RACE AND ETHNICITY ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: REVISING THE DISCOURSE OF NATION-BUILDING IN COLUM MCCANN'S *TRANSATLANTIC*, SEBASTIAN BARRY'S *ON CANAAN'S SIDE* AND COLM TÓIBÍN'S *BROOKLYN*

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We can find a lot of similarities between Colm Tóibín's 2009 *Brooklyn,* Sebastian Barry's 2011 *On Canaan's Side*, and Colum McCann's 2013 *Transatlantic*, three novels published by some of the most distinguished contemporary Irish writers in relatively the same period. Each in its own way explores the rich and long-lasting relationship between Ireland and the United States. Each of the stories, written by a male novelist, centers around a female protagonist who is forced or willingly decides to emigrate to the United States: Lily Duggan in *Transatlantic*, Lilly Bere in *On Canaan's Side* and Eilis Lacey in *Brooklyn*. The three novels thus hark back to the tradition of the emigrant's narrative, laying stress on the historical reality of Irish female emigration. As a matter of fact, by the end of the nineteenth century, over half of all Irish immigrants to the US were women, many of them single and young, no other ethnic group coming close to that figure during that period (see Diner; Kennedy; and Miller). The three novels are situated at various moments in time but all make direct and precise references to historical events. McCann's skilfully interwoven plot-lines span a century and a half of Irish and American history, starting in 1845 with Frederick Douglass' historical visit to Ireland during which he met Daniel O'Connell, following the invitation of Richard Webb, the co-founder of the Hibernian Anti-Slavery Society. The story unfolds until 2011, when Lily Duggan's great-granddaughter Hannah, who lives in Northern Ireland, survives the loss of her own grandson, the casual victim of a sectarian murder that took place during the Troubles.

Sebastian Barry's own novel also stretches over a long period of history as the narrator-cum-protagonist Lilly Bere, née Dunne, survives three generations of relatives who are successively involved in four different wars: World War One, the Anglo-Irish War, the Viet-Nam War and the First Gulf War.

Even though the action of Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* does not span over several generations of the same family the way the two other novels do, the plot is also set against a historical backdrop, that of small-town Ireland in the 1950s, when so many young people had to leave home and go into exile, especially to the United States, in order to escape economic stagnation and cultural deprivation, a condition made even more difficult for young women facing a life in the margins of society if they could not find a husband.

However, beyond their depiction of the experience of female emigration at various periods of Irish history, a common feature set forward by the three narratives is also the encounter between the young female protagonists and other peoples, other ethnic groups, and through them between Irishness and Otherness. In each case, this encounter problematizes the notion of a distinct Irish identity as construed by nationalist discourse. The narrative of the journey to America thus allows each writer to pit the fate of Irish people, which nationalist discourse has historically tended to describe as one of oppression and discrimination, against that of other ethnic groups living in the United States, more particularly the Afro-Americans. What is more, the three novelists do not only stage their female protagonists' encounters with other racial and ethnic groups, but also their complete assimilation into a multi-ethnic society through marriage and child-bearing, giving birth to mixed-race subjects.

As a result, it may be argued that McCann, Tóibín and Barry depict America not so much as "a land of refuge" as implied by the biblical allusion to Canaan, but as the inverted mirror-image of sectarian, bigoted, nationalist Ireland, obsessed by an exclusive, homogeneous definition of Irishness. The entangling of American and Irish history is a means for the three writers to expose how nationalist discourse is conducive to the exclusion and rejection of all those people who are found not to match the essential determinants of national Irish identity, that is to say are not Catholic, white, or of Gaelic descent. In response, each novel in its own way stages and advocates hybridity, the crossing of the colour-line, the blending of racial, religious and ethnic identities. The novels also specifically question and critique the comparison established between the sufferings of Irish people forced by poverty and colonial oppression to emigrate to America, and those of the African Blacks, deported and enslaved, that was first claimed by such nationalist leaders as John Mitchell in the wake of the Famine. The emphasis laid in the novels on inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations, and on the crossing of the colour-line, is furthermore reflected at an aesthetic level by the three writers' taste for polyphony, multiple plots and coincidences, links which can be found either within the novels themselves, or among their other previous publications, and even with previous works by other writers.

To begin with, we can notice that the three protagonists's names – Lilly, Lily and Eilis – share the same etymology, as they all derive from the same name Elizabeth. Each of the three young women is thus presented as a 'lily', evidently suggesting the purity and innocence attached to their youth and inexperience, but also pointing to the whiteness of their skins. As a matter of fact, these young women's innocence has not so much to do with their ignorance of the realities of sex or love, as would be the case in a traditional novel of female education, as with issues pertaining to race and ethnicity. Those white 'Lilies' are indeed on the whole 'colour-blind', in the sense that until setting foot in America they had never met any other ethnic group but their own and were therefore ignorant of other peoples' histories of sufferings. As a result, their journey of discovery to America may be interpreted as an initiation into what Sinead Moynihan, in a recent book, calls "other people's diasporas", adding that in recent

times she has noticed “Irish and Irish American artists’ increasing interest in representing ‘key moments’ in the history of the US racial and ethnic relations” (Moynihan 3).

The three novels under consideration may be said to share this interest and to confront their Irish protagonists with the realities of race-relations in the US. For example, Tóibín’s Eilis finds a job as a sales assistant at Bartocci’s, where she actually observes Afro-American women with her own eyes for the first time when the latter become allowed to shop in that store. She also seems to hear for the first time in her life about the persecution of European Jews during World War Two through the character of Mr Rosenblum, one of her teachers in night school where she takes a class in accountancy; she is so ignorant of other ethnic groups that “[s]he wished she could tell the difference between Jews and Italians” (Tóibín 82), whom she confuses because most of them are “dark-skinned with brown eyes” – again seemingly discovering the diversity of human types for the first time in her life.

In Barry’s *On Canaan’s Side,* Lilly Bere is rescued from her desperate wanderings through the American continent by Cassie, an Afro-American woman originating from Virginia, who gives her shelter and helps her find her first job as a cook. Through the way she reports that encounter, Lilly as a narrator reveals her ignorance of racial issues insofar as she does not refer once to her friend Cassie’s skin colour when describing her or evoking her life. It is only when Lilly, her friend Cassie and her future husband Joe Kinderman get on a streetcar and the motorman casts racial abuse at them: “Folk don’t like to see Negroes, all stuck in their faces, in general” (Barry 114), that Cassie’s blackness is eventually spelled out for the reader. Likewise, Lilly later marries Joe without being aware of his Blackness – she even believes at one stage that he could be Jewish: “He did tell me once also that he was Jewish, but I must confess, on having relations with him, that he was not a circumcised person, that I could judge” (Barry 134). Lilly’s confusion about race and ethnicity is compounded by the birth of her white-skinned child, even if years later the genetic trait reappears in her muletto grandson.

In McCann’s novel, Lily Duggan, initially a maid in the service of the Webb family, who actually hosted the real Frederick Douglass in Dublin, presents the same type of naivety as Lilly Bere when it comes to skin colour. But her ignorance also means that she is deprived of all prejudice, in keeping with the actual reception Douglass received during his historical visit to Ireland. McCann’s fictional rendering of Douglass’s visit to Ireland is indeed true to facts, especially when it comes to the warm welcome the Afro-American slave received on the part of Irish people and the close relationship he entertained with the great nationalist leader Daniel O’Connell. In a book published in 2012, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race*, in which he also details Daniel O’Connell’s involvement in the abolitionist movement, Bruce Nelson devotes a whole chapter to Frederick Douglass’ relation with Ireland, in which he reports that, in accordance with McCann’s fictional rendering, “Douglass loved O’Con-

nell all the more when they shared the stage at a Repeal meeting in Dublin and the Liberator introduced him to the throng at Conciliation Hall as "the Black O'Connell of the United States" (Nelson 87, a scene that McCann faithfully reproduces in his novel: "two days later, in Conciliation Hall, O'Connell brought him on stage and he thrust Douglass's hand in the air: *Here*, he said, *the black O'Connell!* Douglass watched the hats go up into the rafters" [McCann 60]). McCann also truthfully echoes Douglass' correspondence from Ireland, in which the run-away slave mentioned what seemed to him "the total absence of all manifestations of prejudice against me, on account of my colour" (Nelson 95): "When he sat up, on the boards, crowds came out of their houses just to look at him. They clapped his shoulder, shook his hand, blessed him with the sign of the cross" (McCann 64).

McCann's fictional character Lily accordingly feels no hostility towards the Afro-American slave who is her master's guest: what's more, she grows inspired by his story, and taking her cue from him, decides to escape poverty and the early signs of the Famine by emigrating to America. She therefore walks all the way to Cork to the Jennings' home where Douglass is now staying, in order to ask for the black man's advice and support. When Isabel Jennings persuades Douglass to ride to Howth with her to greet the young servant farewell, the scene brings to the Afro-American's mind a notice he has just read in a newspaper, offering a reward for a run-away negro girl. The incident, and the fictional rendering of Douglass's impressions of Ireland, are used by McCann to skillfully introduce the problematic comparison between the sufferings of the Irish colonized by the British, and the Africans enslaved by the American colonists, an issue that was raised in the wake of the Famine by such nationalist leaders as John Mitchel. Indeed, in a scholarly article published in 2014, Peter D. O'Neill reminds us that Irish nationalists often used the word "slavery" to describe the plight of the Irish peasants under British imperialist domination and adds:

> Mitchel partook of this convention. He wrote in *Jail Journal* that Irish Catholics were deliberately, ostentatiously debarred from executing the common civic office of jurors in any case of public concernment – that is to say, that they were not citizens in their own land – that is to say, that they are slaves – for there is no middle term. (O'Neill 322)

O'Neill even argues that Mitchel's *Jail Journal,* which is held as one of the sacred texts of Irish nationalism, borrows from the style and structure of a slave-narrative:

> Like the slave narrative, *Jail Journal* is a first-person-singular account of an escape from captivity – in Mitchel's case, an escape to freedom in the USA following imprisonment by the British authorities. (O'Neill 321)

Interestingly, Douglass is reported to have first admired Mitchel but then to have been disgusted by the latter's activism in defense of slavery. Peter O'Neill speaks of "the bitter irony that to tell his ultimately supremacist story of victimisation, Mitchel appropriated the slave narrative's tropes of kidnap, of Middle Passage dehumanisation and commodification, of escape, and of liberation" (O'Neill 322). In his novel Mc Cann echoes the contradictions and paradoxes induced by the problematic alignment of the condition of the colonized Irish with that of African slaves either, for example

when he has Douglass reflect that "The Irish were poor, but they were not enslaved" (McCann 81), or O'Connell confide to Douglass that "It burdened him terribly to hear there were many Irishmen among the slave owners of the South" (McCann 61), a clear allusion to John Mitchel's support of slavery, in the name of Black people's alleged racial inferiority (see, e.g., Quinn).

However, the parallel between the fate of the Irish and that of the African slaves remains a topical issue today, as is evidenced by the publication of David Lloyd's edited book entitled *The Black and Green Atlantic*: *Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas*. In his introduction, Lloyd defines "the Green Atlantic" as "the points of contact, overlap and cooperation" – as well as competition and exploitation – across the Atlantic or as "the relation beween two historically oppressed peoples – the dispossessed and colonized Irish, forced into emigration and often indenture from the 16th century, and Africans captured and enslaved during the same period" (Lloyd xvi). Lloyd's title itself is obviously an allusion to Paul Gilroy's oceanic metaphor of the "Black Atlantic" employed to designate the Black diaspora (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*). What is more, in his introduction, Lloyd acknowledges to be responding through this collection of essays to Noel Ignatiev's provocative book published in 1995, *How the Irish Became White*, to which we can also find a reference in McCann's *Transatlantic*. Indeed in an incident which establishes a bridge between the entangled novelistic time-lines, that of the Famine and that taking place in the present era, Hannah, Lily Duggan's great-granddaughter, decides to sell the letter which was once entrusted by Lily's daughter Emily to the care of the aviators Alcock and Brown, on the occasion of their first transatlantic flight, and addressed to the Jennings family who hosted Douglass in Cork. When a buyer applies, that man tells Hannah that he was "aware of the Douglass connection; it had, he said, become fashionable of late for the Irish to think of themselves tremendously tolerant; (…) The academic question was when, in fact, *they*, the Irish, had become white" (McCann 271), an obvious allusion to Ignatiev's theory and to the current debates about Irish people's attitudes towards racial and ethnic relations through history, both in the USA and at home. In the book previously mentioned, Sinead Moynihan remarks that the same issue just pointed out in McCann's novel, that is to say the comparison between the Irish forced into emigration under British domination and the Africans' deportation to America as slaves, was revisited over the recent decades. Frederick Douglass's visit to Ireland was thus recently brought to the larger public's attention through various interventions. She mentions for example a documentary film entitled *Frederick Douglass agus na Negroes bana* ("Frederick Douglass and the White Negro") broadcast by the Irish-language television channel TG4 in 2008; or Donal O'Kelly's play *The Cambria* in which, in her opinion, O'Kelly explicitly contrasts the welcome that Douglass received in 1845 with the contemporary treatment of African immigrants to Celtic Tiger Ireland (Moynihan 99).

In its own way, McCann's novel also questions Irish people's attitude to other races and ethnic groups, rather than focusing on the treatment of Irish immigrants to the

US and the racism they were the victims of. By contrasting Irish people's attitude towards Douglass during his historic visit to Ireland on the eve of the Famine, when Lily Duggan took her cue from him to make the crucial decision to emigrate, with the contemporary era when Lily's descendant is the casual victim of the Troubles, McCann forces the reader to ponder over the legacies of nationalist discourse. Through his skillful interweaving of narrative plots, the sectarian hatred that kills the distant descendant of Lily Duggan in 1978 is indeed connected with Douglass's reflections on the "Irish question" at the time of the Famine, and his doubts regarding the relevance of the comparison between his people and the victims of the Famine whom he encounters during his visit. McCann thus suggests that the same nationalist discourse which established those comparisons between the British government's attitude towards the victims of the Irish Famine and the racism against the African Blacks, was itself a breeding ground from which sprung a form of destructive and inhuman racism. By aligning and contrasting the time of the Famine, and the radical discourse of nineteenth-century Irish nationalists about the enslavement of the Irish peasants, with that of the conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, McCann is obliquely suggesting that religious and ethnic sectarianism in Northern Ireland was, and perhaps still is, a form of racism equal in its potency of hatred and violence to the one inflicted to the descendants of the African slaves. What is more, McCann's fictionalized Douglass is already witness, in 1845, to the complexity of the Irish problem, where the antagonisms and hatreds at stake in the conflicts to come, to which Lily Duggan's descendants are doomed to be the victims of, are already brewing: "The politics still confounded him: who was Irish, who was British, who was Catholic, who was Protestant, who owned the land, whose child stood rheumy-eyed with hunger, whose house was burned to the ground, whose soil belonged to whom, and why?" (McCann 80). As a result, through the prism of the American history of slavery and racism, McCann is not only able to critique the radical nationalist claim that established a kinship of fate between the Irish and the Blacks, but also to show that the same discourse was the breeding ground for the sectarian and racist implications of the Northern Irish Troubles.

To a various extent, the two other novels under consideration are underpinned by the same critical stance towards the sectarian and racist tendencies proper to Irish nationalism – and to all forms of nationalism anywhere. Tóibín's *Brooklyn* however is perhaps the narrative that stages the most ambiguous of the three female protagonists as far as their attitude towards race and ethnicity is concerned. Indeed, Tóibín's novel seems an apt illustration of Bruce Nelson's remark that: "Many historians describe nationalism as a force that was turned inwards, preoccupied overwhelmingly with 'Ourselves', expressing little, if any, interest in parallel movements for emancipation, in other parts of the world" (Nelson 11). As a typical provincial Irish girl growing up in Eamon de Valera's 1950s Ireland, crippled by a disastrous combination of economic protectionism, censorship and cultural obscurantism, Eilis Lacey has been told nothing of the history of other people's oppressions: Ireland's isolationism during

World War Two entails that she does not have a clue about the fate of European Jews, as mentioned above; and once in Brooklyn she discovers the reality of racial discrimination against Blacks. When she is sent over to Brooklyn, her mother puts her in the care of the Catholic priest Father Flood, who supervises the flock of Irish girls regularly sent overseas. He sees to it that they evolve in a strictly Irish environment, so as to make sure that the young women marry within their own circle and thus secure the homogeneity of their ethnic community and preserve their Irish identity. Eilis lives in a boarding-house run by an Irish landlady, together with other Irish girls, and attends Irish dances supervised by the priest. Tóibín thus suggests that despite a long history of discrimination on account of their nationality – especially at the time when the Famine caused the emigration of hundreds of thousands of Irish people across the Atlantic[1] – the Irish, once settled down in the US, have tended to regard other ethnic groups with similar suspicion and racial prejudice. Thus when Eilis's roommates learn that she will have to serve Afro-American customers in the department store she works in, they express their repulsion:

> 'I wouldn't like to serve them in a store', Miss McAdam insisted. 'God, I wouldn't either,' Patty said. 'And is it their money you wouldn't like?' Mrs Kehoe said. 'They're very nice,' Eilis said. 'And some of them have beautiful clothes.' 'So it's true, then?' Sheila Heffernan asked. 'I thought it was a joke. Well, that's it, then. I'll pass Bartocci's, all right, but it'll be on the other side of the street.' (Tóibín 122)

After she meets Tony, Eilis prefers to keep to herself the fact that she is dating an Italian boy, who, even though a white Catholic like herself, is nevertheless regarded as Other. Eilis herself experiences this otherness as she entertains ambiguous feelings towards Tony's family: on first being introduced to them, she finds them alien and strange, as is evidenced, thanks to the device of internal focalization, by the attention she pays to their physical appearance. Tóibín highlights his character's complete ignorance of other cultures; her Irish education among a homogeneous people is reflected by her surprise at other peoples' physical differences, as when she notices about Tony's relatives that "each of them had black hair and eyes that were deep brown" (Tóibín 153). Likewise, she is unable to enjoy the Italian food prepared by Tony's mother and finds it strange and even slightly repulsive: "Everything she tasted she had to stop and hold it in her mouth, wondering what ingredients had gone into it" (Tóibín 154). The disgust she feels on that occasion is equivalent to the nausea she experiences during the sea-journey to America, a physical expression of her mental and psychological disorientation caused by the encounter with otherness. It proves almost overwhelming and makes Eilis feel so uncomfortable that she feels like running away: "She realized she would love to run out of this room and down the stairs and through the streets to the subway to her own room and close the door on the world" (Tóibín 155).

1 As recorded by the famous folksong: "No Irish need apply."

In the end, even if Eilis discovers sexual fulfilment thanks to her Italian lover, she is torn apart between her attraction to him and the desire to marry a local Irish boy and to stay in Ireland, after she is forced to return home on account of her sister's sudden death. It is only because of a twist of fate, an ill-intentioned neighbour who threatens to reveal her secret marriage to Tony, that she finally decides to go back to New York and to become the wife of an Italian-American. This ending may be compared to George Moore's canonical short story "Homesickness", when the protagonist James Bryden, who entertained the idea of marrying an Irish girl for a while, finally decides to go back to New York while suffering from the pains of nostalgia for the rest of his life. In the same way as Moore's story was a bitter depiction of post-Famine Ireland as a waste land riddled by religious bigotry, poverty and moral inertia, Tóibín in this narrative points to the utter failures and contradictions of the nationalist, post-independence Irish state. Indeed, despite its claims to moral and spiritual superiority over foreign, and especially British lifestyles, its vindication of cultural exclusiveness, and its discourse of racial distinctiveness, Fianna Fáil's Ireland was simply unable to provide the necessary economic conditions to keep its population at home. Thousands of young people were thus driven to an often very painful exile. While the small town where Eilis was born and raised offers her nothing but boredom, cultural deprivation and the most narrow form of moral conformism, the conspiracy engineered by Eilis's mother and sister, with the help of the local priest, to pack her away to New York, with or without her consent, is a small-scale representation of the only plan the nationalist state was able to elaborate to meet its people's needs. That plan was emigration, with the added constraint that the young should cling to their Irish identity wherever they would be re-located. Tóibín's narrative of exile and confrontation with otherness should also be set against the background of Ireland's metamorphosis at the turn of the twenty-first century from a closed, homogeneous type of society, into one of the most globalized economies in the world, attracting new strands of immigrant populations originating from all parts of the world, and causing a profound redefinition of Irish identity and culture. In the book already mentioned, Sinead Moynihan argues that the rekindled interest in "other people's diasporas" that she recognizes among Irish artists should be set against the background of the wave of immigration into Ireland which followed the boom of the Celtic Tiger economy. In her words, this late interest is "a means of coming to terms with debates on race and immigration in contemporary Ireland" (Moynihan 3), adding that "one of the most palpable trends in Irish culture of the Celtic Tiger is the juxtaposition, literal or implied, of narratives of Irish *emigration* to the United States with those of *immigration* to Ireland" (Moynihan 2).

Brooklyn can thus be read as another example of contemporary Irish artists' renewed interest for other people's diasporas, and as a critique of the nationalist emphasis on the homogeneity of the Irish people, defined by whiteness and Catholicism. In this way, Tóibín forces the reader to contrast the exclusive, racialised visions of Irishness that originated in the country's colonial past, with the realities of contemporary Ireland, in the same way as McCann's *Transatlantic*.

These nationalist "exclusionary conceptions of identity homogeneity", to quote Bryan Fanning (Fanning 35), are also implicitly deconstructed in Sebastian Barry's *On Canaan's Side*. Barry's work in general has often been described as relentlessly critical of Irish nationalism. Liam Harte for instance has denounced the author's "revisionist agenda" (Harte 205), exemplified by its questioning of the notions of loyalty and loyalism. In this novel, Barry adds a new episode to the saga of the Dunne family, which started with the 1995 play *The Steward of Christendom*, staging Lilly Dunne's father Thomas, an old man in a mental hospital raving like King Lear about his past crimes, when as a servant to the King at the head of the Dublin Metropolitan Police he batoned to death the striking workers of the 1913 Dublin Lock-out.

His descendants are consequently doomed to pay for their father's sins, as is the case for the young Lilly, who is encouraged by her father to marry a Black and Tan soldier, and consequently has to face banishment, exile and persecution. The republican struggle for independence and for the unity of the island is therefore depicted, as in McCann's novel, as conducive to sectarian exclusion and rejection, except that discrimination in this instance is based on the citizens' loyalty to one side or the other of the British/Irish divide. This is Barry's provocative way of revising the narrative of the Irish struggle for independence, which in his view relied upon an exclusionary, segregating discourse meant to reject all those considered unfit to belong to the imagined community of Irish, Gaelic, Catholic, anti-British Republicans.

In this episode of the Dunne saga Barry, like McCann, displaces the critique of Irish exclusionary discourses by retracing Lilly's fate, who escapes the terrors of the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War, only to confront the complexities of racial inequalities on the other side of the Atlantic. Like McCann's *Transatlantic, On Canaan's Side* highlights the place and role of the Irish community in the building up of the United States. But the novel also suggests the underlying contradiction between the nationalists' claims of victimization on one side of the Atlantic, and the confrontation with other, equally or perhaps even more oppressed peoples, in America, in the wake of the steady flow of Irish emigration to the US. Lilly Bere's brief encounter with Martin Luther King can be read as an echo to the encounter between Lily Duggan and Frederick Douglass in McCann's *Transatlantic,* pointing to the same interrogations regarding the legitimacy of comparing the fate of the Irish with that of Afro-Americans, as conveyed by the notion of the "Green Atlantic." Thus, while working for Mrs Woholan and her daughter, a rich East Coast Irish-American family of politicians probably based on the Kennedys, Lilly hears of King's asassination in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. This allusion to the murder of the black leader suggests the discrepancy in the situation of the descendants of the Irish migrants and that of the descendants of the African slaves. Whereas the Woholan family, who are of Irish descent, have been able to rise to power and wealth, the descendants of former southern slaves, to quote from Martin Luther King's famous speech "I Have a Dream", are still persecuted and assassinated, like King himself. Lilly herself is allowed to thrive in America,

whereas her friend Cassie, the grand-daughter of a Georgian slave, meets with a tragic fate.

On the other hand, a very old Lilly discovers that the IRA gunman who was long ago in charge of eliminating her as well as her Black and Tan fiancée, has pursued her all along her very long life. This eerie life-long pursuit serves as a reminder of the archaic persistence of the sectarian violence engendered by Irish nationalism well into the last decades of the twentieth century, manifesting the haunting presence of the fathers' sins in the present times. In this regard, Barry like McCann hints at a parallel between the violence engendered by nationalist sectarianism in Ireland and the violence of racism in the US. Even though Lilly hangs on to the last to her vision of America as a land of Canaan, a refuge from the persecutions she faced in Ireland, the racial discriminations, the wars and the bereavement she encounters in the United States all deny this image of a promised land. According to Barry, religious bigotry, racial discrimination and hatred of the other fuel violence on both sides of the Atlantic. The fact that both Lilly's son and grandson fight in two American wars overseas, in Viet-Nam and Iraq, points to the United States' continuing history of imperialist interference, premised upon the racial and cultural superiority of the West, in the same way that issues of ethnic and cultural identities have continued to breed violence and conflict in Ireland well into the contemporary era. It reminds the reader that thousands of young Americans lost their lives in the name of their loyalty due to their nation, just like hundreds of Irishmen did. The name given to Lilly's grandson, William Dunne Kinderman Bere, thus encapsulates the complex heritage of racism, sectarianism and conflicted loyalties the Irish and the Americans combine as peoples and as nations. America is no better than Ireland in terms of conflict and violence, but Ireland should not be blind to the racist implications of the Protestant/Catholic, or Republican/Loyalist feud.

To conclude, we may say that in their novels, whose publications were almost concomitant, McCann, Tóibín or Barry use the traditional narrative of the Irish emigrant to the USA to raise questions regarding Ireland's attitude towards race and ethnicity, both in the past and in the present. The three novels suggest that, despite the realities of a history of oppression and suffering, based on the alleged racial inferiority of the Irish people, Irish nationalist discourse was itself the breeding ground for exclusionary, discriminatory attitudes. The general ignorance, blindness and altogether denial of Otherness induced by the discourse of Irish nationalism is embodied by the three innocent Lillies staged in those stories, who through their displacement are forced to compare and contrast their own identity with that of other ethnic groups. The historical perspectives adopted in the stories, either spanning several generations of the same family, or focusing on the 1950s, enable the novelists to cast a backward look to the times when nationalist discourse and the process of nation-building construed the notion of Irishness as a distinct race. This attempt to define Irish identity was justified before independence by the necessity to outline Irishness in contrast with Britishness, and even to allege of the superiority of the first over the

second. After independence, the obsessive wish to preserve the Irish from all kinds of foreign influence, whether it be in the field of the economy or of culture continued to induce narrow-minded views of national identity, until the turn of the 1960s. To quote John Brannigan in the introduction to his book *Race in Modern Irish Literature and Culture* published in 2009, "racial ideologies and racist practices have not only undergirded the Irish state and its defining cultural institutions and policies, often in muted and insidious forms, but have been central to the ways in which official discourses of 'Irishness' have been negotiated and contested in the cultural sphere" (Brannigan 5).

The three authors thus seem to advocate for the necessity to recognize the sectarian, exclusionary nature of the process of nation-building in Ireland, as the works of several historians, sociologists or cultural historians, some of them being quoted above, such as Bryan Fanning or John Brannigan, to which must be added Dermot Keogh, Steve Garner, Ronit Lentin,[2] and others, have recently documented at length. The need to reassess Irish people's attitudes to "other people's diaporas" and other people's histories in general became more urgent in relation to the resurgence of racism in Celtic Tiger Ireland, at a time when the island was becoming itself a land of Canaan, a place of refuge, for many immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe, Africa and elsewhere.

It is noticeable however that the choice of three female migrants as protagonists have enabled McCann, Tóibín and Barry to make them the mothers of generations of mixed-race subjects, in full contradiction with the discourse of racial homogeneity once prevailing in Ireland, or with the persistence of racial tensions in the US: a way for the three writers to claim a future when all boundaries, whether racial, ethnic, religious, national or cultural, will finally be overcome, on both sides of the Atlantic.

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2 See Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland*; Fanning, *Racism and Social Change*; Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience*; and Lentin and McVeigh, eds., *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*.

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