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## Conflict and Crisis, Dialogue and (Dis-)Connection: Renegotiating Identities through Irish Narratives of Community

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In the first two decades of the 21st century, the condition of glocality was rendered highly visible by the 2008 world financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland, as elsewhere. Moreover, glocality can impact on such forms of identity as that of nationality, either with an exclusionary impetus or effecting the recognition of shared experiences. This article examines how the community, as a spatiotemporal concept, serves as a means of exploring renegotiations of identity and modes of interdependence in a glocal world. Discussing short fiction by Roddy Doyle and Emma Donoghue, published against the background of changing cultural narratives of Irishness during the Celtic Tiger period, I argue that short story cycles function as multi-layered reflections and interventions that place Irish identities in dialogue with other affiliations, but also with Irish history. Such a critical discussion renders visible the potential in literary fiction for coming to terms with conflicts that are rooted in essentialist understandings of identity and for opening up possibilities for renegotiations in light of local and global interrelations. When Doyle's and Donoghue's stories reflect upon and criticise exclusionary tendencies, they further the recognition of shared experiences despite cultural difference within a glocal world. Thereby, they interrupt the perpetuation of simplifying identity discourses based on notions of alterity and exceptionalism, contribute to identity renegotiation, and invite the possibility for building communities during times of continuous crisis.

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## Introduction: Irish Identities and the Condition of Glocality

During the first two decades of the 21st century, the ‘relatedness’ of people, institutions, cultures, economies, and nations within a global network became increasingly visible in Ireland. Connections between the global and the local should not only be considered within the framework of politics or economy in Ireland, because glocality impacts upon various forms of identity, including national identity. While the evaluation of connectivity as a threatening development—take the 2008 world financial crisis or the Covid-19 pandemic as examples—can generate further exclusionary impetus, a recognition of glocality may also lead to acknowledgment of shared characteristics and experience between different peoples. This recognition of glocality during an era of globalisation can thus be a way of overcoming exclusionary discourses and the particular forms of exceptionalism that have traditionally informed dominant understandings of Irishness. Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley delineate how the ‘Irish character’ was ‘[i]nitially Catholic and rural — developing in response to a more powerful British colonial habitus’ (2020: 227) before Irish independence. Molloy puts even more emphasis on alterity: the ‘colonial experience of race and its corollary of death’ established ‘alterity as the basis for a specifically Irish subjectivity’ (2021: 137).<sup>1</sup> This restrictive idea largely served as a stable foundation of an Irish national collective identity and imagined community until the Celtic Tiger period of the early 2000s.

The term ‘Celtic Tiger’ initially only designated the ‘spectacular growth of the Irish economy’ (Battel, 2003: 94) but eventually transformed into an abbreviation for a whole narrative of modernisation and became ‘an important stage in the construction of postcolonial Irish identity, arguably the first one that was not constructed on “otherness,” on being anti- or not-British’ (2003: 101). Although Ireland had already joined the European Economic Community in 1973, the Celtic Tiger marked a clear departure from locality and discursive alterity by transforming Ireland into a global player and a ‘modern’ society—a self-understanding that collided with the pastoral image of a rural Ireland of small communities and of the Irish people as ‘the antithesis of materialistic values’ (Heinz et al., 2012: 4). Drawing on Mac Sharry, White, and O’Malley, Jason Buchanan frames this fast economic growth and apparent success as Ireland’s escape from its ‘long history of famine, depression, and emigration. At the core of this new definition of Irishness is the language of globalization, complete with

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<sup>1</sup> Catholicism, the Irish language and traditional customs also belonged to this dominant idea of Irishness. During the time of the Revival, the west of Ireland was established as the epitome of authentic Irishness, an idea which established the west as an Irish community in contrast to Dublin as a more individualistic society. For a further discussion of the Celtic Tiger as escape from history, and an analysis of collisions of local and global ways of life, see Keohane and Kuhling (2004).

its promise of newness, success, and transformation' (2009: 300). The Celtic Tiger, as an economic boom and as a cultural narrative of innovation and novelty, therefore seemingly eliminated austerity, rurality, alterity, conservatism, and the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

The eventual collapse of the Irish economy during the world financial crisis of 2008 turned the Celtic Tiger on its head, however, evoking memories of poverty and austerity, and questioning the paradigms of modernity, individualism, and globalisation as viable alternatives to established ideas of Irish communality. Although the Irish economy showed signs of recovery in 2014 and Ireland continued on its path towards an increasingly open-minded, 'modern' country, economic collapse and bailout programmes effected a sudden disbelief in an easy escape from (colonial) history. Christopher Morash's diagnosis of a 'profound, existential crisis whose origins go back to the middle of the last century, but which took an acute form in the mid-1990s' (2012: 18) highlights Ireland's continued preoccupation with profound changes and crises. In connection with his interpretation of rupture as a 'continuous feature of a new kind of culture in which the . . . markers of the spatial and temporal revolution of the 1990s continue unabated', Morash's observation complicates the modernisation narrative of escape from the past (2012: 18). He thus provides a point of departure for the examination of identity renegotiations that figure prominently in Post-Celtic Tiger short fiction.

This article considers how selected stories by Roddy Doyle and Emma Donoghue place Irish identities in dialogue with other affiliations, but also with Ireland's own history, as viewed through the lens of community. From the perspective of community-building and social identity formation, these short stories appear as multi-layered reflections and interventions that explore modes of interdependence between individuals, communities, and nations. Published during times of change, crisis, and reorientation, with what Loyal and Quilley consider as the genetic-mythological projection of Irish community coming under enormous pressure (2020: 253), these stories by Doyle and Donoghue reflect upon established discourses that reserve 'Irishness' and a concomitant sense of belonging to a cordoned-off, ethnic 'we-group'. Since attempts at defining Irish national identity in a glocal world are as diverse as the communities alluded to in the short stories—imagined, local, temporal, ethnic or transnational—all attempts at defining one new national identity are both futile and counterproductive, because they can only function as demarcation strategies, producing tangible realities by effecting xenophobic tendencies and social inequalities.

Irish short fiction provides a space for the renegotiation of identities and notions of belonging in light of local and global interrelations. By relating the personal crises

of the protagonists to larger crises rooted in essentialist understandings of collective identity, the short stories incorporate the local and the global, the particular and the universal. I maintain that these narratives—whether ironically, critically or conciliatorily—reflect upon and eventually critique exclusionary discourses in order to further a recognition of shared experiences and similarity despite the question of difference. These stories interrupt the perpetuation of simplifying discourses of national identity that rely on alterity and exceptionalism. Doyle and Donoghue’s stories thereby highlight possibilities of community building and maintenance during times of continuous rupture.

The following section approaches the notion of an Irish national identity and community from a theoretical and historical perspective to discuss how, as a spatiotemporal concept, community serves as a means of renegotiating identities and modes of interdependence in a glocal world. From this perspective, I move on to consider major cultural and societal changes in relation to the narrative of the Celtic Tiger and its entanglements with shifting identities. I elaborate on concepts of national as well as social identity formation and scrutinise apparent tensions between the local and the global, the past and the present. The third section outlines how Irish short fiction is a particularly notable form through which to explore the renegotiation of identity with due regard to conflicts and crises, dialogues and (dis-)connections. The final sections of this article discuss Doyle’s *The Deportees* as a short story cycle that centres the margins of a multi-ethnic society and Donoghue’s *Astray* as transnational literature that evokes shared experiences across time and space to highlight how short fiction intervenes in and amplifies identity discourses.

### **Tensions between the Local and the Global: Irish Identities and Communities**

As Loyal and Quilley argue, despite changing foci and the shift towards a more mobile ‘I’ in modern society, the ‘we layer’ has not vanished, rather it has moved away from families and communities to the more abstract, imagined community that Benedict Anderson defined the nation as (2020: 230). Instead of working with the more traditional idea of community as a locally bound group of people, this article takes into account how membership in a community relates to forms of consciousness that place the self in relation to other people and includes the recognition of shared experiences, values or practices. Such recognition can result in the renegotiation of identities with regard to different kinds of belonging to diverse communities.

Drawing on Otto Bauer, Loyal and Quilley emphasise how *all* human beings share certain characteristics but how, simultaneously, the identification of specific aspects that people only share with *some* other human beings is a more integral aspect of

identity (2020: 227). This insight relates to the formation of social groups, defined by Jan Stets and Peter Burke as ‘a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category’ (2000: 225) or, as Loyal and Quilley phrase it, it connects to the construction of a ‘we-group’ and a ‘dependable “survival group”’ that is fuelled by culture, language and history, and remains a ‘means of orientation’ (2020: 227). Anderson’s concept of the nation as imagined community functions in a similar way. According to Anderson, the nation is imagined because its members will never know, meet or hear of most of the other members, ‘yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (2003: 6). Furthermore, he emphasises that ‘[c]ommunities are to be distinguished ... by the style in which they are imagined’ (Anderson, 2003: 6–7). This central aspect relates to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as ‘structuring dispositions expressed in our social practices’ (Loyal and Quilley, 2020: 231). Loyal and Quilley argue that the imagined community, as a national ‘we-group’, has functioned as the ‘dominant locus’ for identification: an Irish national habitus developed ‘in response to a more powerful British colonial habitus—this “national character” altered as the power balances shifted, especially after independence’ (227). On this abstract level, Irishness—in the sense of a specific national character shared by the Irish people—remained an integral aspect of political, social, and cultural dimensions of Irish life.

Gerry Smyth makes the case for seeing national identity as a myth that ‘emerged during the nineteenth century as a response to certain ways of understanding Irish history as well as certain developments in Irish political, economic and cultural life’ (2012: 135). He specifically highlights ‘the Great Famine of the 1840s which ... was the fountainhead of the great Irish global diaspora’, ‘heightened cultural activity’, and nationalist discourses (135). Smyth thus not only emphasises the 19th-century roots of contemporary Irish national identity, but the diaspora’s role in the formation of the imagined community. In a similar way, Amanda Tucker and Moira Casey emphasise that ‘diaspora often reinforces the idea of belonging based upon blood ties and heredity’ (2014: 4). Since it includes and remembers emigrants and their descendants, Irishness thus cannot be framed in terms of locality only: Ireland is a ‘hybrid culture’ that is ‘local and global’ (Morales Ladrón and Elices Agudo, 2011: 3).

Still, alterity and exceptionalism continued to form the (unconscious) basis of an Irish ‘we-group’ through post-Independence times. As a ‘powerful cultural signifier for progress and newness’ (Buchanan, 2009: 300), the Celtic Tiger eventually promised a more global identity based on the paradigm of modernity. It disrupted the former idea of the Irish—both within Ireland and as a diaspora—as community defined and linked by a shared history of suffering and by experiences such as emigration. The

heterogenisation of ways of life not only changed local communities or the ways that Ireland was perceived, but it also changed the ways in which Ireland envisioned the world and the position that it held in global affairs, as Marisol Morales Ladrón and Juan F. Elices Agudo argue (2011: 1). Furthermore, they accentuate that the ‘construction of the global does not necessarily involve a rejection of the local’ (2011: 2).

This phenomenon can be evaluated differently and to different effects, as recent Irish history shows: while ‘Tigerhood’—to borrow Róisín Ní Mhaille Battel’s term—furthered the glocal condition of Ireland, this reality did not prevent social closure. The Direct Provision system and the 2004 referendum on citizenship in the Republic of Ireland, which was a reaction to the increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees in the late 1990s and early 2000s, renders demarcation and closure highly visible. Seventy-nine percent of the Irish electorate voted in favour of the 27th amendment, which introduced a definition of Irish citizenship that is determined by ancestry rather than place of birth. It thus effected an ethnic definition of affinity as ‘membership’ which included the diaspora but excluded immigrants (Heinz et al., 2012: 4). According to Loyal and Quilley, this impulse is hardly surprising: ‘in the context of increasing globalisation of capital, economic dislocation, and scarcity of resources’, ‘self-understandings underpinned by the nation state’, and thus by an imagined community, formed the ‘basis for a process of social closure to reaffirm access to those resources and status distinction’ (2020: 253).

Such developments can be explained by considering how ideas of change, reinvention, and a ‘different’ country cut both ways. While the notion of exceptional Irishness marked difference from other (national) communities, the cultural narrative of the Celtic Tiger marked Ireland’s difference from itself and thus partially accounts for the longing for new identities and signifiers. Smyth criticises a lack of critical engagement, a disregard of hybridity and transnationalism, and a neglect of a new moral vision in the endeavour to construct a whole new Irish identity. Such a new vision would have necessitated a concept of difference, which Appadurai conceives of as the ‘most valuable feature of culture’ due to its contrastive, instead of substantive outlook: ‘[C]ulture is not usefully regarded as a substance but is better regarded as a dimension of phenomena, a dimension that attends to situated and embodied difference’ (2010: 12). Culture, therefore, ought not to be regarded as a property of a certain group, rather as a ‘heuristic device’ (Appadurai, 2010: 12–13).

Various dimensions of similarity and difference figure prominently in glocal societies because glocalisation implies the entanglement of local and global levels, encompassing what Morales Ladrón and Elices Agudo describe as the ‘dynamics of the search for one’s identity and the cross-current need to open up new boundaries’ (2011: 2).

This idea incorporates both the notion of a central identity linked to homogeneity and the ‘need to expand to the margins, searching for difference in heterogeneity’ (2). The following section briefly outlines how Irish short fiction, as an important form of cultural production from the perspective of narrative of community, interrogates such dynamics and reflects on the multiple layers of identity formation and renegotiation.

### **Irish Short Fiction between Local and Global, Lonely Voice and Community**

In *Postcolonial Poetics*, Elleke Boehmer states that literature in general, and postcolonial writing in particular, ‘has the capacity to keep reimagining and refreshing how we understand ourselves in relation to the world’ (2018: 1). This idea also applies to Irish short fiction which engages with the complexities of identity construction and renegotiation. Despite the longstanding production of Irish identity through alterity or ‘Otherness’—for example, in contrast to normalising (English) identities—and although many canonised ‘works deal with questions of national and cultural identity, social struggles, and the legacy of history’, Haekel argues that ‘Irish literature is predominantly inter- and transnational in its outlook and the way the works are marketed’ (2020: 21).

This partially holds true for short fiction, which has always been open to European and Russian influences (see O’Connor, 1963). Despite its place at the margins of the canon, it has often been labelled Ireland’s national genre; an idea that can be traced back to Frank O’Connor’s *The Lonely Voice* (1963).<sup>2</sup> The short story thus holds a central position in Irish literature, which plays an important role in the social and cultural imagination of the imagined community. Due to its position, manifold forms, and diverse publishing outlets, the short story appears as the ideal form to develop aesthetic-political counter-narratives to dominant cultural narratives. As the ‘art of saying less but meaning more’ (Hunter, 2007: 2), it merges apparent simplicity or accessibility with levels of complexity that invite reflection and active engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Despite different, often incompatible theories and definitions, a central characteristic of this form is its focus on personal moments of crisis in mundane life. According to Frank O’Connor, short stories centre on the ‘little man’ and ‘submerged

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<sup>2</sup> Despite its merits, O’Connor’s famous theory has been critically revisited in the past decades and termed too restrictive (see Kenny, 2007). His conception of the short story as the only essential form in Irish literature is compatible with the idea of essential difference from the coloniser’s culture and identity, for instance, and hence ties in with alterity discourses.

<sup>3</sup> Although Irish short fiction is often read as a realist form that relates to political, social, and cultural developments, it should not be reduced to such an approach, as D’hoker asserts in her introduction to *The Irish Short Story* (2015). For further discussions of the impact and theorisation of Irish short fiction, see Kenny (2007).

population' groups and thus foreground 'an intense awareness of human loneliness' (1963: 18–19). His conviction that the short story always features outlawed figures and their conflicting relationship to society seems to contrast with the notion of community. However, as a hybrid genre oscillating between the individual 'lonely voice' and the more encompassing view and wider tableau of the novel, the short story cycle appears as a particularly noteworthy form. Through the 'simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence' (Garland Mann qtd. in Brouckmans, 2015: 87) of its parts and the 'tension between unity and fragmentation' it creates (Brouckmans, 2015: 87), the short story cycle provides a kaleidoscopic image. It is also the default form of the narrative of community (D'hoker, 2018). According to Sandra Zagarell, the 'self exists here as part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit' (1988: 499). Zagarell's seminal definition largely derives from her reading of 19th-century narratives that concentrate on forms of communities that writers imagined to 'have characterized the preindustrial era' (499). These narratives represent 'a coherent response to the social, economic, cultural, and demographic changes caused by industrialism, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism' (499) and delineate 'the contrast between community life and the modern world' (503).

The community and the modern world can hardly be disentangled anymore in early 21st-century narratives, however. '[L]ines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments' are obscured by globalisation (Appadurai, 2010: 9–10); when the local and the global are intertwined, the traditional community cannot be maintained and preserved along the lines of cordoned-off locality, as the discussion of selected short story cycles will exemplify. The Celtic Tiger narrative of renewal, modernisation, and globalisation, however, functions as a foil for the relation of the self to spatiotemporal and imagined communities in many recent narratives. In light of the tensions of the Celtic Tiger era, Zagarell's definition of narrative of community still serves as a point of departure for new engagements with communities, with conceptions of identity, and with Morash's idea of rupture as continuous feature of Irish society.

Drawing on van Bever Donker's work on narrative ethics, I maintain that the encounter with a short story, its topics, its characters' crises, and its complex condensed form demands an active reading, effecting a responsibility to respond (2012: 6–8). The short stories discussed below do not centre on alterity and loneliness as absolute principles of Irish culture and identity. They emphasise universal, shared experiences and transcend alterity through an encounter with the Other—the migrant, the historical Irish, the 'new' Irish—via their themes, forms, and narrative voices. Doyle's short story cycle particularly turns encounters with an 'Other' that resides outside of the



‘we-group’ into an acknowledgement of similarity despite difference, as the following section illustrates.

### **Immigration and Glocal Irishness in Roddy Doyle’s *The Deportees***

The notion of mobility is essential to transnationalism and to any perspective on globalisation as a multilayered phenomenon. While the term ‘migration’ in Ireland traditionally signified emigration and life in exile, Ireland became a global player and an immigration country in the 21st century, to which even former emigrants returned. The need for workers in certain sectors during the second phase of the Celtic Tiger boom coincided with the enlargement of the European Union in 2004—one factor in the rapid immigration before the 2008 recession. The 2016 Census proved the ‘significant impact [of migration] on the country’s population’ (Ruhs and Quinn, 2009): while only 6% of the Irish population were born abroad in 1991, the 2016 Census counted 17.3%. The above mentioned 2004 referendum on entitlement to citizenship by birth exemplifies the apparent perception of inward migration as a threat to the traditionally and frequently evoked idea of a particular Irish identity. Since immigrants were regarded as factors of production in relation to global consumption, rather than as persons in their own right according to Amanda Tucker and Moira Casey (2014: 4), they were denied entrance into the ‘we-group’. This reaction to the presence of immigrants, especially to people of colour, seems surprising in light of Ireland’s former struggles with the legacies of its colonial history and when remembering how the experience of migration has been an integral aspect of Irish history and identity.

While engagements with migration and migrants frequently figure in Post-Celtic Tiger literature, Tucker and Casey regard Doyle’s *The Deportees* as the most famous literary work in Irish multiculturalism,<sup>4</sup> arguing that it shows how ‘racial and national privilege continues to shape discourse about cultural difference in Ireland’ (2014: 15). Doyle’s short story cycle engages with immigration and the complexities of Irishness in a glocal context. First published in the early 2000s in *Metro Eireann*, a multicultural paper edited by Nigerian journalists Abel Ugba and Chinedu Onyejelem for immigrants

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<sup>4</sup> Despite their attempts to counter xenophobic tendencies, writers such as Roddy Doyle and Donal Ryan have been criticised for glossing over systemic failures or for re-centring Irish identities. ‘Immigrant writers’, on the other hand, have introduced different perspectives on migration and migrants’ lives in Ireland, but have, with few exceptions (for example, Melatu Uche Okorie’s *This Hostel Life*), not received the same amount of attention. Immigrants and refugees are still often excluded from public life (e.g., due to the Direct Provision system) and African-Irish artists, in particular, do not have equal access to publishing. Such writers’ exciting work only goes almost unmentioned in my article because it deserves a detailed discussion which the scope of this paper did not allow for, and will be discussed elsewhere.

to Ireland, the short stories can be read as counter-narratives to xenophobic quotidian discourse that conceptualised difference as a flaw (Doyle, 2007: xii). The outlet chosen for the first publication of these stories, their serious themes, and the frequent choice of Eastern European and African immigrants as protagonists, indirectly evoke societal and cultural struggles but still target reconfigurations of Irish identity in a multicultural and increasingly glocal society. Doyle attempts to write a new community into existence, focussing not so much on the broad dimensions of citizenship, intercultural encounters and misunderstandings, employment and exploitation, or racism in general, but on the personal crises that short fiction foregrounds. His short stories criticise exclusionary impulses of Irish life in an often ironic manner: they expose the senselessness of stereotypes ('Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner') and of futile attempts at measuring Irishness ('57 % Irish'), They evoke a sense of small communities or friendship in the making ('New Boy') and sometimes imagine the formation of (im)possible utopian communities ('The Deportees').

Doyle's sometimes simplified images of friendship and of community-building and his ironic critique of Irish hypocrisy, narrowmindedness and exploitative behaviour ('I Understand'; 'The Pram') were considered to be not as suitable as the 'fierce social criticism' of his earlier works in addressing the 'problems inherent in the new dominant discourse which gives priority to economic prosperity and which turns Ireland into an actor on the stage' of global capitalism (Heinz et al., 2012: 4-5). Besides, from a current perspective, a male white writer speaking for (a homogenised group of) immigrants is problematic (see also Tucker and Casey, 2014: 20). Notwithstanding this criticism, Doyle's attempt to establish a point of departure for contact between an ethnically defined Irish society and immigrants constructed as 'Other' is as noteworthy as his reflection on increasing heterogeneity.

Many of Doyle's stories end on a positive note, appealing to the hospitality of Irish society to include the immigrants who share the experience of loss of community and the need to emigrate that had long marked Irish experience. Through Doyle's depiction of subjugation and isolation, the figure of the immigrant or refugee functions as a mirror and a reminder of the racialisation and oppression that the Irish experienced during colonial rule. Immigration thus is not a simple movement facilitated by modernity and globalisation, but highlights shifting identities and crises that continue to haunt 21st-century Irish reality despite the dominant idea of 'newness'. Doyle's stories reflect on identity in a multi-ethnic context, criticise social closure, and aim at inclusion. They do not conceptualise Irish culture as an essential property reserved for the 'ethnic' Irish, but instead frequently allude to the 'productive contact' between different cultures which Paul Jay (2010: 3) emphasises when drawing on Kwame

Appiah's work on homogenisation and agency in a globalised world. Doyle's characters thus trigger questions of community building and of belonging that span both space and time and that revisit notions of Irishness in relation to whiteness and blackness, as the following discussion of 'Home to Harlem' and 'The Deportees' shows.

The matter of racialisation is already addressed in Doyle's introduction to *The Deportees*. On the one hand, he captures the feeling of rupture and rapid transformation in a by now frequently quoted sentence: 'I went to bed in one country and woke up in a different one' (Doyle, 2007: xi). On the other hand, he reflects on the history of alterity by remarking that he would not use one of his other now famous quotations—'The Irish are the n\*\*\*\*\* of Europe' (xii)<sup>5</sup>—from his 1987 novel *The Commitments* (Doyle, 1998) anymore. This line relates to the idea of a racialised Irish identity (see Molloy, 2021: 132, 134) but would, according to Doyle, 'make no sense' (2007: xii) in the early 2000s due to Ireland's new status as a wealthy country. Despite this simplification of identity-construction processes, Doyle's renunciation is suggestive of changing discourses when the idea of Irishness as 'blackness', and thus as alterity, was superseded by 'whiteness' during the Celtic Tiger period. His short stories engage with whiteness and blackness in more complex ways, highlighting how these are frames of mind and patterns of thought and thus not necessarily tied to skin colour. Doyle was, therefore, already engaging in a discourse about decentring whiteness that is increasingly gaining ground in Irish Studies in the third decade of the 21st century.

I follow Jan Cronin, who states that 'Doyle has reconfigured rather than dispensed with analogies between blackness and Irishness' (2013: 188). His continued engagement is most obvious in 'Home to Harlem', the most complex and subtle story in *The Deportees* and the only one not set in Ireland. The protagonist Declan is a visiting student in New York, where he seeks to write a thesis to prove (or claim) that the Harlem Renaissance 'had kick-started Ireland's best writing of the twentieth century' (Doyle, 2007: 181) and particularly influenced Yeats and Beckett. On a larger scale, however, Declan's mission is to inscribe blackness into Irishness. Declan admits to feeling that his blackness continues to disrupt his Irishness (Cronin, 2013: 189), creating a sense of alienation that he is also faced with upon arriving in the USA. There is no box for

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<sup>5</sup> This article does not fully replicate Doyle's sentence for reasons of sensitivity and to prevent the amplification of a racist word under which many people have suffered. However, please note that Doyle used the n-word in *The Commitments* to highlight identification processes between Irish (working-class) culture in Northside Dublin and African-American people, particularly relating to notions of discrimination and Othering. Director Alan Parker's replacement of the racist term with the word 'blacks' in his film adaptation of *The Commitments* (1991) shows that Doyle's sentence was already considered problematic in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, the scope of this article does not allow for a detailed discussion of the complexities of Doyle's highly problematic diction in light of matters of subjugation and racialisation. For a discussion of racialisation in Ireland, see Molloy 2021.

Declan to tick on the registration form, because it only offers ‘White, Non-Hispanic; African-American; Hispanic’ (Doyle, 2007: 179). The administrator thereupon adds another box and the word ‘OTHER’, telling Declan that this is his category (2007: 180). Declan is thus still marked as ‘Other’ even in New York, where he hopes to find his grandfather, supposedly an African-American soldier whom his grandmother met in Glasgow during World War II, and a community he can relate to.

Culture and ethnicity are exposed as problematic frames of reference when the story invites reflection on the entanglement of, and simultaneous tensions between, personal or role identity and social identity: ‘Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group’s perspective’ (Stets and Burke, 2000: 227). The basis of role identity, however, ‘resides in the differences in perceptions and actions that accompany a role as it relates to counterroles’ (Stets and Burke, 2000: 227). In Doyle’s short story, Declan is first constructed as a lonely voice when he attempts to find his place and to create a certain view of Irish culture as influenced by black culture. He initially defines his hybridity and status of disbelonging as a problem: ‘I’m black and Irish, and that’s two fucking problems’ (Doyle, 2007: 185). Cronin’s insightful reading of ‘Home to Harlem’ from the angle of Julia Kristeva’s concept of paradoxical community<sup>6</sup> highlights how the idea of being a problem actually aligns with Irishness. Declan understands that a sense of distance or disconnection is an integral aspect of Irish identity: ‘Multiple versions of Irishness (the rocker, the peasant, the European, the Irish language speaker) afford multiple experiences of shortfall or positions of exteriority. The implication is one of a culture of mutual inadequacy or shared exteriority’, i.e., ‘the condition of being outside’ (Cronin, 2013: 189, 188).

Eventually, Declan ceases trying to find proof for the influence of the Harlem Renaissance on Irish literature but starts looking for himself (Doyle, 2007: 202). He finally not only succeeds in connecting to a person who may or may not be his uncle, but also in reconciling his experience of disbelonging by looking for analogies between the Harlem Renaissance and Irish literature. He thereby moves ‘beyond insularity’ (Cronin, 2013: 189) and adopts a transnational perspective that centres on dialogue instead of demarcation. He tells his supervisor that he is ‘going to study writing that questions the *we* in *we’re fuckin’ great* ... —The Harlem Renaissance questioned the same kind of *we*, here. I’ll compare the two ... They’re both in me’ (Doyle, 2007: 213). Declan thus accepts hybridity and Irishness as an integral aspect of his personal and

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<sup>6</sup> Cronin argues that Declan’s model of Irishness ‘resonates with Julia Kristeva’s account of the emergence of a “paradoxical community”’ (Cronin, 2013: 189) outlined in *Strangers to Ourselves* (Kristeva, 1991). The paradoxical community is formed by foreigners whose recognition of themselves as foreigners effects their reconciliation with themselves (Cronin, 2013: 189).

group identity, which also shows in his attitude towards language. While he regards using words such as ‘grand’ or ‘sláinte’ (195) as an empty performance for Americans at first, he eventually feels more comfortable in activating this group identity by re-enacting an Irish habitus that is both a stereotype and part of his identity (214).

While ‘Home to Harlem’ is not set in Ireland and focuses on (dis)belonging, ‘The Deportees’ paints a picture of multicultural Dublin and centres on the creation of a multi-ethnic ‘we-group’. In the title story of his cycle, Doyle returns to Jimmy Rabbitte, the protagonist of *The Commitments*, who again tries to form a music group but deliberately excludes ‘white Irish’ (Doyle, 2007: 36, 41) this time. ‘The Deportees’ does not figure as classic narrative of community in Zagarell’s sense although it focusses on Jimmy Rabbitte’s everyday life as a sequence of crises and highlights his endeavours to build and maintain a community. Instead of presenting a contrast between community life and the modern world (Zagarell, 1988: 503), the short story reflects on community building in a fluid world which can incorporate the local, also in terms of a specific idea of Irishness defined by openness and hospitality, and the global with regard to the places of origin of the group members and the music they play.

Despite Jimmy’s considerable problems in forming a community of very different people, in maintaining the band between disastrous gigs, and despite xenophobic threatening phone calls, the ending of this short story, written in future tense, appears almost utopian:

Some of them will leave, the band or the country; others will join, and some will come back. Leo will leave, home to Moscow. Kerry will be the second to go. She’ll have a baby, and another, both girls, and she’ll write regular articles for the *Irish Times* ... Kenny will leave, and come back ... Gilbert won’t be deported. He’ll out-sprint the Guards ... The two Dans will play with the Wu-Tang Clan, and Lauren Hill will drop by. Bono will bring a pizza and Eminem will bring his ma. (Doyle, 2007: 75-77)

This ending opens up a space for building a new community at the margins, which is both locally anchored in Dublin and formed by members from all over the world, through the communal experience of the power of music. As explained above, shared experience and a certain ‘uniformity of perception and action’ as well as knowledge of belonging figure as bases of social identity (Stets and Burke, 2000: 225-227). At the same time, the heterogeneity of this group, in terms of nationality and culture, signifies the continued existence of individual identities. Appadurai’s sense of difference outlined above allows for the recognition of such productive and valuable

encounters. Moreover, and despite its oscillation between similarity and difference, Jimmy frames this community as lasting; independent of the individuals forming it. The band thus figures as a stable, open community in a glocal world that its members can (re)turn to. Since this community particularly invites figures at the fringes of society, to borrow O'Connor's term, it imagines the submerged population group as a possible future 'we-group' based on shared aspects in spite of difference. On the other hand, the increasing improbability of the future incidents Jimmy lists adds an element of uncertainty. This turns the small multi-ethnic community into a utopian space in the very definition of the word: it appears as *eu topos* [no place] and *ou topos* [ideal place].

Doyle's often ironic and humorous short stories reflect on identity formation and notions of belonging to both local and global communities; they highlight exclusionary discourses and further recognition of shared experiences and similarity despite difference, which is conceptualised as dimensional and productive here, thereby countering established but simplifying identity discourses. As most of these short stories end on a conciliatory or even utopian note, they invite engagement with the possibility of community building and new social identities based on shared perception and experience at a time of alleged re-invention.

### **Transnational Irish Short Fiction: Emma Donoghue's 'Counting the Days'**

Struggles over inclusion or exclusion and the need for reconceptualisation of (national) identity are symptomatic of a society torn between nostalgia for the perceived local realm of the past and the willingness to 'reinvent' the imagined community to enter a modern and global future. After the euphoria of the Celtic Tiger period, the pitfalls of an ideology that sought to swap old and local for new and global became increasingly visible when the world financial crisis in 2008 showed that a separation of local from global is impossible. The global crisis threw Ireland back upon itself and the interest in 'even shallow versions of multiculturalism or social integration' lessened further (Tucker and Casey, 2014: 5). Post-Celtic Tiger literature increasingly highlighted the impact of the world financial crisis on the country, on local communities, and on individuals when disillusionment with the fallacious promises of the Celtic Tiger reached its climax. Simultaneously, it displayed a new orientation towards the past and its legacies, thus departing from the simple belief in a 'wholly unique form of "future" Irishness that would forever close the door on the "deadly familiarity" of history' (Buchanan, 2009: 305). Heinz et al. explain this tendency by highlighting that the new stories of, for instance, globalisation, had not yet acquired the same cultural appeal as the 'old stories of communality, home, exceptionalism and nationhood'

(2012: 5).<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Emma Donoghue's short story cycle *Astray*, and her short story 'Counting the Days' in particular, makes for an insightful reading because it innovatively combines different temporal and spatial levels of Irish identities and connects familiar stories of the past with contemporary discourses. The following discussion of 'Counting the Days' as an example of transnational short fiction demonstrates how literature can revisit the idea of exclusively Irish experiences to challenge exclusionary concepts that gained ground in the imagined community.

Generally speaking, transnationalism focuses attention on forms of 'cultural production that take place in the liminal space between real and imagined borders' (Jay, 2010: 1).<sup>8</sup> Transnational Irish literature thus places 'Irish identity in dialogue with other cultural, national, or ethnic affiliations', as Tucker and Casey emphasise (2014: 2). Since the scope of this article does not allow for an extensive discussion of transnationalism, the following analysis focusses specifically on its relation to social consciousness and to identity formation. Both aspects are targeted by the second of Steven Vertovec's six premises of transnationalism: it relates to Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity and diaspora, stressing how 'the condition of diaspora or transnationalism comprises ever-changing representations that produce an "imaginary coherence" for a set of malleable identities' (Vertovec, 1999: 451). He emphasises that '[p]articularly in contexts concerning global diasporas ... there is considerable discussion surrounding a kind of "diaspora consciousness" marked by dual or multiple identifications' (452). I thus think of transnationalism as a condition of consciousness, as a dialogue, and as related to a broad definition of globalisation the cultural dimensions of which cannot be disentangled from political and economic realities or from historical events. For the Irish imagined community, such dimensions and events include the Great Famine and ensuing emigration waves, for instance.

Donoghue's *Astray* establishes 'semi-involuntary' emigration as a universal experience (Donoghue, 2012: 263). Donoghue creates a mosaic of individual stories that are connected via the common theme of travelling, and the crossing of geographical and metaphorical borders. All fourteen stories, which are divided into the three sections 'Departure', 'In Transit', 'Arrivals and Aftermaths', can be labeled hybrid fiction. The fictionalised narratives are inspired by historical events and documents (mostly letters and newspaper articles), upon which Donoghue briefly comments after

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<sup>7</sup> Post-Celtic Tiger literature is often critical of Ireland's development, especially targeting relations between self and community. See Boller (2022) for an examination of how short story cycles by Gerard Donovan and Donal Ryan foreground how communities can fall apart through the metaphorical invasion of both globalisation and the legacies of Irish history and culture.

<sup>8</sup> Transnationalism is often regarded as a rather recent phenomenon, although it is linked to former approaches and paradigms, such as border studies and postcolonial studies and 'work done under the auspices of the emerging study of globalization' (Jay, 2010: 2-5).

each of the stories. From the title to the afterword, all paratexts play an important part in setting the direction and tone of the cycle. The leitmotif is, for instance, already introduced by the epigraph taken from Virgil's *The Aeneid*, a text commonly considered world literature:

Tell us underneath what skies,  
Upon what coasts of earth we have been cast;  
we wander, ignorant of man and places,  
And driven by the wind and the vast waves. (Donoghue, 2012: n. pag.)

The epigraph and the afterword on Donoghue's personal experience as a migrant add new layers of meaning to the stories. Experiences of liminality and border crossings are entwined with destabilisation, dislocation, and disconnection from home, community, and belonging.

Liminal states and renegotiations of identities, in connection with concepts of belonging and home, feature prominently in *Astray*. Donoghue underlines the psychological dimension of migration as a universal experience instead of concentrating on, for instance, the Irish national trauma and its impact on national identity:<sup>9</sup> 'So often these tales of emigration turn into tales of transformation, as if changing place is just a cover for changing yourself' (2012: 184), she writes in her afterword. Donoghue's characters are figures 'loiter[ing] on the margins, stripped of the markers of family and nation' (Donoghue, 2012: 263), so their liminal positions are connected to notions of hybridity and ambiguity, instances of displacement, and the crossing of 'physical and psychological borders' (Casey and White, 2017: 104).

'Counting the Days' belongs to the second part, 'In Transit', and is told from the alternating perspectives of Henry Johnson and his wife Jane. This structure facilitates drawing connections not only between Jane, who is travelling from Belfast to Québec with her children, and Henry, who is awaiting them in Canada, but also between the country she has just left and the one she is about to enter. Both Henry and Jane appear to be lonely voices at first glance, but they are connected through their rereading of each other's letters. The story illustrates hybridity: quotations from Henry and Jane's historical letters, the duality of their voices, as well as the awareness of the temporal and spatial distance their words have to cross in the year 1849; all these features invite a transnational reading of 'Counting the Days' with a 'focus on pluralities, differences, hybrid identities, and complicated transnational geographies' (Jay, 2010: 4). Simultaneously, the story is reminiscent of the 'longstanding history of

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<sup>9</sup> Since Emma Donoghue emigrated to Canada herself, she can be seen as an Irish, Irish-Canadian, transatlantic (Haekel, 2020: 22) or transnational writer.



Irish multiculturalism and hybridity' that Tucker and Casey emphasise (2014: 3). By foregrounding the potential universality of migration experience, this narrative about migration and diaspora goes beyond the common return to the past often encountered in Post-Celtic Tiger literature, engendering the dialogues and connections that Tucker and Casey consider central to Irish transnational literature (2).

The temporal and spatial setting of the story, 'Gulf of St. Lawrence, 1849', is prominently positioned on an extra page between title and text, adding to the frame constructed by the other paratexts. This timespace evokes collective memories of the GreatFamine and, furthermore, St. Lawrence carries important historical meaning with regard to immigration, settlement in Canada, and the drawing of borders. The setting is a liminal space, neither here nor there, and Jane's state is one of in-betweenness. Due to this setting and theme, 'Counting the Days' stands in the tradition of earlier literary works. As Margu rite Corporaal and Chris Cusack explain,

Many works from the Irish or the Irish diaspora explore the appalling conditions of transatlantic emigration ... [In] Irish and Irish American literature written between 1855 and 1885, the voyage assumes a symbolic function, featuring as a rite of passage for the characters and their sense of ethnic identity. (2011: 344-345)

Despite echoes of such works in 'Counting the Days', Donoghue's short story differs in some significant ways. On the one hand, Henry's experience in Canada functions as a counter story to classic migration narratives. Donoghue highlights the lack of belonging, the attempts to take root, and the emigrants' shared suffering in the new world. Eventually, Henry dies in a cholera hospital on the day he wants to meet his family at the harbour. He and the other patients are 'all part of the same boiling sea' (Donoghue, 2012: 62) when they die of a 'disease familiar to those who are herded from country to country, from city to city' (63). In contrast, Jane's ship is not a coffin ship; she and the children survive both the famine and the passage. Indeed, the people on board are hungry but not starving, and Jane also did not suffer from starvation at home in Ireland. She is a Protestant and although her family was poor, they were the ones who had 'to jam the door against whoever might knock' (58). Still, many family members have already emigrated in hope of a better life, and now Jane follows her husband Henry. In her liminal sphere between Ireland and Canada, between old and potential new communities, she imagines how 'on one side people weep for them and stare into the horizon that has swallowed them up, and on the other side, others stare back, waiting for the first glimpse of them' (58). However, although Canada accommodated a large number of Irish immigrants, the idea of a community waiting for them remains an illusion. Her wish for a new community (63) relates to the malleability of identities and the imaginary coherence that Vertovec emphasises in his discussion of transnationalism.

Jane's small community on board of the ship is united by an experience of leaving, of disconnection, and of waiting. She is appalled by the lack of news on this ship, which appears as a liminal or even heterotopian space, where the 'passengers have to spend their time guessing what is happening in the real, landlocked earth' (Donoghue, 2012: 58). In this unfamiliar place and situation, Jane particularly longs for Henry, who, in turn, cannot wait to see her again. Jane's insecurity and anger do not diminish her imagination of their family as a space of security and strength: 'this is how Jane knows her kin, by an occasional flash of resentment so intimate that she never feels it for outsiders: the maddening itch of the ties that bind' (82). Jane defines herself in relation to Henry, her family, and her capacity to endure hardships; her individual identity is thus constructed in connection to a social identity that centres on her nuclear family but simultaneously turns to an imagined community suffering from the famine.

Donoghue's short story provides familiar points of reference and relates a narrative of shared experience, foregrounding the 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states' (Vertovec, 1999: 447). Jane's status as a migrant longing for a sense of belonging in a new world, while reflecting on the home that she has lost, anchor her in transnational diaspora consciousness. Migration, as form of mobility connected to the endeavour to maintain connection with a community, is a process which is still integral to the reality of a contemporary globalised and glocal world, as Donoghue also stresses in her afterword when she highlights the connection between Irish emigrants in the 19th century and 'economic migrants' today, the latter being a 'cold phrase for a passionate wish for a better life' (2012: 266).

Donoghue's cycle invites readers to actively reflect on Irish national identity and on the formative influence of cultural narratives and historical events such as the Great Famine. Her stories and comments allude to how community building and the need for a sense of belonging do not have to become methods of social closure but can, instead, even transcend the geographical boundaries of Ireland and the demarcations of the imagined community. When national identity is renegotiated in a transnational framework, the (Irish) reader, who encounters both 'the Other' and their own history in the cycle, is invited to actualise their responsibility to respond to a short story that does not only bind implied teller and listener but also underlines universal experiences. As transnational literature, her short story cycle thus highlights 'multiple points of identification and belonging that result from a writer's commitment to Ireland, to other countries, and to the world at large' (Tucker and Casey, 2014: 2).

## Conclusion

As narratives of community, Doyle's and Donoghue's short story cycles provide counter-stories to dominant cultural narratives that effect social closure by constructing ethnic or at least fixed 'we-groups'. Their diverse local, global, and transnational communities highlight how shared experiences can proliferate over the perceived need for borders and exclusion, thus prompting a renegotiation of established national and social identities in an increasingly connected world. Through their themes, narrative voices, and the particular condensed form of the short story, these narratives invite an active reading and effect a response that can eventually further dialogues and prompt the recognition of similarity despite difference in a glocal world, and of universal elements of life, such as hope and death, friendship and violence. Both writers resist the temptation to create a totalising view that disregards local or personal levels of life (see Jay, 2010: 9). Instead, they offer complex reflections on identity renegotiations by placing the local, personal, and particular in relation to global dynamics and structures. Consequently, these narratives eliminate tensions between the recognition of commonalities and the impetus to distinguish a community as a 'we-group' from a perceived 'Other'.

The stories' engagement with migration—a theme which is particularly Irish and universal at the same time—directs attention to the tensions between local and global levels of life and questions of belonging, similarities or difference. The focus on the simultaneous global and local nature of communities renders visible the 'challenge of treating categories such as the local and the global, the personal and the historical, and the cultural and the economic as if they represented fixed distinctions' (Jay, 2010: 9). While such apparently fixed definitions and simplified (mis)attributions endanger open-minded identity renegotiations and strategies of inclusion, an engagement with narratives of community can, in turn, contribute to a remapping of the geographies (4) of Irish literatures, perceiving difference not as a hindrance but as a chance for fruitful encounter that makes room for pluralities and shared experiences. As transnational literature, the short story cycles hence contribute to the transformation of Irish literature and '[push] beyond national boundaries to imagine the global character of modern experience, contemporary culture, and the identities [national literatures] produce' (9). Irishness in Doyle's and Donoghue's short stories oscillates between feelings of belonging and disbelonging, it appears as a partially free-floating form of social connection fuelled by common perception and experience, literature,

and language. Although the orchestration of a ‘*conscience collective*’ is often ‘both descriptive and normative while reflecting and prioritising the values of the dominant class and ethnicity’ (Loyal, 2018: 83), the short story cycles invite a new understanding of Irishness as a foundation of an imagined community that can cater for different personal and social identities and even include marginalised lonely voices.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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