

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Transnational Ireland on Stage: America to Middle East in Three Texts

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Introduction: Between the Local and the Global on the Irish Stage

Historically, the comprehensive Anglicisation of Ireland from the early nineteenth century, and the geopolitical location of Ireland in Europe, have laid the foundations for more Irish participation on the world stage. The rapid globalisation process, however, has not fully removed the frustration buried deep in the Irish psyche about the country still being in partition, but it has encouraged many contemporary playwrights to express concerns regarding other areas that are just as troubled as the state of their country, despite the fact that the Northern Ireland issue is not yet fully resolved.

It is noteworthy that globalisation, as the continuation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism in a new form, not only carries forward the exercise of colonial incursion but facilitates the oppressively homogenising effects on the less advantaged Other. This is partly due to the rise of critical theory to 'productively complicate the nationalist paradigm' by embarking on *transnationalism* since the 1970s.¹ One consequence of this was to prompt reevaluations of existing cultural productions, thus initiating cross-cultural and interethnic dialogues that had usually been absent in colonial and Eurocentric establishments, and prompting the public to envisage the Other across both real and imagined borders. Even more significantly, the meaning of a text starts to shift if it is studied in an international context, and this applies particularly to a text in which the characters venture into unexplored territories and impel 'meaning [to] transform as it travels'.² The transformation of meanings is further accelerated by intercultural encounters that are motivated by globalisation that interconnects individuals and societies around the world. Our moral circle thus expands and is redrawn through such physical or imagined encounters with people of different ethnicities at distant locations. In the case of Ireland, how globalisation benefits or frustrates the Emerald Isle has been a subject for inquiry in recent decades, alongside that of the rollercoaster ride of the Celtic Tiger.

It might be of interest to see how contemporary Irish playwrights, by creating *transnational* dramas that highlight border-crossing experiences, reassess more rarely regarded Irish experiences, past and present, in international scenarios. Their attempts at going beyond sectarian politics, partly to cultivate a transnational audience, may aim at challenging the Irish-centered convention that has existed since the movement towards Irish Independence and the Irish Revival. It is noteworthy that they contextualise Irish history not necessarily from insular viewpoints but in connection with other regional or ethnic experiences, thus initiating multicultural counteractions with predominant world powers.

The three texts to be explored here are Frank McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992), Sebastian Barry's *White Woman Street* (1992), and Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra?* (2006), which are set respectively in Beirut, the state of Ohio and Iraq. The questioning of narrow national models in these plays may open possibilities for creating meaning in a transnational context and reveal how prejudices and boundaries can be transmitted to distant locations and then become institutionalised.

¹ Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2010) 1.

² David James, 'Testing Transnationalism,' *Contemporary Literature* 52.1 (2011) 193.

Frank McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992): A Room without a View in Beirut

Born in 1953 in Buncrana, located in northern County Donegal, Republic of Ireland, and close to the border that divides the island, Frank McGuinness has admitted that in his youth the frequent border-crossing experiences from home to Derry had a significant impact on his writing, prompting him to be 'a writer involved with politics' in an attempt 'to cause a different type of bother.'³ Carrying these experiences into his adulthood, McGuinness developed a critical observational perspective concerning Irish relations with the outside world and those binary oppositions and ideologies that lead to political and religious sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Although some critics think that postcolonial studies, with their explicitly political nature of inquiry, have come under threat because of globalisation, they are essentially two sides of the same coin and deserve 'a dialectical relationship with each other, [as the] histories of the two are inseparable.'⁴ *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, set in a cell in Beirut where three hostages of different nationalities are chained to separate walls, offers a global and postcolonial space in which to examine the man-made divides that trouble these characters from Ireland, England and America. As they have all been abducted randomly on the street simply for their skin colour, the significance of their given identities, becoming void, challenges existing political philosophies.

Regarded as 'his most accessible play' for American audiences, the play received international acclaim due to its 'cultural references of brotherhood,' as McGuinness mentioned in an interview.⁵ Although this is not the first Irish play that has appealed to international audiences, it should be noted that its success is due to the presentation of transnational experiences that question sectarianism and suggest a humanitarian perspective on issues that are relevant in countries where the play is staged, despite the playwright once expressing the view that a political play cannot effectively change anything: 'I don't think you can change people's attitudes and I don't think you should try.'⁶ Nevertheless, what McGuinness was attempting was an experiment through which an international scenario can be presented that enables Ireland to be seen in a broader context. Although set in Lebanon, the play was written by an Irish playwright who has to cross the border to the Republic for study and work and has acquired mixed views as a result of being both an outsider and insider of Northern Ireland. This drama displays a similar stance in that it allows the audience to cross borders in order to understand the complicated relationships between the Middle East and Western superpowers. This play also illustrates how McGuinness, mainly based in Dublin, has expanded his attentions 'well beyond the concerns of the local and the national', so as to produce an alternative view in which the public can see Ireland within an international framework and the wider world from an Irish perspective.⁷

The play may not demonstrate a ready-made solution to the Irish/British political dilemma over Northern Ireland but it may, as Homi K. Bhabha claims, 'emerge as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal' of current ideologies.⁸ As Eurocentrism that has dominated

³ Richard Pine, 'Frank McGuinness: A Profile,' *Irish Literary Supplement* 10.1 (1991) 29. For more detail, see Eamonn Jordan's 'Frank McGuinness,' *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights* eds. Martin Middeke and Peter Paul Schnierer (London: Methuen) 234-250.

⁴ Jay 34.

⁵ Jacqueline Hurlley, 'Frank McGuinness,' *Ireland in Writing: Interviews with Writers and Academics* eds. Jacqueline Hurlley, Rosa Gonzelez, Ines Praga, and Esther Aiaga (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998) 67. The play has won the London Standard Award, the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, the London Fringe Award, the Harvey's Best Play Award, and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. In addition, from its premiere to 1998 this play had been translated into twelve languages.

⁶ Deirdre Purcell, 'Interview,' *Sunday Tribune* 15 May 1988, 17.

⁷ Jordan 235.

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 86.

western perceptions of the Orient that is disavowed, it is fair to say that it is not until these western hostages in the play are made powerless by their abductors that audiences can see how they are victimised by the Eurocentric myth *per se*. Take Edward, an Irishman and a hardline republican soldier who volunteers to join the UN's peace-keeping troops in Lebanon, for example. The reason that Edward would volunteer for peace-keeping duties in the Middle East is in part to fulfill his desire for adventure: '[I was at] home wondering what it would be like to be here.'⁹ His venture to the Middle East is not a *scouting* trip but is implicitly involved with European superiority over the troubled East, as far as the UN is concerned. The peace-keeping mission, protected by armed force, may fail to be accomplished but technically it is a defence of the failings of Eurocentrism. Interestingly, before Edward departs for the Middle East, he has sensed that at home in Europe he is trapped 'in a bad hole'.¹⁰ As his home in Ireland has been a source of disappointment, his voluntary admission to the UN's peace-keeping troops is thus an intentional breakaway from home and an adventure that should bring him new excitements. Ironically, his adventure with the UN – an organisation that operates beyond physical borders – is not as romantic as he had hoped but proves to be a fiasco, in that the European values he follows, perhaps unselectively, prompt him to be abducted and imprisoned in a windowless cell in which he has no idea of time, date, or year. Edward and his cellmates are faced not only with an endless predicament but the fact that they are the sacrificial victims of the Eurocentric illusion about ruling the East as a dominator and peace-keeper.¹¹ Ironically, the cell is as borderless as the UN, but the operation of the UN results in a prolonged war in which no one has 'any sense of causality, development, fullness or even duration',¹² as these hostages experience in their helpless state.

McGuinness's choices of characters give this play a confrontational air, since these hostages are, at least in the view of their abductors, political and cultural intrusions to the Islamic world. Adam, an American doctor, whose research topic is 'the effects of war on innocent young minds', enacts American values in places where he is not welcome.¹³ The research that Adam conducts, which includes consideration of shell-shocked Lebanese soldiers, is not therefore simply a humanitarian task. Metaphorically, anywhere that American troops are stationed functions as an extended frontier within which American nationalism is celebrated and Adam's research is duly supported. Although Adam's presence in Lebanon may suggest the advent of modernisation and globalism – albeit for the benefit of the West – the random abduction of the hostages signifies the unpredictability of the Middle East crisis. More specifically, for Lebanese civilians, taking three white men hostage is more than an expression of animosity towards the military forces of the UN. That is, the UN, in which the US plays a pivotal role, affirms the necessity of keeping foreign peace-making troops in Lebanon, while its extended military presence may serve to enlarge the imagined territories, or areas under the domination of western superpowers. It is ironic that the peace-making mission – having been justified by the UN – prompts antagonisms between local Lebanese people and the outside world, or the West, but does not guarantee the interests of individuals. The

⁹ Frank McGuinness, 'Someone Who'll Watch Over Me,' *Plays 2* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002) 95, 92.

¹⁰ McGuinness 92.

¹¹ McGuinness dedicated this 1992 play to Brian Keenan, who published *An Evil Cradling* (1991) to describe his four and a half years spent as a hostage, along with other captives from twelve nations, in Beirut from 1986 to 1990. However, McGuinness, perhaps to respect the privacy of the other hostages, has on other occasions claimed that this play has 'nothing to do with Brian's life; there are parallels with what he suffered – but it isn't his story' (qtd. in Hiroko Mikami, *Frank McGuinness and His Theatre of Paradox* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002) 95.

¹² Michael D. Bristol, Michael D, 'In Search of the Bear: Spatiotemporal Form and the Heterogeneity of Economics in *The Winter's Tale*,' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.2 (1991) 147.

¹³ McGuinness 94.

windowless cell in which the three hostages are jailed and guarded by Lebanese warders therefore epitomises those people who are most powerless and deprived in the international political power struggle. The frustration, helplessness and anger of Lebanese civilians therefore lead to random abductions from a Beirut street market.

The three hostages' isolation from the outside world indicates that the clashes are not simply between two nations but are confrontations between modernity and tradition, imperialism and nativism, Christianity and Islam, or more generally the West and the East. Specifically, with the hope of being released, Adam recites passages aloud from the Koran so as to impress the soldiers that he has been properly converted. The Bible, alongside the Koran in the cell, is of little use to strengthen the faith of the three hostages but confuses them about whether they may be magi or actually sinners already abandoned by the Christian world. However, they gain comfort and help in relieving their anxiety by engaging in chitchat about sexual encounters, arguments about word choices in Irish and British English, and plots they make up for horror films, as well as undertaking minor physical exercise in the limited space. In other words, what has been assumed to be universally or globally feasible may be locally problematic, antagonistic or meaningless in the multi-cultural scenarios experienced by these hostages.

It is worthy of mention that, in one production of this play, in 1992, Adam, the American hostage, was played by Hugh Quarshie, a black actor born in Ghana.¹⁴ The preference of the director, Robin Lefevre, for a black performer profoundly challenges the western perspective of the world, as it reminds the audience of ethnic biases against non-white communities in history. The intention of casting a black actor carries an irony in that American or European values have historically resulted in the dislocation of a huge number of non-white people from their place of origin, while Adam, being black, is seen as a scapegoat for the intrusion of the West in Lebanon. Although, metaphorically, the presence of a black actor in this production dramatises the interethnic and transcultural elements in international politics, and involves an implicit call to examine racism in a West/East encounter, it also implies the vulnerability of border-crossing exchange, especially for dislocated non-white people, in that globalism still guarantees Eurocentric and American interests on the front line. This explains why Michael, an English lecturer, is the only one who is not released at the end of the play but left in a desolate state in the cell. He is thus an involuntary blood sacrifice in the confrontation between the UN and the guerilla forces in Lebanon – most likely for the strategic benefit of the former.

McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* dramatises a border-crossing experience by relocating Irish, American and English protagonists to a Middle Eastern scenario, which is symptomatic of the growing interest by Irish playwrights in visualising their nation within a global context and in giving a voice to those who had hitherto been neglected during the social transformation of Ireland. In order to discuss further the enduring antagonisms of the global and the local in relation to the Irish experience in an international context, Sebastian Barry's *White Woman Street*, set in a small town in Ohio in the United States, will be explored in the next section.

¹⁴ Analyses of McGuinness's *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* have, since its first production, been abundant and in depth. However, discussion about employing a black actor to perform this American role is limited, albeit that 'there is no mention of his colour in the published text play' (Jordan 168). The choice of a Ghanaian actor greatly complicates the transnational and cross-ethnic nature of the play and relates to two other plays to be discussed later in this essay. See Eamonn Jordan, *The Feast of Famine: The Plays of Frank McGuinness* (Berlin: Peter Lang 1997).

Sebastian Barry's *White Woman Street* (1992): A Historical Revisiting of '1916' in Ohio

One feature of a number of contemporary dramas that concern the foreign experiences of Irish people is that their characters often wish to be away from Ireland or have recently returned home.¹⁵ Only a limited, but not necessarily insignificant, number of Irish plays are primarily set overseas with an international cast, which diversifies the conventional Irish theatre – 'by Irish authors, and plays relative to Ireland interpreted by *local* actors under a self-contained board of direction.'¹⁶ It can thus be argued that Barry's *White Woman Street*, looking at Ireland from an alternative historical viewpoint that is less keen to prove the universality of any perspective, illustrates an ignored Irish experience in a transnational context in America.¹⁷

A noteworthy fact about this play, set in 1916 in the wilds of Ohio, is its correlation with the Irish experience in that particular year, when the Easter Rising, which is lionised as a key signifier in republican discourse, took place. Although that event is only mentioned in passing through an Irish protagonist's description of home,¹⁸ the playwright's choice of this significant year in Irish history creates a strong resonance among Irish audiences. Notably, by introducing a revisionist look at this crucial year in modern Irish history, the play touches on an often ignored but unsettling facet of the lives of Irish-Americans that had troubled their forefathers down the years, including those remaining in or emigrating from Ireland. In other words, in this play the Easter Rising rings its bell in a manner that is not obvious but is also not silent, in that the audience – watching a play set in Ohio in 1916 – returns to a historical year in which the Easter Rising took place and which has been consistently over-highlighted by Irish historians. This strategy allows the audience to observe, in a transnational context, how the Irish Famine and American Indian Wars had caused the Irish to be both victims and oppressors in the New World. This unpleasant facet of Irish life, however, was rarely featured by Barry's early predecessors who were more concerned about the Irish (cultural) nationalism that gave birth to the Irish Literary Theatre, later renamed the Abbey Theatre. The neglected experiences of the Irish diaspora in Ohio, as the play illustrates, can serve as a critique of the master-narrative of nationalistic dramaturgy and unearth those Irish-Americans who 'do not fit with the way we want to imagine our history'.¹⁹

¹⁵ Migration is a theme frequently visited by Irish playwrights with characters wishing to leave or recently returning. The settings may be across the Atlantic, within the British Isles, in Europe or the Southern Hemisphere. To name only a few: Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (1966), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994), Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), Hugh Leonard's *Da* (1978), Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), Anne Devlin's *After Easter* (1994), Christina Reid's *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989) and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* (1989), Jimmy Murphy's *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2000), Sebastian Barry's *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995), and Jim O'Hanlon's *The Buddhist of Castlenock* (2002). Dolores Walshe's *In the Talking Dark* (1989), and Damian Smyth's *Soldiers of the Queen* (2002), both of which are set in South Africa under apartheid; Dermot Bolger's *In High Germany* (1990) and John Banville's *Conversation in the Mountains* (2008), set in Germany in the 1980s and 60s respectively. Noticeably, there are also plays about non-Irish migrants in Ireland, for example Donal O'Kelly's *Farawayan* (1998), *Asylum! Asylum!* (1994) and Gavin Kostick's *The Ash Fire* (2002). However, I propose to focus on these three plays set in relatively unusual locations in Irish drama, in an attempt to explore those often marginalised Irish experiences overseas.

¹⁶ John Edward Hoare, 'Ireland's National Drama,' *The North American Review* 194.671 (1911) 566. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Barry does not have many plays set outside Ireland. *White Woman Street* and *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995) are two clearly set overseas, while the latter – set at the turn of the twentieth century about a returned woman migrant's marriage with a descendent of the Big House in County Kerry – is partially set in Bristol. This play has a colonial subtext as regards the Boer War in South Africa.

¹⁸ The year is mentioned in the stage direction on page 122 and Trooper and Clarke's conversation on page 161.

¹⁹ Nicholas Grene, 'Out of History: from The Steward of Christendom to Annie Dunne,' in *Out of History: Essays on the writing of Sebastian Barry*, Ed. Christina Hunt Mahony (Dublin: Carysfort, 2006) 169.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that this 1992 historical drama illustrates, to some degree, an Ireland that is being transformed into a global state. This is done by presenting characters of several different nationalities – with only one character, out of six culturally displaced outlaws, being Irish. It can be assumed that, compared to the revisionist debates which have focused by and large on Irish *native* experiences, the geographical distance maintained in the play brings about a ‘direct challenge to the primacy of the nation-state in its present form’, as well as an alternative perspective in (re-)writing Irish history.²⁰

The alternative perspective resides firstly in the background choices of multi-national characters who all live on the margin of migrant society as gangsters who plan to rob trains that carry gold and their future. What draws them together, notably, is the force that edges them out from mainstream society. Trooper, in his fifties, came to America from Ireland in his youth, and was a labourer on canals and railroads. Without having the means to support himself, and being unable to go home, he has joined the gang in order to make his fortune. James Miranda is a black slave who, on seeing his peers killed and dumped in a ditch by their owner, has run away from a farm in Tennessee. Nathaniel Yeshov, a young man in his thirties from Brooklyn, and of Russian-Chinese parentage, constantly feels alienated for being unable to speak properly in either Russian or Chinese, and neither can he identify himself as an American: ‘It was prison the way I be in the head.’²¹ Clarke, in his seventies, is a native American Indian from Virginia who has experienced the mass slaughter of his people and watched women being raped by whites. He survived by becoming a pimp for colonial officers and speaking ‘damn good English ... [as] easy as white man.’²² Mo Mason, also in his seventies, is an Ohio Amish who has never returned to his puritanical community during the past fifty years but is still mentally trapped by its teaching, which is in conflict with his desire for whores. Blakely, an Englishman from Lincolnshire, is no less alienated than the other ‘poor robbers without no homes.’²³ Although they have been on the run together for five years and all have issues with each other, their common experience of having been in prison and wishing ‘to forget such places’ prompts their comradeship and desire to stay in the gang,²⁴ alongside their collective longing for being ‘a true man with gold ... Gold can turn a human creature any colour.’²⁵

The background of these six dislocated characters illuminates the creation of a performative space²⁶ that potentially extends the realm of Irish historical revisionism by spotlighting the deprived Irish in the US and their little-documented experiences. On the other hand, the fact that the play was premiered at the Bush Theatre in London, and the dramatisation of the overseas Irish in relation to other ethnicities, imply the growing desire of Irish playwrights to boost the visibility of Ireland in the global network.²⁷ Despite the play focusing to a great extent on Trooper, the Irish wanderer, and his

²⁰ Anthony McGrew, ‘A Global Society,’ in *Modernity and Its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Open UP, 1992) 63.

²¹ Sebastian Barry, ‘White Woman Street,’ in *Plays 1* (London: Methuen, 1997) 158.

²² Barry 155.

²³ Barry 130.

²⁴ Barry 158.

²⁵ Barry 141.

²⁶ The performative space, or performativity, is a notion first created by Judith Butler, who describes it as a kind of ‘reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.’ Although Butler applied it mainly to gender issues, this notion has been used as an interdisciplinary term referring to the challenge to existing ideologies and traditions or the intention of constructing new ones. This play, by presenting a foreign scenario that coincides with the 1916 Easter Rising, may be performative in this sense. For more details on performativity, see Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge) 2.

²⁷ *White Woman Street* was premiered at the Bush Theatre in London on 23 April 1992 and toured to the Abbey Theatre for another run from 21 May of the same year.

suspicious involvement in the mass slaughter of native Americans, his interactions with people of other ethnicities imply the double marginalisation of those already silenced in a transnational context. That is, regardless of whether these six characters have arrived in America as low-skilled labourers or economic migrants – brought by the early stage of globalisation – they are incapable of speaking with a public voice but have to survive individually on the lowest rung of society. Specifically, the tensions between the different ethnicities in the play and the killing of native Americans disclose the brutality inherent in the imperial rule of European settlers – usually unseen by the public or not featured in written histories – as it is always the winners rather than the defeated who get to write about themselves. Those who cannot be conveniently categorised as belonging to a recognisable nationality would be marked as inferior and consequently excluded from official documentation. Specifically, the six characters who deviate from their original courses in life would probably be written out of official history or, at most, be given only the merest mention in history monographs and textbooks. For this reason, as Ireland had not yet been recognised as a country in 1916, Trooper cannot help but fall through the cracks, which, along with his murder of a native American child prostitute, leads to him becoming an outcast in (Irish-)American society.

The emphasis on one's national identity is thus a matter of challenge, in that all the other five characters are in a similar quandary because of their ambiguous identities. For example, Nathaniel cannot identify himself as either Russian or Chinese because of his mixed origins, his incompetence in speaking his native languages, and being unfamiliar with either culture. As for James Miranda and Clarke, their skin colour bars them from the political standing extended to white European settlers and their descendants, despite the fact that James, an escaped black slave, is also involuntarily relocated to America from a distant location. Clarke, the native American Indian, is on the cultural and political fringe in the 'new world,' even though no one in the play can be more *native* than him. Mo Mason's lust for women makes him religiously unfit in the eyes of the puritanical Amish community. Blakely, the only one who retains a recognisable identity as an Englishman, cannot return to his home in Grimsby, Lincolnshire, as it has been devastated by famine. Under these circumstances, the distinctions between their national or ethnic identities are gradually eroded until they are merely classed as robbers of gold trains – without any further critical explorations being needed.

Although *White Woman Street* is set in Ohio with multi-ethnic characters, the Irishness of the play rests on young Trooper's imagined encounter with an Irish prostitute whose presence is deemed to be unmentionable as a cure for the homesickness of Irish soldiers who are 'sullied up by [Indian] wars'.²⁸ Ironically, Trooper, travelling through 'five hundred miles of wilderness' and not meeting the prostitute he has long desired,²⁹ ends up raping an underage native American girl who slits her throat in his presence after submitting to him. Such a horrific experience should not be seen as an isolated case but as one of many undocumented incidents which happened during European colonial rule up to the mid-twentieth century. Satirically, what initially draws Trooper to White Woman Street, a red-light district, is the urge to ease his homesickness by visiting an Irish whore from Listowel: 'a sight of home, a goddess of my own countrymen,'³⁰ as she has been idolised as 'a woman of a hundred stories, a hundred boasts, a kind of fire-hot legend of those days, such as had power over their talk and ... was likely a goddess, and surely built that canal.'³¹ The playwright might well have intended to produce a counter image to Kathleen ni Houlihan, a mythical and over-

²⁸ Barry 149.

²⁹ Barry 147.

³⁰ Barry 149.

³¹ Barry 150.

politicised figure in Ireland, whereas this insalubrious image of an Irish whore in Ohio may potentially add problems to the nationalistic discourse. On the other hand, these culturally and geographically displaced characters, including the Irish and native Indian prostitutes whom the audience never see on stage, illustrate the darker side of American history that involves injustice, racism and infringements of human rights.

It can be contended that, by inventing characters who are constantly on the move as robbers and escaped slaves, the playwright may want audiences to see these individuals within the larger historical context of the American society becoming highly capitalistic after the Gold Rush. As the Gold Rush produced a westward flow of people to California for the first time in American history, the *nouveaux riches* were promptly created, and the resulting capital was redistributed with a mixed impact on class distinction, slavery, and interethnic exchange. Arguably, by presenting an image of how these migrants survive in an interethnic scenario, the play reroutes the moral direction of a national drama on the world stage. That these characters are of Chinese, Russian, native American, English and Irish origins implies an advent of intercultural exchange in the coming era.

Last but not least, the playwright's portrait of an Irish character overseas in 1916 unveils the parochial nature of the Irish nationalistic historiography in terms of its general dismissal of the experiences of Irish immigrants abroad. Notably, the play encourages the creation of an alternative perspective for the making of an *international* history of Ireland in which the Irish at home and overseas should both be considered in order to gain a more complete picture of the nation.

Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra?* (2006): From Patriots to Traitors?

Born in Dublin in 1968 and having worked for extended periods in Paris, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, New York, and for six years in Northern Ireland, Teevan is different from many fellow playwrights who have lived mostly in Ireland. Though based in London, his frequent border-crossing experiences have sharpened his sensitivity and led to shrewd observations about cultural clashes; only in London does he feel 'least anxious about the issues of cultural difference'.³² The mid-twentieth-century generation he was born into also experienced the Northern Ireland Troubles and their aftermath, witnessing how Ireland was transformed from an agricultural state to an economic power known as the Celtic Tiger.

Partly to examine how news can be manipulated, and partly to interrogate British policy in the Middle East under Tony Blair's administration, Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra?* parallels the perspectives of different ethnicities and nationalities, in order to reflect on the imperial rule that once dominated Ireland and was now seen in another form in Iraq. First broadcast in July 2004 on BBC Radio 4 and later premiered at West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds in 2006, this anti-war play provides audiences with a critical distance from which to see the absurdities 'in the white heat of the invasion of Iraq by Allied Forces', as the playwright stated.³³ What is of greater significance is that Teevan continues McGuinness's and Barry's attempt in contextualising characters of different ethnicities in a wider international context.³⁴ By questioning deeply the legitimacy of the British and

³² David Sexton, 'Interest in Conflict Radio,' *Sunday Telegraph* 18 July 2004, 1.

³³ For details, see the interview with Colin Teevan on the website of the African-American Shakespeare Company, accessed 19 July 2012, para. 3 of 19. <http://www.african-americanshakes.org/AboutUs/AboutUs_Artists/AboutUs_Artists_ColinTeevan.html>.

³⁴ Teevan is a well-travelled playwright, and these experiences may have contributed to a perspective, often seen in his dramas, in which the Irish, even a single character, should be examined through a broader framework alongside those of other ethnicities. Compared with McGuinness's and Barry's, Teevan's choices of setting are much more multinational. He not only adapted works by Euripides, Cervantes, Wu Cheng-en, Henrik Ibsen, Jaroslav Hašek, Edoardo Erba, and Giuseppe Manfredi, but co-authored two plays with Hideki Noda, a Japanese playwright. He is one of the very few

American invasion of Iraq and their prolonged military occupation of the country, the play demonstrates how the two world powers had not only damaged the infrastructure of major cities, such as Baghdad and Basra, but also taken the lives of thousands of civilians as the country fell into anarchy.

Although the play challenges the rightfulness of the invasion under Tony Blair's leadership, it is Ursula, a woman journalist from Ireland, who initiates a series of journalistic assignments that would potentially embarrass the British government, despite her reporting being, to some extent, questionable due to her insufficient research, biases, assumptions and personal emotions. The problem of news-making in producing a favourable storyline is unfolded at the beginning of the play, when Ursula is seen at a news agency in London, complaining that the items she has submitted for a report have not been sorted in chronological order as she expected. Arguably, what the playwright would like to illustrate through Ursula is not just the work ethics of journalism but also the anti-terrorist ethos that is nurtured by the western media. The news agency that Ursula approaches, which is an embodiment of the western media, should be seen as partly responsible for popular images of the Middle East crisis. Its biased reporting prompts misleading impressions about the Iraqi government supporting al-Qaeda and harbouring 'weapons of mass destruction', despite there being no clear evidence of a connection or of such weapons being held. Incidentally, the play, which was premiered in 2006, reflected the playwright's highly critical views about the Blair government's justification for dispatching troops to Iraq. In the play, British soldiers' killing of a group of unarmed Bedouin civilians showcases this particularly unpleasant facet of the war.

Ursula's reports about the killing of civilians are certainly not welcome to the right-wing media, whereas such killings can be common but are often strategically covered up or by the authorities: Stewart, a low-ranked British officer in the play, has experienced them on the front line in different trouble spots. Specifically, in contradiction to Ursula's on-site observation, the cause of the deaths of the Bedouin civilians receives no mention in the British media, while the British military vehicle which is accidentally blown up by a British soldier is presented in the news as a result of terrorist action. It can thus be argued that the playwright intends to question the interdependence between the media and the British government. To achieve this, and partly to attract viewers/readers with visual or audible evidence and supporting matter, only those incidents which can be reconstructed by the media in a literal and lineal manner would be made public and they are often edited by people who have never been on the front line. Individual experiences, which Ursula thinks are more worthy of report, are often ignored or manipulated to suit political agendas, so as to solicit public support and to demonise the religious and cultural Other as potential terrorists.

A less discussed facet of the Iraq War, which this play explores, is how racism and sexism can be pillars of war. For instance, the soldiers' sexual fantasies about and assaults on Ursula, and their constant racist remarks about Iraqis, illustrate the excessive western chauvinism that exists in military operations. For soldiers, a female presence is deemed to be a potential interference with military action on the front line. Ursula is thus the detested Other to be removed, although her presence, as well as that of the ethnic, religious and cultural Others from the Islamic world, is necessary for the western superpowers to verify their (masculine) superiority and to confirm their domination over the less defensible. Specifically, the demonstration of masculinity exemplifies the continuation of colonial domination over the Other and the weaker sex – even metaphorically. That Ursula is often called 'bitch' by the soldiers, and the fact that she appears in the sexual fantasies that lead to Freddie's attempt to rape her, are a metaphor for how imperial and patriarchal power still

English-language playwrights devoted to topics on the Middle East Conflict. Other plays include *The Lion of Kabul* (2009) and *There Was A Man, There Was No Man* (2012).

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lingers in the twenty-first century. For these soldiers, Ursula is a much more convenient target for domination than the Iraqi guerillas. A further contradiction of the peacemaking mission of the Allied Forces is the verbal and physical abuse of civilians who are either carelessly killed like the Bedouin or are frequently dubbed 'ragheads'.³⁵ Unfortunately, how the violence is used is 'classified information', as the (accidental) killing of Bedouin civilians in the play is immediately covered up, while the number of British casualties is soon made public through the media.³⁶

The play serves to illuminate agonising truths about of the Iraq War, in that the portrayal of brutalities is to some extent faithful, given that the playwright had interviewed several war reporters and soldiers who confirmed that 'accidental killings at roadblocks' and 'payment of blood money' did happen.³⁷ Although highly critical of the military operations of the Allied Forces, Teevan does not seem to advance any perspective in describing the troubles in Iraq and their causes and effects, given that the reporting by western media about the Middle East was *not* always impartial and sometimes only reflected the interests of the winner, or the Bush's and Blair's administrations.

What is also noteworthy is a reference to Kabro a Generals, provided by Malek, an Iraqi taxi driver who is hired to take Ursula and the soldiers across the desert. As Malek explains, those enshrined in the temple as great generals by Alexander the Great are only 'in his version of the truth',³⁸ while they are ultimately traitors in the eyes of the ancient Persians. Kabro a Generals thus represents 'what was a sign of treachery to the East, [but] was a shrine to heroism in the West.'³⁹ With this reference to the Persian version of a historical incident, the presence of Allied Forces in Iraq as 'another western invasion' is comparable to that of the late Babylonian period, as Malek implies to his passengers.⁴⁰ To Iraqis, the result of the extended war is not liberation but never-ending occupation that is regarded 'more as arrogance' on the part of the West.⁴¹ There is therefore an implicit satire here, in that these soldiers who are undertaking an unauthorised mission are not only traitors to Britain but are similar to those Greeks who once showed the white flag to the Persian Empire but were later honoured by Alexander the Great for political purposes.⁴² It can be argued that the truth will only be fully appreciated when an interethnic or intercultural understanding of history is established. Ironically, as the reports written by Ursula are subject to re-editing by the news editors in London, exactly how the *coalition* forces of the UK and US in the Middle East operate would only be available to those who are deeply involved in the action on the front line.

The Breakdown of Euro-Centrism in the Three Irish Plays

As was mentioned earlier, Eurocentrism has for centuries, both explicitly and implicitly, directed the making of the oriental Other, and it was only when postcolonial critics started to develop transnational perspectives that the insularism of nationalistic discourses could be examined and challenged. As for Ireland, its geopolitical and economic ties with Great Britain throughout history have provided a fixed point for critics from which to discuss the central-periphery model of

³⁵ Colin Teevan, *How Many Miles to Basra?* (London: Oberon, 2006) 29.

³⁶ Teevan 29.

³⁷ Sexton 1.

³⁸ Teevan 71.

³⁹ Teevan 71.

⁴⁰ Teevan 70.

⁴¹ Teevan 70.

⁴² According to Malek, the Greek generals found themselves surrounded by hostile tribes, so they decided to negotiate with the Persians. However, the Persians refused any negotiation but cut off their heads and displayed them in public. However, seventy years later when the Persian Empire fell to the Greeks, Alexander the Great set up Kabro a Generals to house their remains and to honour the generals who were thought to have been sacrificed for Greece.

(post-)imperialism, and also provide a location for observing how transnationalism converts a nation-state into a global one.

The three plays discussed as a group exemplify a process that can be dated back to the native American conflicts, the Cold War, and the Iraq War, during which world power was reaffirmed through a series of military actions. Notably, the three plays demonstrate how the ‘zones of silence’ which are exclusively created by ‘a [Eurocentric] diasporan axis of political, military and economic affiliations’ have brought about the difficulties of lateral communications between and within oppressed countries.⁴³ The windowless cell in *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me*, the suicide of a native American girl in *White Woman Street*, and the miscommunication between British soldiers and Bedouin civilians in *How Many Miles to Basra?* all embody such communication failures as experienced by an individual or a group of mixed ethnicities in a transnational scenario.

One facet that these three plays have in common is that they were all premiered in the UK, rather than in Ireland. One reason might be because contemporary Irish playwrights hope to gain a wider audience outside the Emerald Isle with plays set in international contexts. They are also keen observers of the social and political transformation of British society and its problematic alliance with the US.

Both first staged in 1992, respectively at the Hampstead Theatre and the Bush Theatre, *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* and *White Woman Street* reflect the changing attitudes of the public as regards British Dependent Territories and their colonial links to Britain,⁴⁴ particularly two years after Margaret Thatcher resigned from her post as Prime Minister.⁴⁵ Furthermore, although *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* was adapted from the accounts of Brian Keenan, an Irish writer who attracted the attention of western media after being abducted in Beirut in 1985 and held captive for the next four and a half years, the play questions indirectly the British alliance with the US during the Cold War, and reveals the extended consequences that afflicted civilians in the affected nations.

White Woman Street, by the same token, is a dramatic critique, from an Irish point of view, of the British imperial mindset embodied by the 1982 Falklands War, following which the Conservative Party received a resurgence of support in the next year’s UK general election. The gap between the privileged and the powerless in an international scenario is further visualised in *How Many Miles to Basra?*, premiered in 2006 in London’s Tricycle Theatre, which is a venue known for its left-wing stance. The position taken is that the Iraq War was prolonged by leaders who could have terminated it – seeing that no weapons of mass destruction were eventually found.

The three plays under discussion suggest not only the need to reassess Irish experiences in the present and the past, but more significantly they offer retrospective views of imperial violence and its impact on people of different ethnicities. By not endorsing any particular ideologies or cultures, the foci of these plays are on marginalised individuals and their struggles in a transnational setting,

⁴³ Jean Fisher, ‘Editor’s Note,’ *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* ed. Fisher (London: Institute for the International Visual Arts, 1994) xii.

⁴⁴ The name ‘British Dependent Territory,’ introduced by the British Nationality Act 1981, was replaced by ‘British Overseas Territory,’ introduced by the British Overseas Territories Act 2002. The British territories overseas were still officially called ‘Dependent Territories’ when the two plays were first staged.

⁴⁵ Specifically, these two plays were staged after the first Gulf War (2 August 1990 – 28 February 1991) during John Major’s premiership. Major’s successful renewal of his term of office by winning the general election of 1992 was in part due to the success of the UN authorised coalition force to which the UK committed a major contingent, and in part to his replacement of Thatcher’s unpopular Community Charge with a Council Tax. In spite of this fourth consecutive victory for the Conservative Party, it is probable that both playwrights would have wanted to draw the attention of the audience to the institutional deprivation of the disadvantaged in the British system. The English lecturer, Michael, who is the only person not released from the windowless cell in *Someone*, and Trooper, the Irishman wandering in the wilds of Ohio in *White Woman Street*, showcase the playwrights’ concerns for these disregarded people.

which notably counteracts the lingering effects of Euro-centric imperialism. Set *outside* Ireland, the three dramatic texts may correspond to what Steffen Mau implies by his proposal for a more interactive international community in which ‘the social life of each individual is less and less limited to the nation-state territory’, the traditional borders of which are now constantly contested, de-naturalised and hybridised (23). As the three plays demonstrate, the more that confrontations are ignited by globalisation, the greater the chance that transnational dialogues will be able to build a platform for all voices to be heard.

One of the shared characteristics of the three plays is the challenge by the playwrights to European cognition of the world since the Enlightenment and also insular Irish nationalism. In McGuinness’s *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me*, the hostages’ lives in Lebanon are entirely subject to people who revere the Islamic Koran, while audiences see Edward, the Irishman, and Michael, the English lecturer, argue over the correct use of certain English words. Their debate is meaningless, because what they believe to be appropriate usage is only ideological or simply customary. That is, when Edward insists that Michael should use ‘film’ instead of ‘movie’ to refer to a motion picture, it is the Irishman himself who holds on to a linguistic convention which makes him more English than his English cellmate. As a whole, what used to be regarded as major cultural values can be politically invalid or religiously void in the world of the Other. For Michael and Edward, their argument does nothing that contributes to their being released sooner from the prison of the Other, or their enemy.

Barry’s *White Woman Street* also challenges the nationalistic historiography about the year of 1916 by setting it in a transnational scenario in that year, although 1916 is only mentioned in passing during the play.⁴⁶ Whereas fervent Irish nationalists were keen to posit a political identity that was different from the English one, and historians have documented and entered debates on the domestic turbulence, the ups-and-downs of Irish migrants are almost forgotten in the official records. For Trooper and other Irish migrants – whose love for Ireland is no less than that of any Irish nationalist – their bodily contact with an Irish whore, her smell and touch, is more important than the Easter Rising, in that her body prompts them to feel most physically in touch with Mother Ireland. Ironically, as Trooper has been physically and ethnically subjugated to the given social/colonial hierarchy, his rape of the young Indian girl, or ‘that furrow’,⁴⁷ has allowed him to receive a temporarily improved status as a white dominator, even though he is also a socially marginalised character in that settlers-dominated, migrant society.

The depiction of the conduct of the Allied Forces in Teevan’s *How Many Miles to Basra?* can be seen as a strong critique of Tony Blair’s administration and its anti-terrorist agenda. Although Ursula and the news agency in London both have their own biases about how British Intelligence ‘sex(ed) up the dossier on Saddam’s weapon capabilities’,⁴⁸ it is fair to assert that the extended occupation of Iraq allowed certain politicians to establish their interests through state machines and international networks. Ursula’s strong concerns over how the news agency decodes her submitted items imply the possibility that the war may be misrepresented. Furthermore, how the war should be represented often mirrors fear of and imagining about the Other. Fear as such is not necessarily created by propaganda or within cooperatives like the news agency, but it can be a factor that prompts individuals’ hostility to the Other, or whoever are regarded as potential terrorists. The indifference of the news agency in London to the three Iraqi deaths also emanates from such sentiments, leading to the killing not being worthy of inclusion in Ursula’s report, as the victims belong to the fearful and deniable Other rather than being innocent Caucasians.

⁴⁶ See note 18.

⁴⁷ McGuinness 163.

⁴⁸ Teevan 9.

Irish dramas that have international appeal are not limited to the three discussed in this essay, although they may reflect demands for reexamination of the Irish past seen from the broader perspective of contemporary Ireland. These three contemporary plays set in locations distant from Ireland demonstrate that first borders are no longer prerequisites for defining one's identity, and second globalisation often incurs a revisionist view of 'historical breakpoint', as the 'present premises and understanding of history's dynamics must be treated as conceptual jails'.⁴⁹ Through the compression of time and space, a transnational drama can present numerous, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives of those 'jails' conditioned by major or minor players on the world stage. The quandaries that trap all the characters may thus portend the collapse of political and religious confinement that leads some regions or countries into war or leaves them in a constant state of conflict. In addition, the interactions of Irish protagonists with those of other ethnicities should not be taken only as a minor Irish experience, in that they showcase the demand for the reshuffling of political and economic powers so as to accommodate the Other more amicably. The three plays, perhaps a collective theatrical response to how justice should be firmly upheld in a transnational community, should be seen as opening a dialogue aimed at peace.

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⁴⁹ James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) 5.