagh's writing in *Seven Psychopaths* are better understood not as even tongue-in-cheek repentance but as part of a wider anxiety about the relationship between aesthetic and political concerns that permeates the film – most particularly, regarding the ethics of screen violence.

McDonagh has referred to his beliefs as pacifist, telling Fintan O'Toole that from a young age, he "was always coming from a left-wing or pacifist or anarchist angle that started with punk" (2006, p. 42). Both his plays and his films routinely contain violent spectacle and gore, sometimes played as tragedy, though more often as comedy, and often a mix of the two. *Seven Psychopaths* is a commentary on whether this is the contradiction many would perceive it as. Jordan notes that throughout the film "slippage occurs from one to the other as if there is little or no differentiation between" fiction and reality (p. 214). The opening scene features two gangsters played by Michael Stuhlbarg and Michael Pitt, both of whom had main roles in *Boardwalk Empire*, the HBO series set in Prohibition-era Atlantic City, the

[15] The setting also evokes the U2 album *The Joshua Tree*, which, like *Seven Psychopaths*, is an Irish perspective on the United States which contrasts mythic pop-cultural images of America with national reality.

pilot of which was directed by Martin Scorsese (Winter, 2010). After opening on a shot of the Hollywood sign, the camera plans over to the gangsters, making it immediately unclear if this scene is real or takes place on a film set within the film's diegesis. They discuss people shot through the eye, juxtaposing Moe Green, the fictional character from *The Godfather*, with real gangster John Dillinger, blurring fiction and reality further. Certain other scenes in *Seven Psychopaths* are also depicted in ways that make ambiguous if they are diegetically real or fictional: the story of the Quaker stalking his daughter's killer is initially presented as a story from Marty's imagination, but it is later revealed that it is the true story of Hans's life – he being the Quaker father. The fictional and real versions of the story depicted on-screen have several differences, including the daughter being Black and Harry Dean Stanton being replaced by Walken-as-Hans as the Quaker father, but are broadly the same in the shots and locations used. Jordan highlights that Woody Harrelson's performance as Charlie Costello – a psychopath seeking revenge for the theft of his beloved poodle – evokes his role as a serial killer in *Natural Born Killers* (p. 224), a role in which he was cast in part because Harrelson's father was a convicted murderer, with director Oliver Stone claiming he could see "murder in his eyes" (D'Agostino, 2024). The possibility of a symbiotic relationship between fictional and real violence, an animating concern in *Natural Born Killers*, is also a concern through *Seven Psychopaths*, in both directions: in an attempt to have real violence inspire fictional violence, Billy claims that he started murdering in order to inspire Marty's writing, while simultaneously, Billy is named after the film *Taxi Driver*, which famously inspired John Hinckley Jr.'s obsession with Jodie Foster and attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan. This blurring of fictional and real violence literalises and so heightens the stakes of the film's anxiety about if one's pacifist political beliefs demand an alternate artistic approach. Marty wants his *Seven Psychopaths* script to be "about love and peace": he tells Billy that he is "sick of all these stereotypical Hollywood murderous scumbag-type psychopath movies. I don't want it to be one more film about guys with guns in their hands." In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, McDonagh stated that both he and Marty are "trying to strive against the violence in the film," adding, "I really did want it to be about Buddhism and peace and love, at the same time as making a Sam Peckinpah film – to me, his films were anti-violence, too, about the doomed nature of violent men." (Utichi, 2012, p. 16) Violence is the most morally urgent way that Marty feels a pressure to conform to existing narrative structures: while his misogyny emanates internally, his efforts to resist on-screen violence are subject to an endless external pressure, vocalised most frequently by Billy but palpable in the ether regardless.

The way that these narratives are rooted in US cultural hegemony is demonstrated in the film's use of the Vietnam War. Marty has particular trouble writing the story of one of his psychopaths, a Vietnamese man introduced wearing the robes of a Catholic priest, in a hotel room with an American sex worker. As Marty develops the character's story over the course of the film, he is revealed as a Viet Cong fighter whose family were among the hundreds of civilians murdered by American soldiers in the My Lai massacre. He has travelled to the US in order to take his revenge, planning to detonate a bomb, strapped to the sex worker, in the middle of "some kind of convention … on the rights and wrongs of the Vietnam War" in Phoenix, Arizona. Billy is enthusiastic, but Marty is reluctant to finish writing this character's

plot because he feels “there's no way that story's ending but grimly.” As in *In Bruges*, McDonagh emphasises a neocolonial interpretation of the Vietnam War, and by having that emphasis exist in Marty’s own writing, again foregrounds solidarity between Ireland and other postcolonial nations. Both McDonagh and Marty position the US as aggressors and war criminals and its citizens as wilfully ignorant: in Marty’s original version of this story, the sex worker idly wonders if the US had “a big war … one time” with Vietnam. (That Jordan feels the need to describe the My Lai massacre as a “real historical event that included many civilian casualties” (p. 216) underscores this point.) This approach could potentially frame the planned bombing as a catharsis reminiscent of Quentin Tarantino’s historical-revisionist revenge fantasies, which as well as being a major influence on *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*, act as a touchstone for the sequence in *Seven Psychopaths* in which Zachariah (Tom Waits) tells Marty about he and his lover, Maggie, murdering noted serial killers across the US. As in the cases of those uncaught serial killers, justice was never truly served for the My Lai massacre: even after the initial cover-up was exposed, only one soldier – William Calley – was convicted, and his sentence was reduced “from life imprisonment to ten years to house arrest to parole” over the course of just three years (Beidler, 2003). This parallels the lack of consequences for British troops murdering civilians in Northern Ireland, and is part of a critique of state violence at home and abroad that spans across several McDonagh works, including *The Pillowman*, *Hangmen*, and *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*. *Seven Psychopaths* both steers away from the catharsis of historical-revisionist revenge and vocally calls attention to that decision to steer away. Dean argues that the film makes the case that, unlike in Tarantino’s revenge fantasies, “delight in violence against the violent offers diminishing returns” (p. 209). The film itself, however, seems more ambivalent than that: although Zachariah became disillusioned with “serial killer killing”, he tells Marty that he still loves and misses Maggie, that he should have “helped her kill that hippie” – the Zodiac Killer – and that he would like Marty to put a message saying so at the end of the film so that he and Maggie can reconnect. This ambivalence is part of why the Viet Cong fighter’s story feels so difficult to complete satisfactorily.

At the end of *Seven Psychopaths*, Marty listens to a voice recording where Hans outlines his own version of the Viet Cong fighter’s story: in Hans’s story, the sex worker is highly educated and is introduced in a red dress instead of lingerie, and when the Vietnamese man is about to detonate the bomb at the convention, she says in Vietnamese, “Desist, brother. You know this will not help us.” He then opens his eyes “in the middle of a street in Saigon, circa 1963, in the orange robes of his Buddhist order.” He has drenched himself in petrol and is about to self-immolate. Another monk says, “Desist, brother. You know this will not help us”, to which he replies, “It might.” The part of the story that took place in Phoenix is revealed as having taken place in the imagination of the first Buddhist monk to self-immolate in protest of the Vietnam War, Thích Quảng Đức. In Hans’s account, “the act of self-immolation is not defeatist, it is courageous,” Jordan writes, “it is not denying life, but life enhancing.” (p. 222) Contrasted with the disquiet of Zachariah and Maggie immolating the Zodiac Killer, Quảng Đức’s suicidal protest is presented as heroic, creating a moral gulf between retributive violence (as Zachariah and Maggie dole out, or as the monk imagines doing in the Phoenix narrative) and self-sacrificial violence (as the monk chooses despite his

uncertainty that it will make a difference). As Jordan notes, Malcolm Browne's photograph of Đức's self-immolation won a Pulitzer Prize and helped make Quảng Đức's suicidal protest a major international incident (p. 222). The distinction between the ethics of self-sacrificial and retributive violence is linked in the film to how Marty (and McDonagh) relates to distinct religious traditions: Buddhism, which is typically (if somewhat erroneously) associated with pacificism in western thought (Swann, 2021); the Religious Society of Friends, informally Quakers, a central tenet of which is non-violence; and Catholicism, the blood-soaked faith in which he was raised and which plays a key role in Irish diasporic identity.

"I put a lot of Heaven and Hell stuff in my stories," Marty tells Hans, "but I'm not sure what I believe." While *In Bruges* sees its central characters wrestle with their relationship to the Catholic faith steeped in Catholic surroundings – the churches and religious artworks of Bruges – Marty similarly wrestles with an ambiguous or uncertain religious feelings in a seemingly secular setting. He does not acknowledge being raised Catholic in dialogue, making more overt references to Buddhism and Quakerism, but continually puts Catholic imagery and aesthetics in his stories as they play out on screen even when he appears to be writing about Buddhism or Quakerism. The Viet Cong fighter is introduced in the robes of a Catholic priest: "He's not even a priest. I just like the image of a Vietnamese guy in a priest's outfit with a snub-nosed .44." In his version of the Quaker father story, the killer of the Quaker daughter is described verbally as having "found religion, and was sincere about it," and visually, it is clear that the religion he has found is Catholicism: he is visited by a priest in prison, he is shown praying the rosary, and the walls of the apartment he lives in after release are covered in crucifixes, images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and statues of Mary. Before his suicide, he "recall[s] a Catholic tract he'd read" which stated that those who die by suicide are guaranteed a place in hell – which he embraces as a way of escaping the Quaker father who has stalked him all these years. *Seven Psychopaths* is, in large part, about Marty's attempts to explore religious movements that better coalesce with his political commitment to nonviolence. But regardless of these explorations, Marty continues to return to the aesthetics of Catholicism, and later, perhaps to its spirituality, also: as I will discuss at greater length below, at a key moment, Marty makes the sign of the cross. If, as Charlotte McIvor writes, "New interculturalism demands that we see the articulation of so-called cultural identities in performance and/or in everyday life as a constant process of negotiation that drags the past along with it into the performative present each and every time" (2019, p. 22), *Seven Psychopaths* drags the legacy of Catholicism as a part of Irish and personal identity into contemporary explorations of alternate religious traditions that are imagined, rightly or wrongly, to be purer or more peace-loving.

Simultaneously, Marty is questioning the bounds of nonviolence or pacifism. In the Quaker story, it is the father character who is dubbed a psychopath, and his nonviolent stalking is presented as a desperate torment. Explicitly mentioning the Catholic Church's condemnation of suicide frames the film's broader contemplation of self-sacrificial and retributive violence. Catholicism, in the case of the Vietnam War, is associated with the aggressor: Quảng Đức objected to the Catholic, American-backed regime in South Vietnam's oppression of Buddhists (Jordan, p. 221). Jordan further highlights that one of the most

famous imitations of Đức was, like Hans, an American Quaker: Norman Morrison, who set himself alight outside the Pentagon in 1965 (p. 222). However, I will further add that three days later, Roger Allen LaPorte self-immolated in protest of the war: while dying of his wounds, he stated, "I'm a Catholic Worker. I'm against war, all wars. I did this as a religious action." (Tischler, 2002, p. 386) After his death, Dorothy Day, founder of the socialist/anarchist Catholic Worker Movement, wrote an article titled "Suicide or Sacrifice?" that considered LaPorte's actions in the context of the Catholic Church's teaching that suicide is a sin, concluding, "There will undoubtedly be much discussion and condemnation of this sad and terrible act, but all of us … know that Roger's intent was to love God and to love his brother." (1965, p. 7) If, as Jordan writes, "The suicides of public figures haunt [McDonagh's] work in many ways" (p. 222), LaPorte's is one of them. This points towards alternative ways of conceptualising Catholicism, Catholic identity and the political implications of the Catholic faith, particularly – as in *In Bruges*, with its open-air city confessional – beyond the confines of the institutional Church.

Near the film's climax, when Marty finds Hans dead, he blesses himself over the body. This "link[s] him with the innate Catholicism … in *In Bruges*", Jordan writes, and "re-affirms that religious belief is an aspect of Irishness that is easily and persistently circulated within many global narratives." (p. 215) Catholicism is not uncritically presented as inherent to Irishness, however, because Marty's religious ambivalence is juxtaposed with Hans, who is explicitly both Polish-American – derisively called a "Polack" by Costello – and Quaker, despite the analogous emphasis on Catholicism in Polish diasporic identity: the role of Catholicism in Polish diasporic identity is particularly clear since the Polish-Jewish diaspora, certainly in the US, are rarely identified *solely* as Polish. As John J. Bukowczyk outlines, nineteenth-century migration from the old Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth included both Polish Jews and ethnic Poles, but the "divergent development of their respective communities in immigrant America" underscored a development of racialised nationalism defined against an ethnic Other (1998, pp. 307-8). Religion, both in itself and as an ethnic signifier, played a key role here: in his book on Irish, Jewish and Polish diasporas in the US, Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that early Polish-American diaspora organisations were divided on the subject of whether they were Polish or *Catholic* bodies, with the Catholic-specific faction ultimately winning out (2002, pp. 37-8). Hans being Quaker presents this as not inevitable or inherent, making Marty's relationship to Catholicism more specific to him personally even while remaining related to his Irishness. Catholicism and Irishness are linked through a web of historical associations, but as two ways of being in the world that overlap in imperfect, haunting and sometimes surprising ways. Dorothy Day, who I have highlighted as an example of the heterodox anarchist Catholicism that McDonagh gestures towards in both *Seven Psychopaths* and *In Bruges*, was an Irish diasporan – but she was an adult convert to Catholicism who was of Scots-Irish descent on her father's side (Miller, 1982, p. 2). Jordan calls Marty blessing himself a "reflexive" action (p. 215): though I think this is overly dismissive of the significance of the gesture, it would also be a gross simplification that blessing himself marks Marty's return to the arms of Mother Church. The film does not end with Marty being imbued with fresh religious vigour, but simply finishing his screenplay. Blessing himself appears to be, rather, the best way to which he has access to express an

inexpressible internal feeling, that may or may not be best understood as religious in nature. Samuel Beckett once said, "Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, and so I use it." (Bair, 2002, p. 327) In *Seven Psychopaths*, Marty returns again and again to Catholic aesthetics because they are, fundamentally, what he knows: a system of symbols that he, a writer, is capable of using to create meaning. Irishness, too, is a system of symbols that he, a writer, is capable of using to create meaning – a distinct but overlapping system, each capable of both complementing and clashing with each other. Catholicism, Irishness and Irish Catholicism are, in *Seven Psychopaths* and in McDonagh's work broadly, consistently acknowledged as, in effect, mere accidents of birth, resisting narratives of superiority or righteousness. But they are, simultaneously, deep-rooted frameworks for understanding the world and one's place in it: inescapably significant despite any technical argument for their insignificance.

If *Seven Psychopaths* is in large part driven by an anxiety around religious feelings, political commitments, and the ethics of violence, McDonagh's next American film addresses the same issues with a greater degree of, if not certainty, than assuredness. *Seven Psychopaths* bursts with questions; *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* offers, however tentatively, answers – ones rooted in McDonagh's diasporic background even as he sharply distinguishes his own perspective from an Irish-American one.

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri

Martin McDonagh's only film thus far with no Irish characters, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) was met with both acclaim and controversy. Set in the fictional small town of its title, it combines a rape-revenge narrative with elements of a neo-western to create a meditation on the relationship between revenge, justice, mercy and violence, within and outside formal systems of governance. The film centres on Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand), who, seven months after the rape and murder of her teenage daughter, hires out three billboards through which she demands justice. In black text on a bright red background, they read:

> RAPED WHILE DYING
>
> AND STILL NO ARRESTS?
>
> HOW COME, CHIEF WILLOUGHBY?[16]

Much of the acclaim went to its excellent ensemble cast, especially the stellar central performances from McDormand and Sam Rockwell, both of whom won Academy Awards. Its handling of race relations and police brutality against Black people – including the apparent redemption of Sam Rockwell's police officer character – attracted criticism. As was the case for his first play set in the US, *A Behanding in Spokane*, some of this criticism rested on assumptions about McDonagh's outsider status. *Time* magazine film critic Stephanie

[16] As previously, this is transcribed from the film, which appears in the Works Cited. Quotations take the same citation.

Zacharek dubbed *Three Billboards* "life in a small American town as viewed by someone who seems to have spent no more than a few drive-through minutes in one." (2017) Zacharek intended this remark derisively, but as in so much of his work, McDonagh here is self-consciously engaging with the cultural imaginary of a place, whose relationship to the real physical locality is complex. Due to the multivalent forces of US cultural hegemony – which, as I outlined regarding *A Behanding in Spokane*, involve both American neocolonial power and international desire – McDonagh, as an Irish-British writer-director, has an intimate knowledge of this cultural imaginary regardless of his presumably fleeting relationship with the corresponding physical locality. This allows for the many ways that *Three Billboards* is, however covertly, an Irish diasporic work of art: its Missouri setting allows for the exploration of intercultural spaces in contexts often reflexively assumed to be homogenous; its attitude towards redemption and forgiveness is deeply rooted in a contentious but unmistakably Irish diasporic Catholicism; it expands in complex ways on the scepticism and hostility towards police and agents of state violence that recurs throughout McDonagh's work, which, as I have previously outlined, are connected to immigrant and diaspora experience of policing and a broader anti-imperialist critique.

Missouri in *Three Billboards* is an intercultural space capable of acting as a simulacrum of the US as a whole and interpolating distinct regionalised aspects of the US cultural imaginary. As McIvor notes, New Interculturalism "presumes cultural heterogeneity not only between cultures separated by national borders or designation, but within individuals of the same 'culture'" (2019, p. 11). A New Intercultural approach, then, is capable of revealing how *Three Billboards* deals with the cultural heterogeneity of a space often presumed to represent cultural *homogeneity*, that is, a small town in Missouri: the kind of place that, whether dismissed as flyover country or reclaimed as the American heartland, is typically rhetorically placed in contrast to the multicultural metropolises of New York and California. But where New York or Los Angeles are easily understood as multicultural due to their significant immigrant or ethnic minority populations, as well as being sites of elite intercultural exchange, McDonagh uses the setting of Missouri to highlight the always already intercultural status of American life: that there is no stable entity of American culture. Many critics reflexively refer to the film as being set in the South, with Abu Haque building on this assumption to argue at length that McDonagh "ultimately reproduces the old southern rhetoric and not the present day South" resulting in a "bizarre ambiguity of cinematic representation that makes the representational space of Ebbing, the small southern town, a misrepresentation." (2019, p. 26) But Missouri can be classified as part of multiple regions, including ones typically seen as defined in opposition to one another: both southern and northern, as well as midwestern, eastern, and western. Its history complicates its relationship to any of these regional identities, which are cultural, social and political more than simply geographic. Missouri, Debbie Olson writes, "has held a unique position within US racial politics", simultaneously "north/south, urban/agrarian, slave/free, conservative/progressive" (2020, p. 100), the "gateway to the West and the Frontier Myth, a region emblematic of US expansion, racial tension past and present, and also the birthplace of … Black Lives Matter." (pp. 94-5) After European colonisation, Missouri was under French and then Spanish rule (Parrish, Christensen and Lookingbill, 2020, p. 31). Under the terms of

the Missouri Compromise, it was admitted to the Union in 1820 as a slave state (Parrish, Christensen and Lookingbill, 2019, pp. 65-70). Missouri voted against seceding from the Union (Parrish, 2001, p. 9), following which its pro-Confederate governor maintained a parallel government in exile, through which the Confederacy laid claim to Missouri (Parrish, 2001, p. 39). Missouri soldiers fought on both sides of the Civil War, with the Missouri State Archives estimating 109,000 fighting for the Union Army and 30,000 for the Confederacy (*Soldiers' Records: War of 1812 - World War I*). Throughout the twentieth century, Missouri was considered a political bellwether, voting for the national winner in all but one US presidential election between 1904 and 2004; this streak was broken when John McCain won Missouri over Barack Obama in 2008, since which Missouri has been considered a solidly Republican state (Keegan, 2024). This last point is important because, though rarely noted, *Three Billboards* appears to have a period setting: technological details, like the presence of flip phones and CRT televisions, as well as, as I will discuss, references to the Iraq War, place the film several years before its 2017 release, most likely towards the end of the Bush administration or early in the Obama one. Indeed, Jordan states that a version of the *Three Billboards* screenplay was drafted in the 2000s (2019, p. 104). Missouri makes for a more effective simulacrum for the US as a whole because the film taps into its recent history as a bellwether, but – released during the Trump presidency – deriving power from the audience's knowledge of what is to come. Whereas Debbie Olson understands Ebbing's portrayal as being an aberration from "the rest of postmodern, mostly enlightened, American society" (2020, p. 112), capable of change due to the arrival of Black police chief Abercrombie, I argue that Missouri in general and the fictional space of Ebbing in particular are positioned as the American norm.

The idea for *Three Billboards* was inspired when McDonagh saw similar billboards while travelling in the US (Connelly, 2018). While those real billboards were, according to McDonagh's recollection, in Georgia or Alabama – states that, whatever their sociopolitical and cultural specificities, are unambiguously southern – in the film, the action is transferred to the altogether more ambiguous space of Missouri. McDonagh establishes Missouri's regional ambiguity through a network of regional signifiers, including allusions to cultural works created by Irish diasporans. Many critics reading Ebbing, Missouri as simply a southern town is, while an error, understandable given the film's indebtedness to the writing of Flannery O'Connor, who is overtly referenced when Red (Caleb Landry Jones), the man who hires out the titular billboards to Mildred, is shown reading *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Grace Chiou notes several parallels between McDonagh's film and the title story of that O'Connor collection, including in *Three Billboards*' focus on misfit characters, the violation of social niceties, and its use of physical violence as opening for grace (2018, p. 21). Sam Rockwell's character is called Jason Dixon, which is, as Olson notes, an obvious pun on the Mason-Dixon line (p. 104). A key scene in the film is soundtracked by the Joan Baez cover of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down", originally recorded by The Band, which sympathetically narrates the story of a poor white southerner in the last days of the Confederacy. The song's apparent endorsement of the Confederate lost cause myth – Ta-Nehisi Coates dismissed it as "another story about the blues of Pharaoh" (2009) – is complicated by Robbie Robertson, the songwriter, being Canadian, half-Jewish and half-

indigenous; Baez is half-Mexican, from New York and has been active in left-wing causes throughout her career. Whether this affects the song's meaning or demonstrates that the lost cause myth has widespread purchase beyond the South is a matter for the listener. Regardless, the song, like Ebbing, where it is diegetically played on the bar's jukebox, is both Southern and not. *Three Billboards* overlays its southern aesthetic with distinctly Midwestern references. The Midwest refers to the northern-central part of the contemporary contiguous United States: it overlaps heavily with the Rust Belt, the former industrial heartland most heavily impacted by the decline in American manufacturing, and is often rhetorically associated with a more "real" or authentic America. Notable midwestern allusions in *Three Billboards* include the films of the Coen brothers, who are from Minnesota. (The Coens are Jewish, though they spell their name in the manner of the common Irish surname, rather than the more typical "Cohen".) The film's tragicomic tone has a distinct Coen brothers flavour, with Nick Pinkerton comparing *Three Billboards* to the "Midwestern Gothic" (2017) of *Fargo*, directed by the Coens and also starring McDormand, their frequent star and Joel Coen's wife, for which she also won a Best Actress Oscar. Regular Coen collaborator Carter Burwell composed *Three Billboards*' score. Dixon's mother is played by Sandy Martin, known for her role in Irish-American sitcom *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (Day, Howerton and McElhenney, 2005-present), in which she also plays the emotionally neglectful mother idealised by her stunted, violent, codependent and closeted[17] son. Angela Hayes, Mildred's murdered daughter, shares the name of the teenage girl with whom Kevin Spacey's character becomes obsessed in *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), whose unnamed suburban setting production designer Naomi Shohan conceived as Evanston, Illinois or another "high-end suburb outside Chicago" (2000). Director Sam Mendes, like McDonagh, has worked in both theatre and film and is English with an immigrant parent, his father being Portuguese-Trinidadian (Wood, 2008) – but where *American Beauty* examines a particularly upper-middle-class malaise as a defining aspect of American experience, *Three Billboards* positions generic American life as working-class, semi-rural and frequently violent.

This violence is part of the film's interest in Missouri as the West, and in particular, its place in the mythologised space of the western genre. Olson highlights the depiction of spitting throughout *Three Billboards* as a common motif in westerns, with this film framing spitting as "a discursive expression of powerlessness" in addition to, as in a western, "disgust or contempt." (p. 105) Bernard Beck writes that McDormand "dominates the screen like the most imposing of Western movie heroes: unsmiling, jaw clenched, her voice sharp, and her eyes piercing." (2018, p. 94) Indeed, as McEntree notes, McDormand modelled her performance, especially physically, on John Wayne, particularly in films directed by John Ford – who, as I have discussed, was deeply informed by his Irish background in his portrayal

[17] Mac in *It's Always Sunny* is gay, and closeted until coming out in the eleventh and twelfth seasons. Dixon in *Three Billboards* is arguably hinted to be a deeply closeted queer man, including his unprompted mention of the persecution of homosexuals in Cuba, his mother's reaction to his saying he doesn't have a "fancy woman" and Willoughby reassuring him that nobody will "think [he's] gay" if he tries to embrace calm. This thread in the film is very subtle and going into detail is outside the scope of this dissertation. It is notable for the purposes of this dissertation, however, that this subtext is illuminated in part by connecting him to the most explicitly Irish-American character in *It's Always Sunny*, played by fellow Irish diasporan Rob McElhenney.

of both the Irish and American Wests – with Rockwell correspondingly taking inspiration from Lee Marvin's role in Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (2021). *Three Billboards* is concerned with the key themes of classic westerns, that is, the relationship between the individual and the community – Mildred, as Jordan writes, experiences hostility from many townsfolk for her stand against the police (2019, p. 105) – and between justice and law. As McEntree notes, *Three Billboards* depicts a near-lawless land, reproducing the "the general uselessness of the law" typical in both westerns and rape-revenge films (2021), both more important generic antecedents for *Three Billboards* than the detective movies about hunting serial killers that Jordan cites (p. 104). In the case of both genres, McDonagh reorientates their story structures through gender. The soundtrack highlights this through prominent use of female covers of songs written from a masculine perspective: in addition to Baez's cover of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down", the film ends with Amy Annelle's cover of "Buckskin Stallion Blues", by Townes Van Zandt, whose version is included earlier in the film, and English singer Renee Fleming's rendition of "The Last Rose of Summer", written by Irish poet Thomas Moore. Regarding rape-revenge, the centring of the parent of a raped and murdered child as the avenger places *Three Billboards* in a tradition with masculine revenge fantasies like *Death Wish* (Winner, 1974), but where those films, as McEntree points out, position their "male avengers" as "proxies for the law," Mildred is in this respect more aligned with the "direct competitors" to the law in classic rape-revenge films like *I Spit On Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978) or *Ms .45* (Ferrara, 1981), in which revenge is depicted as "the justice of the marginalised, of those whom the law excludes", with the victim becoming their own avenger. This subversion of the parent-orientated revenge film is associated with Mildred's gender and status as a victim of domestic abuse: her hostility to the police is explicitly tied to both when she says about her ex-husband, "Ex-cop, ex-wife-beater. Same difference." (Though statistics vary widely due to methodological differences and difficulties in data collection (Mennicke and Ropes, 2016), studies indicate that police officers are more likely than the general population to commit intimate partner abuse (Goodmark, 2015, pp. 1186-7).) In Carol J. Clover's seminal book on gender and horror cinema, she associates the rape-revenge film very closely with the western, writing that the city/country dynamics in rape-revenge "urbanoid horror" mirrors the "settler western" in its depiction of the southern rural poor, often the attackers in rape-revenge and functioning as a politically correct substitute for Native Americans (2015, pp. 134-5). *Three Billboards* also subverts this convention, centring a (nominally) southern poor rural woman and, in its allusion to *American Beauty* and refusal to resolve the case, hinting that the attacker may be an (sub)urban sophisticate like Kevin Spacey's character in that film. The police assume that the rapist and murderer was likely a "drifter" – a figure who exemplifies Clover's contention that the redneck's rhetorical value as the Other rests on being "infinitely displaceable onto someone from the deeper South or the higher mountains or the further desert" (p. 135).

From the western theme of the justice/law relationship, McDonagh builds out a meditation on law, justice, and mercy, rooted in large part in the roles of both Catholicism and policing in Irish diaspora identity. Regarding Catholicism, *Three Billboards* continues the contentious relationship to that faith that was central to *In Bruges* and *Seven Psychopaths*, but with less of the ambivalence and uncertainty of *Seven Psychopaths*. Rather, McDonagh both takes his

strongest stance against the institutional Church and embraces Catholic morality and Catholic aesthetics most overtly. Regarding policing, I have outlined in previous chapters the largely negative relationship between the Irish diaspora and the police force in Britain. Irish-Americans, in contrast, historically used membership of the police force as a method of assimilation. Though initially attacked by a nativist movement as dangerous criminals, in the second half of the nineteenth century joining the police force allowed Irish-Americans to distinguish themselves from – and participate in the oppression of – both Black people and more recent waves of immigrants, particularly in northeastern cities like New York and Boston: at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is estimated that five out of six New York police officers were of Irish descent (Lohr, 2021, p. 203). The stereotype of the Irish cop is deeply embedded in American culture: police in American films are frequently portrayed as Irish-born, especially in the first half of the twentieth century but continuing through to Sean Connery's character in *The Untouchables* (De Palma, 1987), James Cromwell in *LA Confidential* (Hanson, 1997), and Chris O'Dowd in *Bridesmaids* (Feig, 2011). Police officers of Irish descent are even more common, including Popeye Doyle in *The French Connection* (Friedkin, 1971), Murphy in *RoboCop* (Verhoeven, 1987), the protagonists in *The Departed* (Scorsese, 2006), and TV shows like *NYPD Blue* (Bochco and Milch, 1993-2005), *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008), and *Blue Bloods* (Green and Burgess, 2010-present). In *Three Billboards*, McDonagh brings an anti-police scepticism rooted in Irish diasporic identity to a setting where such a thing is largely non-existent, if not outright contradictory. McDonagh presents the police force as systemically biased, in ways that lead to both over- *and* under-policing depending in large part on the gender, race and class of the alleged perpetrators or victims. It is common knowledge in Ebbing that Dixon tortured a Black person in custody, joining, as Jordan notes, "the long list of violent and illegal interrogators to feature in McDonagh's work." (2019, p. 107) McDonagh once again mocks the disconnect between genuine anti-racist action and politically correct concern about the appearance of racism when Mildred sarcastically asks Dixon "how's it all going in the nigger torturing business" and he corrects her, saying you are meant to say "persons of colour torturing business". The torture itself is kept off-screen, a visual absence that Olson argues underscores the presence of racial violence (p. 109), similar to the logic of not seeing the shark in *Jaws*, but which Kareem Abdul-Jabbar argues "makes it easier for the audience to forgive [Dixon's] trespasses." (2018) It should be highlighted that the film also does not depict on screen Angela's rape and murder. Dixon's violence *is* depicted on-screen, however, when he attacks Red, a white man, in the film's most disturbing sequence: in an unbroken shot, a handheld camera follows Dixon up the stairs to Red's office, where he assaults Red before throwing him out a window, then punching his secretary as he descends the stairs to beat Red further. "I got issues with white folks too," he grumbles as he walks back into the police station. This is not, as in many cop dramas, the excesses of a ruthless tough-on-crime approach, going too far and breaking the rules to bring criminals to justice: it is simply reckless personal violence, spurred on by Dixon's grief when Willoughby dies, which he is allowed to commit with impunity because of his status as an officer.

In the context of the main plotline – Mildred and her billboards – the Ebbing police are explicitly presented as ineffective in tackling the most heinous of crimes, rape and murder.

While this may be due to lack of evidence, Mildred's ex-husband Charlie, an ex-cop, faces no repercussions for domestic abuse, reinforcing the idea that violence against women is under-policed, even as people of colour are over-policed for minor non-violent crimes. Dixon arrests Mildred's friend and colleague, a Black woman, for cannabis possession simply to get back at Mildred. Dixon is not, however, a lone bad apple, since, as Grace Chiou observes, "the other cops are hinted to be just as bigoted" (p. 9). Willoughby, an affable man who Jordan describes as "Anything but hyper-masculine" (p. 107), nonetheless tells Mildred, "If you got rid of every cop with vaguely racist leanings, then you'd have three cops left. And all of them are gonna hate the fags." Mildred juxtaposes this under- and over-policing in her interview with local news, saying, "It seems like the local police department is too busy goin' round torturing Black folks to be bothered doing anything about solving *actual* crime." Jordan interprets this remark as Mildred playing down the torturing of Black people as outside the category of "*actual* crime", "partly affirming her own white privilege and unconscious racism through self-prioritisation" (p. 112). But this is more obviously an attempt to distinguish violent crimes from police targeting people of colour for frivolous offences. She continues: "… my daughter's burnt body is lying six feet under the ground while they're … busting eight-year-olds for skateboarding in parking lots." Mildred's unconscious racism is more visible in her positive comments about California anti-gang laws, which allow for exactly the kind of racial profiling she apparently objects to in the local news interview.

Her comments about anti-gang laws, however, make a critique of fraternal associations which she explicitly applies to the Catholic Church, and the film as a whole implicitly applies to the police force. She makes these comments in a scene in which she is visited by Father Montgomery, a local priest. Montgomery criticises Mildred's billboards, saying that he had "a dozen people come up to me on Sunday … No-one's on your side about this." In response, Mildred outlines the 1988 California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, under which "participation in a street gang is illegal and punishable by imprisonment" (Van Hofwegen, 2009, p. 682), which courts have broadly interpreted to apply "to all gang activity, whether violent or nonviolent." (p. 681) In Mildred's telling, whether an individual is involved in criminal activity or not, "You are still culpable, by the very act of joining those Crips, or those Bloods, in the first place." She compares this to sexual abuse committed by priests:

> … if you're upstairs smoking a pipe and reading a bible while one of your fellow gang members is downstairs fucking an altar boy, then, Father, just like the Crips, and just like the Bloods, you're culpable. 'Cause you joined the gang, man. … And when a person is culpable to altar-boy-fucking, or any kinda boy-fucking … then they kinda forfeit the right to come into my house and say a word about me, or my life, or my daughter, or my billboards.

Jordan compares the California laws to anti-IRA laws in Britain and Ireland "prohibiting membership of unlawful or proscribed organisations" (2019, p. 106), as well as Republican paramilitaries considering legitimate targets "anyone associated with crown forces, even suppliers of goods and services, and civil servants" (p. 106). Making those associations

implies that McDonagh is critiquing Mildred's attitude, here, but in the film, this is clearly a moment in which Mildred is presented as heroically standing up to patriarchal authority. Father Montgomery is not a victim of guilt by association but a prop in a showcase for McDormand: the priest never appears again. As such, this scene speaks to Irish concerns in a more roundabout fashion. The scene establishes that Mildred is from a Catholic background: Montgomery mentions that she has "stopped coming to church", so was therefore formerly a church-going Catholic. The surname Hayes can be of Irish, English, or – like Coen – Jewish origin, derived from respectively an anglicisation of Ó hAodha, various Old English place names, and the Yiddish word for "life" ('Dictionary of American Family Names,' 2003, p. 146). If this is Mildred's birth name, the establishment of her Catholic background minimises the ambiguities of her surname and positions her as likely of Irish descent. If it is her married name, it nonetheless indicates that she is part of a broader Irish-American family or community. Simultaneously, her first name being as thoroughly English as "Mildred" implies a high degree of assimilation into the WASP American mainstream. Her rebuke of the Catholic Church, then, is at once a cry of freedom by an ex-Catholic woman against the injustices that she and others have suffered, and made possible by an assimilation that reduces or eliminates reliance on parallel migrant or ethnic minority institutions – a reliance which made communities all the more vulnerable to exploitation by religious organisations.

Three Billboards equivalises priests, gangs and – less directly but in more depth – police, not to, as Jordan implies, scapegoat larger groups for individual crimes (p. 110), but, as Grace Chiou observes, to highlight how fraternal associations "are centered around protecting the institution from outside critique." (2018, p. 8) Violence and cover-up are presented as so embedded and so self-perpetuating that such institutions may be irredeemable – but redemption for the individuals within them is possible, *only once outside the institution*. After Willoughby's death, he is replaced as police chief by Abercrombie, a Black man, who witnesses Dixon's assault on Red. After taking over the station, Abercrombie fires Dixon, but it is ambiguous whether it is for the assault or for his insubordination. Although Olson describes Abercrombie as "the embodiment of the social change" (p. 106), we do not see any such change. Dixon is not arrested for the assault. Abercrombie is shown to maintain the fraternal order of protecting the institution, albeit in a more limited form: he tells Mildred, "We ain't all the enemy, y'know?" which seems like an attempt to re-legitimatise the moral authority of the police, not to embody a new form of policing. "Blacks know something about black cops", James Baldwin writes about *In The Heat of the Night*, "… They know their presence on the force doesn't change the force or the judges or the lawyers or the bondsmen or the jails … They know how much the black cop has to prove, and how limited are his means of proving it: where I grew up, black cops were yet more terrifying than white ones." (2000, p. 63) Or, as Ice Cube put it, "they'll slam ya down to the street top / Black police showing out for the white cop" (Jackson, Patterson and Curry, 1988). In this respect, especially in the period context, Abercrombie functions as an analogue for Barack Obama: his arrival seems to signal transformative change, but what change ensues is largely superficial. He may no longer keep a known torturer on the payroll, but he does not enforce any legal consequences upon him. The lack of punishment for war crimes broadly –

particularly when committed by imperial powers and their state agents – is signalled when Dixon attempts to bring to justice a man from Idaho who he overhears bragging about raping a woman he set on fire, a crime that sounds like Angela's murder. Upon investigating the DNA sample that Dixon provides, Abercrombie concludes that the Idaho man was outside of the US when Angela was killed: "I've seen his records of entry and exit to the States, and I've spoken to his Commanding Officer. … He ain't our guy." When Dixon – slow and doltish as always – asks where the man was, Abercrombie tells him, "If the guy's got a Commanding Officer, and if the guy got back to the country nine months ago, and if the country where he was is classified, which country do you think he was in? … I'll give you a clue. It was sandy." In the scene, Abercrombie guesses that the man was just "bragging". Both Olson and Jordan describe him as presumably innocent (Olson, p. 110; Jordan, p. 109), with Jordan comparing him to the Birmingham Six and Guilford Four (p. 110), but I maintain that the audience, having heard the man both describe the rape and, in an earlier scene, behave threateningly towards Mildred, is meant to believe that he is guilty. In respect of the man's guilt, Jordan speculates that there may be "some military conspiracy/cover-up to offer him a false alibi." (p. 109) But the more plausible explanation is much simpler: that he raped and murdered a woman in Iraq in his capacity as a US soldier. American soldiers both perpetrated and photographed rape, sexual assault and sexual humiliation of male and female prisoners in Abu Ghraib (Harding, 2004). In 2006, a group of US soldiers gang raped a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and murdered her and her family (Rawe and Ghosh, 2006). This was covered up by US investigators and military leadership and was only exposed due to another soldier reporting it, which he hesitated to do because he feared he would be killed for whistleblowing (von Zielbauer, 2006, p. 10). This incident, like the one described by the Idaho man in *Three Billboards*, involved the victim being set on fire. Alluding to such war crimes encapsulates McDonagh's joint critique of over- and under-policing: state forces are empowered to over-police working-class communities and communities of colour and, simultaneously, to commit crimes – including sexual violence, gender-based violence, racist violence, and war crimes – not just without being held to account, but under the guise of holding criminals to account. As in *Seven Psychopaths*, McDonagh presents an American society that cannot be understood without acknowledging its neocolonial wars of aggression – a perspective both rooted in his Irish diasporic identity and largely absent from Irish-Americanness.

But the absence of institutional change does not mean *Three Billboards* has a bleak moral outlook. Despite Mildred's overt rebuke of the Church, *Three Billboards* is deeply informed by Catholic art, literature and morality in its themes and storytelling. McDonagh is, as Chiou writes, "informed by Flannery O'Connor's narrative focus on violence as generative for revelation" (p. 16). Dixon, having reached his ethical low point with the assault of Red, sneaks into the police station and reads the letter Willoughby wrote for him before he died. As Kareem Abdul-Jabbar observes, the order of events "contrasts the faith and hope the chief had in [Dixon] with the wretched person he has become." (2018) Chiou notes that the letter "has an effect beyond Willoughby's human powers to motivate Dixon while he is alive." (p. 15) It succeeds where Father Welsh's suicide letter in *The Lonesome West* seemingly fails. Speaking from beyond death, Willoughby becomes a bestower of what

Christians call grace, both unmerited and transformational: “Willoughby loves Dixon in his imperfect and undeserving state”, Chiou writes, “Before Dixon has enacted any redemptive actions or demonstrated repentance for his accused sins, Willoughby proclaims that he is ‘good.’” (p. 16) Believing the police station is empty, Mildred sets it on fire, throwing Molotov cocktails through the windows. Dixon saves the casefile on Angela Hayes’s murder, deliberately running through the flames and using his clothes and body to shield it. He is severely burned all over his body, and when admitted to hospital, is placed in a room with Red. Unable to recognise Dixon under his bandages, Red speaks kindly to him: “You want a glass of orange juice? I got a straw somewhere. Hey, don't cry. You'll be okay.” Dixon starts to cry and repeatedly apologises to Red, who is angry and upset upon realising it is Dixon under the bandages. Though he says “I don’t care! And stop fucking crying,” a few moments later, Red silently places a glass of orange juice with a straw in it in front of Dixon. Catholic writer GK Chesterton – English and, on his mother’s side, Swiss-French (Coster, 2004), and a supporter of Irish nationalism (Davenport, 2014) – described Christian charity as “pardoning unpardonable acts, or loving unlovable people.” (1927, p. 173) Abdul-Jabbar, in different words, highlights this as the central theme of *Three Billboards*: that the film “wants us to forgive the unforgiveable. To feel compassion for the undeserving.” Even while criticising the institution of the Catholic Church, McDonagh draws on Catholic intellectual and artistic traditions to reveal underlying radical possibilities, both personal and political. This approach is a natural extension of his approach to national heritage: he is, as he told Fintan O’Toole about the influence of The Pogues on his Irish identity, “taking the parts you love and destroying the parts you hate.” (2006) In this case, McDonagh appears to “love” the universalism that gives the Catholic faith its name, but which the fraternal association of the Church seems incapable of embodying: in *Three Billboards*, Chiou writes, McDonagh “critiques solidarity based on familiar social connections or social capital which enables injustice” (p. 10), instead making the case for a “solidarity beyond obligation” (p. 11).

Forgiving the unforgivable is modelled for the audience through Red’s act of mercy and forgiveness: one that is, for Red, painful – he sobs on the other side of the room as Dixon drinks his juice – but is, for Dixon, transformative. “The glass of juice is not only a signal of mercy,” Chiou writes, “it teaches Dixon that being a good man may be costly to oneself and involve sacrifice and risk” (p. 19). For Chiou, violence generates redemptive possibilities, as in an O’Connor story, but McDonagh adds to this the transformative possibilities opened through love, kindness and support (p. 16). “[M]ercy and forgiveness”, she writes, in *Three Billboards* “are posed as deliberate and active concepts that have the potential to disrupt reactive patterns and open new prospects.” (p. 6) In contrast, as Charlie’s nineteen-year-old girlfriend reads on a bookmark, “Anger begets greater anger.” When he overhears the Idaho man talking about raping and murdering a woman, Dixon deliberately provokes a fight in order to get some of his DNA. He does not fight back, but happily endures the beating. That the Idaho man is *not* Angela’s killer is appropriate, Abdul-Jabbar argues, “because the trial is not about receiving a reward but about being the kind of Christlike person willing to suffer for others.” Rather than functioning as any kind of police brutality apologia, Dixon’s arc relies upon recognising him, earlier in the film, as unpardonable, unlovable, and undeserving. As Chiou notes, the structure of a parable is built on this kind of reversal of

expectations, drawing – if overstating – parallels between the negative reaction by some audiences to Dixon's redemption to likely contemporaneous audience reaction to the Good Samaritan parable (pp. 2-3). She highlights that Dixon "pursues justice even after he is removed from the police force" (p. 13), but the film actually goes further in distancing Dixon's redemption and pursuit of justice from policing: as McEntree puts it, "Dixon can only take this step in pursuing justice *after he has ceased to be a policeman and finally turned his badge over to Abercrombie*." (Emphasis in original) This makes it clear that the police are a malignant force not only on victims of over- and under-policing, but is spiritually corrosive to police officers themselves, an obstacle to their innate moral inclinations towards justice.

As the film ends with Dixon and Mildred driving to Idaho to kill a man, it may appear that Red's act of mercy was not, in fact, transformative, and that Dixon's pursuit of justice for Angela's killer is simply a new context for his pursuit of personal catharsis through violence. "At the end of the drama," McEntree writes, "he has not turned his back on retributive violence." But in the film's final scene, Mildred – serious and audibly nervous – tells Dixon that she burned down the police station. The revelation that she was responsible for his near immolation could obliterate their newfound companionship – a companionship that, as Chiou notes, is visually represented by the two characters who were first introduced driving alone being depicted "in one car together on a similar mission" (p. 13). But Dixon replies, "Well, who the hell else would it have been?" Mildred lets out a quiet chuckle, realising he had known all along – and apparently long since forgiven her. They then both admit that they are not sure about "killing this guy", and agree to decide "along the way." As Abdul-Jabbar concludes, "they're unaware that by forgiving each other, their quest is already successful."

In *Seven Psychopaths*, Marty says that he puts a lot of "heaven and hell stuff" in his writing. Like the characters in *In Bruges*, he is unsure what he believes, outwardly non-religious but still haunted by the Catholicism of his childhood. *Seven Psychopaths* is a jangle of nerves, not knowing how to reconcile all the conflicting things that shape your sense of self and understanding of the world. Yet *Three Billboards* reconciles so many of the same conflicting impulses and ideas with graceful ease. Its world is both secular and sacramental; its characters both unpardonable and Christ-like. But this reconciliation's clarity is inseparable from its painfulness. This includes the pain of a trial by fire, but much more, the pain of forgiving, and being forgiven. So much of McDonagh's work involves the revealing of apparently irreconcilable binaries – English and Irish, film and theatre, reality and artifice – as restless, undulating dualities, a manifold, with separateness or purity not just foolish or dangerous but impossible. In his American films, McDonagh presents this at theological scale.

Conclusion

Too often, Martin McDonagh is considered either Irish or English, rather than, as he has stated, both and neither. (O'Hagan, 2001) But my goal with this dissertation was not merely to correct a piece of biographical information. Instead, I have sought to show that McDonagh's diasporic identity can and should prompt new ways of thinking about his work, revealing overlooked aspects of individual works – allusions, connections, context – and highlighting overarching themes that stretch across his oeuvre. Intercultural encounters animate his plays and films, as apparently disparate or oppositional cultures are depicted as constantly cross-pollinating: Ireland and England, yes, and the US through the force of cultural colonialism, but also cultures from various parts of mainland Europe, from Africa, and from Australia. He presents the pursuit of a pure or authentic national culture as both destructive – through his critiques of nationalist histography – but more importantly, as fundamentally impossible. In McDonagh's work, all cultures are heterogeneous, both internally and through unending, undulating intercultural contact: his drawing on cultures that span across national borders, such as Irish diaspora cultures and Catholic cultures, serves to illustrate this.

But there is nothing utopian, nothing transcendent, in McDonagh's centring of intercultural encounters as constant, foundational, and inevitable – at least, nothing utopian or transcendent in the present moment. McDonagh's portrayal of intercultural relations is shaped by the seismic forces of colonialism, globalisation, mass migration, totalitarianism, and violence by state and non-state actors, all of which are presented as not merely interrelated but as faces of one unfathomably large project of hegemony and oppression. McDonagh's in-between and hybrid positioning allows him to see more of these faces at once, where they fuse and bend. McDonagh's sense of justice – whether legal, moral, or theological – is deeply rooted in his Irish diasporic background, in the places where he embraces it and where he rebels against it. As it expressly culminates in *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*, the magnitude of injustice in the world requires not comprehending one face at a time, but moving towards an intersectional solidarity. Not intersectional as a liberal buzzword – one that wouldn't make space for the politically incorrect bent of McDonagh's humour – but as a deeply felt response to political reality. Whether this is truly possible, in McDonagh's work or in the world, is unclear: instead, the emotional core of McDonagh's politics is one of yearning. The same longing is central to the frustrated, fused Catholicism and anti-Catholicism of his cinema: a desire for something utopian or transcendent that is not, as the transcultural theorists frame it, some inevitable fruit of a cultural cross-pollination that has always already existed.

In the decades since he first burst onto the stage, McDonagh studies has remained trapped in the same dichotomies: ones of interpretation – positioning McDonagh as Irish or as English, analysing his work as postcolonial or as postmodern – and ones of categorisation – delineating his Irish plays and films from his non-Irish ones, or his theatre from cinema. It is ironic when, as I have shown, McDonagh is constantly resisting, complicating, or exploding dichotomies of all kinds. This is why Lonergan made the case that McDonagh studies needed to move *beyond*, not merely repeating postcolonial or postmodern arguments nor

embracing a weak form of globalisation theory, in order bridge the binary of local and global (2007, p. 174). Bridging binaries, however, is insufficient for the complexity of McDonagh's plays and films. What is needed is to move away from binaries entirely. In this respect, this dissertation represents an important contribution to study of McDonagh. New Interculturalism centres what Ric Knowles calls the "rhizomatic (multiple, non-hierarchical, horizontal)" (2010, p. 50) while remaining rooted in the material histories that McDonagh's works both are inevitably shaped by and actively excavate. Positioning McDonagh as a hybrid, diasporic subject, I have illustrated how McDonagh's approach on so many fronts is one of multiplicity: everything overlapping, blurring, palimpsestic. Irish and English aren't the only oppositional forces to which his response is both and neither. Rather, understanding Irishness and Englishness, so often defined in opposition to one another, as a both/neither proposition guides his depiction of or engagement with binaries of all kinds.

Having developed a strong framework for interpreting Irish diasporic art throughout this dissertation, scholars can apply this in the future to other Irish diasporic writers and filmmakers. For instance, film director Danny Boyle is almost never discussed as an Irish diasporan despite having a very similar background to McDonagh: born in England to two parents from the west of Ireland, where the family visited each summer, though he was raised in the north of England, which creates a compelling contrast with McDonagh's London Irish origins (Whitington, 2019). Considering Boyle as similarly both and neither Irish and/nor English, positioned to negotiate multiple cultures, could productively analyse his repeated interest in the Celtic Fringe nations, particularly Scotland, in films like *Shallow Grave* (1994), *Trainspotting* (1996) and *T2 Trainspotting* (2017), including Irish-Scottish identity in both *Trainspotting* films, his centring of Irish characters in *28 Days Later* (2002), and his engagement with Indian and Indian diaspora experiences in *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Yesterday* (2019) respectively. Expanding beyond his career as a film director, he was a producer for BBC Northern Ireland, where he conceived of and produced the short film *Elephant* (Clarke, 1989) about the Troubles. Decades later, he was creative director of the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, the apparent British patriotism of which has not been contextualised by Boyle's complex national identity, even when he declined a knighthood later that year.

My framework could also be applied to artists who are more typically considered part of the Irish diaspora, as my focus on the basic instability or impurity of national identities through the lens of New Interculturalism contrasts with the multicultural and transnational approaches typical of diaspora culture studies. John Ford, for example, is widely understood as an Irish-American director, but using the same approach as I did for this dissertation, one could examine how Ford constantly depicts the US – and the west in particular – as a site of constant intercultural contact, with white characters depicted not as a supremacist block but as a diffuse collection of Irish, Italians, Germans, Swedes, and Mormons, as well as his variously offensive, paternalistic, and heroic portrayals of characters of colour, including Chinese railway workers (1924), African-American soldiers (1960), and the Cheyenne in exodus (1964). Sometimes, as an Irish American, Ford clearly identifies with these characters' oppression; other times, his off-white status as an Irish American in the early twentieth century is shored up by propagating stereotypes.

While the nature of my approach meant I was able to at least touch on most pertinent issues in McDonagh studies, there are several places that I could expand in future research, including examining his portrayal of disability in greater depth: McDonagh's repeated representation of both physical and mental disabilities across his oeuvre has, outside of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, largely been received as simply ableism when not ignored entirely. There is also further scope to explore McDonagh's use of religious imagery and ideas, which I predominantly addressed in the context of his Irish diasporic background. In particular, the Hans storyline in *Seven Psychopaths* can be read as an attempt to retell the events of the New Testament from the perspective of God the Father. I further think that understanding of McDonagh's style would be greatly enhanced by contextualising his work and the in-yer-face theatre movement in general within pop culture's shock humour turn of the 1990s and early 2000s, which included rapper Eminem, comedian Tom Green, reality comedy TV show *Jackass*, and animated sitcom *South Park*.

In *Seven Psychopaths*, Hans takes hallucinogens and sees a vision of his late wife, bullet still lodged in her head, "in some grey place."

"England?" Marty – McDonagh's self-projection-as-Dubliner – asks. Hans answers that it seemed "a lot worse than that." Marty borders on dumbstruck: "Wow." It is a simple, borderline hackneyed gag, but in the metatextual context that McDonagh so emphasises throughout the film, it is rendered at once self-depreciation and postcolonial punching upwards, a sardonic commentary on the idea of an afterlife and part of a sincere attempt to wrestle with religious belief. The joke operates simultaneously as the perspective of an insider and an outsider. As portrayed by Colin Farrell and written by McDonagh, Marty speaks at once with two voices, in the constantly shifting duality that defines his work: English, Irish, both, neither.

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