

“I’m Black an’ I’m Proud”: Ruth Negga, *Breakfast on Pluto*, and Invisible Irelands

Charlotte McIvor

This article examines Ethiopian-Irish actress Ruth Negga’s performance in Neil Jordan’s 2005 *Breakfast on Pluto* in light of recent cultural, racial, and socio-economic shifts in Irish society. How does Negga’s identity as an Irish actress of color influence possible receptions of this film in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland and contest notions of Irishness that have typically been allied only with whiteness?

Roddy Doyle famously posited a relationship between the Irish and African-Americans thus in his 1987 novel *The Commitments*:

--The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads.

They nearly gasped: it was so true.

--An’ Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. The culchies have fuckin’ everythin’. An’ the northside Dubliners are the niggers o’ Dublin. ----Say it loud, I’m black an’ I’m proud.

He grinned. He’d impressed himself again.

He’d won them. They couldn’t say anything.¹

Jimmy Rabbitte, band manager, uses this turn of phrase to convince his motley crowd of Dublin Irish musicians to form a soul band, although the phrase was later reimagined in the film as, “The Irish are the *blacks* of Europe” [emphasis mine].

In 1987, in the midst of the continuing Troubles in the North, long posited by some as an anti-colonial war, and ongoing poverty in the Republic, Rabbitte’s statement had a particular resonance. It captured the confused ethnic identity of the Irish throughout the 19th and 20th centuries as well as framed their contemporary underprivileged status in a metaphor that was immediately understandable to the lads and the book’s/film’s audience. “Celtic Calibans,” “Black Irish,” “Simians,” “Paddies,” “the niggers of Europe:” these slurs against the Irish recall a colonial history of violence that positioned them as an inferior race vis-à-vis the British,

¹ Roddy Doyle, *The Commitments*, in *The Barrytown Trilogy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 13.

yet also positioned the Irish as frequent collaborators in the work of Empire in India and other outposts. Thus, the contradictions and immediate emotional appeal contained within Jimmy Rabitte's assertion indexes an Irish history of engagement with race, ethnicity and power that is far from simple.

A contemporary engagement with African/African Irish identity and politics in Ireland, as well as with various other Third World nations and groups can be traced to the rise of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. From the late '60s through the present day,² the Irish Republican Army and associated parties asserted their identification with Third World anti-colonial struggles, as well as with Black Nationalist groups, through murals³ and other forms of propaganda as the Troubles erupted and transformed the landscape of Northern Ireland into a bloody struggle between various political factions composed of Catholic and Protestants over the question of whether Northern Ireland was rightfully part of the UK or the Republic of Ireland.⁴ This renewed identification with a language of anti-colonialism on the part of the I.R.A. was also accompanied by the influence of the African-American non-violent Civil Rights movement on peaceful protests organized during this period. These protests were responding to the presence of the British and high levels of unemployment and poverty in the Catholic community.

² As recently as 2007, the Irish-Cuban solidarity group erected a new mural in Derry to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Che Guevara's death. This memorial also acknowledged Guevara's Irish heritage through his grandmother through honoring him as "Che Guevara Lynch." Sinn Féin MLA Raymond McCartney said that their celebrations would look at: "the shared history of Cuba and Ireland and transition from armed struggle to political struggle. Ireland has long been a beacon for those in the wider world seeking justice and equality and struggling against colonialism and imperialism. We have also learned from other nations who have had to struggle for their freedom. During the 1981 hunger strike Fidel Castro stood up in the United Nations in defence of the men in the H Blocks and the women in Armagh and we must never forget that that" ("Derry to mark the 40th anniversary of Che Guevara death," <http://www.sinnfein.ie/news/detail/20601>).

³ Nationalist mural painting in the North did not begin in earnest until the early 80's. Bill Rolston traces this to the Republican H-Block prisoners hunger-strike campaign in 1981 and to the death of Bobby Sands in particular. Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara, Lenin, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and South West Africa People's Organization are some of the figures and groups depicted in Republican murals during this period. See Brian Rolston, *Politics and Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Salem, MA: Associated University Presses, 1991).

⁴ See Brian Dooley, *Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland & Black America* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1998); Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press); David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

The Troubles lasted from the late 1960s up until the Belfast Agreement of 1998. During this major period, an Irish understanding of ethnicity and colonial histories was constantly being re-imagined in relation to the violence in the North. This period eventually coincided with the rise of post-colonial theory in the Western academy, a convergence that should be examined as more than conveniently coincidental. During this period, Ireland's relationship to post-coloniality was frequently framed through its contemporaneous engagement with what some would term an anti-colonial war and which others would criticize for continuing to center a violent nationalism at the root of Irish politics as well as ignoring the claims of Irish Unionists.

Neil Jordan's 2005 film *Breakfast on Pluto*, based on Patrick McCabe's 1998 novel, is set during this period in the late 1960s and early 70s in a fictional Irish town called Tyreelin. The film is the story of Patricia "Kitten" Brady, a young transgendered woman who searches for her birth mother in London. She is the daughter/son of the local village priest, Father Liam, and his former housekeeper. Set against the background of the eruption of the Troubles, Kitten's circle of friends notably includes Charlie, played by Ethiopian-Irish actress Ruth Negga.⁵ In the course of the film, Negga's character plays a central role as Kitten's best friend and the girlfriend of their mutual friend, Irwin, who becomes heavily involved with the I.R.A. After an ambiguous failed romance with the lead singer of Billy and the Hatchets, who is also an arms runner for the I.R.A., Kitten leaves Tyreelin to seek her mother in London as violence mounts at home. In London, she barely escapes strangulation while attempting to enter sex work, serves as assistant for a magician, works as a "Wobble" for a popular children's television show, and is accused of being a terrorist when her biological sex is revealed following a bombing at a British nightclub. Violence pursues Kitten even as she decries it as "too serious," but this last incident finally brings her back into contact with Father Liam who reveals her mother's name to her after tracking her down hiding out working at a peep show. Posing as a telephone survey worker, Kitten does not ultimately reveal herself to her mother who has a new family and more urgent events call her back home to Ireland. A now pregnant Charlie is devastated when Irwin is killed by the I.R.A., and Kitten returns home to take care of her and prepare for the new baby. Reconciled

⁵ Negga was trained in acting at Trinity College and named as "Ireland's Rising Star" in 2006 at the Berlin Film Festival.

with Kitten, Father Liam sets up her and Charlie in the rectory and they enjoy a brief period of happiness. Community shock at Father Liam's conduct and shelter of this unwed pregnant mother and queer friend culminate in the rectory being firebombed, and Charlie and Kitten essentially being forced out of the town. In the final shots of the film, Charlie, Kitten, and the baby are featured as a happy queer family living together in London (http://www.allmoviephoto.com/photo/2005_breakfast_on_pluto_026.html), seemingly having come to terms with the violence and anxieties which plague them throughout the rest of the film by leaving Ireland. This ending suggests that Kitten has found happiness through domesticity rather than "true love" and in finding her father, Father Liam, the village priest, rather than her mother.

Yet, as Judith Halberstam observes in *A Queer Time and Place*, London, particularly in the 1970s at the height of the Troubles, can hardly be considered a "multicultural refuge, a place where formerly colonized peoples find a home."⁶ Here, Halberstam is actually referring to the ambiguous ending of Jordan's 1993 film *The Crying Game*, which also featured a transgendered character at the center of the plot in an examination of the Northern Irish Troubles. But Halberstam's comment also holds true for *Pluto* and renders the ending of both films highly suspect. In both, a relationship between queerness, racial Otherness, and exile in London appears essential in order for the Irish characters to transcend the conflict in the North as well as the oppressive Catholic society that they leave in search of freedom. Nevertheless, while the ending of *Breakfast on Pluto* is whimsical, it is far less ambivalent than the final prison meeting between Dil, a black British transgendered woman, and Fergus, an IRA operative. Fergus still proclaims his heterosexuality despite Dil's continued advances. Neither Dil nor Kitten get to consummate any desires onscreen, but Kitten's quest to discover her family is rewarded with a family that defies her expectations and brings her happiness and narrative closure.

Unlike *The Crying Game*, where the racial identities of Dil and Jody, her former boyfriend and a British soldier, are indicated in the script, Negga's appearance in *Pluto* appears to have been an accident of casting. In McCabe's 1998 version of the novel, Charlie's physical appearance is never described. Director Jordan stated in an interview: "I didn't know much about her when she came to the casting, but the

⁶ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 81.

moment I saw her act, I decided to change the script so that she could appear in the movie."⁷ Yet, the changes to the script that Jordan indicates do not foreground Negga's difference, but rather sublimate it in a move that recognizes the unlikelihood of an Ethiopian-Irish schoolgirl in 1970's Northern Ireland. However is it possible to reconcile this encore combination of queerness, Irishness, racial difference and exile in London with a fortuitous casting boon? How does *Pluto's* ending reprise that of *The Crying Game* from the frame of an Ireland that has been much changed? What more do the final shots of Charlie, Kitten, and their baby in London suggest using the hindsight of contemporary immigration debates? How is the fact that *Breakfast on Pluto* is set 20 years or more before *The Crying Game* further complicate this question?

Since Doyle's 1987 novel, Ireland has undergone more than a few changes that have radically transformed the resonance of his earlier assertion that "the Irish are the niggers of Europe." For instance, the Irish have been forced to suddenly deal with bodies of color in their midst rather than using racial otherness as a convenient metaphor for emphasizing their own oppression. Since the early 1990's, the Republic and the North have been experiencing an unprecedented period of prosperity termed the "Celtic Tiger"⁸ accompanied by waves of immigration from Africa, China, India, Pakistan, and Eastern Europe, as well as returning former Irish emigrants.⁹ Immigration has transformed Ireland from what was previously described as a monocultural society in terms of nationality and race, into a country reckoning with issues of diversity and multiculturalism on a mass scale, arguably for the first time within its own borders.¹⁰

⁷ Jorge Gutiérrez, "Ruth Negga: A Star Without a Label," from <http://www.cafebabel.com/EN/article.asp?T=T&Id=8984>, retrieved 21 April, 2008.

⁸ "The Celtic Tiger" is a term borrowed from the "Asian Tigers" (Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong). The notion of an economic "tiger" refers to rapid and consistent growth in an economy and their levels of industrialization, etc. It should be noted here that Ireland's economy is characterized as exceptional to that of Europe through a metaphor that links it to the Global South. See Michael J. O'Sullivan, *Ireland and the Global Question* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

⁹ In 2008, of the new immigrants: 16.2% were (returning) Irish, 7% were from the UK, 8.6% from the EU 15, 33.7% from the EU 12, and 16.3% were from the rest of the world. See "Population and Migration Estimates: Table 2: Estimated Immigration Classified by Sex and Nationality, 2003-2008," <http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/population/current/popmig.pdf>, retrieved 1 October, 2008.

¹⁰ The perception of Ireland as a previously monocultural society is inaccurate. The most obvious omission is the history of Catholics and Protestants in the Republic and the North. Yet, the Jewish and Traveller communities are also long-established, Chinese and Italian immigrants

By viewing Ireland's recent cultural and racial shifts through the performance of Ethiopian-Irish actress Ruth Negga as she plays Charlie, a young woman deeply affected by the casualties of the early Troubles, a telescopic view of 20th and early 21st century Irish history is achieved. As subjects of and collaborators in British Empire, the Irish found themselves scattered throughout the world most notably during the 19th and 20th centuries. Through emigration, forced deportation, incarceration, missionary work, the British Army or Civil Service, the Irish traveled to India, Africa, the Caribbean, Australia, and Canada.¹¹ It has recently been emphasized by William Flanagan, former president Mary Robinson, president Mary Macaleese, Diane Negra, Luke Gibbons, and Catherine M. Eagan¹² among others that the Irish diaspora must be considered a crucial part of the "Irish people." This group, currently numbering in the tens of millions, has exerted a particularly strong pull on the mainland Irish imagination and is colluded in the formation of contemporary notions of "Irishness" as an ethnic and cultural category. My view of this history through Negga's performance in *Breakfast on Pluto* emphasizes the multiple imbrications between categories of race, class, ethnicity and gender in Irish history. I am not seeking only to expand an understanding of "whiteness" as ethnicity, as has been the previous tenor of critical race theory within Irish Studies,¹³ or alternatively to emphasize the Irish as "subaltern," but rather, to demonstrate that the history of the "global Irish" includes contact with many other cultures and populations. The terms of this contact suggest that a contemporary Irish engagement with multiculturalism should avoid comparisons of "sameness" and "difference" with immigrant populations. Rather, I seek a more

have been coming to Ireland since the 19th century, and Ireland received programme refugees from Hungary and Vietnam in the 20th century. See "European Intercultural Workplace: Republic of Ireland," http://www.eiworkplace.net/texts/National_Report_Ireland.pdf, retrieved 25 September 2008.

¹¹ See *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor (Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2006); Michael Holmes, "The Irish and India: Imperialism, National and Internationalism," in *The Irish Diaspora*, ed. Andy Bielenberg (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000).

¹² See William Flanagan, *Ireland Now: Tales of Change from the Global Island* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Luke Gibbons, *Ireland After History* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

¹³ See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995); Steve Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization and Irish Culture* (Galway: Arlen House, 2004).

thorough account of the intersections which have contributed to the formation of Irish ethnicities and which have brought immigrant populations to Ireland in the shadow of global capitalism and political unrest.

This argument is not to imply that "Irishness" is continuous across the space of North and South amongst those identifying as "Irish." Elizabeth Butler Cullingford remarks in her 2001 *Ireland's Others* that while "Ireland is accustomed to being stigmatized as the feminized object of English discourse, ...in women, gays, abused children, travelers and the working class it has produced its own internal Others."¹⁴ Absolute categories of the Irish nation and state which emphasized a white, settled, Catholic subject who conformed to heteronormative expectations of gender roles guaranteed the existence of a discrete Irish culture. This rendered the Irish distinct from the British and autonomous, and was reflected in policies of economic and political isolationism that persisted through the 20th century. As Thomas Docherty observes in the context of Ireland, "...the nation-state, historically, exists primarily or is called into being as an attempt to ward off the power of globalization, to 'contain' the global as it were."¹⁵ Cullingford's analysis does not take into account the manner in which external "Others," the "New Irish," have now added to the internal stratification of Irish society in regards to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class, but these shifts naturally extend her critique. The ambivalent identity of the "New Irish" and their frequent marginalizations as raced, gendered, and classed subjects exposes the persistent logic of Irish cultural belonging as heteronormative, white, male, middle-class and Catholic. The history of those prejudices has not begun with the new immigrants they have only extended and transformed conventional Irish logics of exclusion. The "New Irish" call attention not only to the construction of "white Irish" as ethnicity but the manner in which normative notions of citizenship cited against incoming immigrants have to be maintained through the "Othering" of populations designated both internal and external.

Locating Irish "whiteness" within British colonial history should move beyond simply re-emphasizing the continuation of Irish oppression to demonstrate how Irish whiteness, oppression, and

¹⁴ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2001), 6.

¹⁵ Thomas Docherty, "The Place's Fault," in *Global Ireland: Irish Literatures for the New Millennium*, ed. Ondřej Pilný and Claire Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2005), 17.

prosperity are constructed in relation to the movement of money, peoples, cultures, and goods through a broader post-colonial map that has been more recently re-invented as a benevolent "globalization." This confrontation with colonial whiteness situates the traumas of the past while also helping the Irish recognize their own historical relationship to the post-colonial histories of people who have found their way to Irish shores. Such a perspective is necessary for an informed confrontation with the changing face of capitalism, potentially understood as a neo-imperialism driven by transnational corporations.

U.S. companies, for example, were largely responsible for Ireland's initial burst of affluence in the 90's through off-shore investments. It would be ridiculous to suggest that the Irish are the victims of neo-imperialism while many Irish citizens enjoying unprecedented prosperity react virulently to new immigrants in their midst. Yet, the urge to narrowly define the Irish experience as expressed by anxiety over immigrants is energy that would be better spent in investigating what lies behind the seeming benevolence of the "Celtic Tiger." How do the potentially shared projects of the Irish and their recent immigrants past, present, and future expose the workings of global capitalism as a neo-imperial project? How do these arrivals recall the traumas of colonial histories that brought both sides into contact with one another, and have so again? As uneven affluence persists in Irish society, and "Irishness" as a global brand has become a series of caricatures of an Irish preoccupation with historical trauma, how does an approach to Irish history that views the "global" as not merely a path for the transport of commodities or a facile celebration of "Irish culture" work against this urge? How does this historical model release the national, in order to suggest a transnational and antiracist model of inclusion that works against the logic of capital? How does Negga pull this into focus?

My approach thus locates Irish engagements with racial and cultural alterity on the terrain of Empire and beyond as crucial to the formation of Irishness.¹⁶ Negga's anachronistic presence in *Breakfast*

¹⁶ For more perspectives on this claim, see: Ronit Lentin, "At the Heart of the Hibernian Metropolis: Spatial Narratives of Ethnic Minorities and Diasporic Communities in a Changing City," in *City 6* (2002): 229-249; Declan Kiberd, "Strangers in Their Own Country," in *Multiculturalism: The View from Two Irelands*, eds. Declan Kiberd and Edna Longley (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001); Jason King, "Black Saint Patrick Revisited: Calypso's Tower of Babel and Culture Ireland as global networks," in *Performing Global Networks*, ed. Karen Fricker and Ronit Lentin (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007): 38-51.

on *Pluto* recalls this history to a contemporary audience and renders her external appearance of racialized "difference" visible and consequential to the film and its reception, even though it apparently bears no impact on the plot of the story. Negga's performance models an ideal vision of Irish belonging that does not erase the co-mingling of Irish pasts and presents with histories of other peoples. Negga forces the audience towards a contemporary engagement with a transnational Irish history that illuminates the history of a "global Irish" who have now come to the island of Ireland either as returned white Irish emigrants or as would-be citizens who share colonial and European histories with their new neighbors, despite racial and cultural differences. Negga, in an article fittingly entitled, "Ruth Negga, a star without a label," observes: "For the moment, I don't have to worry about people trying to fit me into a box. Up until now, there were no mixed-race roles in Ireland. It's not like in the UK, where these roles do exist and then you are typecast from then on."¹⁷

My tactic here is not to tokenize or constrain Negga's body in the enunciation of her "difference" from the other "white Irish" bodies in the film or to discount her assertion that she is free from being put in a box. Rather, it is important to recognize the role that she plays in Jordan's 2005 film, which looks back at Irish history from a contemporary vantage point. From this contemporary perspective, her status as an Irish actor of mixed race descent is far less remarkable than it would have been in the film's setting of the 1970s. Additionally, representations of observable "difference" that attest to peaceful co-existence among Irish subjects have been repeatedly deployed as a litmus test to demonstrate that Ireland is a nation that embraces difference. From the cover of Roddy Doyle's 2007 collection, *The Deportees and Other Stories*,¹⁸ which features an older black man and a shorter white child, to Emma Donoghue's cover *Landing*,¹⁹ a queer transatlantic love story featuring Silé Sunita O'Shaughnessy, Indian-Irish from Dublin, and Jude, Canadian, from Ireland, Ontario, exterior ethnic difference is registered as marketable trope. This second cover represents Silé and Jude's union through a white and brown hand forming the shape of a heart on the cover, the

¹⁷ Jorge Gutiérrez, "Ruth Negga, a star without a label."

¹⁸ See http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/images/0670018457/ref=dp_image_0?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books.

¹⁹ See <http://www.emmadonoghue.com/images/sm-novel-landing.jpg>.

visible observance of ethnic "exteriority"²⁰ always standing in for a successful resolution of "difference," broadly construed. Doyle's and Donoghue's book jacket images, as well as the marked trend towards the development of intercultural Irish theater companies in recent years²¹ certainly locates visibility and performance at the center of representations of "Ireland Now."²²

An over-emphasis on visual representation as "cultural citizenship," however, only presents the surface of the problem as its solution. A discomfort with Ireland's suddenly multicultural society is at the root of many contemporary discussions of Irish politics and culture. In fact, the visibility of Negga as a prominent Irish performer as well as the popularity of scenes of social harmony in Ireland obscure the continuing racial and socioeconomic inequalities of "Celtic Tiger" Ireland, and the many gradations of citizenship, work permit or asylum seeker status that demarcate possible levels of participation in the Irish public sphere. Jason King has criticized the decision of Irish theater companies such as Calypso to employ immigrant actors of color who are also often asylum-seekers. He writes: "...they are often called on to embody and enact as spurious agents of social and cultural diversity who gain no reciprocal right to remain in the ostensibly culturally diverse society they appear to represent."²³ He elaborates elsewhere, "As in the master-slave dialectic, they are needed by Irish society to provide visible emblems of its racial diversity while they remain in a situation of complete dependency, as figures who simultaneously embody a form of

²⁰ See Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991).

²¹ Arambe Theater Productions was founded in 2003 by Nigerian performance artist Bisi Adigun, and "officially launched" by Roddy Doyle in 2004. Their website states: "The main aim of the company is to afford members of Ireland's African communities the unique opportunity to express themselves through the art of theatre": <http://www.arambeproductions.com>, retrieved 15 May, 2008. Pan Pan Theatre Company is a company founded in 1999 by Aedin Cosgrove and Gavin Quinn. This company has an international profile, and collaborated in 2006 on a Mandarin Chinese production of *Playboy of the Western World*, staged in Beijing and Dublin: <http://www.panpantheatre.com>, retrieved 15 May, 2008. Calypso Productions, a theater company which attests to be "creating a catalyst for social change" also regularly engages in intercultural work as they write on their website: "Calypso is constantly seeking ways in which our productions can be made more accessible, inclusive and engaging for people from a wide variety of cultural, racial and socio-economic backgrounds": <http://www.calypso.ie/index.html>, 15 May, 2008. Certainly not coincidentally, all of these companies are based in Dublin.

²² I am borrowing the title of William Flanagan's book *Ireland Now* here.

²³ Jason King, "Black Saint Patrick: Irish Interculturalism in Theoretical Perspective & Theatre Practice," in *Global Ireland: Irish Literatures for a New Millennium*, ed. Ondřej Pilný and Claire Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2005), 47.

cultural recognition yet suffer social and political occlusion from the Irish mainstream."²⁴ "Cultural citizenship" through representation does not resolve deeper issues in Irish society. But if these representations are not taken for granted or as unequivocally positive and inclusive, their complicated resonances as in Negga's performance can point to several layers of enmeshment in Irish history and not merely a facile celebration of "Ireland Now."

The end of the Troubles dovetailed with the rise of the "Celtic Tiger" and the political, economic, and cultural changes that it has brought to Irish society. Not insignificantly, racist attacks in the North and South have dramatically risen during this time of transition, and Unionist-affiliated individuals have been repeatedly implicated in these incidents suggesting a transfer of aggression onto the recent immigrants, although this suggestion is not meant to exempt Catholics from racial prejudice.²⁵

The scene in which a pregnant Charlie and Kitten are expelled from Father Liam's rectory by community-sanctioned arson in the 1970's matches the contemporary pattern of violence in Ireland. A great deal of the controversy over arriving immigrants focused on pregnant women giving birth in Ireland in order to gain citizenship for their families.²⁶ This anxiety followed alarm at the rising number of asylum applications throughout the 1990's.²⁷ After a 2003 Supreme Court decision and 2004 citizenship referendum, the current law no longer guarantees citizenship for the non-national parents of a child born in Ireland.²⁸ Controversial Irish musician and performer Sinéad O'Connor muses on her website:

I had a great dream a while ago which I loved, which was that An Post were using photos of pregnant African ladies to advertise themselves- and

²⁴ Jason King, "Black Saint Patrick Revisited: Calypso's 'Tower of Babel' and Culture Ireland as Global Networks," 46.

²⁵ See *Divided Society: Ethnic Minorities and Racism in Northern Ireland*, ed. Paul Hainsworth (UK: Pluto Press, 1999). Headlines include: "Loyalists blamed as racist attacks on migrants double in Ulster," (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/may/30/race.northernireland>) "Racist attacks on children double," (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northernireland/1796403.stm), "Ireland to fight racist attacks with new campaign," (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ireland-to-fight-racist-attacks-with-new-campaign-711519.html>), retrieved 6 September, 2008.

²⁶ Before the referendum, it was immaterial whether the woman had conceived in Ireland or abroad. It was the birth event which determined citizenship.

²⁷ UN Refugee Agency, "Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries, 2007," retrieved from <http://www.uncr.org/statistics/47daae862.pdf>, 5 September, 2008.

²⁸ See Anwen Tormey, "'Anyone with eyes can see the problem': Moral Citizens and the Space of Irish Nationhood," in *International Migration* 45: 3 (August 2007), 69-100.

this became the symbol of Ireland, pregnant African women. I just loved that. And I think this whole thing has been a miracle that we should be very grateful for. It's fucking disgusting to see how against it a lot of people are, and how racist we are. I think we should be so grateful to these immigrants, for deigning to grace us with their presence.²⁹

Charlie's pregnancy and her forcible expulsion from Tyreelin in *Breakfast on Pluto* thus takes on a different tenor although, according to the film's plot, the attack is motivated by her lack of a husband, and Kitten's queerness rather than as an explicit recognition of her racial difference. The earlier scenes in the film of Charlie and Kitten being shunned by two white residents on the street signals the limits of Tyreelin's hospitality, and the physical effect of these two bodies which are queer and of color, on the local inhabitants. Speaking of the environment prior to the Citizenship Referendum of 2004, Anwen Tormey writes: "Dramas of the abuse of Irish hospitality, phantasms of excessive and instrumental fertility, and the spectre of a proliferation of immoral and unworthy character were phenomenologically animated by the bodies of black immigrant mothers."³⁰

Nevertheless, taking O'Connor's musings as a cue, the redemptive nature of Charlie's pregnancy for herself and Kitten suggests that while the people of Tyreelin think they are rejecting a curse, in fact they are foolishly refusing a blessing. This rejection reveals the limits of their own ignorance rather than the unfitness of Kitten and Charlie. The year of the film may be somewhere in the 1970s, but the film's release in 2005 nevertheless renders the lesson anew for a contemporary Irish audience. Looking forward to 2008, the diversification of Irish society today actually exposes a history of heterogeneity long obscured and attested to by Kitten and Charlie's struggles in the 1970's of the film.

Hence, Negga's location at the center of these contemporary changes and fears in Ireland in her performance in this historical film as a mixed-race Irish actress positions her in what M. Jacqui Alexander would term "palimpsestic time." This position is far from one of safety. Negga's role as Charlie highlights the violence that was experienced by bystanders throughout the Troubles as well as the violent oppressions practiced by a Irish Catholic community that would shun many kinds of outsiders or sinners insisting on a

²⁹ Sinéad O'Connor, "The Lion's Daughter": http://www.sinead-oconnor.com/home/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=178&Itemid=179, retrieved 15 May 2008.

³⁰ Tormey, 87.

normative heterosexual, white, Irish subject throughout the 20th century.³¹ Moreover, the appearance of her mixed-race body in a movie about the 1970s released in 2005 points forward to the physical and verbal racially motivated assaults that have abounded in Ireland since the early 1990s, and to the persistent fears of pregnant African and other immigrants "invading" Ireland. This series of events implicates the continuation of a post-colonial history that renders racial formations, structural inequalities, and the location of populations and national borders far from stable. In addition, it implicates the history of the Irish as collaborators in and subjects of British Empire worldwide through forced or voluntary emigration. Alexander elaborates on "palimpsestic time":

The idea of the 'new' structured through the 'old' scrambled palimpsestic character of time both jettisons the truncated distance of linear time and dislodges the impulse for incommeasurability, which the ideology of distance creates. It thus rescrambles the 'here and now' and 'then and there' to a 'here and there' and 'then and now,' and makes visible what Payal Bannerjee calls the ideological traffic between and among formations that are otherwise positioned as dissimilar.³²

Given the colonial legacy of the Irish people, it is perhaps a surprise to find that Irish history includes many examples of internal racial prejudice. Yet, this stubbornness does not only indicate a "forgetting" of Irish oppression, but rather operates through its logic. Thus, the dubious case of the Irish as post-colonial: their dual position within British Empire, proximity to Europe, history of displacement and intermixture with other cultures, etc., puts Ireland in 2008 in a crucial position as a vantage point from which to reconsider how post-colonial palimpsestic time functions in regards to race, culture and globalization today.

Negga's performance serves as a site from which to consider a new pedagogy of the palimpsest that reckons with the "blacks of Europe," Irish and otherwise by foregrounding what Vijay Prashad would term "polyculturalism," an alternative to a multiculturalism dependent on the continuation of identity politics as well as "post-nationalism". Prashad writes:

³¹ See Marjorie Howe, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. Éibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997).

³² M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 190.

These defiant skins come under the sign of the polycultural, a provisional concept grounded in antiracism rather than in diversity. Polyculturalism, unlike multiculturalism, assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of a host of lineages—the task of the historian is not to carve out the lineages but to make sense of how people live culturally dynamic lives. Polyculturalism is a ferocious engagement with the political world of culture, a painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions.³³

Prashad does not suggest a capricious disengagement with the violences of these polycultural histories in favor of an unhinged and individualistic cosmopolitan account; rather, he suggests that the full extent of their violence *and* opportunities cannot be understood unless coherent lives are located in sites that index multiple histories in and through the body and lived experience. It is not only Negga and her body that are implicated here: her observable difference, her racialized exteriority, points towards the “polycultural” lives of the other actors and characters in the film hidden under their appearance of a(n) albeit unstable Irish) whiteness. By refusing to look past Negga’s exterior difference, it is therefore possible to avoid looking *only* at Negga as the sign of Ireland now, or as the guarantee of its success. The participation of the ensemble of actors that she supports with her own performance is required to truly reflect Ireland now.

Therefore, “Irish whiteness” is not just a sign which insures privilege or conceals histories of oppression; it also demonstrates how these contradictions converge and cooperate. The instability of the Irish’s location within the British Empire should not be understood as merely frustrating or suspect; instead, it powerfully exposes the weakness of imperialist logic that positioned them thus and which asked its subject to make coherent lives out of these conflicting roles. This understanding, coupled with a true reckoning of the multiple post-colonial histories now gathered in Ireland’s midst, provide a powerful platform for the forging of a new polycultural anti-racist politics that will hopefully outlast the roar of the “Celtic Tiger.”

Doyle writes in December 2006 for his introduction to his latest collection of short stories *The Deportees and Other Stories*:

Maybe it was *Riverdance*. A bootleg video did the rounds of the rooms and the shanties of Lagos and, moved to froth by the site of that long, straight

³³ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), xii.

line of Irish and Irish-American legs- *tap-tap-tap, tappy-tap-* thousand of Nigerians packed the bags and came to Ireland. *Please. Teach us how to do that.*

I suspect it was more complicated. It was about jobs and the E.U., and infrastructure and wise decisions, and accident. It was about education and energy, and words like 'tax' and 'incentive,' and what happens when they are put beside each other. It was also about music and dancing and literature and football. It happened, I think, sometime in the mid-90's. I went to bed in one country and woke up in a different one.³⁴

Just as Jordan regards Ruth Negga's casting a fortuitous accident, Doyle first jokes that perhaps it was Michael Flaherty that lured the Nigerians to Ireland. Within these jokes and accidents, a deeper and more tangled history of economic duress, mutual engagement, anti-colonial solidarities, violence and xenophobia is concealed. These strands must now be unpacked in order to truly reckon with what the Celtic Tiger bears behind her/his stripes. Doyle did not simply wake up in a different country, he woke up to a country that had lured its more far-flung history home to itself. James Joyce's Stephen Bloom famously mused in *Ulysses*, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." As Roddy Doyle tells us, perhaps that wake-up call has finally come in Ireland.

³⁴ Roddy Doyle, "Foreword," in *The Deportees and Other Stories* (New York: Viking, 2007), xi.