

**“AREN’T WE CITIZENS OF THE WORLD?”: IRISH DIASPORA
AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN DEIRDRE MADDEN’S
ONE BY ONE IN THE DARKNESS, ANNE DEVLIN’S *AFTER EASTER*,
AND NUALA O’FAOLAIN’S *MY DREAM OF YOU***

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Introduction

Emigration and exile are experiences inextricably entwined with traditional notions of Irish identity. However, while most Irish emigrants turned their backs on Ireland for mere survival, rendering its history of migration a story of individual and national woe,¹ Irish migration history of the 1980s and beyond suggests a different story. In a transnational and global age the term ‘emigration’ has been replaced with the more positively connoted concept of an ‘Irish diaspora.’ This idea not only encompasses all descendents of Irish emigrants, but also the members of the so-called ‘new wave’ migration in the wake of the Celtic Tiger. Accordingly, in her inaugural speech in 1990 Mary Robinson declared: “There are over 70 million people living on this globe who claim Irish descent. I will be proud to represent them” (Gray, “Unmasking” 220). Robinson’s extension of her representative function beyond the Republic’s borders is emblematic of a “global imagined community” (Gray, “Unmasking” 220), characterised by cosmopolitanism, hybridisation as well as economic and cultural interconnectedness. The image of the young and educated ‘high-flying emigrant’ rapidly became the symbol of a new economically booming Celtic Tiger Ireland. As Breda Gray points out: “By the early 1990s the media in both Britain and Ireland were suggesting that for many young Irish adults, ‘London, not Dublin [was] becoming their capital city’” (Gray, “Ethnicity” 65).²

What is more, the term diaspora suggests a career-oriented generation of migrant yuppies who, thanks to the latest technologies and means of transport, are continually connected to their home country, altering and expanding the idea of ‘Irish identity’ and its place in Europe and the world (see Gray, “Unmasking” 223). Migration is experienced as less permanent and, by implication, less painful than in former centuries. In the 1980s and ‘90s, therefore, Irish migrants appeared as transnational commuters rather than emigrants or even exiles. As Robert Cohen enthusiastically puts it, gone are “the traumas of exile, the troubled relationship with the host culture and other negative aspects of the traditionally upheld diasporic condition. Instead,

1 As Liam Greenslade points out with respect to the Irish Famine years of 1845-49: “Caught in an economic double bind that resulted in mass starvation, for the Irish emigration became the only viable means of survival” (204).

2 Gray is quoting from Popham (18-21).

strong diasporas are now represented as the key to determining success in the global economy" (12).

In this paper, I will analyse literary representations of the Irish diaspora in England from the 1990s which suggest that the celebrated ideal of a transnational, global identity serves to gloss over some of its more problematic aspects. As Gray notes, "the discourse on diaspora, like the discourse on nation, tends to subordinate gender, class and other politics" ("Unmasking" 213). Foregrounding the issues of gender and religion, I will focus on individual characters from three different literary works: Cate from Deirdre Madden's novel *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), Helen and Greta from Anne Devlin's play *After Easter* (1994), and Kathleen from Nuala O'Faolain's novel *My Dream of You* (2001).

Deirdre Madden, *One by One in the Darkness* (1996)

Traditionally, Irish female migrants in England found employment in the domestic or health care sectors. From the 1980s onward, however, the number of Irish women "in managerial and professional occupations requiring higher qualifications" has increased significantly (Gray, "Ethnicity" 67). Gray explains why Irish women in London in the 1980s and '90s, despite these changes, were still relatively invisible: in order to survive on the English job market, these women often 'privatised' their Irish origin and identity, leading a kind of double existence by oscillating between their Anglicised selves and their Irish roots (see "Ethnicity" 77). One example of this type of assimilated Irish career woman in the 'global city' of London is provided by Madden's novel *One by One in the Darkness*, published in 1996. Cate Quinn, one of the three sisters at the centre of the novel, originates from a small place in Northern Ireland, but lives and works as a successful fashion journalist in London. Her assimilated identity is most obviously expressed in her decision to change the initial letter of her name from a 'K' to a 'C,' because she considers the former "too Irish [...], too country." However, "it never crossed her mind that her family would have any problem with this, and she had been grieved and embarrassed when it became clear that they were hurt by what she had done, and saw in it a rejection of themselves" (Madden 4).

Cate impersonates the classic figure of the migrant living in two worlds. The first chapter narrates her journey from London to Belfast, where she intends to confront her mother and two sisters with her pregnancy. As a single, unmarried woman, Cate suspects that this piece of news will hardly go down well. This suggests a predictable discrepancy between Cate's modern urban life and her rural Catholic family's moral expectations. On her way to the airport, Cate remembers an earlier journey on the occasion of her father's death, when she hurriedly searched for "suitable things to wear at home [...] but everything struck her as wrong: too pale or bright, too stylish" (Madden 3). Again the discrepancy between *Cate* and *Kate* is clear. With respect to her Irish self and her London self she represents the classic doubling of identity.

According to Breda Gray, this “double consciousness” is typical of migrants whose country of destination is geographically close to their country of origin, so that there is a regular exchange going on with those who stayed behind (“Ethnicity” 76). Outwardly, career woman Cate is perfectly integrated in her adopted country, but internally there is an unbridgeable distance to her London surroundings, resulting from her Northern Irish roots and concomitant experiences: “She had friends in London, good friends, but she’d realised that there was no one to whom she wished to tell what had happened [her father’s death], much less anyone she wanted around her at that moment. She had just wanted to be home” (Madden 3). Her hesitancy to share her grief at her father’s death even with her “good friends” in London seems justified by her colleagues’ subsequent reactions. Having been shot in the house of his brother, an IRA member, he is readily branded as a terrorist, who basically got what he deserved. Cate recalls “a coolness and reserve with some of her colleagues after the funeral, and it was something more than the English being less comfortable with the bereaved than the Irish were. What they were thinking only dawned on her slowly, and it was so horrible that she shrank away, afraid of having to confront it until she was forced to do so” (Madden 91). The discrepancy between Cate’s London self and her Irish self is symbolised, rather blatantly, by a small scar beneath her hairline, caused by a farming accident as a child. Touching this almost invisible scar “restored a sense of reality, a sense of who she was, in a way that looking at her own reflection could not” (Madden 2).

Surprisingly, Cate, who outwardly seems so at home with the world of dinner parties, fashion, and one-night stands turns out to be a regular churchgoer. She also keeps a holy image, albeit a modern one, in her London flat. As Jerry White notes, “[e]ven as Cate leaves her marginal community for the metropolitan/imperial center of London, and even as she changes her name, she retains central parts of her marginal identity and manages to update them and make them relevant to her condition” (459). However, Cate not only integrates parts of her identity into her new life, but she also perceives her home from a new, an outsider’s, perspective, “trying to fathom Northern Ireland in a way which wasn’t, if you still lived there, necessary. Or advisable, she thought. Or possible even” (Madden 82). Still, Cate’s strong ties to her family and home are precisely what thwart her chances of settling down and starting a life of her own in London. As one of her partners, “a man whom she’d been seeing for about six months,” puts it: “‘Cate, I can’t tell you how sick I am of hearing you go on and on about your bloody family. Do you ever think of anything else?’ [...] Unwittingly, he’d gone straight to the root of the problem. [...] Cate was shocked to realise that the point he made was valid” (Madden 148).

Conversely, Cate’s balancing act between her life in London and her Northern Irish home works precisely because of her strong bond with her family: “What did she have ‘in common’ with Sally and Helen, except that they were sisters? Surely that was the whole point of family. It was to change strangers into friends that you needed some kind of shared interests, beliefs or aspirations, but with your sisters, what you

had 'in common' was each other" (Madden 88). Ultimately, Cate's family accepts her unconditionally, and even the illegitimate child will be admitted to the family circle, functioning as a carrier of hope. At least, this idea is suggested by Cate's sister reflecting on the unborn child: "To say how much she felt the family needed something like this would have been to point up how haunted and threatened she had felt herself to be over the past two years" (Madden 145-146). While at the end of the novel the three sisters lie "one by one in the darkness" (Madden 181), each immersed in her own grief and bitter-sweet childhood memories, anticipating an uncertain future, the unborn child represents a glimmer of hope for a new transnational identity untroubled by past trauma.

Anne Devlin, *After Easter* (1994)

Anne Devlin's play *After Easter* also deals with three Northern Irish sisters. One of them is thirty-three-year-old Helen, described in the *dramatis personae* as a "highly successful commercial artist" living in London. Rather than changing her name, Helen discarded her Irish accent so as to succeed in the London world of business. In Helen's pragmatic reasoning, "I find when I'm buying or selling an American accent gets me through the door. Whereas an Irish accent gets me followed round the store by a plainclothes security man" (Devlin 9). Even though Helen goes for an American rather than a British accent – "There are limits to betrayal – even for me" (Devlin 9) – her assimilation to London seems exemplary; she is the prototype of the 'high-flying emigrant': "Me? I'm flying really. There are three managerial positions in my company and I can have my pick" (Devlin 9). Still, she shows signs of what Gray diagnoses as a sense of guilt internalised by many Irish female migrants: "There is still an uneasiness about leaving Ireland. [...] To leave for any reason other than work or career might be seen as rejecting 'mother Ireland,' the mother that fed, reared and cared for her children" ("Unmasking" 217). In the course of the play it becomes obvious that Helen, who leads a promiscuous life, seeks to escape from her family's narrow Catholic moral values. Unlike Cate, Helen seems unable to reconcile her 'double identities,' which is why she eschews contact with her family. She is thus representative of many female migrants who fail to manage the balancing act, because their lifestyle is not accepted by their families and friends back 'home,' who deem it not 'Irish' enough (see Gray, "Unmasking" 214).

Helen's outward appearance, too, testifies to her changed 'migrational' identity. Her brother's reaction illustrates this nicely: "God, Helen, you look like a million dollars [...] Why don't you just wear your bank balance on your sleeve –" (Devlin 33). Helen, in turn, asks her brother: "Aren't we citizens of the world? We were the last time we met" (Devlin 33). Ironically enough, though, it is Helen who has to admit that all she does is done in reaction to her father's domineering example: "He wouldn't let me go either. So I had my revenge on my socialist father. I became a capitalist in the most intimate sense: I only come if there is money" (Devlin 73). What is more, it turns out

that Helen donates large sums of money to Catholic orphanages in her home country. Here too, then, cutting loose of one's national roots and family ties seems at best a superficial solution, which easily leads to repressing or denying one's own identity.

This conflict is explored in depth through the example of Greta, Helen's sister, the play's central character. *After Easter* begins and ends with monologues by Greta, whose identity crisis accentuates the subject of the invisibility and voicelessness of women in the Irish diaspora. Thirty-seven-year-old Greta lives in Oxford as a professor's wife and mother of three, the youngest being a new-born girl. Her initial monologue takes place in an anonymous psychiatric clinic somewhere in England, to which Greta had been admitted after sitting on the road and trying to stop a bus.

This act of protest, ostensibly caused by a marital crisis and postnatal depression, is in reality part of a lasting identity crisis, originating in Greta's migration experience fifteen years back. As Greta tells her sister: "I left Ireland in 1979, but I never arrived in England. I don't know where I went" (Devlin 16). At the same time, her way back seemed barred: "They didn't like George [her English husband], so I stayed away" (Devlin 7). The liminal state in which Greta finds herself accordingly – neither England nor Ireland – as well as her concomitant identity loss she describes as a kind of death: "[A]t that time in the house in the glen – two years after I came to England, I felt suicidal and that's when it happened. [...] I – died" (Devlin 14). Greta's suicidal mood had been triggered by the contrast between the school where she taught at the time – "I hated that school. English Catholics. They used to call me the Irish Art Teacher" (Devlin 13) – and her English holiday home, whose similarity to her Antrim home overwhelmed her "with homesickness" (Devlin 13). Greta narrates her so-called death experience in vivid terms: "I was in such despair that I opened my mouth and let out a huge cry until my voice filled the whole sky. And I felt it leave my body and go up into the stars. I did. And I knew I had died that night" (Devlin 14).

The metaphorical loss of her voice and language links Greta to other migrants, such as an illiterate man from the Republic of Ireland and an Indian child, whom she teaches English: "Father, I recognize them, the man from Mayo and the Hindu child, because I am the same. I too am a copier. I do it out of fear" (Devlin 59). That Greta, after her 'death experience,' deliberately chooses to teach English to immigrants rather than to English children, does not necessarily imply though that she identifies with this heterogeneous group. On the contrary, it suggests her longing for conformity: "I taught them to read and write English. I wanted to be English" (Devlin 15). This motivation ties in with her insight that she prefers to copy others rather than embrace her own identity.

Greta is, in Gray's terms, "doubly displaced" ("Unmasking" 215). On the one hand, she leads a relatively isolated life as an Irish migrant in Oxford; on the other hand, both her life and her husband are rejected by her family back home. Her sister Aoife puts this very bluntly: "I never did like him – I never understood how you could have married a cold English man" (Devlin 6); "Say what you like – but this I believe, the

English and the Irish cannot love each other” (Devlin 7). Greta repeatedly tries to transcend this national pigeonholing: “I am a Catholic, a Protestant, a Hindu, a Moslem, a Jew” (Devlin 7) and: “I don’t want to be Irish. I’m English, French, German” (Devlin 12). Her doctor’s question: “Why do you resent being Irish so much?” she answers thus: “I don’t resent being Irish – I only resent it being pointed out to me. I suppose I am beginning to resent being the only Irish person at every gathering” (Devlin 4). However, her repressed Irish-Catholic identity haunts her in the shape of spiritual visions (e.g. of Mary Magdalene) representative of her past, which she needs to face (see Wood 305). One of these she describes as follows: “It felt as if the whole of Ireland was crying out to me” (Devlin 11). In order to be resurrected from the dead she needs to confront her past, and she gets the opportunity to do so when her father’s heart attack and subsequent death lead to a family reunion in Belfast.

Back home, Greta faces a number of complex familial conflicts, not least of all a mother-daughter conflict resulting from a life-long competition for the husband’s/father’s love. This conflict points towards Greta’s problematic gendered and sexual identity, which, in turn, is inextricably entwined with her national and religious identity. The play explores at length the supposed incompatibility between female sexuality and the Catholic ideal of femininity represented by the Virgin Mary. Only after sorting out her own familial conflicts, especially those centring on her mother and the image of femininity she represents, is Greta able to return to England and re-enter her own life. This means first and foremost accepting her identity as a mother and responsibility for the new-born child she had rejected. The last scene presents Greta telling her own story of resurrection, and interestingly enough the setting is not indicated as Oxford, but in more general terms: “*Greta is at home, rocking a baby, telling it a story*” (Devlin 75). At the end of *After Easter*, then, Greta has found her self. This self-recovery and internal homecoming, however, is possible only after Greta has confronted her national, religious, and familial roots, reconciling these with her female identity. It is only through this confrontation that Greta succeeds in overcoming her own internal exile and starting to live in what she calls the “main room of [her] life” (Devlin 28).

Nuala O’Faolain, *My Dream of You* (2001)

Nuala O’Faolain’s protagonist Caitlín de Burca, or Kathleen Bourke, as she calls herself in England, is a single and childless career woman turning on fifty. Having left Ireland at twenty to live in London and become a travel-writer, Kathleen has led a seemingly independent life taking her to exotic and exciting places and ensuring her independence also in economic terms. While to others her life seems glamorous and enviable, in reality she suffers from her inability to engage in a stable relationship and create a home. She feels torn between a sense of having been “saved from Ireland by England” (O’Faolain 35) and being an outsider in London even after twenty-five years. Countless scenes highlight the anti-Irish racism Kathleen has to endure on a

daily basis. When her American friend Jimmy remarks on how lucky they are to “have England, but [...] our own places, too,” Kathleen counters: “We do not ‘have’ England. [...] Maybe you do, but I don’t. Not a day passes but some remark about ‘you Irish’ is made to me in a condescending tone” (O’Faolain 97). However, her pointed aversion towards her home country – “It’s no good in Ireland. [...] I never want to see it again! It’s no place for a woman” (O’Faolain 98) – suggests that it may be precisely her unresolved relationship with Ireland that prevents her from feeling at home anywhere else. Like Greta, she needs to face her past in order to find herself.

Jimmy’s sudden death causes Kathleen to quit her job, move out of her London basement flat and return to Ireland after almost thirty years of self-imposed exile. In her desperate need to fill her ‘wasted’ and barren life with meaning, Kathleen sets out to research the Talbot divorce case, which she has been fascinated with since her early twenties. It concerns the legal case of an English landowner in Ireland, Richard Talbot, and his wife Marianne, who came to Ireland at the time of the Great Famine in the mid-1840s. There, Talbot eventually divorced his young wife, separating her from their daughter, supposedly because Marianne had an adulterous affair with an Irish servant called William Mullen.

Even though she is in possession of only the barest facts, Kathleen’s imagination is gripped by what she assumes must have been an extraordinarily passionate love:

There could hardly have been two people less likely to be drawn to each other than an Anglo-Irish landlord’s wife and an Irish servant. Each of them came from a powerful culture which had at its core the defining of the other as alien. But they sloughed off those cultures to reach out to each other. They didn’t even have a native language in common, yet they pierced through layers of custom and dared every sanction, impelled by the need within desire to express itself. (O’Faolain 66-67)

This kind of passionate love affair transcending barriers of class, race, and culture is what Kathleen has been craving throughout her life but has failed to achieve for various reasons, but mostly for what she calls her “availability” or rather inability to refuse any man’s sexual advances. There are numerous hints that Kathleen’s inability to create a ‘home’ originates from her childhood with an uncaring, domineering father and a passive and depressive mother. Still, despite the fact that Kathleen’s sexual relationships fail to provide her with the passionate love she seeks and at the same time feels unworthy of, one of her biggest fears is that she might cease to be sexually attractive to men. Her desire for a stable home and happy marriage is presented as a contrary need. As Kathleen puts it, explaining her single state to her sister-in-law: “If I’d stayed in Ireland I suppose I would have married. I’ve been looking around since I came back this time and there’s a kind of Irish couple where he trains the GAA team and she’s big and good-looking and shy and they have three red-haired little boys all wriggling away in the back of the Toyota. I wish I’d been that woman —” (O’Faolain 222).

The seemingly contradictory and equally unfulfilled wishes for extraordinary passion and ordinary domesticity meet their temporary fulfilment in Shay, an Irishman in his fifties who divides his time between Liverpool and his father's farm in the west of Ireland. Significantly, elderly Shay is not the dashing hero out of a romance, but "an ordinary-looking man" in "Everyman's clothes" (O'Faolain 148). Still, it is with Shay that Kathleen experiences both the bliss of sexual fulfilment and everyday domesticity. Shay, rather predictably, is a married man though, not prepared to leave his family for Kathleen. Traversing between Ireland and England, however, he provides a link between Kathleen's seemingly irreconcilable worlds and helps her to come to terms with her "double identity."

Parallel to this love story, Kathleen uncovers unexpected documents about the Talbot divorce case that cast doubt on her imaginative reconstruction of Marianne and William's alleged passion. Instead, evidence suggests that both fell victim to a plot arranged by Talbot so as to give him grounds for divorcing a wife seemingly unable to bear him a son. As it becomes clear that Kathleen cannot possibly unearth the truth and faithfully reconstruct Marianne's life, she gradually turns her into a foil for her own desires and fears. By interlacing both story strands, the novel explores how identity is inextricably entwined with the past, both through the Famine narrative and Kathleen's personal history of a deprived and loveless childhood resulting in a disoriented and unsteady adult life.

Tropes of hunger, starvation, and barrenness are used at multiple levels to illuminate Irish gendered identity. Kathleen comes across evidence that Talbot tried to starve his wife, locking her up in the big house and later in England. Crop failure and women's infertility are linked, firstly on the literal level as undernourishment causes infertility and secondly on the metaphorical level which plays upon traditional representations of the land as female. The Famine, during which the feminised land refused to provide nourishment, is projected on women in later legislative attempts to control their bodies and regulate their fertility (see O'Kane Mara 201). Because Marianne fails to bear her husband a son, she is – possibly – abandoned, cruelly separated from her daughter and driven mad. This fate, again, is mirrored by Kathleen's own infertility: "The older I got the more I asked questions about the purpose of my existence, if it was not to have a baby" (O'Faolain 370). Finally, we learn about Kathleen's most deeply rooted trauma that made her leave Ireland thirty years before. Her mother, five months pregnant, had been diagnosed with cancer of the womb and denied treatment to either cure it or at least reduce the pain so as not to endanger the child's life. When both mother and child died, Kathleen blamed Catholic Ireland in general and her self-righteous father in particular.

The central theme of physical and emotional (under)nourishment manifests itself in numerous ways, such as the mother's lifelong failure to provide food or express love for her children. Kathleen's need for passionate love is also described in terms of hunger, which again is intertwined with the regret at her own infertility: "I wanted – an

intense, incoherent, sexual longing surged up through my body – to both feed and be fed. And there was no chance” (O’Faolain 372). Being “motherless in every direction” (O’Faolain 372), as Kathleen puts it, what she needs in order to heal is not so much the passionate love of a man, but the caring maternal love of a mother figure. This she finds in a librarian tellingly enough called *Nan* Leech, who assists her in her research. Nan is an elderly woman on the verge of death, suffering from terminal cancer of the womb, who has remained unmarried and childless because of the Marriage Bar. Nan takes on Kathleen as the daughter she might have had and helps her to get back on track, come to terms with her life as it is – without Jimmy and Shay – and resume her own life in London, caring for her remaining friends who have been through their own traumas and crises.

As Miriam O’Kane Mara puts it, “O’Faolain’s text proposes another creative, rather than procreative, space for women. Yet the text includes no characters who combine the roles of successful career with motherhood in a meaningful way” (204). This supposed incompatibility of career, motherhood, and romance seems to characterise many of the female characters in recent contemporary Irish women’s fiction; while giving birth implies hope and fulfilment, it remains unclear whether motherhood can be combined with either having a career or a fulfilled partnership. Be that as it may, Kathleen fills this void by adopting her own family (the friends she makes in Ireland as well as her colleagues back in London), thereby suggesting a concept of identity and community beyond national and biological boundaries.

Conclusion

To conclude, all three works discussed in this paper testify to what Breda Gray calls the “inadequacy of understanding immigrant identity with reference only to the country of destination” (“Ethnicity” 178). Cate’s invisible scar, Helen’s secret donations to the convent, Greta’s visions, and Kathleen’s obsession with the Talbot case all suggest the more or less strong ties that bind all four characters to their country of origin and thus to their families and roots. Cate’s changed name, Helen’s American accent, and Kathleen’s nomadic life signal not so much their having achieved a transnational identity but rather the attempt to bridge the experienced discrepancy by means of a ‘doubling of identity.’ In Greta’s case the dangers inherent in this doubling become very obvious, as it leads to loss of identity, depression, and visions of the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene. The stories of both Greta’s and Kathleen’s self-recovery respectively document the complexity of this process, which inevitably entails national, gendered, and familial components.

Ultimately, the female characters created by Madden, Devlin, and O’Faolain imply that it is possible to become a true ‘citizen of the world’ – provided that this process is preceded by self-recovery, which means that one needs to confront and integrate rather than repress one’s roots. It is only then that carrying one’s own home within oneself becomes possible, in the sense that Mária Kurdi claims that re-born Greta, at

the end of *After Easter*, is carrying her home “hidden inside the soul forever, like Ireland herself, to be carried wherever she goes” (105).

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