SYNGE'S *PLAYBOY* AS INTERCULTURAL CONTACT ZONE: THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE WESTERN WORLD

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Multiculturalism, Adaptation, and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)

In the last decade of the twentieth century, when "multinational corporations [...] settled on the island to take advantage of generous tax concessions and subsidies, as well as an English-speaking labor force", Irish self-definition saw its latest substantial change (Reynolds 4; see Morash and Richards 122-23). The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought the violence in Northern Ireland to a halt (McDonald 329) and Celtic Tiger affluence accelerated Ireland's transition from an agrarian to a high-tech player in a globalized economy, marked not only by emigration and a large diaspora but, conversely, also by immigration and ethnic diversity: "[A] largely agricultural state became a multiethnic and multicultural nation heavily dependent on multilateral trade" (Kao 199; see Reynolds 2-5).

The new social situation, assessed in studies such as Carmen Kuhling and Kieran Keohane's *Cosmopolitan Ireland: Globalisation and Quality of Life* (2007), challenges the postcolonial understanding of Irish society. As the economic crisis of 2008 slowed but did not stop immigration, demographic change persists (Morash and Richards 136-37).[1] Unitary nationhood, ardently embraced in earlier periods in the Irish context, is increasingly superseded by multiplicity and a diversification of identities, which, in the words of Stuart Hall, define themselves "not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference" (402). Transnationalism and multiculturalism have come to replace the postcolonial paradigm, in which Ireland figured as an oppressed and victimized nation. As the "Celtic Tiger's excesses of the late 1990s and early 2000s perhaps made Irish self-comparison with the wretched of the earth unseemly", Ireland begins to hover ambivalently "between colony and colonizer" (McDonald 339).

In addition, digital technologies render concepts of Irishness increasingly fluid, changing the ways in which Ireland is conceived of and understood in the computer age. Realities are being processed as media representations, which take their place. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) Jean Baudrillard maintains that it is "a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (2). In this vein Patrick Lonergan registers

1 A socio-psychological analysis of the vulnerability of male immigrants in Ireland to self-images of hegemonic masculinity as a compensation for social and economic marginalization can be found in King, "Three Kings" 22-28. King's essay also discusses the impact of the economic crisis in 2008 on the situation of immigrants and their notions of masculinity (23-24, 26).

a cultural deterritorialization of Irishness, which begins to function "as a brand – a commodified abstraction that gives meaning to its purchaser instead of signifying the physical territory of a nation" (*Theatre and Globalization* 28). Paige Reynolds adds in *The New Irish Studies* (2020) that the "terms 'Irish writer' or 'Irish literature,' once aligned neatly with the author's nationality or the text's setting, are now moving targets that reflect the durability and adaptability of Irish writing in the present moment" (4). Shared cultural diversification leads to transnational and interdisciplinary homogenization.

Not only is Irish literature becoming increasingly hybrid and multicultural, the New Irish Studies are also pursuing trends which are not far away from the principles of the New American Studies, for example. In "National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives" (1994) Donald Pease writes that the New American Studies are dissociating themselves from the traditional meta-narrative of national unity and are embracing class-, race-, and gender-based demands of social movements, which deconstruct nationhood (4). The notion of a unitary United States is critiqued in the name of minority groups, who are disenfranchised by an idea of unity which excludes them. The New Irish Studies diagnose a similar postnationalist dissolution of binaries, a blurring of the contours of what Irishness means and, at the same time, a greater interconnectedness of Ireland and the Irish within Europe and the globe.

As the National Theatre Movement of Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and Synge provided the dominant cultural expression of the nationalist paradigm of Irish self-definition around the turn of the twentieth century, the drama of Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness, Dermot Bolger, Enda Walsh, Christina Reid, Marina Carr, and many others has reorganized old patterns into new syntheses on an intercultural basis from the 1980s onwards. The dissociation of cultural spaces, the hybridization of identities, and the constructedness of what passes for real define many contemporary Irish art works, from London Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's American movie *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) to *The Ferryman* (2017), English dramatist Jez Butterworth's play on the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

In Dermot Bolger's plays *In High Germany* (1990/1992) and *The Parting Glass* (2010) Ireland's national soccer team turns into the composite image of a multiculturally redefined national identity. It replaces more cohesive, unitary images of Ireland as either an old woman, who is rejuvenated through the blood sacrifice of the young men that passionately fight for her, as in Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), or as a house that has to be renovated once independence is reached, as Sean O'Casey suggests in *Juno and the Paycock* (1923). Contemporary Caribbean, African, and Chinese "transpositional adaptation[s]" (Sanders 26; see Rees) of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* can be considered expressions of changes in the cultural imaginary. Embedded in specific historical situations, they turn Synge's masterpiece into an intercultural contact zone between familiarity and

otherness. These adaptations deal with options of interculturalism but also represent forms of hybridity themselves, as they aesthetically, structurally, and politically transform Synge's classic.

The development of a stable self-image in the face of opposition, resistance to the powers that be, resilience in adversity are at the heart of Synge's *Playboy*. The initiation story of youthful Christy Mahon is a performative narrative of growing self-awareness, which finally leads to a new attitude and a liberated life with a differently calibrated distribution of power and leadership. Christy's increasingly fabricated tale of his parricide develops into "the enabling condition for his transformation" (Townsend 53). A century before the age of social media, the play demonstrates how closely framing, storytelling, and viable self-images are intertwined.

That Christy's adolescent rebellion against paternal authority is also an ambiguous metaphor of political transformation generates the play's complexity and is responsible for its lasting appeal. Christy "promises to frighten away the colonial police" and "rekindles the town's resistance to the state – to its peelers, licences and laws" (Townsend 54, 55). In *Inventing Ireland* (1995) Declan Kiberd reads Christy's development as an anti-colonial political allegory, in which Old Mahon's colonialist dominance clashes with Christy's (genuine) and the villagers' (only pretended) anti-authoritarianism, a process which corresponds to "Frantz Fanon's dialectic of decolonization, from Occupation, though [*sic*] nationalism, to liberation" (184).

What this liberation signifies on the social and political plane is not easy to gauge. Sarah L. Townsend suggests that it translates into a form of "cosmopolitan-nationalist liberation" (47), which transcends national, religious, ethnic, and political demarcations and restrictions. It can be associated with the Fifth Province described in the 1977 first issue of the newly founded journal *The Crane Bag*. The Fifth Province is the ancient notion of an imaginary meeting ground where the conflicts of the four provinces of Ireland can be reconciled and resolved (Townsend 49). It is a consummation devoutly to be wished, a terrain which provides orientation but cannot be entered. Like the trajectory of Christy's emancipation it is comprehensive in its promise but hazy in its concrete contours. In a more transnational perspective it foreshadows Edward Soja's Thirdspace, "moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also where new ties can be forged. It can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practised and fully *lived*" (Soja 276; italics in original).

Intercultural adaptations of *The Playboy of the Western World* seize on Christy as the model decolonizer suggested by Kiberd and Townsend. Synge's quintessentially Irish *Playboy* thus develops into a "paradigmatic example […] of an emergent intercultural Irish theatre" (McIvor 72; see Lonergan, *Irish Drama* 125; Morash and Richards 127-44). The chief feature which makes Synge's play adaptable to distant lands and their impact on the Emerald Isle is its moving demonstration of the way personal and collective identities are forged and constructed. These identity constructions depend

on projections from outside which, by processes of internalization and instinctual self-fashioning, are converted into what we call ourselves. The emotional depth of this dramatization of identity formation turns Christy into the Playboy not only of the Western world but of many worlds (McIvor 40).

Over the last thirty-five years this potential for re-interpretation has been mined largely by three adaptations.[2] Mustapha Matura's 1984 *The Playboy of the West Indies*, which primarily explores intercultural parallels between communities in rural areas on the West coast of Ireland and the East coast of Trinidad, is by far the earliest of these plays. An African and a Chinese version of Synge's *Playboy*, produced between 2006 and 2009, are not informed by ethnographic comparability but motivated by the African and Asian immigration to Ireland since the 1990s. In these processes of transposition intercultural convergences but also historical developments between the 1980s and the early twenty-first century come to the fore. Different accentuations, triggered by changing political perspectives, distinguish these versions from each other.

The Playboy of the West Indies (1984) – Cosmopolitan Rebellion and Communal Xenophobia

Trinidad-born playwright Mustapha Matura's *The Playboy of the West Indies* transposes the plot of Synge's classic from the Mayo *shebeen* to a rum shop in Mayaro, an actual fishing village on Trinidad's East coast, in 1950. The cultural differences of locale are foregrounded. Both Peggy and Ken, the Pegeen and Christy replacements, are described as being "of African origin" (Matura 9, 17). Ken is a crab catcher and nature lover, who likes swimming in the lagoon (27). He excels not in sports on the beach but in a regatta on Discovery Day in honor of Christopher Columbus (32, 38, 51). The Caribbean Christy hits his father Mac with a cutlass, not a loy, "an he dead like a ripe mango, squash like one too" (21). The villagers drink rum instead of porter and do not dig potatoes but cut cane instead (21). Changes in cultural positioning, characterization, and linguistic expression are very prominent in Matura's *Playboy of the West Indies*. There are also changes of plot and characterization (40-41).

Matura's play is set in 1950, when Trinidad and Tobago were still under British rule, similar to Ireland in 1907. But colonial oppression, a moving force in Synge's original, does not have a plot-driving function in Matura's version. Direct references to oppression and the fight for freedom are scarce. In Mayaro racial discrimination seems to have largely merged with bureaucratic chicanery (10). At one point the village girls invoke the fight for freedom by the slaves in Haiti: "Drink, drink ter slaves dat run off wit cattle dey work for. De slaves a Haiti who rise up on de French an win de freedom,

2 There are other adaptations, which are more loosely related to Synge's original: the 1998 *Play-boy* by Desperate Optimists, which "pushes Synge's work beyond representation" (Morash and Richards 142), and "Brad Turner's 1994 Canadian film *Paris or Somewhere*, which transposes the play's characters and plot to smalltown Saskatchewan" (Morash and Richards 144).

ter Toussaint L'Ouverture" (43). This reference to colonial history stands alone, however, and is without consequence. There is very little contextualization and integration of this dimension into the action of the play.

The Mayaro villagers' reaction to Ken's attempt at father-slaying before their very eyes is meaner but also less politicized than the parallel events in Synge's version. In the original, Pegeen blows the bellows and burns Christy's leg with a sod, as the Mayoites want to tie and hand him over to the police (117). In the West Indies, Peggy drops a noose over Ken's head and holds the rope for her neighbours to hang him on an "almond tree" (75; see 45, 77) themselves. To complete her treachery, Peggy invents a story which will cover up Ken's lynching on the beach. She plans to "go say a turn 'im down an he string up heself" (76), as if he committed suicide because she jilted him. The ending of *The Playboy of the West Indies* raises sharper moral questions with regard to the villagers and especially Peggy as their ringleader than Synge's original, but it hardly raises wider political ones.[3]

Self-determined individuals like Mac and Ken oppose cruel schemers like Peggy and "de bloodthirsty village a Mayaro, an de fools dat live here" (78). It is a conflict between the community's xenophobia on the one hand and both Mac's and Ken's embrace of cosmopolitan liberation on the other – not between colonial oppression, collective cowardice, and emancipatory fervour as in Synge's original. Ken finally tells his father that he will come with him, not "like a gallant captain with his heathen slave" (Synge 117) but "like Robinson Crusoe an he Friday" (78; see Sihra 233). Both the original and the Caribbean version of the *Playboy* thus indicate an ironic inversion of the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, the seizure of power by the oppressed, who can think of nothing better than to perpetuate the hierarchies they themselves suffered from.

The Nigerian *Playboy* (2007) – Acculturation and Repatriation

The Dublin-based Pan Pan Theatre Company and Nigerian playwright Bisi Adigun's Arambe Productions adapted Synge's *Playboy* to very different intercultural situations. Both these productions took place between 2006 and 2009 in the period shortly before and after the financial crisis, which in Ireland was marked by increased Eastern European, African, and Asian immigration to urban areas (Keating 251; Morash and Richards 136-37). Both these versions also draw on Christy Mahon's role as the outsider who tries to find his way into a specific social ensemble by means of a story of violent rebellion against paternal and political authorities. Unlike the Caribbean and the Chinese *Playboy*, the African version retains its Irish setting, moved from rural Mayo in 1907 to suburban Dublin a century later.

3 Contrary to my argument, Sihra sees an anti-colonial impulse in Matura's characterization of his protagonist as an anti-hero, outlaw, and rule-breaker (232). Sihra also considers Matura's use of language anti-colonial. Matura uses Caribbean English as Synge uses Hiberno-English, both deviating from the norm, "'the master's tongue'" (231; see 232-33).

Bisi Adigun, who founded Arambe Productions, Ireland's first African-Irish theatre company, in 2004, struck upon the idea that Christy Mahon is "the archetypal 'asylum seeker'", inventing a colourful tale to pave his way: "I see Christy Mahon as the epitome of the majority of immigrants constantly searching for who they are in a foreign land" (Adigun 261). Adigun approached Roddy Doyle, one of the most popular contemporary Irish writers, to engage in an adaptation of Synge's *Playboy*. Jointly written by a well-known Irish writer and an equally well-known advocate of interculturalism from Nigeria, co-produced by an Irish-African theatre company and the Abbey, the new version was staged as the national theatre's centennial production of *The Playboy* in 2007, showcasing the post-ethnic mind-set of the new multicultural Ireland (McIvor 66-67, 69; Townsend 60).

Against the background of a real-life Nigerian murder case (Adigun 265-66), Yoruba Christopher claims to have killed his father with a pestle for pounding yams instead of a loy for digging potatoes (Adigun and Doyle 16), to have subsequently buried him and fled from Niger to London and then to Belfast (17-18; 41).[4] He finally lands "in a modern, suburban pub, on the west side of Dublin. There is evidence of an invented form of Irishness" (Adigun and Doyle 3; see Morash and Richards 137; Kao 15-17, 214; Lonergan, *Irish Drama* 126; Sihra 229-30). This simulacral impression is re-inforced by "a CCTV screen, above and behind the bar" (Adigun and Doyle 3). Imagined realities rival empirical realities, as a real bale of turf sits beside an electric fireplace (3, 20). Adigun and Doyle's setting both concretizes and individualizes Lonergan's diagnosis of an increasingly simulacral and branded Irishness. Self-fashioning is linked with media representations, the cosmetics and clothes industry, and a general atmosphere of Celtic Tiger commercialism (3, 30). Both the girls around Pegeen and the gangsters surrounding her father are eager to become subjects of tabloid coverage (39). When Christopher tells her about his parricide in Nigeria, Pegeen immediately googles his murder (41). Jimmy and Philly, Michael's henchmen, imagine Christopher's father-slaying as the script of a crime movie (51).

Nigerian Christopher and Chief Clement Malomo, his father, differ from Synge's Christy and Old Mahon not only historically and culturally but also with regard to their social and educational status. Unlike the original Christy, Christopher is not at all "the looney of Mahon's" (Synge 99). The rise of a shy and naïve son of a poor small farmer to the champion of a Mayo village is replaced by the difficulties of a culturally and socially superior young African and his wealthy politician and businessman father to adapt to the ways of gangsters and drug traffickers in contemporary West Dublin (15, 35-36, 45, 52). In Christopher's narrative, his life in Nigeria appears marked by academic ambition and economic success (22), although the family's social rise may be contaminated by Chief Malomo's serious deficits of character (24).

4 I am grateful to Dr Bisi Adigun for generously sending me the unpublished manuscript of the play.

Compared to Michael James's Mayo *shebeen*, the moral climate of Michael's West Dublin pub has considerably deteriorated (26-27). Both the jargon and the atmosphere are fairly close to Pan Pan Theatre's Beijing hairdresser-cum-brothel (see below). Michael himself is introduced as a "publican and gangster" (2) and "a seemingly jovial, but dangerous, man" (7). Susan, Honor, and Sarah summarize the stratum of Irish society foregrounded by the play when they toast Christopher and the Widow Quin: "To the two of yis, the walking killers. . . . And all the others like you; the hit-men, the heroin dealers, coke dealers; crooked cops and politicians, and publicans and lawyers; celebs and DJs, and the whole fuckin' lot of them" (37; see 48). The sports on the beach, in which the original Christy excels, are replaced by a ferocious attack on Michael by rival thugs. In a street fight, Christopher, appointed the pub's security man, heroically beats off the assailants. These events are reproduced as footage on Honor's mobile phone in a twenty-first-century version of electronic teichoscopia. After his triumph the enraptured girls treat Christopher like a pop star, a martial arts icon like Conor McGregor (53-57).

For a brief moment – when Pegeen exclaims: "I never thought I'd feel like this, for someone who isn't even Irish" (59) and Christopher replies: "If I was told a few days ago that I would feel like this about a woman who is not from my country – my tribe, I would have laughed" (59) – the love of Irish Pegeen and Nigerian Christopher appears to be an intercultural utopia come true. It is as if the Fifth Province or a Thirdspace has been reached. That such intercultural understanding should dramatically fail on account of a disproved narrative of father-slaying in Africa followed by an unsuccessful second attempt of parricide in Ireland defies belief – especially as the would-be murderer has just been presented as a latter-day Bruce Lee.

In both Matura's Caribbean and Adigun and Doyle's African version the respective communities punish Christy's inability to kill his father by taking the law into their own hands. Michael's henchmen plan to bury both Africans together Mafia-style (66). In response, Chief Malomo denounces the "[j]ungle justice" (68) of the pub regulars and takes his son back to Africa with him. Ireland appears as an uncultivated jungle, Nigeria as the site of a more civilized life. Christopher does not want to reverse the relationship to his father by becoming "a gallant captain with his heathen slave" (Synge 117) as in the original or "like Robinson Crusoe an he Friday" (Matura 78) as in Matura's Caribbean version. All he wants is to shed the role of an immature son and to live a self-determined life, "the master of my own destiny" (68-69). This attitude appears as a less controversial form of emancipation than Christy's in the original and Ken's in *The Playboy of the West Indies.* African Christopher Malomo has shed his predecessors' colonialist mentality.

The interrelation between Christy Mahon's outsider status in the Mayo community and the fate of contemporary refugee Christopher Malomo in Dublin does not quite dovetail for several reasons. Christopher's "criminal act of murder in Nigeria disqualifies him for asylum under the Irish Refugee Act of 1996" (Townsend 60). In addition, "Christopher's 'freedom' is hampered permanently by black market ex-

ploitation, the threat of extradition and a complete absence of legal recourse" (Townsend 60-61). In view of his exploits as a streetfighter, Christopher may even be said to confirm "stereotypes of deceit and criminality associated with asylum seekers" (McIvor 70; see 72).

The most relevant structural modification in Adigun and Doyle's version is its lack of personal transformation. Unlike the original Christy, who turns from sheepish country bumpkin into a self-determined individual, Christopher Malomo has no reason to change. As he comes "from a wealthy background of upward mobility in Nigeria" (McIvor 70), he can at the end leave Dublin precisely as he came, not for any Fifth Province or Thirdspace, but for a Nigerian environment more prosperous than what he experiences in Ireland (Townsend 60; see Morash and Richards 137-38). Yoruba Christopher Malomo realizes his desires by returning home to Africa rather than by any form of diasporic acculturation. Christy's Irish project to go "romancing through a romping lifetime" (Synge 117) turns into a Nigerian success story.[5]

The Chinese *Playboy* (2006) – The Context-Dependence of Political Impact

The Pan Pan Theatre adaptation of Synge's *Playboy* was co-funded by Irish and Chinese sources (McIvor 56). It took Pan Pan four years and five futile attempts to find a suitable Chinese partner in the Beijing Oriental Pioneer Theatre (O'Toole 417-18). Their *Playboy* co-production was shown in Beijing first and later also in Dublin.[6] Gavin Quinn wrote an adaptation of Synge's play in a Chinese setting. Chinese dramatist Yue Sun and co-producer Wang Zhaohui rendered it in "the colloquial street language of contemporary Beijing" (O'Toole 408) in a complicated translation process, making use also of a Mandarin translation of Synge's original from the 1920s.[7]

5 The play's production history led to a deplorable conflict. Adigun and Arambe Productions claimed a breach of contract by Roddy Doyle and the Abbey, as the 2008-2009 resumption of their 2007 co-production contained over one hundred alterations, unauthorized by Adigun and Arambe. Royalties from both productions had also not been paid. The out-of-court settlement resulted in both Doyle's decision to relinquish his rights over the co-authored version to Adigun and in a financial agreement, costing the Abbey an estimated 600 000 Euros (McIvor 43-44; King, "Contemporary Irish Theatre"). Intercultural empowerment on stage sadly ended in intercultural conflict in the courts. The quarrel about control over the text of the *Playboy*'s new version appears as an unfortunate afterthought to the problems of territorial, communal, and individual authority which inform the play itself.

6 Pan Pan Theatre was founded in 1993 by artistic co-directors Aedín Cosgrove and Gavin Quinn. It is an avant-gardist theatre company, supported by the Irish Arts Council and Culture Ireland, which has toured widely and specializes in international co-operations involving foreign-language productions.

7 There is no accessible printed or manuscript version of the Pan Pan adaptation. Pan Pan Theatre informed me that there is currently no text version that can be shared but that Gavin Quinn may assemble an edition, which can then be circulated (email to the author, 5 October 2021).

Reminiscent of Brendan Behan's lodging house/brothel in *The Hostage* (1958), the play is set in "'whore-dressers' [...], or a hairdresser/foot massage parlour/brothel, on the outskirts of contemporary Beijing" (O'Toole 407). Cosmetic treatments serve as a front for prostitution, just as illegal *poitín* consumption may have similarly been camouflaged in Michael James's original *shebeen*. The women populating the Pan Pan whore-dresser, wearing miniskirts and lingerie, turn into reality Christy's imagined "drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself" (Synge 115) whose mere mention allegedly caused the *Playboy* riots in 1907. The Beijing production faced its own riots in 2006, as "audience members registered complaints with the Chinese Ministry of Culture about the highly sexualized nature of the performance" (Keating 253). In the original, this (in)famous remark is immediately followed by the Widow Quin's and Sara Tansey's attempt to protect Christy from the rage of the villagers by dressing him up as a woman. Sara pulls off one of her petticoats for Christy to wear but he adamantly rejects cross-dressing (Synge 115). Especially the extremely short miniskirt of the actress playing Sara Tansey seems to have provoked indecent reactions from male members of the Beijing audience, who were disciplined by police presence in subsequent performances (Kao 16). By contrast, the Pan Pan website markets the Dublin performance using newspaper headlines, such as *The Sun*'s "PEKING AT YOUR KNICKERS […] AN IRISH PLAY HAS SPARKED A SEX STORM IN CHINA – because one of the cast shows her KNICKERS" (Pan Pan Theatre Website, capitals in original; see Morash and Richards 140). Under Western eyes, overenthusiastic or prudishly indignant Chinese reactions to scantily clad performers figure as an invitation to watch the play. Building on the original Christy's extensive self-reflection in a mirror (Synge 88), the condensed "eighty-minute performance" (Morash and Richards 140) develops stage realism "into the contemporary cultural context of reality television" by video coverage of the actors preparing in the dressing rooms and by the use of salon mirrors reflecting the audience (Keating 253; see Morash and Richards 140). Like Adigun and Doyle's *Playboy*, the Pan Pan production emphasizes the topicality of the original's theme of self-definition as performative self-invention by demonstrating some of its ramifications in the computer age.

Regarding the political accentuation of the production, a debate developed about the descent of Ma Shang, the Chinese Christy Mahon. Quinn wanted him "to hail from Xin-Jiang, the troubled Uyghur and Sinomuslim province in the North-West of China" (O'Toole 408; see 409, 420). Quinn feared Chinese government censorship and Yue Sun interethnic vulnerabilities, however. For the performances in Beijing Ma Shang is therefore marked as an outsider in less controversial ways than in Dublin. In Beijing "Ma Shang hailed from Har Bin in the North East province of Dong Bei. When the play toured to Dublin, the playboy became a Uyghur once more" (O'Toole 408; see McIvor 57). In China people from Dong Bei are perceived as sufficiently different from the Han Chinese to also mark them as outsiders (O'Toole 420; McIvor 59; Morash and Richards 139-42). In Dublin Ma Shang's Uyghur ethnic and religious affiliation

suggests parallels to the history of the British colonization of Ireland and addresses the topical Western debate of human rights violations, Chinese attempts to assimilate the Muslim Uyghur cultural identity by relocations and other oppressive measures (McIvor 57-58).

Whereas in Beijing he is just different, in Dublin Ma Shang's Muslim identity is emphasized. He "praises Allah frequently" (Fricker) and wears a Muslim skull cap (McIvor 58; Morash and Richards 141). In Synge's original, Christy Mahon is at one point associated with political radicalism on an international scale. Philly Cullen, one of the villagers, assumes that the crime Christy committed may have been "fighting bloody wars for Kruger and the freedom of the Boers" in South Africa around the turn of the twentieth century (79). To this first suggestion of his potential transnational ambitions Christy flatly replies: "I never left my own parish till Tuesday was a week" (79). In the Dublin version of the Pan Pan production, the suspicion of Uighur Ma Shang's terrorist leanings is updated: "'Were you off to the middle east, young fellow, fighting bloody wars for Osma [*sic*] Bin Laden and the freedom of the arabs? [*sic*]'" (qtd. in McIvor 58; see Morash and Richards 140-41).

While both in Beijing and in Dublin an all-Chinese cast performed the play, in Dublin the spoken Chinese text was supplemented by English surtitles prominently placed behind and above the stage. The English surtitles reproduced Synge's original text so that "the production juxtaposed the action on stage against the historical Hiberno-English of Synge's play" (Keating 254). In an interview, director Quinn argues that "'the surtitle is the museum and the stage is the contemporary performance'" (qtd. in McIvor 58). The audience is to be sensitized to the historicity of the play "in order to query the relationship between an Irish 'then' and a Chinese 'now' quite overtly" (McIvor 59). The surtitles from Synge's text ambitiously evoke the rural Irish provenance and production history of the play, ranging from the Abbey premiere in 1907 to *DruidSynge* in 2005, which is contrasted with the intercultural thrust of the Beijing whore-dresser's stage action. It is also contrasted with the Chinese the actors speak, which was most probably lost on most of the Dublin audience. The intercultural dimension of the Pan Pan production would arguably have become more transparent had the surtitles consisted of the English version of Quinn's adapted text instead of Synge's original (McIvor 59-60).

Transpositional Adaptations – Problems and Opportunities

In Synge's original, personal liberation and the politics of decolonization structurally converge in a comedy of self-fashioning of near-Shakespearean complexity and lightness, which is difficult, if not impossible, to emulate. In Matura's *Playboy of the West Indies* the political dimension is reduced to the locally focused conflict between the hypocritical moral rigour of a community and a young man's self-assertion. In the Nigerian *Playboy* multicultural ideals clash with intercultural tensions, and African self-definition leads back to Africa rather than to any Western World. In the Pan Pan

Playboy the discrepancies between the original and its adaptation, between the Beijing and Dublin adjustments of the Pan Pan production, reflect differences of cultural and linguistic contexts, of intentions, perspectives, politics, and traditions.

Integrating more recent conflicts into Synge's canonical Irish play is not possible without mediation and compromise. Intercultural discrepancies are as inevitable as intercultural cooperation is promising and adaptations only go so far. They cannot totally reconcile the continuity of traditions and the differences of cultural contexts, the urgency of topical problems and the desire to preserve authenticity (Rees). Chris Morash and Shaun Richards raise the question as to "what relationship these *Playboys* have to their Syngean predecessor beyond the title and the bare elements of the plot" (142). The mirrors on the Dublin stage of the Pan Pan production, which also reflect the audience, throw this question back at all of us. Do these adaptations concern us and, if so, in what way? Like Christy and Old Mahon, originally faced with their own transformations and meanwhile with Caribbean, Chinese, and Nigerian revenants, Ireland and other countries of immigration may collectively ask in disbelief: "Is it me?" (Synge 82, 117).

The foundation on the Irish source text amalgamates distant locations and ethnically different protagonists with questions of Irish identity in both intercultural and intersectional contact zones. A deconstructive development is noticeable with regard to both national identities and textual authority. *The Playboy of the Caribbean* is a play written by single author, which was then produced and published. The Nigerian *Playboy* is based on the cooperation of a dramatist and theatre producer with a fiction writer. A script was jointly written for a specific production. Revisions of this script led to dissension. An assemblage of texts – Synge's original, Quinn's adaptation, and their respective Chinese translations – is behind the Pan Pan *Playboy*, rendering it as intertextual as it is intercultural.

The oedipal theme of Synge's *Playboy* widens this playing field even more. It indicates that the *Playboy*'s canonical Irishness can in turn be deconstructed as being based on Sophocles and Attic tragedy: "these texts rework texts that often themselves rework other texts. The process of adaptation is constant and ongoing" (Sanders 31). In contemporary convergence culture (Jenkins) the categorical difference between source and adaptation blurs. Synge's play and its contemporary adaptations demonstrate such pliability. The character development of Christy Mahon is an initiation story of individual emancipation, which has universal qualities. But the *Playboy* riots in 1907 were triggered by a specific political situation in a particular historical moment.

Answers to the question whether the *Playboy*'s adaptations concern us are tied to their transcultural appeal but also to the specific contexts which trigger them. The twenty-year gap between the Caribbean version of Synge's *Playboy* on the one hand and the African and Chinese adaptations on the other is characterized by the contrast between postcolonial pride in an independent culture and the sometimes

violent urgency of interethnic relations. The impact of the Caribbean version rests on the fusion of Synge's Irish plot and Matura's Trinidadian environment. The later African and Chinese versions take Christy Mahon's rebelliousness as a model to address problems of ethnic minorities and asylum seekers. Beyond transcultural adaptability the three versions of Synge's masterpiece discussed highlight the ways in which particular historical conditions influence and shape cultural production. Matura takes pleasure in delineating similarities in difference, Adigun, Doyle, and Quinn fit Synge's original to their political purposes.

The twenty-first century African and Chinese adaptations are marked by a fundamentally changed cultural climate in Ireland and everywhere. Their concern with ethnicity, otherness, and identity is fraught with an urgency and radicalism Matura's 1984 Caribbean version lacks. Adigun and Doyle highlight problems of contemporary Irish society, which render it so uninviting that a young would-be immigrant from Africa prefers to turn on his heels. Quinn, the director of a Dublin theatre, embraces co-operation with colleagues in Beijing, runs the risk of a Chinese-language adaptation of an Irish classic to be performed in both, very different, cultures – and is successful in bridging all these gaps.[8]

This vital interest in issues of ethnicity and identity, oppression and liberation in a transnational context is shared by other dramatists, as McIvor and Spangler's anthology *Staging Intercultural Ireland: New Plays and Practitioners* (2014) demonstrates. The exploratory spirit of Arambe Productions and Pan Pan Theatre with regard to assemblages of cultural diversification is also shared by the New Irish Studies, informed as they are by "the altered textures of life in twenty-first-century Ireland – the increased authority of formerly marginalized voices, the profound influence of digital technologies on everyday life, the international interest in Irish national concerns" (Reynolds, "Introduction" 2). In distinct variations these "altered textures of life" are characteristics of many Western countries.

In the same spirit, the Autumn/Winter 2020 issue of the *Irish University Review* opens with a collection of stories and poems, entitled "Amplifying Us: New Writing in Ireland" (Penney and Enyi-Amadi). The contributions by an Irish Traveller leader and by Irish black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) writers deal with in-betweenness, experiences of liminality, leading the life of "the Schrödinger cat of being Irish [...] simultaneously Irish and not Irish, visible and not visible, in and out of the pale", as Philomena

8 Both Pan Pan's engagement with China and Adigun's and Arambe Productions' enthusiasm for the insertion of African perspectives into Irish culture are ongoing. Both theatre companies continue to produce intercultural adaptations as well as original plays. Quinn and Pan Pan have continued their collaboration with Yue and Zhaohui, producing both a play by Yue and two adaptations of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* between 2010 and 2014 (McIvor 62). Adigun and Arambe Productions have produced other adaptations (King, "Three Kings" 20, 30-32). Adigun also writes original plays himself, such as *Once Upon a Time & Not So Long Ago* (published in McIvor and Spangler 201-44).

Mullen, born in Ireland to an Irish mother and a Nigerian father, describes herself (252). Against the wider background of a "'transnational turn' that has moved attention away from nation states as discrete entities, towards more comparative and global perspectives" (McDonald 340), the intercultural adaptations of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* can be said to open theatrical black boxes to their audiences to provide glimpses of Schrödinger cats inside. Trying to pave the way for a more diversified and yet egalitarian world, they open up opportunities for more and different experiments with postnational specificities.

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