

# “You’ll Never Kill Our Will To Be Free”: Damien Dempsey’s “Colony” as a Critique of Historical and Contemporary Colonialism

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*Abstract:* This article, through a musical, lyrical, and contextual analysis of the Irish recording artist Damien Dempsey’s song “Colony,” probes contemporary discourses concerning colonialism and postcolonialism. In presenting Dempsey’s work through this lens, we seek to interrogate how one singer employs protest song as a vehicle for social critique in a nuanced fashion. Our reading reveals different levels of meaning, in part dependent on contextual knowledge. Furthermore, the simple structure belies the complexity of the issues involved in any discussion of postcoloniality in Ireland and beyond, and because of this the song is rendered all the more potent and persuasive.

*Résumé :* Cet article, à travers une analyse de l’enregistrement de la musique, des paroles et du contexte de la chanson « Colony » de l’artiste irlandais Damien Dempsey, sonde les discours contemporains au sujet du colonialisme et du postcolonialisme. En présentant les travaux de Dempsey sous ce prisme, nous cherchons à interroger la façon subtile par laquelle le chanteur utilise la chanson engagée comme un véhicule de critique sociale. Notre lecture révèle différents niveaux de sens, dépendant en partie d’une connaissance contextuelle. En outre, la structure simple dément la complexité des questions qui reviennent dans toutes les discussions au sujet du postcolonialisme en Irlande et au-delà, et cette chanson en est, pour cette raison, d’autant plus puissante et convaincante.

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This paper draws on the musical canon of (and an in-depth qualitative interview with) the highly popular Irish recording artist Damien Dempsey (1971- ).<sup>1</sup> In the early 1990s, a then young singer-songwriter started to adapt Irish ballads and infuse them with influences from other protest genres, in an attempt to “educate” people about inequality in Ireland and beyond. Over the last two decades, Dempsey has continued to write and sing songs that challenge injustice, championing a particular postcolonial-inflected new Irish cosmopolitanism that places community, love, and social engagement

at its heart, in the process configuring Dempsey as a critical citizen who moves beyond insular nationalist and regional, postcolonial Irish concerns, while simultaneously rooting himself within his own local experiences. As such, Dempsey operates both as an interesting protest-singer case study in the Irish context specifically, but also as an example of how to discuss, more broadly, the relationship between protest singer, song, and performance in their historical and political context. Our approach may also provide a model for analyzing popular protest singers and related postcolonial discourses in their respective jurisdictions, particularly as these discourses intersect with class and neoliberal concerns, which are key to this article. Finally, we aim to offer evidence that protest genres may prove to be particularly hybrid in terms of form, content, and inspiration, given that protest song can be found worldwide and influences can be translocal in very specific ways. Ultimately, our critical reading of the work of Damien Dempsey in this paper adds to the ever-growing literature on protest music (Peddie 2006; Roy 2010; Dillane et al. 2018).

In critically examining “Colony,” we are especially interested in how the music and lyrics relate to the wider socio-cultural positioning of the song (Clayton et al. 2003; Cook 1998); the degree to which Dempsey’s song operates as “magnetic” or, perhaps less efficaciously, “rhetorical” protest (Denisoff 1968); and how one singer’s understanding of postcolonialism endeavours to speak not just to, but also beyond, local concerns. A close reading of the song structure and other aspects of the musical materials reveals different levels of meaning, in part dependent on contextual knowledge. At the same time, we argue that the ostensibly simple structure of the song, which speaks to local Irish soundscapes, also has an ability to translate at the embodied and not just literal level, to reach those outside of the Irish context. Furthermore, the simple structure belies the complexity of the issues involved in any discussion of postcoloniality in Ireland and beyond, and because of this the song is rendered all the more potent and persuasive.

As the title of the song suggests, “Colony” deals with the impact and legacy of colonization. Dempsey approaches his critique from a local Irish perspective while drawing international comparisons with other colonized peoples. To this end we begin our article by discussing the Ireland inhabited by Dempsey, laying out the terrain for understanding the country as postcolonial and some of the challenges it faces, matters that directly influence any understanding of the song “Colony.” The next section discusses typologies of protest songs and their efficacy before we hone in on Dempsey, exploring his early career and illustrating his long-term commitment to issues of social and political justice, thereby positioning him as a protest singer. We then undertake a close reading

of the song, studying the compositional tactics Dempsey uses, lyrically and especially musically, to get his message across effectively. This in turn allows us to step back into the broader context once more, having illustrated that our particular reading of the song aligns with Dempsey's own politics, and that this process is not without its tensions and challenges. Ultimately, we consider the relationship between singing protest and seeking change, and the ways in which songs with a particular political message counter, reconfigure, and contribute to particularly fraught social and political discourses, potentially providing a pathway to new understandings of old ideas.

### Postcolonial Ireland?

Irish society bears many of the scars of colonization and "the depth and protraction of Ireland's 'mixed' colonial experience" in terms of "its collusion and subjugation ... together with the vanguard initiative of its anti-colonial agitation, are instrumental and informative" (Flannery 2007: 1-2). Thus, in spite of the Republic of Ireland undergoing a process of decolonization,<sup>2</sup> there are many who argue that the legacies of centuries of domination by our colonial "masters" continue to be seen in / influence our "shared ideologies of progress and development"; even now "postcolonial legacies continue to influence the Irish economy, culture, politics and society" (Murray 2005: 18). Colonization is regularly cited as a key explanatory variable in debates concerning Irish identities; Irish public attitudes to authority; counter-insurgency and "terrorism"; economic dependency and economic underdevelopment; feelings of cultural inferiority (especially in terms of native language decline); and low self-esteem as well as a variety of forms of dysfunction including alcohol addiction and abuse<sup>3</sup> (see also Moane 2014).

In providing an overview of the colonization of Ireland, it is essential not to take a simplistic view (see White 2010). So what are the defining moments in the history of the colonization of Ireland? And how significant has the colonization of Ireland been on its people? These questions are important as they set up the framework for interpreting Dempsey's "Colony" in terms of how informed he reveals himself to be and in identifying the key historical moments from which he creates his colonial and postcolonial narrative.

A series of British plantations in the 16th and 17th centuries resulted in the large-scale confiscation of Irish-owned land and an onslaught of what has been termed a civilizing offensive over the native Irish. In "Colony," the first critical historical moment mentioned in the song refers to this period as the conquest of the "ancient" "Gaelic" people. The British establishment

subsequently introduced harsh and oppressive Penal Laws in the 17th century in an attempt to assert the supremacy of the Anglican Church over the Catholic and Presbyterian churches in Ireland. British policy also sought to obliterate the Irish language from existence. The Act of Union in 1801 marked the dissolution of the Irish Parliament and a concentration of political power in London. Some four-and-a-half decades later, the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852) demonstrated, perhaps more than any other event, the highly problematic relationship between colonizer and colonized. Viewed by some commentators as constituting a form of genocide,<sup>4</sup> the Great Irish Famine resulted in over a million deaths and the forced emigration of over 2 million people. This is the second major historical moment or rupture evoked in Dempsey's "Colony."

Taken together, these events resulted in further decline of the already dependent economy and native language. The sheer scale of the Great Famine and its lasting effect on the Irish psyche has been described by some commentators as representing a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (see, for example, Foster 2001). Reactions to the Famine as well as the Land War and the campaign for Home Rule in the latter half of the 19th century evidence the emergence of a sustained form of resistance to British colonialism in Ireland (see Rees 2010; Boyce 2005 for an overview of Irish history during this time period). So while many Irish men fought on behalf of the British Empire in the First World War (largely at the behest of John Redmond, leader of the moderate Irish Parliamentary Party, who saw it as a means of acquiring Home Rule), the rise of nationalism and republicanism resulted in a political (and military) revolution in 1916 that would eventually transform the relationship between Ireland and the UK. 1916 is the third crucial historical moment referenced in the song.

None of this is to say that once the old Imperial powers were ousted, all was fine. The post-revolutionary period and political independence from the British Empire gave way initially to an economic war and then to further economic dependence on Britain. The radical republican and socialist internationalist elements of the 1916 Revolution were quickly overshadowed by a political and cultural conservatism while the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church further ensured a pervasive conservatism and cultural stagnation, effectively replacing British Rule with a Theocracy (see for example Luddy 2005; for a detailed overview of Irish history from 1912 to 1985, see Lee 1989). This is the fourth critical moment addressed in "Colony."

There is one aspect of postcolonial history not explicitly addressed in "Colony," yet as we illustrate shortly, it is so well rehearsed and such a part of Dempsey's vocabulary, that it is important to understand it, as it allows

for a very particular reading of the song. In the early decades of the 20th century, there was outright hostility to critical ideas emanating from a left-wing perspective. The left, for its part, has largely remained splintered and fragmented since that time. The minute ideological differences between the two main centre-right political parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) are routinely framed as competing versions of Nationalist ideologies and histories (Coakley 1999). More recent modernization and social change have been heavily influenced by Ireland's membership of the EEC/EU (European Economic Community/European Union), and neoliberal ideologies have come to predominate. In concrete terms, this is best exemplified by an increased focus on marketization, privatization, individualism, and the retreat of the state in terms of public service provision. Indigenous Irish firms became vulnerable after entry into the EEC in 1973, with 44 percent of these companies closing down by 1986 (O'Hearn 1998: 39-42). Thereafter, the development strategy of the Irish state was concerned with ensuring that regulations, the tax structure, and the labour force were as attractive as possible to foreign investment (O'Hearn 1998: 48), with the "indigenous capitalist class ... forced to play the role of "middleman" for international capital" (Power et al. 2014: 42). In the 1980s, the Irish government extended the low corporation tax rate to financial firms and established the International Financial Services Centre in Dublin, with Ireland subsequently becoming an effective tax haven for many foreign multinational corporations (McCabe 2010: 11). When the Irish economy underwent a period of unprecedented and rapid economic growth driven by transnational capital during the Celtic Tiger boom economy years (1994-2008), the Irish government provided even "greater incentives to so-called 'wealth creators,' who were given the run of the country" (Power et al. 2014: 42; see also Cooper 2009; Murphy and Devlin 2009).

The supposed "miracle transformation" of the Irish economy and society during the boom years was fuelled by the growing presence of transnational capital (in terms of services and manufacturing but also in terms of tax evasion/avoidance<sup>5</sup>) and a steadily inflating property bubble,<sup>6</sup> which was facilitated by Irish banks increasingly lending cheap money that they borrowed from European banks at very low rates of interest (Allen 2009: 48). The illusion of Ireland's economic miracle (see Share and Corcoran 2010) was brutally exposed when global finance capitalism crashed in 2008 (O'Flynn et al. 2014). In 2010, Ireland, faced with a sovereign debt crisis, entered into a "programme" and received funding from the Troika of the EU, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and European Central Bank, becoming the most (bank) debt-burdened country in the EU (Taft 2013a, cited in O'Flynn et al. 2014: 924). Additionally, it can be argued that currently the Irish state is facilitating the 21st-century

face of colonialism, namely, stateless transnational corporations, by charging them low (or no) tax on their vast profits (see McCabe 2011 for example), profits that are often generated through the exploitation of cheap labour in the Global South.

In sum, it would seem that very little has changed in the postcolonial period. The political establishment remains conservative and significant levels of power now rest with stateless transnational capital and the arch champions of neoliberalism such as the EU, the IMF, and World Bank. In such circumstances, have the Irish merely changed masters and been colonized all over again? As we illustrate shortly, Dempsey would seem to think so, and the way he has sought to express this is through his songwriting and related performance activities. But before engaging in a detailed analysis of “Colony,” it is important to understand the place of song in and as an act of protest.

### The Centrality of Song in Protest

Protest songs are frequently situational, though they may also be abstract, generally expressing opposition to injustice, war, climate change, etc. The sociologist R. Serge Denisoff (1968) sees protest songs in terms of their function, which he deems to be a form of propaganda. Denisoff categorizes protest songs as either “magnetic” or “rhetorical.” For him, “magnetic” protest songs are designed to draw people to a given social movement and encourage solidarity and commitment to the cause. In contrast, “rhetorical” protest songs are frequently characterized by individual outrage and propose a candid message designed to change political opinion on a particular issue. These categories remain useful when discussing Dempsey. Many of his songs might be understood as more rhetorical, in the socio-political sense, where Dempsey, through his craft, is expressing a profound discontent for a particular issue. By performing this discontent, by drawing attention to a plight or unresolved situation, he seeks to change opinions or at the very least to raise awareness of the issue, though arguably rhetorical songs come up short in that they do not prescribe a template for change. Other songs may be seen as magnetic, where Dempsey not only highlights a problem, but also offers potential solutions, as in the song “Community” (*Almighty Love*, 2012), which offers a balm to increasing individualization and concomitant social problems in the neoliberal era by promoting moving back to community supports.

Stewart (2014) explores Dennisoff’s typology of song in greater depth, including categories of “magnetic-rhetorical” and “introspective” or “mood” song, the latter of which was introduced by Dennisoff but never developed.

Again, Dempsey's entire song output may profitably be categorized within these four categories, though context, of course, is important. For protest songs are not just simply propaganda or rhetoric (or, indeed, mood). They often also function as performances and musical events. Therefore, one cannot underestimate the importance of Dempsey's persona as "authentic singer-songwriter" in conveying his message, rhetorically and/or magnetically.

Authenticity, Martin Stokes argues, is not a quality or thing but rather "a discursive trope of great persuasive power" (Stokes 1994: 7). In other words, authentic is what we *deem* to be authentic. However, as Biddle and Knights argue, it is perhaps more difficult to agree with Stokes's assertion that authenticity is "definitely not a property of music, musicians, and their audiences" (Stokes 1994: 7) and instead suggest that "authenticity can be real ... and can actually influence musical behaviors" (Biddle and Knights 2007: 34). In the case of folk singers, it is often the natural, seemingly untutored voice, tied to its local accent and honest in its delivery, that is deemed authentic. According to Simon Frith, authenticity in music pertains to the "reflection of experience" (in the singer), which also speaks to the experiences of the community. Frith goes on to assert that this suggests there is no differentiation between the social experience of the singer and the community, specifically in terms of "identification" (1981: 159). Authenticity, then, is tied to persuasion, in a voice that sounds like your own, or, at the very least, seems to capture that working-class honesty.

Roy argues that where songs are composed to change political consciousness, they are not always successful in raising awareness because they are not tied to specific, charismatic artists. He goes on to argue how performers such as Benny Goodman were actually more successful than individual protest songs at drawing attention during the civil rights movements in the United States to African-American culture (and hence African-American exclusion) by finding ways to include highly skilled black musicians in performances (2010: 1-27). This is not to say that songs specifically composed to be political cannot become popular or efficacious, but rather that such songs, like any musical creation, are more effective and affective when strong and charismatic figures perform them. The delivery of the message must be as profoundly satisfying musically as it is politically potent lyrically. A protest song's delivery by a perceived "authentic" artist is key (see Peddie 2006 and Piotrowska 2013) and, as a working-class, Northside Dubliner and inheritor of a robust, urban Irish ballad tradition, Dempsey embodies and performs authenticity in multiple ways, as we discuss in the next section, in terms of acknowledging his origins, his local accent, his influences, and in keeping his message true.

## Damien Dempsey: A Protest Singer

Born into a working-class family, Damien Dempsey grew up in one of the more disenfranchised Northside suburbs of Ireland's capital city, Dublin. He has on numerous occasions spoken of his youth as being characterized by feelings of isolation and marginalization (see for example Dara McCluskey's documentary *It's All Good: The Damien Dempsey Story*, 2003). Accordingly, we argue that his life experiences<sup>8</sup> and upbringing in the strong working-class neighbourhood of Donaghmede (where he still resides), has ultimately instilled in him a desire to question injustice through his artistic endeavour. We consider him to be a "raconteur of the marginalized" (Power 2011) as his repertoire has consistently championed working-class values, and in particular he has spoken out on the issues that affect the vulnerable in Irish society and beyond.<sup>9</sup> As the rest of this article will demonstrate, Damien Dempsey has consistently produced songs that create alternative cultural texts that re-imagine people and places, and challenge the dominant discourse about the global and local impact of neoliberalism.

Dempsey has released eight studio albums, a live album, and a greatest hits collection over a seventeen-year period. Dempsey's songs demonstrate consistent and persistent concerns with inequality of all kinds. "Colony" is not an isolated song but one that sits comfortably in Dempsey's overall oeuvre, where, ultimately, colonization, anti-racism, anti-neoliberalism, and inequality resonate and interlink, confirming Dempsey as a protest singer from the outset. In 2000, Dempsey released his first full-length album, the title of which signals the thematic concerns that have preoccupied him throughout his career. *They Don't Teach This Shit in School* contains tracks that speak to broad concerns such as emigration ("NYC Paddy") and postcolonialism ("Colony"). In 2003, Dempsey released his second album *Seize the Day*, a pivotal moment in his career. One track, "Celtic Tiger," powerfully critiques the unequal impact of the Celtic Tiger boom period on Irish society (see Dillane et al. 2018 for a fuller discussion), as well as songs about addiction ("Ghosts of Overdoses"), sectarianism in Northern Ireland ("Marching Season Siege"), and institutional abuse ("Industrial Schools"). Dempsey released his third studio album, *Shots*, in 2005. It includes a reworked version of "Colony," which, along with another track, "Choctow Nation,"<sup>10</sup> attacks the evils of colonialism. The album also includes tracks such as "Not on Your Own Tonight" and "Sing all our Cares Away" which offer a more hopeful outlook. Dempsey released his fifth studio album, *Almighty Love*, in 2012. Once more, it was highly (yet more subtly) political in its message. Track ten, "Money men," for example, is about the



billionaire bankers who roll economies, have governments in their pockets, overthrow or bump off elected leaders if said leader isn't playing ball with them, fund wars and secure the contracts to rebuild after the wars and charge big interest – basically the foulest men on this planet. (Dempsey 2012)

Like “Celtic Tiger,” this track is a strong critique of capitalism, although on this occasion, unlike the aforementioned track that focuses specifically on Ireland, it offers a broader international narrative position. The anti-racism track “Born Without Hate” revisits the issue of postcolonialism with Dempsey singing about how the colonized often develop a collective amnesia of their own experiences, in the process repeating the sins of their colonial oppressors.<sup>11</sup> The lines “I feel the hate for the immigrant man, and yet my own are in every land” have particular resonance with the Irish context, where we have seen a rise in racism towards immigrants even as Irish people have emigrated in huge numbers to all corners of the earth.

Protest singers too have been a huge influence on Dempsey. A beneficiary of a rich urban Irish ballad tradition, Dempsey's biography announces his primary influences as being street ballad singers Luke Kelly and Ronnie Drew, both of “The Dubliners” – singers associated with nationalistic and Republican Irish songs – and the Irish protest singer Christy Moore, who has campaigned on numerous issues. Alan Moore has identified recent “folk singers” in the UK (Eliza Carthy and John Boden), who are “serious songwriters at the point at which they produce albums which seem a long way from the tradition, bringing that writing experience back to folk performance” (Moore 2016: 65). Dempsey's orientation is somewhat different. He is a singer-songwriter, heavily indebted to folk music, operating within a popular music sphere, into which he has brought traditional Irish music. He is clearly guided by international voices also. Such influences include American singers from the protest pantheon like Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen, as well as the highly influential Jamaican protest singer Bob Marley.<sup>12</sup> In an interview we conducted with him in 2013, Dempsey explained that

a lot of these old songs were protest songs ... these old ballads you know, telling you about the fight at that time. How people had to fight what was being done to the people and their struggle back then. I like to think I am writing modern day ballads.

It is noteworthy that while most recording artists are aware of the obstacles within the music industry that make it ever more difficult to take a counter-

hegemonic stance on many social issues, some, like Dempsey, are willing to (potentially) sacrifice commercial success for what they believe to be the right thing to do.<sup>13</sup> In essence his work should be seen as “the expression of a ... political sensibility ... that is appalled at living in a society that venerates the few while seeking to humiliate the many” (Coulter 2010: 168).

There is no doubt that in the figure of Damien Dempsey, a working class, Irish republican (in the wider sense of the word<sup>14</sup>) with a commanding voice and compelling stage presence, this level of musical and political persuasion finds convincing expression, whether in a live performance or, as we discuss shortly, on a sound recording. To perform a textual reading of the song “Colony,” then, is not just to examine its structure and materiality but to understand it in the broader context of the performance life of an artist known to embody the standpoints and perspectives of which he sings. At the same time, it is important to drill down into the detail of a song structure to see what it is in that musical artefact, which, when brought to life through performance, somehow speaks to an audience, some of whom are already primed for the message and others who respond in a more visceral way to the feelings expressed.

### Structural Efficacy of “Colony”

This section discusses the metric, harmonic, and melodic structure of “Colony,” examining how the lyrical content is shaped and made more potent through a variety of clever and effective compositional decisions. Some of these are generic, while others are specific to Irish music forms, including Irish language song ornamentation and embellishment (Ó Canainn 1978). Rich textual and sonic allusions are made throughout and even where these are local and specific (Irish), they manage to work simultaneously at a broader, more international level, which speaks to the important translatability of protest song, in which layers of possible meaning do not necessarily conceal the central tenet of the protest song in question.

The lyrics rehearse a number of discourses: the detrimental impact of colonialism on the colonized, the aggression and depravity of the colonizer, the lack of remorse and the continuation of the “empire spirit,” and the inner strength of the colonized to overcome their colonial oppressors. The song starts by placing the narrator of the song at the centre of colonial politics, “I sing the song of the Colony,” noting that even today people still continue to suffer from the results of colonization: “How many years and you’re still not free.” The “you” is ambiguous. It could be addressed to specific people or it could be that

"you" refers to the general Irish population: we're still not free. To whom does the narrator speak? There is no direct allusion to Ireland in these opening lines (though the evocation of a crying mother as symbol for a colonized Ireland is a literary trope that persisted for hundreds of years in Ireland; see Meaney 1991). Therefore, this opening section seems to want to address the general condition of colonization and how it persists today.

The structure of the song is quite straightforward. It might even be said to be simple, which is often an important characteristic of a song where the metaphorical and literal meaning of the words are of paramount importance. The unfolding narrative takes priority. What is important, however, is not only how the underlying structure supports this telling, but also how, in our view, these elements are central to the delivery of the song's core message as we outline in the following section.<sup>15</sup>

The almost eight-minute version (7:58) appearing on Dempsey's first album (2000) opens with fifteen seconds of a solemn militaristic drum beat before it is joined by other instruments. The drum kit establishes a four-square pulse, with an emphasis on **1**(and), **2** (and), **3** (and), (4) **and**. The first three beats are given particular emphasis. It has quite a militaristic feel, with the use of the snare and bass drums, which have strong associations with marching and war. In the later version of "Colony" on *Shots* (2005), the song is almost a minute shorter (7:08), and the drums are not included. Instead the rhythmic pattern set up by the guitar strumming creates a similar persistent pulse throughout the song. In the 2005 version, as in the original, the key is E major. The guitar starts on chord I (E), which it reiterates four times. This is followed by two repetitions of a IV-ii-I movement, i.e., from A major, to F# minor, to E major. Figure 1

Emaj                      Emaj                      Emaj

I sing the song of the co - lo - ny how ma - ny ye - ars and you

Emaj                      F#min                      F#min

still were not free and your mo ther cries and you

F#min                      F#min

ask God why?

Fig 1. Structure of "Colony."

shows the syncopated melodic outline of the song against its limited harmonic palette.

The opening part of the vocal line is derived from movements on the third, fifth, and octave tonic pitches with some structural passing notes (pitches 6 and 4, with note 6 on the word “colony” being treated to very idiomatic Irish language sean nós style ornamentation to localize it and make it very much about Ireland in a sonic sense<sup>16</sup>). The melody starts on the fifth, B, and continues to pivot on it, reaching up to the octave briefly (high E) and then moving downward to hover on the third (G#) and resting there. Such melodic materials have an openness and honesty – there is no harmonic or melodic guile here. These are the materials of the major chord and the first two lines sit on that chord of E major. Once the harmony shifts to chord ii (F# min), the melody consists of a repeated short figure around the third and the tonic, ending on the second note, unresolved, just as the resting on chord ii is unresolved and propels the song forward.

This metric, chordal, and melodic structure, repeated over and over, forms the basis for the first half of the song while above it the lyrical material changes. The lyrical material features four brief but pointed stories about two women and two men in Ireland at different points in history. Each of these painful stories are sung to the same materials as the opening lines, thereby marking them as all belonging to the same state and experience. The implication is clear: colonization happens in many guises but with the same end for most people, which includes poverty, deprivation, exclusion, and violence. The details may differ, but the structures are the same and are repeated over and over, mirroring the structural inequalities that are reproduced in society from generation to generation.

First, comes Annie, a woman from a town in Wicklow known for its execution of Irish patriots following the failed 1798 rebellion when the Irish tried to break free of English rule (a fact only those familiar with Irish history would know, but in this context it only adds layers of meaning; it does not change the fundamental challenges faced by the protagonist). For Annie, there is a new war. Tuberculosis has taken over, and the “population boom” refers both to population expansion and to the implosion of the population – dying from ill health. With “eleven to a room” there is little wonder that the disease is spreading amid poverty and overcrowding.

Next, Katie from inner city Dublin is evoked. She too lives in slum conditions, without the basics, such as shoes. She, like many other inner-city folk, suddenly finds herself in the middle of war activity during the 1916 Easter Rising against British occupation. History has celebrated the “patriots” of this fight, but the suggestion here is that Katie may have also fought for Irish freedom, either literally or simply through her own daily struggles.

The third person mentioned is Freddy, a man from the local flats (or social/public housing) in the old Liberties section of inner-city Dublin. Freddy tries to survive in brutal conditions and is forced to contemplate illegal activity just to make ends meet in a situation that offers few if any alternatives. This is a sympathetic, if aphoristic, take on structural inequality.

Finally, there is Thomas, Freddy's rural counterpart, underscoring that poverty is not just an urban phenomenon. Semi-starved Thomas is from a village in County Mayo, a region hit very hard by the Irish Famine. It is also an area marred by high levels of emigration. Thomas grows up in a "two room shack" and is eventually incarcerated in Letterfrack, a notorious industrial school set up by the Catholic Church for abandoned and "criminal" boys.<sup>17</sup> The school had a history of rampant sexual and physical abuse perpetrated by the staff. Thomas was probably sent there for stealing food or some other minor misdemeanour. At this point in the song, there is a return to the opening chords in the I-IV-ii pattern, which brings the listener back to where (s)he started. It also sets the listener up for a change in narrative voice as the next section moves from lyrical singing to a rap-inflected delivery.

"I look to the north," Dempsey intones in song-speak. His Dublin accent is strong, and he plays with internal rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, all characteristics of Irish/Gaelic song (see Williams and Ó Laoire 2011). Dempsey speaks from the first-person position, from an Irish vantage point, and he notes that in whatever direction his gaze turns, it is the same thing that he sees. These lines recall "Donal Óg" (Young Donal), an older Irish song that talks about colonizers coming and how they "took" the north and south, east and west, moon and sun, and even God "from me."<sup>18</sup> Dempsey registers the irony of how colonizing nations have exerted their power all over the world in the name of "their God" Jesus Christ, while simultaneously ignoring the central tenets of Christianity and wielding a sword "in the other" hand. This section builds in passion and rhetorical power, rising in intensity, culminating in strong rhymes, speaking of who is to "blame" and who is "inhumane."

A moment of lyricism softens the harsh, rap-like delivery when briefly, Dempsey sings of "my Gaelic Irish mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers" who had their own art and culture.<sup>19</sup> He makes a claim for this great, primordial civilization "with our own ancient customs, laws, music, art, way of life and culture, tribal in structure" at a time when the future colonizers were still "Neanderthal nations." We read this as a very clever flipping of the dominant construct whereby it is historically the colonized who are constructed as the racialized Neanderthal/savage/uncivilized heathen.<sup>20</sup> The return to the melody for Gaelic people is structurally powerful as it enacts

the possession of culture and civilization (i.e., song), in stark contrast to the European colonizers, who are only mentioned in bleak spoken word. They are uncivilized. They are without song, he seems to suggest.

The song moves to international comparisons with other downtrodden peoples who have suffered injustice at the hands of various colonizers including England, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, and France, as he lists in the song. Brothers and sisters are found amongst Aboriginal peoples of Australia and Canada, Native Americans, and Indians in the Asian Subcontinent.<sup>21</sup> Dempsey critiques how there has never been a formal apology from the colonial powers, how colonial history is still taught in school as the “glory days” of the Empire, and how misled people from colonizer nations are in thinking that they are “superior to me,” a line in which “me” refers to Dempsey as an individual but also as a representative of all colonized people. In speaking for Ireland as a colonized island, a literal reading would suggest that Dempsey is constructing a primordial, homogenized Gaelic Ireland. However, a more nuanced contextual reading suggests otherwise, revealing that Dempsey has quite a sophisticated take on the many sides of Irishness.<sup>22</sup>

The final section of the song introduces new melodic material for a section on resistance and opposition (Fig. 2). “You’ll never kill our will to be free,” Dempsey sings loudly and strongly, reiterating the point three times before finishing with the line, “Inside our minds we hold the key.” The melodic structure is important. The upper octave note from the opening is now present in its full glory, falling on beat one, reiterated three times, the third sitting above a tonic chord.

In the final line, unlike earlier in the song when the end of a line hovered on note 2, F $\sharp$ , now there is resolution as the song ends on the tonic note and chord of E major. “Inside our minds we hold, *hold* the key” (emphasis ours): and that is how everything can be solved and resolved. That second iteration of “hold” is important. It is the only place in the entire

The image shows a musical score for the final lines of the song "Colony." It consists of two staves of music in the key of E major (indicated by three sharps: F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff contains the lyrics "You'll ne - ver kill a will to be free to - (oo) be" with chords Amaj(IV), F#min(ii), and Emaj(I) written above. The second staff starts with a measure rest marked "5" and contains the lyrics "free in - side our minds we hold hold the key..." with chords Emaj(I), Amaj(IV), F#maj(ii), Emaj(I), and Emaj(I) written above. The melody features a prominent upper octave note (E5) on the first beat of the second line, which is reiterated three times.

Fig. 2. “Resolution” found in the last lines of “Colony.”

song that a word has been repeated immediately after its first iteration and therefore underscored. For Dempsey, the power to change is in the hands and minds of the people.

### Significance of the Different Versions

As well as noting the absence of the snare drum and bass drum in the *Shots* version of "Colony," there are other differences that are worth pointing out, as we see them as marking Dempsey's growing awareness of how to make the song more appealing and, possibly, efficacious. The chords played on the guitar are treated to more harmonic variation than in the original version, with the opening tonic chord receiving different voicing and some figurations. Also, the second version features a brief flute motif, outlining in melodic terms the harmonic move IV-ii-I in E major, which is so pivotal to the song. More significantly, the Irish uilleann pipes reiterate the melody from "you'll never kill our will to be free." This iconic Irish instrument is often used to signify the nation in paintings and it is frequently employed in film soundtracks to "sound" Ireland.<sup>23</sup> Arguably, these changes are simply part of the evolution of a band sound as Dempsey moved through his performance career and established a more regular band around him. But it is equally possible that he re-recorded this song in this manner because he wanted to make musical allusions to potent indigenous musical instruments of Ireland while downplaying the militaristic side of colonization and further emphasizing the musicality of the "Gaelic" people with their own evolved culture. Just as Native Americans may be associated with drums, Aboriginal Australians with clap sticks and didgeridoo, and Indians with tabla or sitars, the Irish too have their (iconic, stereotypical, and by extension problematic) native instruments to illustrate the presence of long-established musicking cultures. The second version also speaks to Dempsey's growing awareness that his local songs of protest really do have international significance and that people other than the Irish are willing to listen to his songs, while at the same time potentially wanting to hear sonic indicators of their Irish origins (i.e., the uilleann pipes).

### A Contextual Reading of "Colony"

Considered in isolation, this song might seem to offer a simple postcolonial reflection and a deliberate alignment of the colonial history of Ireland with colonial histories elsewhere, especially Australia, North America, and India. And the song certainly functions in this way, even if the linkages made are more

metaphorical than literal. However, in the context of Dempsey's continual commentary on social justice issues of all kinds, and because he re-released this song during the Celtic Tiger years, it is also possible to see this song as a commentary on how colonization is continuing, albeit in new economic guises (and this makes sense when thinking back to the economic circumstances of the four Irish examples he gives at the start of the song). In his interview with us, he observed:

I think what has happened before, colonialism and all, they have just refined it now. They learned by their mistakes. We have refined colonialism now and they make it much more subtle, much more effective. So if you know your history you can see that. (Dempsey 2013)

Colonization may have been based on ideas of racial superiority in the past, but what is constantly underplayed is class "superiority" and the stratification of societies into those who have and have not; those who are rich and those who are poor and stay poor.<sup>24</sup> When the focus is *only* on the colonized "other" as a racial category, there is a tendency to elide the economic displacement that takes place. By invoking Colony as an alignment of peoples who have been economically raped and disenfranchised, Dempsey focuses far more on class power than on racial power, though the two, of course, are enmeshed.<sup>25</sup> When one considers the plight of many postcolonial countries today (including Ireland, albeit to a lesser extent than others), one of the greatest barriers to economic growth is the structural poverty and dependency (or in some cases huge financial indebtedness) that still exists between these countries and their former colonial masters.

Other "new colonizers," in the form of financial organizations such as the IMF, international banks, and vulture funds, can also be easily understood in this light. The great economic collapse of 2008 showed just how much the interests of European banks, property developers, and (inter)national speculators were put ahead of "ordinary" people in Ireland. Ireland's government responded by ensuring "state bailouts of developers and financial firms, increased taxes (though not on capital) and the nationalizing of certain bankrupt banks" (Power et al. 2014: 43), all of which had (and continue to have) a devastating impact on sections of Irish society:

The socializing of private debt is just one of the biggest, it's – I'm fucking tearing me hair out about it – it's one of the biggest scams and I don't know how they are getting away with it ... It's billionaires doing it. I always thought that if you invested in something and if



the investment went bad, you lost your money but these fuckers are saying, “no I want the money back off that disabled person there, or that carer there, and that person on welfare there, and that working person there. I want the money back off them.” Billionaires saying this, you know, and the government saying, “Ok, we’ll give you the money back.” (Dempsey 2013)

As such, neoliberalism should be understood as a class project (Power et al. 2014: 43) and also, as some (including Dempsey) would argue, as part of the fine tuning of colonialism that needs to be resisted. Thinking about such things while listening to a live or recorded performance of the song highlights the different levels at which this song works and how it can also contribute to the discourse of postcolonialism and class politics in both effective and affective ways.

## Conclusions

Informed by our interview with Damien Dempsey, as well as by a musical, lyrical, and contextual analysis of the song “Colony,” this article has probed contemporary discourses concerning colonialism and postcolonialism as it relates to class and economics. In presenting Dempsey’s work through this lens, we have sought to interrogate how one singer employs protest song as a vehicle for social critique in a nuanced fashion. In a statement, which speaks to Denisoff’s “rhetorical” protest song category, Dempsey reflects on how his artistic output helps to bring about change, which, for him, starts with the individual: “I think a song can change people’s opinion you know. If it’s something that they didn’t know that went on, they can hear a song and go ‘Jesus!’ I think it can change an opinion – yes ...” (Dempsey 2013).

But it is not just a change of opinion, or education about certain facts, that Dempsey seeks to achieve through his music. He also wants to create an awareness of the inequality embedded in class structures, in order to bring these into question and ultimately change those structures. And for him, songs are, in part, the key. Following from one of our interview questions, we leave the last observation to Dempsey:

X: So do you think that your music in some ways allows people to develop a class consciousness?

Damien: I would hope so yes. I hope so. Well they are not going to get it from [English-Irish boy pop band] One Direction, you know. [Laughs.] (Dempsey 2013) 🍀

## Notes

1. Damien Dempsey has won several prestigious national awards, including the Irish Meteor Music Award. His albums have topped the Irish charts and gone Platinum. He has been lauded by performers including Brian Eno, Sinéad O'Connor, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Morrissey, and by the prestigious publications Rolling Stone Magazine, The Guardian, Billboard, MOJO, and The Sunday Times amongst others. He has a very loyal following, tours extensively, and plays to sold-out venues all over Ireland and indeed, internationally.

2. Depending on one's perspective, there is an argument to be made that Northern Ireland has yet to undergo such a process. Its position in the United Kingdom of Great Britain *and* Northern Ireland suggests a colonial relationship, for example. See also the situation in which Northern Ireland (and Scotland) – which voted to remain in the EU during the 2016 UK Brexit referendum – finds itself currently: these wishes have been ignored by the UK parliament, which takes precedence in such matters.

3. Dempsey discusses these issues in track eight, "Industrial Schools," on his 2003 album *2003*, as does Sinéad O'Connor on her 1994 track "Famine."

4. See for example the work of Tim Pat Coogan (2012) or the renowned British historian, AJP Taylor who likened the famine in Ireland to "Belsen," a reference to the infamous Nazi concentration camp (cited in Murphy 2013).

5. Companies like Apple, Intel, Google, Paypal, etc. have located in Ireland to avail of low and sometimes effectively zero tax rates. Thus while high GNP rates may exist, the actual tax take by the state has decreased.

6. There is an argument that Irish people's obsession with property ownership is a legacy of colonialism (for further discussion see for example McGreevy 2012)

7. In other words, the mere presence of highly accomplished black performers in the public sphere was in itself a gesture that normalized African-American participation in music. From Roy's point of view, this can be as effective a means of protest as a carefully worded message.

8. Dempsey has for example first-hand experience of losing friends to suicide (written about in his song "Chris and Stevie"), and has seen up close the devastating impact that addiction, unemployment, and a loss of hope can have on a community.

9. We acknowledge that some might see protest songs merely as release valves, a means for the public to vent without effecting any actual change. There might also be those who would argue that they are merely another avenue by which artists can commercially exploit their fans (See Devereux 2010 and Power 2011 for documentation of similar discussions pertaining to Morrissey's commercial exploitation of religion and class). Yet it would be groundless to argue that Dempsey is simply interested in making money from the effects of neo-colonization. Dempsey has, for example, worked with the graffiti artist Maser, who painted Dempsey's lyrics on derelict buildings in Dublin. The money raised from sales of photographs of this work went to The Simon Community, a charity that helps the homeless in Ireland.

In 2010, together with songwriter Glen Hansard, he recorded "The Auld Triangle" with the proceeds going to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul's "Keep The Lights On" Campaign. In 2016 he was involved in the Save Moore Street campaign (see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/20/dublin-moore-street-protesters-easter-rising>) and in 2017 he was involved in the Home Sweet Home campaign during which a state-owned building was occupied by activists in order to provide shelter for the homeless in Dublin. All of this demonstrates his commitment to social justice.

10. The processes of colonization and post-colonization are often contradictory and complex, and, indeed in the Irish case, some Irish people (most notably Roman Catholic Church missionaries as well as slave trade organizers) were themselves actively involved in practices resulting in the indoctrination, exploitation, and colonization of subjugated people elsewhere. "Choctow Nation" is a song that apologizes to this particular Native American tribe (who "sent money you could not afford" to the suffering Irish people during the great famine) for the role that an Irish man played in their demise. "I am sorry for that evil man, I feel shame that he came from my country, I am sorry for that Sheridan, And the other tools used in Colonies" (lyrics from the song).

11. See Carr (2016) for a discussion of how anti-Muslim racism has manifested in the Irish context, for example

12. See <http://www.damiendempsey.com/biog.aspx> (accessed 27 June 2016).

13. Dempsey claimed in a *Sunday Times* interview with David Sinclair that Sinéad O' Connor had given him the strength to say what he thinks is wrong with the world (2012). In our interview with him, he also named Christy Moore as influential, observing that he and O' Connor "are proper soul singers for me. They would have sacrificed their careers, their money-making abilities to say what they want to say. To speak out against what they felt was wrong"

14. "Irish Republican" in the narrower sense of the term refers to a supporter of Irish Independence from Britain. It has traditionally been applied to (and claimed by) those who supported the armed struggle by the Irish Republican Army against British rule in Northern Ireland. In contrast, when we refer to Damien Dempsey as being an Irish republican, we mean that he is an Irishman with republican ideals, i.e., he is opposed to a monarchy as a form of government and supports the establishment of a liberal, egalitarian republic.

15. As we performed this close analysis some time after our interview with Dempsey, it was not possible to ask if he agreed with our interpretation (he is currently on tour and unavailable). In many ways, we only came to this interpretation after spending a lot of time reading about him, reading the interview transcripts, engaging in research in the broader social context, attending concerts, and listening repeatedly to his songs on various media platforms. Having said that, we also believe that this kind of critical reading is not necessarily about convincing the musician that this is the "one" correct interpretation. In fact, as many music researchers will be aware, often our informants disagree with what we propose. As in all of our

work, the reading is suggestive, provisional, and open-ended but presented in a way that we believe and hope is ultimately useful and persuasive in what it offers in the context of this specific journal.

16. Ó Canainn (1978) defines sean nós (Irish Gaelic for “old style”) singing as an unaccompanied complex way of singing in Gaelic, which has a highly ornamented melodic line.

17. See Letterfrack Industrial School (“Letterfrack”), 1885-1974

<http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/pdfs/> (accessed Nov 10, 2016).

18. A version of this ancient Gaelic song can be found in *The Kiltartan Poetry Book*; with prose translations from the Irish by Lady Gregory, New York and London: G P Putnam’s Sons and the Knickerbocker Press (1919). The song is entitled “The Grief of a Girl’s Heart” in this version, but it is also commonly known as “Donal Óg” (Young Donal).

19. This is a very important trope for Dempsey. With respect to ancient Gaelic culture, he says: “People used to come from all over Europe to send their kids to college in Ireland – the monks of Clonmacnoise and all ... and the Brehon laws, which are never taught in school. The Brehon laws were much fairer laws than what we have now. You see the law nowadays and they favour the wealthy. The wealthy never seem to go to jail for all the white-collar crimes. You see what’s gone on here [Anglo Irish Bank, Seanie Fitzpatrick, etc.]: how many of them actually went to jail?” <http://irishpost.co.uk/damien-dempsey-travesty-new-irish-britain-dont-sense-irishness/> (accessed 8 Oct 2016).

20. See for example the depictions of Irish people in Punch cartoons from the 19th century. For further discussion see Iगतiev (1995).

21. In the case of Aboriginal people in Canada and Australia in particular, rampant child sex abuse, like that mentioned in the “Letterfrack” reference at the start of the song, points to shared experiences of abuse in postcolonial nations. Dempsey does not just refer to land displacement, therefore, but also to violent abuse by those in power in a colonial and postcolonial contest, with ramifications right up to the present.

22. A literal reading, which suggests an understanding of a homogenous Gaelic Ireland of the past, highlights what could actually be quite a problematic construct. However, as alluded to previously, we hold that Dempsey is using the construct as part of a powerful rhetorical strategy in this particular song. See also footnote 20 about certain aspects of the Gaelic Culture to which Dempsey is referring. Dempsey’s more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of “Irishness” is evident in the wider body of his work. For example, track nine on Dempsey’s *Seize The Day* album, “Great Gaels of Ireland,” speaks of how the great Gaels of Ireland and Scotland were “the first kings of Europe” and fought the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Turks, recognizing that immigration to Ireland is not a recent phenomenon. Dempsey has also on numerous occasions, when playing “Colony” live, introduced it as an anti-racism song about the class project of colonialism and empire (for more, see his comments in the February 2014 interview with David Hennessy).

23. The uilleann pipes are a distinctly Irish version of bagpipes that were found all across Europe and Asia, as well as in parts of Africa. Evidence of pipe playing in Ireland spans over thirteen centuries. See <http://pipers.ie/resources/instrument/> (accessed 10 Jan 2016). Unlike bagpipes, uilleann pipes are not blown but rather generate air through closed bellows and bag system.

24. We acknowledge that scholars from various theoretical backgrounds will to a greater or lesser extent foreground class as a key issue in “race” discourses. Indeed, some of the earliest discussions around “race” argued that the working classes should be designated as a “different ‘race’” on the basis that they did not have the “blue blood” of the aristocracy, who were thus the “superior ‘race.’” Arthur De Gobineau (1853) was a key figure in this line of thought.

25. One of the effects of colonization and the creation of the “other” is to strip the colonized of their power in every manner – they become for the colonizer the lowest form of human life.

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