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"Other People's Diasporas": Negotiating Race in Contemporary Irish and Irish American Culture
by Sinéad Moynihan
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013.
242 pp. ISBN 978-0-8156-3310-5

Reviewer: **Kathleen Vejvoda**

This study of literary and cultural representations of race and immigration in contemporary Ireland focuses on encounters between white Irish and black subjects, exploring the uses and limits of cross-racial sympathy in a wide range of works from 1998 through 2008, including fiction by Joseph O'Connor, Roddy Doyle, Sinéad Moriarty, and Emma Donoghue; drama by Ronan Noone and Donal O'Kelly; comedic performances by Des Bishop; and the films *The Nephew* (Eugene Brady 1998) and *In America* (Jim Sheridan 2002). Moynihan's central argument is that these texts tend to set African immigration to Ireland against the backdrop of Irish emigration to the United States – a juxtaposition that often reinforces white privilege. A major strength of the study is its attention to the complexity of these racial interactions and the author's expertise in both Irish and American studies.

What impact has the new multiracial, multicultural Ireland had on *white* Irish and Irish-American literature and culture? Sinéad Moynihan poses this question, seeking to fill a gap in studies of race and immigration in Ireland since the Celtic Tiger, which, with the exception of Zélie Asava's *The Black Irish Onscreen* [reviewed in this volume] are mainly sociological. Examining fiction, plays, television shows, and films that foreground, in particular, "white Irish interaction with black subjects" (8), Moynihan argues that Irish culture has tended to compare the experience of African immigrants to Ireland since the 1990s with narratives of Irish emigration to the United States – both in the context of the Famine and subsequently. She examines the ethics of such juxtapositions, interrogating the claims and uses of "cross-racial sympathy" in a wide variety of literary and cultural texts. She looks at the ways in which many of these texts imply the "historical-duty argument": the claim that because of their history and continued experience of emigration, the Irish should welcome immigrants to Ireland. But in most of her readings, she finds such parallels between white Irish and black subjects to be problematic for failing to recognize fully the privileges of whiteness.

In her introduction, she lays out what is at stake in her project: nothing less than "the status of postcolonialism as the dominant theoretical framework in Irish Studies" (14). Her theoretical approach, she says, "pits favored positions from Irish studies (postcolonialism) and American studies (critical race studies) against one another"(14). Whereas postcolonial critics have sought to retrieve a history of connections and cooperation between the Irish and other colonized peoples, Diane Negra and the contributors to her 2006 collection *The Irish in Us* argue that Irish and Irish American invocations of a history of oppression serve to cloak their complicity with white privilege. Though she says she sympathizes with both positions, Moynihan clearly and most consistently aligns herself with Negra's approach.

Chapter One focuses on the representation of Famine Irish and nineteenth-century African

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diasporic subjects in Joseph O'Connor's historical novels *Star of the Sea* (2002) and *Redemption Falls* (2007), examining the ship as a space of transnational exchange. Drawing on historical documents and personages, these novels "revea[l] the complexities of the relationship that existed between the Irish and African Americans" (47), prompting Irish readers to be aware of the plight of contemporary African immigrants. She presents O'Connor as an example of an artist who "favor[s] … transnational over national identity" and who can do justice to the history of Irish-black encounters (59, 60).

Roddy Doyle's short story collection *The Deportees* (2007), the focus of Chapter Two, is a more slippery matter. These stories "emphasiz[e] the struggles faced by immigrants and non white people in contemporary Ireland – a Polish nanny, a mixed-race student, a Rwandan schoolboy – as well as the reactions of white, Irish-born people to their arrival" (72). Moynihan argues that *The Deportees* presents the same interpretive problems as Doyle's other fiction in its habitual "tension between irony and sincerity"(82). In "Home to Harlem," Declan, a mixed-race Irish student, goes to New York to see the birthplace of his African-American grandfather, a narrative that complicates the trope of the roots journey. While Declan romanticizes his African American roots, he is subjected to Irish stereotypes during his tense conversation with his female African-American thesis advisor. When he meets an American woman, he ends up performing an "essentialized" Irishness. One of the most interesting aspects of Moynihan's study, as in Negra's collection, is this analysis of Irishness as performance.

Two plays – Ronan Noone's *The Blowin of Baile Gall* (2002) and Donal O'Kelly's *The Cambria* (2005) – are the focus of Chapter Three. Both works, she argues, address issues of cross-racial sympathy and immigration to contemporary Ireland. She is more critical of Noone's play than of any other text she discusses, stopping just short of calling it racist. In contrast, she finds much to admire in *The Cambria*, which depicts the visit of African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass to Ireland in 1845. Her comparison of Douglass with another freed slave – St. Patrick – is startlingly original. But Moynihan is also wary of the ways in which texts such as *The Cambria* deploy the historical-duty argument and probes more troubling aspects of the play such as O'Kelly's decision to play Douglass himself, "in whiteface" (130). Moreover, comparing the cross-racial sympathy in O'Kelly's play to studies of white readers' responses to contemporary African-American historical fiction, Moynihan perceptively asks how radical such "retrospective sympathy" can really be (132). She concludes that "[e]ven in the service of building a tradition of Irish antiracism, … the appeal to cross-racial sympathy is a strategy that poses all sorts of representational problems" (132).

In Chapter Four, Moynihan scrutinizes the persona of popular comedian Des Bishop, "a white Irish American from Queens, New York", which he trumpets as "'the most culturally diverse place on the planet'" (134). Because of his childhood in Queens, "Bishop presents himself as possessing the expertise to comment on Ireland's newfound multiculturalism" (147). Among other performances, Moynihan examines his RTÉ reality television show *In the Name of the Fada* (2008), in which he goes to live for a year in the Connemara Gaeltacht to learn Irish. Again here she elucidates the performative aspects of Irishness – most notably language and accent – foregrounding moments in which non white, non-Irish subjects learn to perform this Irishness, for example when Bishop meets a Korean-American man who has learned Irish from a CD. When Bishop rhapsodizes about feeling a "genetic connection" to the Irish language, she faults him for being unwilling or unable to perform the radical relinquishment of a sense of stable Irishness that would facilitate alternative, non white ways of "being Irish" or of participating in Irish culture (160-61). But if this sense of stable Irishness is always reducible to whiteness and must be relinquished as incongruous with inclusivity, as Moynihan suggests, is there a place for white Irish people's engagement with traditional Irish culture in a

multicultural Ireland, or does it inevitably bolster white power and privilege?

My main criticism of this study, however – admittedly perhaps unfair, since Moynihan is focusing on race – is that her attention to the importance of class and gender is uneven. While the Bishop chapter is absorbing in many ways, one senses a reluctance to draw out the implications of her claims about Bishop's self-construction as "a canny critic of Irish racism" (135). Here I am reminded of Debbie Ging's critique in *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* (2012) of the cultural productions of two other brash sons of Irish immigrants (in this case to London), Martin and John Michael McDonagh. Moynihan's reading of Bishop's persona could benefit from a similar attention to masculinity and a development of her points about class as well as race. While she acknowledges Bishop's privileged upbringing (the mere fact that his parents could move back to Ireland so that he could attend boarding school), and while she concludes (drawing on Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford's phraseology) that "he is more 'unlike' than 'like' recent immigrants to Ireland", it is hard to determine what we should take away from her critique about Bishop's ethical self-positioning. Her arguments throughout about white privilege at times work against her reading of Bishop: for example, her claim that returning Irish emigrants "wield a double moral power" (136) is unconvincing when she applies it to him, though it makes sense in relation to the mixed-race character of Chad Egan-Washington in *The Nephew*.

In Chapter Five, she incorporates discussions of gender and sexuality in her analysis of race in the films *The Nephew* and *In America*. Citing my argument (2007) that these films are "attempts to come to terms with the role of race in Ireland's – rather than in America's – future", Moynihan argues instead for "the *inextricability* of the Irish from the American contexts of the films" (her emphasis). She interprets Chad, the mixed-race returned Irish American in *The Nephew*, as a "tragic mulatto", an American archetype (170). This chapter is among the strongest, not least because of its compelling argument about the cultural importance of 70s rock star Phil Lynott, who "has become liberal shorthand for the possibilities offered by a multicultural Ireland" (178).She argues that "[i]n *The Nephew*, Chad comes to embody the same crossings and identities – transatlantic, racial, musical – as Lynott" (177). Drawing on Garner and others, she claims that the Thin Lizzy frontman (like Irish-Nigerian footballer Paul McGrath) has been represented in popular culture as an Irish version of the tragic mulatto. She is quick to recognize the problems with this representation and to point out the exceptionalism associated with mixed-race celebrities such as Lynott and McGrath. She quotes Garner's assertion that "'[t]he experiences of not-so-famous black Irish people have been of lifelong rejection and marginalization'" (179).

Given Moynihan's usually thorough attention to Irish media and popular culture in situating her arguments, one surprising omission here is Christine Buckley, who merits at least a reference. Born in the mid-1940s, Buckley (who died in March 2014) was the mixed-race daughter of a married Irish woman and a Nigerian medical student; she was abandoned by her parents and raised by nuns at an industrial school, where she suffered abuse over many years. While she was not a cultural icon like Lynott, she did become a well-known advocate for survivors of clerical abuse, appearing repeatedly in the Irish media throughout the 2000s. Especially when one takes into account the gendering of the tragic mulatto/a, it would be fascinating to consider whether or not Buckley too – who found solidarity with white survivors of clerical abuse, including men such as Michael O'Brien – has been cast according to this archetype.

In the Epilogue ("The Departees?"), Moynihan compares Roddy Doyle's short story (later adapted into a play) "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" (2000) with Sinéad Moriarty's novel *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (2008), critiquing the ways in which both texts ultimately nullify Irish patriarchal fears not only about interracial relationships, but also about guest workers in Ireland. In terms of public policy, Moynihan is critical throughout her study of the 2004 constitutional amendment that, while supporting

citizenship rights for diasporic subjects, denied automatic citizenship to those born in Ireland. Here she extends this critique to Ireland's work-permit system, arguing that Doyle's story, in which the African immigrant "leaves of his own accord," is "ultimately reassuring for white Irish readers" (196).

Her discussions of Moriarty and of Emma Donoghue's novel *Landing* (2007) are especially welcome, given that the texts she discusses throughout are mostly by men and about men. In *Landing*, she examines the politics of race, gender, class, and emigration/immigration, tracing the failure of any kind of sympathy on the part of Donoghue's economically privileged, mixed-race Irish character Síle, the daughter of an Indian mother and an Irish father: "Síle's Narcissism firms the concerns I have expressed throughout this book regarding the potential of mixed-race subjects to challenge Irish whiteness. Even though Síle is a non white, mixed-race Irish subject, she does not destabilize white Irish norms" (204).Of course, one might take some solace in the fact that we can have a protagonist in an Irish novel who is not only mixed-race but also flawed (like any human being), but Moynihan suggests that this character lacks other dimensions. She closes by imagining Roddy Doyle writing a new short story ("The Departees") in which "*both* white Irish-born and non-Irish subjects" – and presumably non white Irish subjects?– "leave Ireland to seek employment elsewhere" (209). It's only a matter of time.

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