

Some notes on deconstructing Ireland’s Whiteness: Immigrants, emigrants and the perils of jazz

“Are the Irish Black?” Bill Rolston asks in his eponymous essay, and proposes that so long as they identify as anti-colonial, the answer might be ‘yes’.¹ Rolston expands upon A.V. Sivanandan’s paradigm that locates the Irish within the anti-colonial crucible of the ‘black struggle’. Both thinkers approach ‘race’ and its categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’ as political constructs; as historically unstable inventions and performed social locations. But the binary of black-as-anti-colonial versus white-as-colonial is far too reductive a paradigm. Following some historical examples of Irish people who have ‘acted white’ (i.e. dominated non-whites), and others who have allied themselves with black and native peoples, Rolston answers “Are the Irish black?” with a conclusive “of course not”. In a footnoted reference, he explains that there are “some people of colour in Ireland, who, along with members of the Travelling community, are subject to racial abuse and attacks”.² This is patently true, but since Rolston’s preceding meditation on the Irish as ‘black’ appears to have required suspending Ireland’s non-whites into footnotes, there is a certain inconsistency in his approach to both ‘white’ and ‘black’ as constructs. What emerges is something like a naturalistic view of the Irish as *a priori* white subjects, who can look to ‘blackness’ for edification. Displacing “people of colour” and Travellers into the footnotes of a hypothetical discussion of whether the Irish might be ‘black’ can also read as their sequestering from the category ‘Irish’. Yet the essay is saturated with the potential to move past its limitations, since Rolston prepares the ground for an enquiry he doesn’t pursue but that I think bubbles under the surface. Instead of asking whether the Irish might be black, the question that seems to me more apposite is, “how are the Irish white?” How has Ireland’s whiteness been constructed; and how can we deconstruct naturalized notions of the Irish as ‘white’?

For the past couple of years, I’ve been examining how culture, events and discourses represent ‘Ireland’ and ‘the Irish’ as ‘white’, and how they construct gendered meanings about this whiteness. I’ve extracted some examples from a few texts I’m working on, of images and events that fabricate the Irish as ‘white’ in contrast to a ‘non-white’ other, to sketch some of the shapes this ‘whiteness’ takes, in the paragraphs below.

Let’s begin with an anti-Semitic cartoon published in 1911, in *The Irish Worker*. Titled “Gentlemen of the Jewry”, it represents an encounter between an idealised family of man, woman and baby that read as ‘Irish’; and a threesome comprising one woman and two men who read as ‘Jewish’ stereotypes. The latter are traders engaged in a buffoonish attempt to pass as natives; their shops are the “Aaron go Bragh Store” (proprietor “Ikey O’Moses”) and “The Emmet Emporium”, so their patriotism is depicted as of a mercenary variety. One asks another, “Begob Ikey, ven vill us poor Irish get Home Rule?” Underneath the image, the caption avers “We have no objection to any man, Jew or Gentile, on account of his nationality or creed. What we do object to is the practice, which is becoming all too common, of Foreigners masquerading under Irish names”.³

Historically in Ireland, their racialisation has seen Jews ambivalently positioned in the

hinterland of whiteness, and more often than not, clear of the category ‘white’ altogether. At the time of the cartoon’s production (7 years after the anti-Semitic Limerick pogrom), Jewish values were construed as threatening to Catholic Ireland, and its communities of Jews deemed racially ‘other’. The Irish were also believed, and believed themselves to belong to a distinct ‘race’. The language of ‘race’ became exclusively hitched to chromatic differences only later into the twentieth century, whereas during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the orthodoxy was that the inhabitants of the British Isles comprised a number of different ‘races’, with the Irish cast as the ‘Celtic race’.

Maintaining the notion of the Irish as a different ‘race’ from the English, as Steve Garner has argued, Irish nationalist mobilisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century conceived of the struggle in terms of “Celt-Gael” versus “Anglo-Saxon”.⁴ In order to establish that the Irish were a European culture worthy of self-governance, nationalists stressed a positive identity for the “Celt-Gael” as white and equal to, yet distinct from the “Anglo-Saxon”, using the conceptual means of their day. At times this involved what Kavita Philip has identified as eulogising the spirituality and artistry that the Victorians considered characteristics of the ‘feminine’ (i.e. ‘irrational’) Celt. Pdraig Pearse put the distinctiveness of the Gael down to ‘his’ eschewal of the spade, loom and sword to recover idealism and rejuvenate the world’s literature.⁵ Thus re-cycled, the ‘feminine’ tendencies of the Celt could scarcely be more exalted. Dublin cartoonists also created the idealised figure of handsome Pat the Irishman; and the visual culture of late nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalism also had its female personification of Ireland in the lovely, lily-white ‘Erin’.

Back to the anti-Semitic cartoon, and the idealised ‘Irish’ family could be said to consist of a match between Pat and Erin, in young parenthood. The cartoon collapses political identity into an ethnic and racial identity of white, sedentary, Catholic, and these are composites of ‘Irish national identity’ embodied by the idealised family with its prescribed gender roles. But when adopted by the stereotyped Jews, signs of Irishness and nationalist aspiration wear like purloined clothing. The two women, the Irish one a maternal beauty, the Jewish caricature an oaf sporting an over-sized Tara brooch, also carry particular meanings. If each of the little units to which they are attached symbolises an ethnic or ‘racial’ collective, the women are structured in opposition to one another within overarching patriarchal economies, in this symbolic scene of competition. The sentiment conveyed in the cartoon is that the Jewish woman, unnaturally non-maternal and lurking in the shop doorway as if on the ominous threshold between masculinity and femininity, stakes a risible claim to the national identity of the idealised Irish woman. While both are feminine figures, our Jewish and Irish women appear irreconcilably cleaved from one another by their ‘racial’ and/as national difference. The image hints at the over-determination of ‘Irish womanhood’ as reproducer of the national stock in the 1937 Constitution of Ireland some years later—which both marginalises women as citizens, while placing them in



hegemonic positions over the State’s ‘others’, its minorities within and its ‘aliens’ without. In the cartoon, one woman’s national qualifier as ‘Irish’ determines her idealised gender identity, while the Jewish woman’s grotesque difference serves to further define what ‘Irish womanhood’ is.

Articulating its concerns about national identity through overlapping ideological concepts of nation, ‘race’ and gender, this cartoon puts me in mind of the pivotal role that the ‘non-national’ (read ‘non-white’) woman played in much more recent attempts to define Irish belonging—Ireland’s referendum on citizenship in June 2004. At the time of its announcement, the government claimed that pregnant ‘non-national’ women are travelling to Ireland solely to give birth to a child that will have a right to Irish citizenship. Since 1921, anyone born in Ireland has been entitled to Irish citizenship on the grounds of ‘*jus soli*’, whereby nationality is determined by one’s place of birth (the traditional Republican form common to over 40 countries). Without any corroborating statistics, the government alleged that pregnant ‘non-national’ women are over-stretching the resources of Dublin’s maternity hospitals. Despite that accounts of besieged maternity wards were fictional, this misogynistic spectre of the unregulated ‘non-national’ maternal body must surely have proved a persuasive cipher of otherness unfettered, for many of the 79% who voted to alter the basis of Irish citizenship from *jus soli*—determined by place of birth—to *jus sanguinis*—transmitted through bloodline. The targets of the referendum were Africans, Asians and Eastern Europeans—the subjects of variable processes of racialisation, against whom the Irish electorate identified themselves differentially as a white, settled majority. This whiteness remains as historically artificial a construct as ever despite its assumption as simply the Irish norm. And as James Baldwin wrote, “as long as you think you are white, there’s no hope for you”, emphasising ‘white’ as a dominating political category, but nonetheless as negotiable and constructed, rather than naturally occurring.⁶

A few days after the results of the referendum were announced, the government chief whip Mary Hanafin reasoned that having one Irish emigrant grandparent affords innumerable Americans a ‘tie’ to Ireland, and therefore an unassailable right to citizenship. Still reeling from the results of the referendum, I was struck by her affirmation of an inconceivably vast diaspora, in the wake of a racist and exclusionary outcome that threatens many in Ireland with deportation. Yet coincidentally, very different thinkers to Hanafin have stressed trans-national links with Irish emigrants, but as a means of thinking Ireland in more plural and inclusive ways. In *Postnationalist Ireland*, Richard Kearney suggests that the nation be re-thought as a “migrant nation [...] the nation as an extended family”, to embrace the millions worldwide who claim Irish descent.⁷ The ‘migrant nation’ is one of the reformulations of ‘Ireland’ he proposes as an alternative to nationalism and its assemblages of race, language, history and religion into a homogenous and exclusionary form of identity. Seeking a motif for the ‘migrant nation’ in Irish culture, Kearney excavates the ancient mythical location known as the ‘fifth province’. Whereas the

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island of Ireland is conceived of as four provinces, in the Irish language the term ‘province’ itself means a fivefold division— an idea thus “as old as Ireland itself”.⁸ ‘Ireland’ is therefore always a question of thinking ‘otherwise’. The ‘migrant nation’ he suggests is a conceptual network of relations that extends from local communities in Ireland to emigrant lives beyond the national territory—that might offer up “different racial confections as well”.⁹ And there lies the blind-spot: while Kearney has identified ‘race’ within nationalism’s toolbox of exclusionary concepts, he also suggests that racial difference lies out there beyond the national shores.¹⁰

Identifying herself as a black Irish woman, Philomena Mullen finds the commonplace, hateful comments in the media about black and Asian immigrants evoke all too familiar feelings of being unwanted in her place of origin, despite it being a country that readily “claims over forty million people of Irish descent worldwide”.¹¹ It seems that symbolic generosity can be boundless when it comes to extending the hand of friendship to Irish-descended emigrants (although I wonder if Mary Hanafin would feel as open towards the ‘Black Irish’ of Montserrat as to the powerful, white-identified Irish American bloc), but vanishes with any attempt to refigure Ireland as an immigrant nation.

Here’s a recent story of Ireland being thought ‘otherwise’, although probably not in the sense Kearney intends. Shortly before the electorate cast their votes in the citizenship referendum, my friend answered an advert looking for extras for a film that was being shot in Dublin. The advert was specific in the type of extras it sought—they had to be ‘ethnic’ (read ‘non-white’), and the casting was for a film set in New York. So the film-maker's intention was to cluster some of Dublin’s non-white faces into Stephen’s Green or wherever, and—hey presto—transform it into multi-racial ‘New York’! During the audition, the casting agent asked the extras if they all lived in Dublin. “That depends on the referendum” was one wry response. Viewed from an oblique angle, this vignette is more than an account of how a fictitious movie world is manufactured. This imaginary transportation of some of Dublin’s ‘ethnics’ into the urban spaces of ‘New York’, has resonances with the displacement (to anywhere but the emerald isle) of non-whites from dominant accounts of Ireland.

Ireland’s ‘imagined community’ (to repeat Benedict Anderson’s well known term; “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”) has, as the anti-Semitic cartoon

indicates, its long-standing racialised others who’ve been constituted as an abnormal and troubling presence within the spaces of nation, and fetishised into an intensely visible spectacle by the media. Otherness has also long since been constructed through symbolic forms in Irish culture. From the early

nineteenth century, the white-filtered, stereotypical images of ‘blackness’ performed by whites in minstrel shows were hugely popular on the Irish stage. So much so, that in his study of minstrelsy in Ireland between 1830-1860, Douglas C. Riach contends that “... the cause of the Negro in America suffered the failure of the abolitionists in Ireland to condemn as wholly inaccurate the image of the Negro most often presented on the Irish stage, and carried to America in the minds of countless Irish emigrants”.¹² So with a nod to Noel Ignatief, we can ask did the Irish really have to wait until they got to America to ‘become white’ by differentiating themselves from ‘non-

whiteness’? Nineteenth century minstrel shows, with their derogatory stereotypes of ‘blackness’ prevailed into the twentieth century and shaped the emergent Hollywood film industry.¹³ The most famous minstrel film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), a big hit in Ireland, features Al Jolson’s journey in blackface from Jewish immigrant to white American and repeats the journey of earlier Irish emigrants whom blackface carried across the cultural borderland into whiteness.¹⁴

The Jazz Singer, as Susan Gubar observes, features very little actual jazz. Nonetheless, jazz was certainly prominent enough on the cultural landscape to yield a potent signifier of otherness in the Irish Free State. It was viewed as ‘African’, and the Catholic church denounced jazz as a debauched form that threatened sexual morality and exercised a “denationalizing” influence on young people.¹⁵ In the 1920s and 1930s, the Irish provincial press, as Louise Ryan shows, widely condemned jazz and modern dancing—its ‘savage’ and ‘uncivilized’ partner in crime. *The Limerick Leader* decried these as “apish and heathenish inventions”; while the Limerick Gaelic Athletic Association warned “African dances have come to the country of late”.¹⁶ The Gaelic League launched its anti-jazz campaign in 1934 and decried the “anti-national” behaviour of politicians such as the Minister of Finance, who had allowed jazz to be played on Radio Eireann and was therefore guilty of “selling the musical soul of the nation”. Some County Councils adopted resolutions that condemned jazz, with District Justices warning of the dangers of immoral “nigger music”.¹⁷ The realm of this impiety was the unregulated dance, where the sexes could mingle to the ‘African’ rhythms of jazz. In 1935, the Public Dance Halls Act was passed, which made dances subject to the sanction of the clergy, police and judiciary. That women were deemed in need of policing against the depredations of jazz-playing dance halls indicates how discourses of ‘race’, ‘nation’ and ‘woman’ have interwoven to fabricate ‘Irish womanhood’ as a site of whiteness invested with the function of boundary marker, and therefore in need of policing.

On the subject of jazz in the early decades of the twentieth century, there’s another cartoon to turn to, published in 1922 in *The Leader* (thanks to Moynagh Sullivan for telling me about this image). It features quite a fetching white Irishman on the shores of the nation, armed and purposeful with a sweeping brush.¹⁸ “Some Work Before Us” is the cartoon’s title, connoting the labour needed if the ‘Soul of Ireland’ is to be recouped. Our well-heeled protagonist throws himself into the task, briskly sweeping a stereotyped, grinning black musician, an equally merry white English music hall comedian, “dirty Press”, “Jazz dance music” and “English novels”, into the sea to return to where they came from. The stereotyped black performer ties in with the concerns that abounded over the ‘pagan’ power of jazz and hints at other symbolic forms of ‘blackness’. In this cartoon, Ireland’s whiteness results from staving off ‘foreign’ influences symbolised by figures of popular entertainment, and their whiff of promiscuous interracial identifications and mixing in the cultural spaces of the hoi polloi.

The alarm that jazz fans sounded in the nascent Irish state was down to their cross-racial identifications and symbolic traversals of nation as ‘race’. They showed how fragile the bindings of ‘race’ really are, despite how much is invested in its belief and in racial difference. They also had the potential to trouble the notion that ‘white’ is somehow just what Irish people naturally are, and to expose it as a jealously maintained construct, hitched to the logic of domination.

Notes

- 1: Bill Rolston (1999) ‘Are the Irish Black?’ *Race and Class*, vol. 41, no. 1-2, p.95.
- 2: Rolston, p.102.

- 3: This cartoon is reproduced in Dermot Keogh (1998) *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Cork: Cork University Press), p.55.
- 4: Steve Garner (2004) *Racism in the Irish Experience* (London: Pluto) p.31. See Colin Graham’s review of Garner in *Variant* 20, Summer 2004 (www.variant.org.uk).
- 5 : Kavita Philip (2002) ‘Race, Class and the Imperial Politics of Ethnography in India, Ireland and London, 1850-1910’, *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 297-299.
- 6 : James Baldwin, quoted in Alastair Bonnett (2000) ‘Constructions of Whiteness in European and American Anti-Racism’, in Torres, Rodolfo D.; Miron, Louis F; and Inda, Jonathan Xavier, eds., *Race, Identity and Citizenship: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell), p.213.
- 7 : Richard Kearney (1997) *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture and Philosophy* (London: Routledge), p.9.
- 8 : Kearney, p.100.
- 9 : Kearney, p.5.

10: *Editor’s Note*: It may be interesting to mention here the ways in which Kearney’s ‘other Ireland’ prefigured certain changes in the *constitution* of Ireland (in both senses of that word). Following the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution (in which had resided the territorial claim to Northern Ireland) were amended so that the territory of the state was described *aspirationally*, defined in terms that do not *yet* exist or apply, as (being in) a state of incompleteness (perhaps this lies behind Bertie Ahern’s recent claim to live ‘in the future’). The extra-territorial link with “people of Irish ancestry” was recognised, but over and above this the “birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland...to be part of the Irish Nation” was affirmed. In 1998, then, *jus soli* was made concrete, while at the same time the strictly territorial definition of the state was subjected to a degree of creative ambiguity. As Chan points out, the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act of 2004 has replaced *jus soli* with *jus sanguinis*, and appears to privilege the notional ‘inalienable birthright’ of “people of Irish ancestry” over any ‘rights’ of the ‘Irish-born child’ (a particularly vile and spurious neologism, coined in the run-up to the referendum in order to establish some kind of innate ‘difference’ between the children of immigrants and those of the ‘real’—white—Irish. The question we should ask is whether the current situation is a *reversal* or a *continuation* of the trend begun in 1998, with the territorial redefinition of the state.

- 11: Philomena Mullen (1999) ‘On Being Black, Irish and a Woman’, *Women’s Studies Review* 6, p.45.
- 12: Douglas Riach (1973) ‘Blacks and Blackface on the Irish Stage, 1830-60’, *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, p.241.
- 13: Susan Gubar (1997) *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press), p.55.
- 14: Michael Rogin (1994) “‘Democracy and Burnt Cork’: The End of Blackface and the Beginning of Civil Rights’, *Representations* 46, p.2.
- 15: Louise Ryan (2002) *Gender, Identity and the Irish Press, 1922-1937: Embodying the Nation* (Lewiston, Queeston & Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press), p.50. Myrtle Hill (2003) *Women in Ireland. A Century of Change* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press), p.106.
- 16: Ryan, p.183.
- 17: Jim Smyth (1993) ‘Dancing, Depravity and All That Jazz: The Public Dancehalls Act of 1935’, *History Ireland*, Summer, p.54.
- 18: Paul Delany (2003) ‘D.P. Moran and The Leader: Writing an Irish Ireland Through Partition’, *Eire-Ireland*, no. 38.

Thanks to Maria Azambuja for the account of the casting session for ‘ethnic’ extras in Dublin.

Suzanna Chan is a Research Associate in Feminist Art Theory at the University of Ulster.

