

**SET PIECE, SET PEACE?**  
**NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE**  
**IN RECENT STAGE IMAGES OF THE NORTH**

**Clare Wallace**

This paper considers the frictions between status quo and change in three recent theatrical works that offer images of Northern Ireland. Stacey Gregg's *Shibboleth* (2015), David Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* (2016), and Jez Butterworth's *The Ferryman* (2017) vividly illustrate some of the intricate and, at times, counterintuitive, ways in which Northern Ireland in the second decade of the twenty-first century remains an overdetermined site of ambivalent affects and negative attachments, in a cultural discourse now further inflected by Brexit. Such patterns are, of course, well established. Seamus Heaney's 1975 poem "Act of Union" is a paradigmatic example of the tropes that congeal around the North. Refurbishing the eighteenth-century *aisling* form in which Ireland is personified as a defenceless woman at the mercy of a masculine England, Heaney portrays the process of imperial conquest as a rape through which the province is conceived. The bastard outcome of Britain's violent incursion is an "obstinate fifth column / Whose stance is growing unilateral. / His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum / Mustering force. His parasitical / And ignorant little fists already / Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked / At me across the water" (Heaney 49-50). Written in the early phase of the Troubles, Heaney's poem bitterly ventriloquises the voice of the coloniser, laying responsibility for the creation of this foetal fury at Britain's feet, but leaving the reader to grapple with the intractable ugliness of feeling the image transmits. In the ensuing decades, the narrative of the North as a dysphoric site of grim tribalism, atavistic violence, paranoia and perpetual conflict became deeply etched in the cultural and political discourse, so much so that in an essay published in 2001, Ronan McDonald warned that "The central danger of all writing about the Troubles is the danger of cliché" (233). McDonald was not the first to flag the problem of imagining the North as a set piece. "[A]s early as 1972," Mark Phelan notes, "Frank Ormsby published his 'Write-an-Ulster-Play Kit' in *The Honest Ulsterman*, signalling just how swiftly drama dealing with the conflict had ossified into stock characters and scenarios" (372). While playwrights such as Stewart Parker or Frank McGuinness were instrumental in contesting such modes of imagining the North, routine motifs of 'love across the barricades,' 'heroic domestic survival,' or the allegorising of the province as an intractable modern-day tragedy (often via adaptations of Greek classics) have been enduring (see Phelan 372 ff.).

It is now more than twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement proposed a new course for Northern Ireland. In the post-Agreement context of a 'set peace,' the challenges of imagining a cultural space that is not predetermined by political violence

and sectarianism, while still respecting the legacy of the Troubles, are complex and ongoing. Despite their many differences, *Shibboleth*, *Cyprus Avenue* and *The Ferryman* each refract the ambivalences of the affective patterning of the North as it is staged. While sharing a temporal zone in the political penumbras of post-Agreement governance and Brexit, their production contexts overlap unevenly in several ways: *Shibboleth* and *Cyprus Avenue* both opened on the Peacock Stage at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin; *The Ferryman* was produced and *Cyprus Avenue* was co-produced by the Royal Court Theatre, London, and both transferred to highly successful West End and New York runs. Three plays, one by an English playwright, are not taken here as representative of the full spectrum of contemporary/post-conflict drama about the North, but they do provide vividly contrasting approaches to the 'set piece/set peace' conundrum. They invite audiences to think and feel in particular ways that are freighted with political implications. My analysis of their affective textures draws on Birte Heidemann's theorising of the North's negative liminality alongside Sianne Ngai's reflections on the aesthetics of negative emotions, in order to investigate how the tangle of "dysphoric affects" (3) that adhere to the North continue to find expression. In particular, Ngai's notion of "animatedness" with its racialised aspect, I will argue, elucidates the politics of powerlessness and agency embedded in these plays, and how they reproduce and restructure the tropes associated with a Northern Irish imaginary.

### Suspended states

As Stefanie Lehner has observed, there is an "uneasy tension between the demands for remembrance and reconciliation" (278) in the post-Good Friday Agreement period. Through an analysis of Jimmy McAleavey's *The Sign of the Whale* (2010) and David Ireland's *Everything Between Us* (2010), she presents a case for "a process of 'un-remembering'" that would enable the "transgress[ion of] previous delimiting and defining paradigms" (282). For Lehner, writing in 2013, Northern Irish theatre-makers are caught between "register[ing] the painful burden of the past" and the need "to dissect it in order to exhume possibilities for a different future." This, she suggests, might "give rise to a 'transformative aesthetics' that proposes an un-remembering of the past to make way for a transformative re-remembering for the future" (278). The fragility of a future-oriented transformative aesthetics, however, must be recognised in a greater cultural context in which remembrance and commemoration are acutely politicised markers of ethnic identity within the province, but are also offset against the cyclical amnesia of British culture more generally with regard to the recent history of Northern Ireland. Brexit negotiations have revealed the painful irony that the 499km land border had been overlooked in the campaign to take back control of Britishness. Meanwhile, Unionist suspicions that a different border – one in the Irish Sea – might ultimately be in the offing confirms a thinly veiled anxiety about British betrayal that has always dogged the Northern Protestant identity. Evidently, the discursive contours of the North in the British (popular) imagination are marked by a very par-

ticular form of thinking that Brexit has merely brought to a level of explicitness, one that simultaneously admits and denies the status of the North as an equal part of the UK, but also one that can, for its own purposes, disregard Irish sovereignty as well.

In *Post-Agreement Northern Irish Literature: Lost in a Liminal Space* (2016), Birte Heidemann elaborates how this delicate, often contradictory, process of suspension, reinvention and rebranding involves contemporary Northern culture in “a *different* kind of ‘conflict.’ While such a conflict may certainly be less violent *per se*, it gestures towards new forms of violence exerted by the Agreement’s rhetorical negation of the sectarian past and its aggressive neoliberal campaign” (4). It is a rhetoric that habitually associates progress with economics, prosperity with peace. Heidemann explores how Northern Ireland’s “negative liminality can be understood as a precarious state of being trapped in a geography of fear, one that is performatively configured by a profuse sense of claustrophobic intensity” (39). This state, characterised by forms of temporal and historical disjuncture, is captured in the interchange between liminal suspension and liminal permanence in cultural and political discourse. In aesthetic terms, she argues, “[i]f liminal suspension refers to textual devices in which fictional subject positions remain perpetually suspended between the two liminal coordinates of identification (loss) and reidentification (renewal), past and present, conflict and conciliation, then liminal permanence pertains to the literary-aesthetic as well as the cultural stasis forged by the non-resolution of such suspended subject positions” (51). Reading Butterworth, Gregg and Ireland through the lens of negative liminality clarifies the questions that arise in their modes of representation and the emotional patterning they produce.

In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai focuses on “weaker and nastier” (7) types of affect – irritation, anxiety, envy, paranoia and disgust – that she posits as “amoral and *noncathartic*” (6) to argue that such dysphoric affects mapped in and generated by cultural texts and artworks register states of “obstructed agency” both individual and collective (3). One of these affects, she contends,

becomes publicly visible [...] as a kind of innervated “agitation” or “animatedness.” On one hand, the state of being “animated” implies the most general of all affective conditions (that of being “moved” in one way or another), but also a feeling that implies being “moved” by a particular feeling, as when one is said to be animated by happiness or anger. Animatedness thus seems to be both an unintentional and intentional form. (31)

Ngai reads animatedness against racialised stereotypes and clichés. These “cultural images [...] are perversely both dead and alive,” persistent in their “liveliness, vigor, zest” and they “remain ugly categories of feeling reinforcing the historically tenacious construction of racialised subjects as excessively emotional, bodily subjects” (124-25). Within Irish studies, such affective manoeuvres and their political implications are familiar in the discourse of the Celt and in the longevity of Stage Irish types. Matthew Arnold’s nineteenth-century diagnosis of the “nervous exaltation” of the Celtic sensibility, at once “undisciplinable, anarchical, and turbulent,” but with “an audacious, sparkling, immaterial manner” (108-110) is an obvious, yet unacknow-

ledged, master text for Ngai's analysis. Arnold's homage to the sentimentality of the Celt clearly does not bend towards an acknowledgement of obstructed agency, but rather serves as a justification of an existing distribution of power. In this vein, the Celt as a Stage Irish figure, and now the Northern Irish have long been framed as animated (colonial) others – accented, ambivalently civilised, emotionally unstable – paradoxically both puppets and actors in an overdetermined narrative that diminishes responsibility and agency in favour of transhistorical tropes. Yet simultaneously, such tropes and types clearly offer paradoxical affects – the pleasures of recognition and misrecognition – as evidenced in work by Dion Boucicault, Bernard Shaw and numerous others. The ongoing affective economy of this representational heritage is, as I hope to demonstrate, palpable in *Shibboleth*, *Cyprus Avenue* and *The Ferryman* and remains, as Ngai puts it, “a nexus of contradictions” (125).

### **The Natives are ... Lively**

*The Ferryman* played to packed houses in the spring and summer of 2017 and was greeted with widespread acclaim. The play opened in April, directed by Sam Mendes, and soon became the fastest selling show in the Royal Court Theatre's history. By June, it transferred to the Gielgud Theatre in the West End and in 2018 toured to New York. Both the London and Broadway productions have swept up numerous awards. Its author Jez Butterworth is a seasoned British playwright and screenwriter with hit plays like *Mojo* (1995) and *Jerusalem* (2009) to his name. *The Ferryman* was welcomed as a masterwork of Shakespearean dimensions that unravels the treacheries of the Northern Irish near past with humour and heart-warming sensitivity (see Clapp, Brantley). Butterworth drew inspiration from his partner Laura Donnelly, an actress from South Armagh, for whom he created the lead female role. One of Donnelly's uncles was murdered by the IRA during the Troubles – his body was never recovered – and this story underpins the play's proliferation of subplots and scenarios. Sean O'Hagan in the *Guardian* was perhaps the first to question the dramaturgical hyperbole and the sense of dislocation the play produces (n.p.). Butterworth's refutation of such criticisms is revealing – in an interview with Sarah Hughes, he complained that “It does just feel frustrating to be called offside for a lack of authenticity. My first play, *Mojo*, was set in 1958 in Soho, another place I didn't grow up in; *Jerusalem* is about a place I spent 12 months in; I've written 10 films in the American vernacular. [...] I feel like the idea that I am English and therefore shouldn't write a play on this subject is a problem” (Hughes). O'Hagan, in fact, does not suggest that as an Englishman Butterworth should not write about Northern Ireland; rather, he outlines reservations about the way Butterworth handles his material, concerns that deserve further unpacking.

*The Ferryman* is set in the late summer of 1981 during the IRA hunger strikes. After a brief prologue scene in urban Derry, the remainder of the stage action takes place in a South Armagh farmhouse kitchen. The scenography is naturalistic and overflowing with minute domestic detail, while a nostalgic mood is curated through the use of vis-

ual and auditory cues. At the centre of the drama is Quinn Carney, former IRA man, farmer, father of seven children, and head of a household of extended family. Action is catalysed by the discovery of his brother's body in a bog. Sean Carney disappeared some ten years earlier and since then, his wife Caitlin and her son, Oisín, have lived with Quinn and his family. In the course of the play, it is revealed that Sean has been killed by the IRA because Quinn rejected further paramilitary involvement. As I have described elsewhere, the central plot thus twists together the consequences of Republican paramilitary involvement with a barely suppressed, romantic attraction that pulses between Quinn and Caitlin – an impasse signalled by the play's title reference to the Greek myth of Charon, the ferryman who transports the souls of the deceased across the Styx and Acheron, but who can do nothing for those restless souls who are unburied. Crossing this core strand are multiple associated subplots attached loosely to the farm, the Troubles and members of the community inclusive of youthful visiting cousins from Derry to help with the harvest, Quinn's household and neighbours (Wallace, "Retro Magic").

*The Ferryman* contrasts with the literature that Heidemann examines in significant ways, not least because it sits within the context of British rather than specifically Northern Irish theatre. However, liminal suspension and liminal permanence are fundamental to the play's affective operations, situation and plot. Being set in the past, the play invites its audience to cross time, to imaginatively leap over the intervening thirty-six years to a very dark time in Northern history, one that may, or may not, be recognised by audiences, but one that appears 'typical' of that history. The specific geographical positioning of the story in a farmhouse kitchen in a borderland county makes explicit a form of negative liminality, where the traumas of Troubles era pulse just beneath the surface of seasonal work and communal celebration. The characters, too, are presented in diverse states of negative suspension: Caitlin hovers on the limen between wife/widow; Quinn's past is neither active nor resolved; the English "factotum" Tom Kettle as wise-fool is neither native nor foreigner; Aunt Maggie suffers from dementia and slides between actively telling stories and complete mental absence; Quinn's wife, Mary, in denial as to the state of her marriage, wavers between illness and health; Aunt Pat railing against the injustices of British colonial power can neither let go of the past nor accept her family's apparent disinterest.

Yet *The Ferryman* is not 'merely' concerned with documenting the impacts of the Troubles. As I have argued elsewhere, it insistently cultivates a sense of something that transcends the tangible material of its present, through its emphasis on harvest traditions and the quirky, at times otherworldly, narrative interventions of elderly family members. This symbolic predisposition produces a tension in the dramatic structure – on numerous levels *The Ferryman*, like its namesake, is between worlds, the natural and supernatural, the rational and irrational, past and present. Even as the audience is reminded of the contemporary moment by the set, the music and the current affairs on the radio, the political realities of the Northern Irish conflict blur into an inexorable atemporal destiny. The outcomes of violence, jealousy, frustration, disap-

pointment and dementia are presented in fateful ways that reach an apex in the play's concluding moments when Quinn kills his old IRA associates, and the rising screams of the Banshees are heard approaching from offstage (Wallace, "Retro Magic"). In consequence, the North's fateful, liminal permanence as a set piece is reinscribed by Butterworth's reliance on mythical and folk allusions, and cyclical patterns of behaviour.

That said, the commercial success of this play testifies to the winning nature of Butterworth's synthesis of comic, melodramatic and tragic elements. The show is saturated with motifs of community, scenes with children and animals, feasting, dancing and music generative of good feelings seasoned with the sharpness of political volatility and poignancy of forbidden love. With a full cast of twenty-three and a running time of three hours, it operates on a grand scale. Butterworth assembles an impressive collage of thematically linked, familiar images and dramatic types that includes one-dimensional evil IRA henchmen, an ethically compromised priest as a failed mediator, a simple-minded, yet strangely eloquent Englishman who has quite inexplicably been part of the community since he was abandoned there as a child. There is a multigenerational Irish household, teeming with children and young people, as well as an old uncle and a couple of aunts in various states of decay with political axes to grind and stories to tell. There is a harvest feast, dancing to both contemporary and traditional music, there is a continuous consumption of whisky that even, at one point, includes the children. There are two secret love stories, and, by the finale, two murders. There are even banshees to conclude. *The Ferryman* proudly and non-ironically displays almost as many borrowed 'treasures' as does the British Museum, from scraps of plays by Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and Marina Carr to allusions to Seamus Heaney.

Strikingly, the affective overcharging throughout the play is channelled through Butterworth's revitalisation of animated figures, many of them – as one reviewer caustically put it – "shameless conscript[s] from Central Casting" (Holden). Highlighting the "interplay between the passionate and the mechanical," Ngai suggests that "if we press harder on the affective meanings of animatedness, we [...] see how the seemingly neutral state of "being moved" becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialised subject, abetting his or her construction as unusually receptive to external control" (91). The most rudimentary example of this state is to be found in the character of Aunt Maggie, who is literally wheeled on and off stage, sitting quietly in a geriatric stupor, sporadically coming to life to deliver tales of past ranging from the Fir Bolgs and the Tanuth Dé to the events of 1916 and unrequited love. But all the characters are mobilised for similar ends. Butterworth's figures are ethnically (rather than racially) marked and "overscrutable" (93) in their hyperexpressiveness – whether they are starting their morning routines, toasting each other over the harvest dinner or arguing over politics. In the dramatic frame of the play, they are lively, but are swept along by forces apparently beyond their control.

There is a keen irony in the coincidence that as *The Ferryman* was filling theatres in London and receiving jubilant reviews, Brexit negotiations with the EU began to reveal the extent to which Northern Ireland's recent history or precarious post-Agreement political balance had been ignored by pro-Brexit politicians in the UK. In its re-discovery of the past as melodramatic tragedy, *The Ferryman* unveils a pre-packaged narrative that unmasks and monetises a fundamental forgetfulness. It capitalises on the fateful, romantic semi-strangeness of the Northern Irish context and tragic inevitability of the natives' affairs while assiduously avoiding what Ruane and Todd in a more general context call "the real structural determinants of the conflict" (40).

### **Puppet pathology**

With the controversy surrounding his latest play, *Ulster American* (2019), David Ireland has been lauded as provocateur and satirist, who like Martin McDonagh is unafraid to sacrifice political correctness in the name of an acidic polemic, a trajectory largely initiated by *Cyprus Avenue*. Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* is an intense chamber piece for four performers. Commissioned by Fiach Mac Conghail at the Abbey Theatre Dublin, Northern Irish writer and actor David Ireland developed the script with Vicky Featherstone who at the time was the Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Scotland. Featherstone moved to London in 2013 to become the Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre and in the end *Cyprus Avenue* opened in February 1916 on the Abbey's smaller stage, the Peacock, as a co-production between the Abbey and the Royal Court directed by Featherstone. Thanks largely to the presence of Stephen Rea in the lead role, the show has been a considerable success with productions in London, New York, Belfast and was remounted in Dublin and London in 2019. In 2019, the second London production was filmed and in September was broadcast on BBC 4; this filmed version was also briefly made available online in 2020. Like *The Ferryman*, the play has won several awards and has been very positively received, with many reviews of the 2016 run noting the relevance of its portrayal of bigotry and sectarianism (see Meany, Billington, Clapp, Cavendish).

The setting of the drama is the urban and bourgeois heartland of contemporary Belfast in a loosely defined, post-Peace Agreement present. Its protagonist, Eric Miller, is a middle-class Belfast Protestant who is meeting with his psychiatrist for the first time. Bridget, a Black-British doctor, invites Eric to talk about himself and what has led him to this point (9). Composed of ten short parts, the plot oscillates between scenes in the present and those from Eric's past, showing how he became convinced that his five-week-old granddaughter was former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams, and the outcomes of this conviction. The play opens with some edgy comic exposition of Eric's attitudes as he stridently defends his British identity, before tracing his growing anxiety about his granddaughter's, and by extension his own, identity. Unsurprisingly, familial conflict ensues when he tests his hypothesis by costuming the infant with toy glasses and painting a beard on her face with a black marker. Banished from the

family home by his wife, Eric roams in a state of extreme distress to the working-class area of Dundonald. There, he finds himself in a park, questioning his cultural identity and contemplating suicide. At that moment he meets Slim, a hyperactive, aggressive, fast talking UVF man, disgruntled by the way the new peace regime has deprived him of a chance to kill a “Fenian” (46). As becomes evident, Eric’s fortuitous meeting with Slim is in fact an externalisation, a dramatic embodiment of his fierce anxiety about and rejection of a set peace. While Eric’s paranoia initially seems aligned with a quirky identitarian bigotry, the somewhat uncomfortable comedy is suddenly ruptured by the graphic violence in the play’s closing scenes when Eric kills his daughter, then his wife and, finally, the baby in order to save Ulster from “Fenian” infiltration.

With a protagonist who is unable to relinquish the past or adjust his sense of self to such an extent that he loses his grasp of reality, the play exemplifies the paradoxes of negative liminality. Eric and his alter ego, Slim, seem emblematic of an Ulster Unionist impasse – an identity perpetually beleaguered by its own liminal fragility. This liminality functions on several axes, the most prominent being the politics of identity within the UK, the tensions of reconciliation in the Northern context, and finally, the ontological fracture of the self as these tensions reach their apex.

Although Eric’s struggle to define himself and his world is the source of much of the play’s humour, his first question to Bridget – “Why are you a nigger?” (7) – strikes a harsh, and gratuitous, note. Indeed, following criticism from the cast, the language of this exchange was significantly modified in later performances during its 2016 run and in the 2019 production and film. Despite the removal of the crudest incendiary racist epithets, the version recorded and broadcast on BBC4 is tonally coarser and more self-explanatory than the original production. Rea’s performance becomes less nuanced, and the character’s situation was more obviously framed throughout as sectarian dysphoria and psychosis. This impulse to clarify the terms of encounter between Bridget and Eric in the recorded adaptation, I would suggest, is indicative of the shift in anticipated audience. Commissioned by The Space and produced for BBC Four by the Royal Court Theatre, the film caters to the non-Irish and non-Northern Irish spectator by establishing Eric’s locale and depicting Bridget’s perspective on Belfast with additional visual footage. As a result, Northern Ireland as a site of strangeness to the British eye is accentuated, an effect augmented by the ongoing reverberations of Brexit.

Intrinsic to Bridget and Eric’s conversations is his unwillingness to accept her Britishness and her misunderstanding of his national and cultural identity. David Ireland exploits the irony of misrecognition when Bridget refers to Eric as Irish. Insulted, he firmly corrects her by listing proofs his Britishness: a grandfather who died at the Battle of the Somme, a father who died at Dunkirk, participation in Orange parades, his job for Her Majesty’s Government. This set of statements indicates a constant pattern of demonstrative acts of loyalty to a static concept of Britishness. Similarly, Eric’s



world view rests upon a transhistorical definition of the Catholic (or in his vernacular, Fenian) other. He cleaves to a fixed, projected dichotomy while his anxiety about Fenian domination of public and cultural life feeds a burgeoning paranoia that eventually overwhelms him. The suspicion that he might be Irish is ontologically destabilising; he can no longer be certain of himself or of those around him – “is that all I am? A puppet?” (37), he asks.

In a sense, Eric and Slim are indeed puppets animated by dysphoric Northern attitudes and allegiances. Yet, they are perhaps more accurately understood as caricatures – strident, hyperbolic, loquacious and accented. David Ireland takes his audiences on a veritable rollercoaster of ambivalent affects and downright ugly feelings. The play courts audience complicity in the recognition of an array of stereotypes, and uneasy laughter at the bold utterance of offensive views. Simultaneously, there is something pitiful in the hypersensitive and contorted system of distinguishing self from other, Protestant from Catholic, Irish from British. Ireland carefully crafts an affective escalation across the scenes, pushing the humour to a bleak tipping point. The violence implicit in the swell of obstructed agency erupts shockingly in scenes seven to nine, when Eric beats and strangles his daughter and continues to the devastating image of his smashing a bin bag containing his granddaughter around the corpse-strewn stage.

*Cyprus Avenue* presents a shocking theatrical image of Northern Irish identity crisis in a post-conflict context that is expressed through dislocated, nonlinear experiences of time and is viciously consolidated in acts of violence against women (Wallace, “Commemoration” 92). The minimalist stage picture contributes to the cumulative sense of dissecting a particular Northern malaise. But the question of the effect and purpose of the recycling of the familiar tropes of the stage Ulster Unionist – dour, patriarchal, self-destructive, unrepentant and psychotic – cannot be entirely ignored. The re-circulation of clichés is played for certain affective dividends. Whether these affects contribute to a dismantling or a reification of those clichés is moot. Ronan McDonald suggests that “If we see cliché as the tired use of language, a use that calcifies and deadens the imagination, then it is the verbal equivalent of tribal entrenchment, a spasmodic reflex towards the familiar and the reassuring, the instinct to go with the grain” (233). Shadowed by a long tradition of performances of Northern Irish crisis, *Cyprus Avenue* confirms the ongoing irredeemability of the Northern Unionist male, and leans uncritically into the all too familiar use of women’s bodies as a trope for territorial conflict. So, while the play is not immediately recognisable as reassuring, its edgy humour and visceral climax predominantly serve to reaffirm the narrative of dysphoric Northern identities.

### **Building and deconstructing**

Stacey Gregg was commissioned by the Abbey Theatre and the Goethe-Institut to write a play in response to the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2008; how-

ever, it was not until October 2015 that *Shibboleth* was first performed during the Dublin Theatre Festival at the Peacock Stage, directed by Hamish Pirie. It is a piece distant from the well-made and naturalistic predispositions of *The Ferryman* and *Cyprus Avenue* that certainly does not share their commercial or critical successes. Gregg's play is deliberately messy, refusing to resolve itself into a tidy dramaturgy. As its title suggests, it sets its sights on Northern shibboleths, customs and codes that maintain and perpetuate social division.

*Shibboleth* is an assemblage of short scenes set in contemporary inner-city Belfast. The focal point of the play is the extension of what is euphemistically called an "Interface Barrier" (17). The characters include a cluster of men who work on the building site, a city councillor and some members of the men's families. Action revolves around morning routines, banter on the construction site and the characters' frustrations and desires. The arrival of a Polish immigrant worker, Yuri, on the site sparks expressions of resentment and threats of violence, yet also results in a new bond of friendship between Alan and Yuri, who share hopes for better lives for their families. The cautious optimism of Alan and Yuri's attitudes is offset by the pent-up anger and self-destructiveness of their younger colleagues Corey and Mo, while both impulses are complicated by the ambivalence of Stuary the foreman, the city councillor, the choral voice of the Brickies and the Wall itself.

Gregg samples a varied set of Post-Agreement experiences and handles them in a self-consciously neo-Brechtian manner. She is patently uninterested in well-made or naturalistic routes through her material. Instead, the play invites reflection on the constructedness of the scene. As stage directions indicate, "We should see the mechanisms of production" (5). Like *Cyprus Avenue*, the spatial points of reference are urban and Belfast-based, but in contrast to Ireland's play, the voices belong to children and young people, the working class and immigrants. The diversity of this world is kept perpetually in view as cast members may remain onstage throughout. The central device is the building of a wall – a wall that is personified in the play and described by Gregg as a scenographic and semiotic "invitation" that may be "manifested in one being, or in all, or in none" (5). In the Abbey production, the Wall was voiced by opera singer Cara Robinson as the cast built a structure of oversized blocks across the stage space.

The play exposes the absurdities of post-conflict Belfast. Encouraging the Brickies to get back to work, the Councillor confesses: "Look. I know, it must seem strange to be building lush city apartments one week and this wall – er, residential barrier extension the next, but, [...] The only way to overcome divisions is to build *more* walls. [...] Yes – security drives up the value of the land. And – money means peace" (60-61). The paradox of building "Peace Walls" (17), purportedly to divide "Themens and Usens," reproduces a state of liminal suspension in the characters, for whom manufacturing structures of division becomes their bread and butter, but also diminishes their existence. The Wall provides much-needed employment while at the same time serving the interests of property developers who exert influence over council officials

in order to maximise profits at the expense of already impoverished communities near these urban dead zones. Throughout the play, the Wall demands construction, defying the Brickies' doubts, and finally even consumes one of the characters into its self-aggrandising negative liminality. Like the dramas discussed by Heidemann, *Shibboleth* "expos[es] the pitfalls of post-Agreement Northern Ireland's neoliberal politics" (193) by revealing the cracks in the narrative of peace as prosperity and senses of disenfranchisement and dissensus.

Gregg highlights the exhausted rhetoric of sectarianism, its set pieces, while simultaneously insinuating the complexities of her characters' attitudes, their faults, strengths and vulnerabilities as they try to live in Belfast. *Shibboleth*'s cast of voices are energetically vernacular, distinctly Northern in tone and accent, but not 'animated' in the same ambivalent ways in evidence in *The Ferryman* and *Cyprus Avenue*. In contrast, Gregg refuses to let clichés congeal or roles to settle, while her characters repeatedly challenge and question the forces that deprive them of agency.

The play's image of the buried past – the Brickies' discovery of a stone with a name engraved on it – gives rise to numerous imagined explanations of its significance and grim reminiscences, all of which are knotted with the violence of the Troubles era. The object of their imaginings brings work to a halt as they seek advice on how to proceed in a moment that suggests the paradoxes of dealing with the past. The tension between elevated and mundane registers is comically signalled as they attempt to invest the line of the fence (and future wall) with the ancient significance of ley lines. Such lines as "All converging on epicentres of incredible mythical power" ironically meet in the banal space of a commercial present – the "Craighaven Pound Shop" (59). The escalation of storytelling and the investment in dubious, semi-mythic pasts is challenged by the city councillor. She is the voice of 'reason,' but also of what Mark Fisher calls "capitalist realism" (10). She swiftly deflates the meaning of their discovery with evidence that the stone is merely another piece of commercial communication, a sign made for an undertaker's business displaced by the development of the city.

As can be seen, *Shibboleth* circulates opposing attitudes to Belfast, to immigrants, to the future and most pertinently, to change through its formal experimentalism. Gregg keeps the attitudes unsettled. In response to the Councillor's pragmatic assertion that "There's generations of trauma. Depression. The blood spilt of thousands, mostly along these lines here. But change is possible," the foreman replies, "No love. Things don't change" (59). As if to physically underscore this impasse, the stage directions indicate: "A breath. Somewhere a rook caws. A car passes. [...] Has someone forgotten their lines? They glance about, out at the audience, uncertain. [...]" (59). In contrast to the other dramas under discussion, this moment of fourth-wall rupture offers the dilemma of transformation to spectators before turning back to the stage action.

Notwithstanding the characters' scepticism, change *is* happening. Alan and Ruby's son will move to an integrated school where his enthusiasm for dancing might thrive.

Despite being attacked by her boyfriend, Yuri's daughter Agnieszka remains determined to continue her studies. Yuri, the Polish outsider, bonds with the Brickies, and Alan in particular. But the play does not reduce change to a simply affirmative gesture. Belfast remains a site of violence, as is evidenced by the beating and suicide of Mo, Corey's seething frustration, or pervasive economic precarity, despite the Councillor's unconvincing assurances that the benefits of luxury property development will "trickle-down" (61). Meanwhile, the improbably personified Wall clamouring to be built impedes any sentimental resolution. In many respects, *Shibboleth* doesn't quite work. Its rapidly paced episodic structure, the use of music, verbal asides and choral effects overload the dramaturgical structure. Yet considering the politics of form, *Shibboleth* is indicative of an attempted transformative aesthetic approach that energetically challenges simplistic or simplified images of contemporary Northern life.

### Resisting inevitability

Vis-à-vis an ambivalently evolving 'set peace,' *The Ferryman*, *Cyprus Avenue* and *Shibboleth* each illustrate the problematics of staging the North in the contemporary moment. It is not a little ironic that of the three, the two plays with the highest public profiles, greeted with the strongest public acclaim, offer a tangled web of "dysphoric affects" (Ngai 3) that arguably reify rather than deconstruct the set pieces of Northern Irish exoticism, violence and extravagant temperamentality. Chief among the pitfalls here is an insidious animatedness and the resilience of fixed tropes that prioritise suspension over transformation, and simplicity over complexity. If ideally theatre moves audiences towards the unexpected, discovery and reflection then, as these three dramas suggest, the North remains a volatile discursive space, where the politics of form needs to be continuously interrogated in order to open a space for the transformation of perspectives and attitudes.

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