

# “Marooned Men in Foreign Cities”: Encounters with the Other in Dermot Bolger’s Ballymun Trilogy

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## Introduction

In *The Townlands of Brazil*, the second play in Dermot Bolger’s Ballymun Trilogy, multiculturalism in Ireland is explored by focusing on the small community of Ballymun, in Dublin city. The first act takes place in the 1960s and explores the fate of an unmarried pregnant woman, Eileen, who escapes having to give up her baby for adoption by fleeing to England. Her experience of being an emigrant in a foreign city echoes that of her baby’s father, Michael. Eileen and he met and conceived their child while he was at home in Ireland on holiday from his job in England. In act two, the play jumps forward in time to the ‘00s. Ballymun is changing, undergoing regeneration, and its population has changed too. In this act, the main characters are migrant workers who are building lives for themselves in Ballymun. The first and second acts echo each other in many ways in terms of story, language and imagery, and physical movement, and by having the same actors play Irish characters in the first act and immigrant characters in the second. In these ways, Bolger encourages the audience to view the present multiculturalism of Ireland through the long history of Irish emigration.

This middle play in the trilogy is book-ended by plays that also analyse encounters with the other. The first play, *From These Green Heights*, explores the lives of the original inhabitants of the tower block of Ballymun, who were initially strangers in the newly built suburb and feared by the local residents. The final play, *The Consequences of Lightning*, based around the death and funeral of the first inhabitant of the tower blocks of Ballymun, examines how the community can deal with its past, its identity as ‘other’ in contemporary Dublin as an area of socio-economic disadvantage, and its present and future regeneration. By situating the encounter with the ethnic other in *The Townlands of Brazil* in the context of local definitions of and encounters with the other, Bolger presents the experience of ‘marooned men in foreign cities’ as one with which all can empathise. Despite the apparent careful construction of the Ballymun plays as a trilogy, they were not initially envisioned as such and evolved organically. Bolger states that ‘When I wrote *From These Green Heights*, I didn’t know it was a trilogy, because it was just a play. And then it was actually very successful and Axis asked me to do a trilogy. But if I was writing a trilogy, I would have said, I’ll make that one decade. But I’d already told everything about Ballymun so the only way I could figure to do it was to write something that was a sequel and a pre-sequel ... Ballymun before the towers were built and Ballymun after the towers had been pulled down’ (Murphy and Bolger 2008, 11). *Townlands* is both prequel and sequel to *From These Green Heights*. All of the plays were initially staged in the Axis Arts Centre in Ballymun to a primarily local audience. The second play was conceived of as a challenge to the audience, who, in the first play, had seen their story depicted. ‘We’ve given the Ballymun people their Ballymun play and it’s their lives and it’s their marches ... and their setting up of the Credit Union and their thing and it’s not sensational ... let’s give them something totally different. Let’s give them something that won’t be so good. Because there is a certain ... fear and suspicion. And there’s also curiosity. I thought it would be interesting to give them a play where nobody’s from Ireland, not to mind from Ballymun and they responded to that really, really well’ (Murphy and Bolger 2008, 12).

Bolger's play presents a challenge not only to the residents of Ballymun but also to Irish society, in the way that it asks its audience to re-imagine their personal and national histories in new historical, social and cultural frameworks.

The story of Act One in *The Townlands of Brazil* goes back before the time span of the first play in the trilogy, *From These Green Heights*, before the towers were built and the first tenants arrived and settled in. When Eileen is growing up in Ballymun, and when she leaves at eighteen for England, Ballymun is 'only a scatter of cottages hugging the back road to Swords with cross-eyed young heifers staring over the hedges'. (Bolger 2010, 110) By act two, it has become an urban community, associated with socio-economic disadvantage, and is in the middle of a regeneration project that will see the infamous tower blocks which defined its landscape for so long pulled down. This rapid change from a rural community to an urban one is something that Bolger experienced himself growing up nearby Finglas. He states that "'my childhood in Finglas was a very rural childhood. All my neighbours kept hens ... looking from my back window I could see a sward of greenery and countryside". It was, of course, "changing hugely all the time" as next to his own row "there were corporation houses being built and people being brought out from the city – thousands of people starting again.'" (Gray and Bolger 1991, 7) Bolger's knowledge of and affinity with the community of Ballymun depicted in the trilogy is perhaps why he was chosen to read at real-life demolition of one of the towers. He read 'Ballymun Incantation' which appears at the start of the trilogy's first play *From These Green Heights*.

The rural community of Ballymun in the 1960s is an impossible place for an unmarried mother to live. For Eileen, a life in England offers an escape route that will enable her to mother her unborn child. In Ireland, the options offered to her are to work in a Magdalen laundry and give up her baby for adoption, or work as a servant for employers who take in unwed mothers as part of a charity organised by a priest. In this case too, her baby would have to be given up for adoption. The option to live and work as a single mother in Ireland in 1963 does not seem to be available to Eileen because of the stigma and shame that would be attached to her family, herself and her child. The dominant attitude towards her pregnancy is indicated by the fact that locals painted the word 'slut' on the road outside Eileen's family home. Her father paints over the graffiti but despite his efforts 'a white mark was left on the tar like a public stain on his soul.' (Bolger 2010, 112) At the end of the play, when Eileen's name is associated with another piece of graffiti, it is a respectful tribute left by her son on the wall of a soon to be demolished Ballymun tower. This is certainly not the first time that Bolger has dealt dramatically with the social oppression of women in Irish society. In *The Holy Ground* for example, Mireia Aragay points out that 'Bolger effects a deconstruction of the submissive, suffering, maternal Irish woman.' (1997, 61) Eileen does suffer for her motherhood, but she is certainly not submissive, taking matters into her own hands and leaving the country when the country will not allow her to live the life wishes with her child. Act two mirrors the 'slut' graffiti when Anna and Monika look out the window and see something painted on the road. Monika thinks that it probably says 'Poles go home.' (Bolger 2010, 155) Bolger shows us that intolerance to difference persists despite the social and economic advances made by the community and country. At the start of act two, Monika relates the story of how she came to Ballymun. Her lover Thomas was working in Ireland and died in a car crash when she was approximately five months pregnant with their child, the same stage that Eileen was at with her pregnancy when her lover died working abroad. Unlike Eileen, she has emigrated without her child, who is in the care of her father's parents, supported by the money she sends back from Ireland.

For Eileen's lover Michael, his adopted city of Liverpool also offers an opportunity for escape. While she is escaping social condemnation and repressive state and religious attitudes to unmarried mothers, Michael is escaping more mundane and localised socio-economic discrimination. He comes from a poor family and wants to make a change for himself and his future children. If he stays in Ireland 'they'll always simply be another bunch of Bradys reared in a labourer's cabin in the townland of Brazil.' (Bolger 2010, 126) In Liverpool however, 'I'm judged on my hands alone and not on who my people were. I've no history in Liverpool. I'm free to become whoever I want to be.' (Bolger 2010, 126) Liverpool liberates him from being defined by his family, and offers opportunity for social and economic advancement that would be impossible in Ireland. Oscar, a Turkish character in act two, relates how Monika's lover Michael felt the same way: 'In Poland, he would always be his father's son. But here he was simply himself, no better or worse than any other man.' (Bolger 2010, 173)

When Michael embarks on a relationship with Eileen, an incident that occurred in the family history of each provides an example of how difficult it is to break out of prejudices associated with one's family. During the civil war, Michael's uncle was beaten to death after locals found out that he intended to join the newly formed free state police. Eileen's uncle was one of those involved in the attack. Mirroring this family feud, in act two, Monika relates how her father and Thomas' father 'stood together during the workers' strike of 1976' but with the onset of martial law, she suspects that Thomas' father betrayed hers. Emigration provides an opportunity to break away from being defined by these family histories in the 60s and the 00s.

In act two, Anna, Oscar, Matthew and Monika all experience the antipathy of some Irish towards them. For some characters, such as Anna, this antipathy turns into virulent racism. Rather than exploring racism as a twenty-first century phenomenon, brought about by the unprecedented immigrant population of the Celtic Tiger, Bolger shows that fear of the other is an age-old problem that merely takes different forms in shifting socio-cultural situations. In act one, Eileen's mother is anxious about the new tower blocks that are planned, and the people from inner city Dublin who will be moving out to Ballymun: 'I've nothing against Dubliners, a few at a time ... but we'll be swamped by outsiders...They'll never belong in Ballymun.' (Bolger 2010, 114) For Eileen's father, change brings with the opportunity for positive change, an attitude that is foregrounded at the end of the play, and he states 'maybe the newcomers won't be as judgemental.' (Bolger 2010, 114) However, Bolger shows that even those who fear strangers the most like Eileen's mother could have been a stranger in a strange land themselves. For Eileen's mother, at nineteen, all her older siblings had emigrated and she herself had a ticket purchased for Boston when her husband proposed and she remained in Ireland to marry instead. Eileen's mother is the character who is most conservative in her views, most fearful of the other, most determined that Eileen must leave when she becomes pregnant. Bolger shows that she too could have been an emigrant like Eileen, Michael and the European characters of act two, had her life taken a slightly different turn. The marriage proposal was put to Eileen's grandfather through a matchmaker, who argued that it should be accepted on the basis that 'if your daughter takes the boat to Boston, then God knows what class of a Chinaman or black fellow she could end up marrying'. (Bolger 2010, 120) Bolger shows that the discrimination towards foreign races that is seen in act two in 2006 was present in 1960s when Eileen leaves Ireland, in the 1940s when her mother stays, and, we can imagine, throughout the social history of the country.

Eileen's mother's attitude towards her pregnancy seems excessively harsh. However, in act one, through Bolger's fluid use of time, we see Eileen as a small child talking to her mother, who tells Eileen about her adolescence, her years of mothering, and her fears that the bright lights of the city will lure all her children away to emigrate. Bolger is skilled at framing situations and characters within contexts that change how the audience evaluate their actions. When Eileen's mother unleashes her vitriol on her daughter when she discovers that she is pregnant, the audience understand that it comes from anger that she will now have to leave the country, when she so desperately wanted at least one of her children to stay. In a similar way, the entire first act frames the second act, and the first and third plays in the trilogy frame this one.

The unchanging nature of this fear of the other, regardless of whether the other is Irish or foreign, is also explored through the character of Carmel O'Rourke. She relates how she has inherited her mother's fear of those who were different from themselves, first the local girls, then the girls from the Ballymun towers and the suppliers. Now, amongst the multicultural mushroom pickers in her glasshouses 'I feel like I'm the true foreigner and the only words I can make out are my mother's, 'Watch them or they'll rob us blind.' (Bolger 2010, 179)

Bolger introduces this racism in act two with the race that is closest to home. Matthew's English accent attracts some insulting remarks when he comes to Ireland: 'Feck off, mister, back to where you belong. We bombed your sort out of Ireland.' (Bolger 2010, 151) However, the unconscious, unthinking racism seen in act two is just as offensive to the migrant workers. When a baby is reported missing, Carmel O'Rourke, Anna and Monika's boss on the mushroom farm, asks them 'If you are Catholics maybe you'll say a prayer that they find them both safe'. Anna's response when Carmel has left shows her anger at this remark: 'If you're Catholic? No, we sacrifice rats to the sun in Moldova.' (Bolger 2010, 160) The Irish attitude towards migrant workers is portrayed as devoid of the traditional Irish welcome. Oscar feels that the requirement for his labour fails to conceal resentment at his presence: 'This country only needs me until my shift ends. Once I put down my shovel, strangers think me a leech.' (Bolger 2010, 124) Anna concurs with this view, saying 'When the Irish have no more use for me, I'll be put on the first plane.' (Bolger 2010, 167) It is Anna who experiences the most powerful racist hatred, when she is followed by a group of girls, hastily assembled via text message, who physically intimidate her and chant 'foreign bitch.' (Bolger 2010, 177) Her response is to shoplift shampoos, the variety of scents and brands available to her a symbol of the prosperity she is desperately searching for, this prosperity the thing that is supposed to make her stay in Ireland and the racism she has to endure worthwhile.

The experiences of Irish emigrants to England in the first act are closely linked to those of the immigrants to Ireland in the second act. For both sets of characters, their status as economic migrants detaches them from their original home and hinders them from feeling at home in their adopted country. Eileen describes the emigrants who returned to Ireland on the 'builder's holiday', the first two weeks in August: 'Every year, you sensed that this place felt a little less like home for them. People looked forward to them coming home but felt an unspoken relief when they left again'. (Bolger 2010, 124) Oscar in act two is also caught between two countries, at home in neither. He has left behind two wives in Turkey, 'The one I left behind the first time I went away and the one I married when I tried to fit back in. Both said the same thing, packing my bag. You don't belong anymore.' (Bolger 2010, 172) Matthew's experience shows how this sense of dislocation can transfer to second generation emigrants too: 'I only felt truly English the day I flew into Dublin and saw how

Irish people viewed me as a foreigner. Before then, I thought I looked obviously Irish.’ (Bolger 2010, 187) Like Michael and Oscar, he is an outsider in both places. Bolger’s 1990 play, *In High Germany*, also explores the relationship between Ireland and Europe. As Damien Shortt suggests, in this play, he ‘offers evidence that the traditional modes for understanding and defining Irishness no longer resonate with the new, European Irish.’ (Shortt 2010, 123) In *The Townlands of Brazil* however, while he is dealing with the same axes of movement between Ireland and England and Ireland and Europe, he shows how Irish identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be understood and defined in relation to immigration as well as emigration – the experiences of those who have come to Ireland as well as those who have left.

The life of the emigrant, though it promises and often delivers social and economic opportunity, is associated with painful loneliness, both for the emigrants of the 60s and the 00s. This loneliness is sometimes alleviated by working excessively hard to accumulate money. Michael’s mother blames overwork for his death. She tells Eileen ‘It was money that killed him, working in a flooded trench. All autumn they say he worked like a man possessed’ (Bolger 2010, 135). In act two, Oscar tells Monica that her lover Thomas worked double shifts because he missed her so much, and the audience wonder if the same was true of Michael. Oscar himself has more than enough money, but is entirely without companionship. He states ‘After twenty-five years chasing work across Europe, I trust no-one.’ (Bolger 2010, 157) Oscar, like Michael, dies on a construction site, when he is looking for a missing baby at the end of act two. The female immigrants in this play work in the safer environment of a mushroom farm rather than a construction site, but the life of the migrant worker can be a precarious one for them too. Anna relates how her cousin Maria was the presumed victim of sex-trafficking and has not been heard from since she left home.

While loneliness is common for individuals, Bolger constantly points out that there is a vast shared experience amongst emigrants across decades and nations. When characters become aware of this, it offers them comfort, albeit temporarily. When Eileen leaves Ireland she says ‘I didn’t feel lonely because the ghosts of a thousand emigrants surrounded me, carrying suitcases and sacks, striding out in search of new lives.’ (Bolger 2010, 144). In the play’s overture and finale too, we see this sense of shared experience break down barriers between individuals in terms of time and geography, when the characters’ voices come together, finish each other’s sentences and create a unified narrative from the divergent characters, discussed below. In the context of a discussion on Bolger’s *In High Germany*, Aidan Arrowsmith argues that ‘In the twentieth-century negotiation of discourses of essentialism and anti-essentialism, counter-revivalism and revisionism, postmodernism and ‘post-nationalism’, ‘Irishness’ is discredited and seemingly discarded’. (2008, 177) *The Townlands of Brazil* refutes this argument, as the play does not discredit the idea of ‘Irishness’ but rather shows its elusive, ever-shifting, multi-faceted nature as it moves through the experiences of residents, immigrants, emigrants and second-generation emigrants.

Characters in this play often echo each other’s words and images, creating linguistic resonances or patterns that highlight the similarities within the characters’ stories. This is particularly true at the beginning and end of the play in which characters from different time periods and geographical locations within the story create an overture and finale to the play. I use these musical terms rather than prologue and epilogue which commonly apply to drama because the verbal echoes and patterns create a poetic musicality within these parts of the play. Speaking of his mother, Matthew states that ‘After the age of eighteen, she never felt able to return here. So, for her, the townlands

of Ballymun remain suspended in 1963.’ (Bolger 2010, 108) In the next monologue, Monika’s, she states that ‘the farther we go, the more home becomes frozen in our minds’ (Bolger 2010, 108), her experience echoing that of Eileen’s 40 years before. Monika’s monologue flows seamlessly from Matthew’s, her first line finishing his last sentence: the tower blocks of Ballymun, Matthew says, ‘are withering, their innards ground down into petals of asbestos by foreign workers to make space for a gleaming New Jerusalem ... [Monika] ... A wondrous chance to wash away the sins of the past, a new start for Ballymun.’ (Bolger 2010, 107-8) Underscoring the link between the first and second acts, when Monika and Matthew’s intersecting monologues introduce act two, they repeat some of their lines from the beginning of act one, alerting the audience to the fact that although this act is set 43 years later, the situations, characters and themes are similar.

The word and concept of Brazil is also used to link the first and second acts of the play. Eileen’s mother tells her about Brazil and Eileen assumes it is Brazil in South America. She is corrected however: it is ‘the townland of Brazil near Swords where people are too busy picking spuds to dance any fandangos.’ (Bolger 2010, 123) Swords is a village near Ballymun, and so the word Brazil functions to connect the local and knowable and the foreign and strange. Speaking in the context of the first play in the trilogy, *From These Green Heights*, Victor Merriman notes the importance of the local dimension of the play, stating that ‘in dialogue with the experiences of local people, cultural workers may generate prophetic narratives, enabling social visions alternative to those generated and distributed globally.’ (2005, 496). In this second play in the trilogy, *The Townlands of Brazil*, Bolger goes a step further and incorporates the local and global dimensions of Ballymun within the play. In act two, Monika gives the word Brazil another connotation, when she refers to ‘our Hy-Brazil of jobs and euros.’ (Bolger 2010, 181) Hy-Brazil is a mythical island, similar to Atlantis, of unknown location. It is purportedly a hospitable island of good fortune. The concept of Hy-Brazil links the local and international dimensions of Brazil in the play, over-riding both with a symbol of the common desire for prosperity, peace and happiness.

As is typical of Dermot Bolger’s style, *The Townlands of Brazil* requires minimalist staging. There is no attempt at realism with backdrop or props, Bolger preferring instead to allow the audience’s imagination create the physical world of the play. The stage directions at the beginning of act one specify only the following: ‘Lights rise on empty stage furnished only with a succession of boxes, which the cast may use to build certain shapes to create spaces’ (Bolger 2010, 107). The simplicity and versatility of these boxes, which can be constructed and deconstructed at will, has a symbolic as well as a practical function. Their changing structure in the play reverberates with the transience of the play’s characters, which move geographically in the story, from Moldova, Poland, Turkey and England to Ireland, and from Ireland to England. They may also relate to the lack of rootedness of the characters, often referred to in the dialogue. In this sense, the boxes can be seen as storage boxes, indicating movement without settling; impermanence and lack of a stable home base. The boxes also reflect the play’s flexible attitude towards time, in which we see characters from the past enter into the dialogue and action of the play without concern for verisimilitude. For example, in the ‘overture’ to act one, the stage directions tell us that Matthew looks at his mother Eileen, who, according to the story, he has not seen since he was a child.

In common with the first play in the trilogy, *From These Green Heights*, all the actors remain onstage for the duration of the play. Bolger specifies that as Eileen enters singing at the start of act one, ‘The rest of the cast enter during the song and spread out, standing as silent figures watching. They will

remain seated on the boxes to either side on the stage when not directly engaged in the action, functioning as a sort of internal audience' (Bolger 2010, 107). As with the boxes, there is a practical benefit to having all the actors onstage. It means that they can easily make brief verbal or physical interjections in the play without distracting from the main dialogue and action on stage with entrances and exits. He also uses the assembled cast for sound effects, such as when they count down from ten to one when Matthew is describing how he detonates buildings at the beginning of act two, or when they make the sound of Anna's alarm clock.

Having all the actors present on stage throughout the play also allows them to act as a type of Greek chorus, becoming the voice of the community at certain points in the play. In this sense, like the chorus of ancient Greek drama, they are partly the audience's representative onstage, and as such implicate the audience in the play's action. Moreover, because the audience look at these actors and see the Irish and immigrant characters they play as well as the anonymous chorus they represent, it suggests that any of the individual characters could be part of the judgemental community that persecutes the characters, narrowing the distance between the characters and the communities from which they feel alienated. Finally, the actors' continuous presence onstage gives the impression that the characters that they play are bearing silent witness to each other's stories; listening, observing and supporting in a way that they often will not or cannot do within the story itself. When Eileen speaks the long monologue of her mother's story in act one, we are told that 'The Cast shift boxes to clear a space around Eileen and gather behind her.' (Bolger 2010, 115) This is an instance where they are not there to be the voice of an antagonistic community but simply to listen supportively and, at one point, help Eileen to enact the story she tells, as they swing her around the stage when she is describing her mother at a dance.

Each actor in *The Townlands of Brazil* plays more than one character and usually, an actor plays an Irish character and an immigrant character. Eileen, the pregnant Irish girl who flees to England with her unborn child is played by the same actor who plays Anna, a Moldovan immigrant, in act two. The same actor plays the Irish Michael, Eileen's lover and Matthew, her son, a first generation emigrant. The actor who plays Eileen's father, a mild-mannered pensioner, also plays Oscar, a Turkish immigrant to Ireland, in act two. Eileen's mother, Michael's mother and Anna's mother are all played by the same actor. The part of Carmel O'Rourke, the owner of the mushroom farm, is paired with the part of her mother, Mrs. O'Rourke. Finally, the actor who plays Monika, the young Polish woman central to act two, plays Theresa too, a young woman who Eileen meets in act one, who is also planning to give up her baby for adoption. The web of relationships that Bolger creates between these characters is complex. Often, there are straightforward comparisons drawn between the two or more parts played by the same actor. At other times, the most striking parallels are between characters played by different actors.

All of the actors participate in the chorus, which functions to unite the characters from different countries and cultures, and show that they could all be part of a judgemental community in different circumstances and implicate the audience in the action, as outlined above. In act one for example, the cast as chorus chant 'no blacks, no dogs, no Irish' as Eileen travels towards Liverpool, reciting the infamous racial slur that Irish emigrants to England encountered. At the end of this act, when Eileen leaves the adoption centre, they shout 'Catch the slut before she steals God's child!' (Bolger 2010, 148) The fact that the actors playing the chorus are also the actors playing the Irish and immigrant characters means that the prejudice faced by Michael and Eileen, emigrants to England in the '60s, is

linked with the prejudice faced by immigrants to Ireland in the '00s, uniting the characters from all the nationalities represented in their shared understanding and experience of prejudice.

In Eileen, Matthew and Monika's 'overture' to act one, Matthew dons a hat and jacket, becoming the bus conductor that Eileen meets on her journey from Ballymun into Dublin city centre to go to the adoption agency. His accent changes from an English accent to a Dublin accent, suggesting the life he could have had, has his mother been able to stay in Ireland, instead of fleeing to England to avoid being coerced into giving her baby up for adoption. Matthew's memories of his mother later in the play show great love and affection for her and the four years they spent together before he was taken into foster care. However, the actor's rapid transition from Eileen's sympathetic son to a critical bus conductor shows how easily Matthew might have had a typically snide and superior attitude towards unmarried mothers had he not experienced the trials of single motherhood in his early life. The bus conductor makes several statements that imply he knows that Eileen is pregnant. When he discovers for example that she is travelling to the ferry for England, he states, 'The crossing can make girls feel quite sick in the early morning' (Bolger 2010, 110). He also comments on her unwed status, saying that he would have thought that if her fiancé sent the ferry fare, 'he'd have stumped up for an engagement ring too' (Bolger 2010, 111).

Sometimes multiple parts played by the same actor show the audience the common experience of seemingly disparate characters. The audience is aware of the old civil war tensions that exist between Eileen's family and Michael's family. Yet, the fact that her mother and his mother are played by the same actor alerts us to their shared sorrow at being the mothers of emigrant children. In act two, this same actor also plays Anna's mother, representing the loss of children to emigration that connects parents across national and cultural divides.

The most overt swap that one actor has to make between two characters occurs at the end of act two when the actor playing Anna removes her blonde wig and speaks as Eileen. It occurs when Michael is narrating the story of his short time with his mother, and how she resorted to prostitution in an effort to make money for herself and her son. Anna, speaking as Eileen, interposes a few lines into his narrative, representing his memories of his mother's voice. The fact that it is the character of Anna who speaks these lines draws the audience's attention to a parallel between Anna and Eileen. Anna has earlier suggested that prostitution would be the only way to make the kind of money in Moldova that she does in Ireland.

When a baby goes missing at the end of act two, it unites the characters of this act in shared concern: 'That night all Ballymun held our breath for that baby. Locals and foreign workers like ourselves.' (Bolger 2010, 182) The incident specifically links the experiences of the female characters of act two. It reminds Carmel O'Rourke of the 'local girls who disappeared years ago' (Bolger 2010, 182), girls like Eileen. The lost baby links obviously to Monika, who feels the pain of separation from her child who she left behind when she emigrated to Ireland. Monika's child's name is Teresa, the same name as the woman the Eileen met at the adoption clinic in act one. We discover that the baby resonates with Anna too, who reveals that she has had an abortion, after becoming pregnant by a man called Michael, the same name as Eileen's lover, who 'went away and never wrote.' (Bolger 2010, 182) Weaving this complex web of connections and intersections, between characters of disparate origin and experience, defeats the accusation that Bolger is simplistically revisionist in his attitude towards the nation. Writing of Bolger's earlier work, Liam Harte argues that 'from the rigid



referents of territory and the nation state, Bolger merely replaces an essentialising nationalism with an equally essentialising revisionism' (1997, 20). In contrast to this view, *The Townlands of Brazil* presents its audience with a nuanced, inclusive, and open perspective on the nation that is shown to have the potential to embrace otherness and difference.

The act of telling stories is seen to be enormously significant for the characters themselves, their relationships with each other, and their place in public memory. The isolation felt by many of the emigrant characters, combined with their underrepresentation in national histories, mean that telling their stories is essential to orientate themselves as individuals and to re-instate them in the story of the nation. For example, Matthew's mother Eileen seems to have been erased as far as official documents are concerned. He has been unable to find any trace of his mother, though he has been searching for about twenty years. In act one, Eileen herself is aware that the fate of unwed mothers who flee the country is to be erased from official public memory: 'I've joined the Ballymun girls who've disappeared from history'. (Bolger 2010, 112) Alone with her unborn child as the ferry sails further away from Dublin, Eileen must reiterate her own life story to remind herself of who she is; to locate herself when she feels as though her identity is slipping away: 'My name is Eileen Redmond. I was born in Ballymun on Whitsuntide, when the Holy Spirit descended...' (Bolger 2010, 148) Anna feels a similar sense of dislocation, saying 'Sometimes I feel that a gust of wind will sweep me away with nobody noticing.' (Bolger 2010, 169) At the end of the play, when Matthew writes his mother's name on the wall of the Ballymun tower block, it has a symbolic function. He is writing her into existence by telling a piece of her story in his graffiti. He is writing her name alongside the names of those who moved to Ballymun and grew up there, 'the Antos and Tomos and Jacintas' (Bolger 2010, 194) and reinstating her rightful place as part of the story and history of Ballymun. The names of Monika, Anna and Oscar are also written on the wall of the tower block before it is demolished. As Monika says to her daughter, 'It's a long story, Teresa, but we're going to be a part of it' (Bolger 2010, 195). In *The Townlands of Brazil*, these Irish and European characters from the 60s and the 00s literally become part of the story of Ballymun. The play has made them part of the fictional life associated with this place and its cultural history. The fact that the play was first staged in the Axis Arts Centre in Ballymun physically locates these fictional characters in this place, just as within the play, they strive to make a physical mark on the wall of the tower, albeit a transient one that will remain only until the towers are blown up. In the play's finale at the end of act two, the voices of the characters intermingle, spanning time and nationalities, taking up each other's phrases to create a unified narrative stream, expressing the commonalities of experience that Bolger has highlighted through language, imagery, character symmetry and story throughout the play:

Monika: Just wait till I fly home ...

Anna (as Eileen): And I'll tell you about when I kissed the only man I ever truly loved ...

Monika (looks at Matthew): And I'll tell you all about your new life ...

Anna (as Eileen): ... in my old home.

Monika: In your new home ...

Matthew: ... In this place called Ballymun. (Bolger 2010, 196)

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