

## **The Irish in Us: Irishness, performativity, and popular culture**

DIANE NEGRA (ed.)

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If nothing else, when the world economy went into an abrupt economic tailspin midway through 2008, it created a new vantage point from which to understand events of the previous decade—and in few places has this sense of rupture been more profound than in Ireland. Whereas the single distinguishing feature of post Famine Ireland had been a relentless endemic poverty, in the early 1990s Ireland's place in the world was dramatically transformed as the Irish economy went into a phase of unprecedented growth. By the time the essays in *The Irish in Us* were being written in 2004 and 2005, Ireland had become a land of hyperbole: it was the most globalised society in the world (according to the journal *Foreign Affairs*); per capita, it had one of highest GDPs in the world, the fastest growth rate in Europe, and so on. Today, in the weightless freefall that is Ireland after the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy, there is the dizzying awareness of having experienced two moments of epochal change in less than 20 years.

It is a testimony to the coherence and insight of the essays in *The Irish in Us* that so many of them stand up so well in the new, uncertain dispensation. In part, this is due to the careful editorship of Diane Negra, both in her introduction, and in her own contribution, 'Irishness, Innocence, and American Identity Politics Before and After September 11.' Negra maps out the collection's territory in theories of performativity,

whose roots are in Judith Butler's work on gender from the early 1990s, but which also draws heavily on more specifically Irish work, particularly Colin Graham's *Deconstructing Ireland* (2001), which argued that 'the idea of "Ireland" is produced more often as a citation than an actuality.' Building on these ideas, Negra moves beyond essentialist understandings of Irish identity, towards what she refers to as the 'everything and nothing' status of Irishness (p. 1). Irishness, she argues, has been coded in so many ways—from deterministic racialism to lifestyle choice—that it has become almost infinitely mutable: 'everything and nothing.'

To a greater or lesser extent, the other contributors to *The Irish In Us* use the space opened up by this position to explore the contradictory complexity of Irishness. Moreover, they do so across an impressive range of cultural practices, ranging from Natasha Casey's fascinating analysis of the differing markets for Irish themed products in the US retail sector (from middle America to white supremacists), to Mary McGlynn's reading of the popularity of Garth Brooks in Ireland, to Amanda Third's speculations on the significance of red hair. Without exception, the contributors work closely to the brief of exploring aspects of performativity, although seldom to such unexpected effect as in Stephanie Rains' highly original analysis of the business of genealogical research. Genealogy, Rains argues, can provide us with a way 'of rethinking identity as neither fixed nor essential, nor endlessly fluid and freely self fashioned, and an always incomplete inventory of the self' (pp. 156–157).

It is indicative of the velocities of change in recent Irish culture that the least satisfying essays here focus on films from the early 1990s, which in turn were grappling with an Ireland of the 1980s that now seems remote from contemporary concerns: Maria Pramaggiore's essay on 'Pregnancy and Performance in Contemporary Irish Cinema,' which takes *The Snapper* (1993) as its frame of reference, and Maeve Connolly's piece on Traveller identities. In the current cultural climate, there is a sense that both of these essays have been overtaken by events. On the other hand, the most solidly historical contribution here opens up genuinely new territory. Sean Griffin goes back to the so called 'Good Neighbour' films of the 1940s, the Fox musicals that were intended to consolidate fellow feeling with American allies during World War II, and finds a group of Irish films, including *Coney Island*, *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* and *Irish Eyes are Smiling* (all 1943). Griffin's reading of *Irish Eyes are Smiling*, in particular, suggests that there is much more to be done on Irish American cinema of this period, as he discovers musical numbers that employ cross dressing and blackface to create characters who swap 'ethnic and racial masks,' and who 'wear their gender like a costume' (p. 78), in ways that are deeply unsettling to fixed concepts of identity.

Griffin's interest in the mutability and exchanges between Irish and African American identities picks up one of the most important thematic concerns running through *The Irish in Us*. This thread begins with Catherine Egan's survey of what she calls 'the racial politics of Hibernophilia,' gains substance in Lauren Oakey's detailed reading of Van Morrison's absorption of black music, and takes an unexpected turn in Gerardine Meaney's deployment of Richard Dyer's theorisation of 'the invisibility of whiteness' (p. 255), in relation the character of Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*. However, the key essay to address the racial positioning of Irishness is Michael Malouf's reading of the mixing of Irish and Caribbean cultures in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* and in the music of Sinéad O'Connor. 'Rather than trying to explain away these instances of cross cultural expressions as aberrations from the

cultural norm,' suggests Malouf, we should use them to rethink 'the role of transnational imagining in our conceptions of nationalism' (p. 347).

Collectively, the essays in *The Irish In Us* are part of an important shift in Irish cultural studies. If anything has become evident as the Irish economy has imploded, it is that the wealth and economic growth of the Celtic Tiger period had obscured a much more profound change in Irish culture: Irish culture is now inextricably—for better or for worse—embedded in global networks of information and mass media, images and sounds. As such, it will not revert back to the more insular culture of earlier decades, which made it possible to sustain an essentialist understanding of identity. What lies ahead, *The Irish In Us* suggests, will be something more multi faceted, more fluid, more complex—and probably more interesting.

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