

## The Indeterminacy of Identity in Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark*

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### Abstract

This article sets out to explore the implications of postcolonialism for Irish identity politics, through Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark*. Through the characters of this play, who struggle to define a coherent national identity for themselves in the industrial city of Coventry, Murphy depicts the reality of modern Ireland by locating the play in the pathology of the alienated individual who contradicts the hegemony of Catholic bourgeois nationalist Ireland. By contextualising the liminal aspects of *A Whistle in the Dark*, the primary aim of the article is to focus on these contradictions and the resulting indeterminate identity that lies at the borderlines of Irish culture. This analysis is informed by Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry in relation to the dynamics of colonialism. Through the sense of failure that permeates the play, and the desire to escape the confinements of constructed identity categories, which restrict and trap the characters within ascribed identities, *A Whistle in the Dark* explores the boundaries between essentialising narratives of Irish identity, and a non-dialectical space. The nature of identity is further complicated by Bhabha's hybrid voices and performances that allow for an indeterminate plurality of identities to exist in these liminal spaces where they are forced to make their own private myths fuse with the contemporary public identity they must inhabit.

Key words: indeterminacy, identity, postcolonialism, hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, agency, mythology, performativity, interpellation

### I

*A Whistle in the Dark* was published by Tom Murphy in 1961 in the immediate aftermath of T. K. Whitaker's 1958 Programme for Economic Expansion.<sup>1</sup> This programme was to explode questions of Irish identity, translating economic reform into cultural reform by presenting serious cultural and socioeconomic changes to a country, which, up to then, had experienced nationalism as the great binding force that united all discourses. Consequently, the nationalist ideology of a single unified society was exposed by the alienation felt by many in Irish society as it

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<sup>1</sup> T. K. Whitaker was Secretary to the Department of Finance and is credited with introducing a national recovery plan in the form of his Programme for Economic Expansion.

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transformed from being a “beleaguered colony to a postcolonial nation state” (Paul Murphy 2001: 224). This transformation of nationalist ideology into something questionable called into being Ireland’s fixity, unity, and homogeneity, replacing it with disruption, disunity and discontinuity.

The disruption and alienation caused by such socioeconomic changes is central to the work of Tom Murphy. Through the untamed Carney brothers of *A Whistle in the Dark*, who, having come from rural Mayo, struggle to define themselves in the industrial city of Coventry, Murphy focuses on the dignity of the human being, whose choices, identity and dignity have been taken away from them through their entrapment in impossible spaces (O’Toole 1994: 57). Through these characters, who have no power and no voice, Murphy’s drama raises all sorts of uncomfortable questions to which there are few, if any, satisfactory answers. His theatre is one that consists of potent absences that frequently interrupt, demanding our attention in a portrayal of the bitter economic facts of poverty, emigration and political ideology, through the intimate actions and thoughts of his characters. Declan Kiberd describes Murphy as, “the most subtle chronicler of the embourgeoisification of rural Ireland” (Kiberd 1996: 612), who locates his drama in the “pathology of the alienated individual” (584). Murphy’s work has been described by Colm Tóibín as “raw, visceral, and immediate,” containing images of “pure violence and hatred, and people [who] really don’t belong” (Tóibín 2012a: 5).

Murphy is not a political dramatist, yet he manages to paint a dialectic of Ireland’s past and present by contradicting the hegemony of Catholic bourgeois nationalist history with the repressed discourses of subordination. He attempts to move Irish theatre beyond essentialist identity politics that define both nation and nationalism. He does this by engaging with characters trapped in a space juxtaposed between the optimism of the 1960s, and the despair felt by many through the experience of limited opportunities. The timing of *A Whistle in the Dark*, the text central to this article, is thus important in that it is set in the aftermath of what Tóibín describes as “an era of pure hope, or pure illusion” (Tóibín 2012a: 37). Despite being written more than fifty years ago, *A Whistle in the Dark* has re-emerged onto Ireland’s stage with a renewed dramatic force, in the aftermath of another time of pure hope and pure (dis)illusion—The Celtic Tiger. The questions raised by

Murphy in the historical moment of the 1960s are once again as relevant now as they were then.

Murphy's work marks a precedent in his attempt to negotiate the limits of a tradition in which his characters do not truly belong. Tóibín refers to Murphy's emigration plays as representative of the uncomfortable truth of dispossession, whereby a whole class of people were dispossessed as Ireland gained its freedom (Tóibín 1987: 29). Thus, the play can be said to represent a social critique of the Irish State. The characters of Murphy's drama embody the alienation felt by those trapped by the oppression of Ireland's economic, political, social and religious reality. Murphy mixes disillusion with shame and self-hatred, where the experience of real dispossession becomes a place of metaphysical loss, and where characters are acutely aware of their position in society.

The social critique that emerges in the play comes from the felt contradictions of the postcolonial state that defines Murphy's drama, and which is central to postcolonialism in Irish literature. His work raises the larger question of what studies of identity mean, in terms of postcolonial discourse. While postcolonialism is a theory grounded in the historicity and teleology of imperialism, colonialism and its aftermath, it has become productive to move beyond such narrow definitions of nationalism or authenticity to disciplines of transformation, otherness, ideology, gender, class and subaltern studies. These interpretations give rise to what may be described as borderland identity studies, where the subject is identified through new configuration of identities, rather than a single "postcolonial identity."<sup>2</sup> In light of these mutable discourses, the study of the formation of identity has therefore proven elusive. It is therefore reasonable to explore specifically what is understood by postcolonial identity politics, with particular reference to *A Whistle in the Dark*, and the sense of betrayal felt by its excluded characters who

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<sup>2</sup> For a further discussion on this see Lloyd's "Regarding Ireland in a Postcolonial Frame" which argues for an extensive exploration of the "notion of multiplicity" as opposed to homogenous postcolonial theories (Lloyd 2001: 14). Similarly, McClintock tries to move postcolonial theory from a simple binary which "marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from 'the precolonial' to 'the colonial' to the 'postcolonial' bringing with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past" (McClintock 1998: 1186).

represent contested categories in what is now an age of multiple belongings.

This dilemma of borderline existence and its resultant effect on identity formation is what Homi Bhabha refers to as the post-colonial “interstices” (Bhabha 1994: 11). These are the liminal spaces that exist in terms of the construction of identity through terms of negotiation, rather than a negation of oppositional and antagonistic elements (Bhabha 1994: 22). Bhabha argues that this liminal space emerges from the hybridity of postcolonial cultures, but he moves the argument beyond the simplistic notion of nationalist movements into one of cultural translation. Thus, the struggles of violence and language in *A Whistle in the Dark* can be considered not simply about nationalist struggle, but rather a struggle for identity. What emerges from *A Whistle in the Dark* in the archaeology of its purgatorial spaces, therefore, is the impossibility of determining identity. The primary aim of this study is to focus on those aspects of indeterminate identity that lie at the borderlines of Irish culture, as demonstrated in Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark*, and attempt to explore how these can be examined in light of a postcolonial politics of identity, as subordinated by the Irish State.

This study is underpinned by the theoretical framework provided by Homi K. Bhabha, particularly his concepts of hybridity and mimicry, in relation to the dynamics of colonialism. Bhabha attempts to direct the reader’s attention away from antagonistic essentialist identities to what he terms the “borderlines of the nation-space,” in an effort to acknowledge what happens in-between cultures (Bhabha 1994: 147). He explores this border or threshold through the liminal, emphasising that it is this “third-space” (Bhabha 1994: 218) which is central to the creation of new cultural meaning, situated as it is between essentialist forms or identities.

## *II*

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha creates a series of concepts which include hybridity and mimicry. These serve to undermine simple polarities of identities of self and other, referring instead to the mixed nature or even “impurity,” “foreignness,” or “mixedness” of cultures in time (Bhabha 1994: 68). Recent colonial writing has sought, through

theorists like Bhabha, to move “post-Other,”<sup>3</sup> into what can be described as the “third-space,” where stereotypes no longer represent fixed forms of representation based on binary nationalist discourse (Bhabha 1994: 75). Instead, Bhabha is interested in showing how subjective identities, as acts of translation, carry over from one place to another.

One of the crucial questions for Bhabha is the question of cultural difference, not in terms of essentialising or homogenising a culture or group simply because of shared traits, traditions or stereotyping. He is concerned instead with cultural difference as a place of hybridity, where constructed identity is “neither one thing nor the other” (Bhabha 1994: 25), and which alienates the forms of our recognition. Bhabha asserts that cultural groups, in terms of the politics of difference, are not centred on the margins, nor are they the “excluded term at the centre” (Bhabha 2000: 312). Rather, cultural location is always, in Bhabha’s view, an articulation of various intersecting and often contesting positions that must be negotiated and translated in space and time (312). This interstitial location occupied by the diaspora, the colonised, the culturally dislocated, and the subjects that do not fit neatly into conventional homogenous national and racial typologies, is where conceptions of hybridity emerge.

What follows then, according to Bhabha, are the ambivalent effects of hybridity and mimicry in terms of the subject who is “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 1994: 25), so that an alteration of identity occurs. Bhabha has coined the term “hybridity” to characterise this ambivalent process within which hybridisation becomes that space, where one negotiates “the structure of iteration which informs the determination of identity,” between agonistic elements (Bhabha 1994: 26). In this way, identity is translated through strategies of appropriation, revision and iteration, producing possibilities for those who are less advantaged and

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting discussion on otherness, Drichel raises the question of how it is possible to conceptualise contemporary identity without resorting to the same old stereotypes that have become so ingrained in references to formerly othered peoples. She asserts that colonial otherness inevitably contains and disavows an alterity that cannot be articulated along the discursive principles of the dominant discourse. To bring about the deconstruction of this alterity, defined as it is through dominant discourses, Drichel suggests an engagement with the deconstruction of otherness in order to avoid falling into an essentialist trap (Drichel 2008: 590).

have traditionally had identity conscripted for them. Bhabha argues that cultural difference is a re-articulation of subjectivity that is transformed by the partial desire of hybridity into a “grotesque mimicry” (Bhabha 1994: 75). This does not “merely ‘rupture’ the discourse” (Bhabha 1994: 86), but ruptures forms of recognition. Consequently, hybridity and mimicry translate the whole notion of identity, alienating it from narcissistic identifications that are no longer dialectically articulated through an “arrested, fixated form of essence” (Bhabha 1994: 75). For Bhabha, nations and cultures are “narrative constructions that arise from the hybrid interaction of contending national and cultural constituencies” (Bhabha 1994: 2), where identity is negotiated.

Through the dual concepts of hybridity and mimicry, Bhabha tries to move his theory beyond the understanding and use of the stereotype, and the notion of fixity, in terms of representation (Bhabha 1994: 75). For *otherness* not to be reduced to a stereotype, based on essentialist ideas, another form of representation needs to be assumed. Drichel describes this as a “partial assumption of a stereotype” (Drichel 2008: 588), where the other can *be* and *not be* the stereotype. This “menace of mimicry” (Heinige 2009: 34-35) of the coloniser and colonised, mutually performing an inaccurate version of themselves to the other, lies in its misrepresentation, which is then taken for truth. Because of its enunciation, repetition and misinterpretation, this partial representation allows for a re-articulation of the whole notion of identity, and thereby alienates it from its essence through a splitting of the subject. Bhabha thus introduces the existence of the “third space” (Bhabha 1994: 49), where hybrid identity is enunciated and signified, and where this misrepresented mimetic stereotype can be recognised. The third space allows for a negotiation of difference between “polarizations without acceding to their foundational claims,” and which therefore “both challenges the boundaries of discourse and subtly changes its terms” (Bhabha 1994: 119). Consequently, this “interstitial perspective” (Bhabha 1994: 3) takes the place of what Bhabha calls, “the polarity of a prefigurative self-generating nation” (Bhabha 1994: 148). This disrupts the “signification of the people as homogenous” (Bhabha 1994: 148), and thereby escapes any self-referential echo allowing for a postcolonial analysis that is not weighed down by essentialist narratives.

Extending his argument, Bhabha holds that hybridity is not experienced solely as a physical removal from place, but also as a

temporal space that allows for otherness to be examined in light of a temporality that disrupts the terms of stereotypical cultural oppositions. By looking at identity in terms of temporality, it introduces a liminality that is encapsulated in a succession of historical moments: between the shadows of a self-generated past, which is not entirely absent, and a tentative present, which is not as yet properly defined, but which displaces the historical present. Hybridity thus enables the potential to question identity in terms of a contemporary culture that is situated in the past certainties of a nationalist pedagogy. Individual identity is thus bestowed by tradition as a partial form of identification, but rearticulated through contemporary temporality, which is subjectively inscribed. Bhabha argues that this “agonistic state of hybridity,” of being in the middle of difference, takes us beyond the multicultural politics of mutual recognition (Bhabha 1997: 438). In some respects, this agonistic state exists because the once-colonised subject simultaneously occupies a past space in which there is a time-lag where postcolonial belatedness disturbs signified, subjective identity, and articulates the heterogeneity of the nation (Bhabha 1994: 148). What the hybrid space does, therefore, is gives rise to a central “introjective movement of anxious identification” (Bhabha 1997: 442), where culture and identity are thus a result of the events of history, in all their indeterminacy.

### III

*A Whistle in the Dark* has been understood by many as an engagement with Ireland's colonial past, through its representation of the experience of emigration to England, the former colonial power, which displays the stage Irish figure in a heightened form of brutality and drunkenness (Heininge 2009: 2). Contrary to this, however, O'Toole claims that *A Whistle in the Dark* represents more than just an emigrant drama in its portrayal of complex identity politics. O'Toole describes Irish emigration as a “demographic, economic and statistical fact,” but also as “a way of seeing, and of being in, the world” (O'Toole 2012: 30). He further argues that a culture shaped by centuries of mass emigration and colonialism is one in which realism is impossible, and where narratives are mythologised (O'Toole 2012:30). This (im)possibility of realism is also identified by Richard Kearney, who suggests that mythologising master narratives can lead to both perversions and utopias, such that they can

both incarcerate and emancipate the way subjective identity is formed (Kearney 1984: 23). This raises the question of whether it is possible to represent a single, fixed reality of postcolonial Irish identity on the stage. O'Toole suggests that this is not possible, that in fact, reality is constructed in such a way that identity becomes a struggle that is both unfixed and uncertain, because of its shifting borderline existence, which is set against constructed or essentialist identities (O'Toole 2012: 30).

*A Whistle in the Dark* revolves around a social critique of these myths and narratives that shows the growing antipathy felt by the Carneys, left behind by the postcolonial "New Ireland," instigated by Whitaker's reforms (Arrowsmith 2004: 318). In this early play, Murphy compares the calcification of Irish identity as set against the hollowness of independent Ireland, where the old certainties of class, race and nation become contested categories, in what has become an age of multiple belongings. He shows the intense frustration of the Carneys, as they burn with the memories of past humiliations. Through these humiliations the Carneys recognise that the language and identity of heroic Ireland is not theirs. This alienation, which they were taught at school through the "certainties of a national pedagogy" (Bhabha 1994: 142), from which they were singled out for "special" treatment (Murphy 2001: 46), is made apparent, and serves to show the hybridity of their identity.

Through this hybridity, they not only sit on the border of Irish/English culture, but are also juxtaposed across class divisions and the rural idealism of nationalist Ireland, which contradicts the Carneys's urban actuality. Bhabha makes the case that emigrants do not always realise "how fully the shadow of the nation falls on the condition of exile (Bhabha 1994: 141). Murphy explores the psychological effects of moving from one culture to another, which can change everything and nothing at the same time, such that the "shadow of the nation" (Bhabha 1994:141) remains as a psychological unease. The Carney brothers are still identified as the same "iron [men]" (Murphy 2001: 165) they were back in Mayo, only now with a wider and more diverse range of antagonists to fixate upon (Harte 2012: 15). Even Michael, the protagonist who tries to assimilate and conform to versions of middle-class, interpreted as Englishness by his family, is haunted by the fact that his desired identity makes him no less a "paddy" in English eyes, or a "tinker" in Irish eyes (Harte 2012: 15). Despite his perceived "successes," Michael is still the victim of his hyper-masculine clan that



breeds in him a self-loathing, compounded by the shame and rage he feels from his impotent desire to be other than who he is. There is a sense of being trapped in a purgatorial world, amongst the complexities that emerge from the entanglement of discourses that the postcolonial nation represents.

By writing in the aftermath of Whitaker's economic reforms, Murphy questions de Valera's nostalgic, essentialist vision of Ireland, through the representation of the harsh realities of the Mayo "peasant class," forced to emigrate to industrial Coventry in a migrant act of survival. The play exposes de Valera's essentialist agrarian idyllic vision of Ireland, by demythologising his representation of the West of Ireland as "the last vestige of an essential Gaelic culture" (Murphy 2010: 219), through the sardonic discourse and general brutality of the Carneys. Through these economic migrants, questions of identity, othering, and agency emerge in the disconnect that occurs between a particular kind of postcolonial Ireland, in relation to the particularity of post-imperial England (Arrowsmith 2004: 317).

The Carneys have ended up in Coventry because the economy of Mayo in the late 1950s is shown to have offered little. Michael left Ireland ten years prior to the 1961 setting of the play, and his brothers have recently followed suit. His flight from his past reflects the bid by post-Whitaker Ireland to move towards capitalist modernity: a modernity that is seen to be anathema to the violence and tribalism, symbolised by Dada Carney and his sons. Instead of the traditional sentimentality of the agrarian peasant, the mark of success towards social advancement and upward mobility is signified by the acquisition of a professional position, such as the characters of Anthony Heneghan the architect, or John Quinlan, the doctor (Murphy 2001: 28). Michael Carney wants Des, his youngest brother, to be "something, respectable" (Murphy 2001: 18). He wants to own his own home and be part of a "civilised" family. The political utopianism of de Valera's Ireland, reflected in the play, is shown in stark contrast with the failure of the economic utopianism of de Valera's nationalist protectionism (Arrowsmith 2004: 317).

This utopia is demythologised by Murphy, who subjects Irish sentimentalism to a particularly strong critique, where the myth of the rural idyll has become, as Kearney argues, a perversion that has resulted in a downright oppression (Kearney 1984: 23). Mush declares "the economy [is] destroyed since the demand for St. Patrick's day badges

fell” (Murphy 2001: 28). His vision of the Irish economy represents everything that is opposite to the values of the 1960s: “opportunism, meritocracy and cosmopolitanism” (O’Toole 1994: 62). Des suggests contemporary Ireland offers little hope for the future and contrasts Ireland’s postcolonial poverty, where he manages to get “a lousy few quid” (Murphy 2001: 29), with the many opportunities he anticipates in England, where there are no “slave-drivers,” or where “you don’t have to lick no one’s shoes” (Murphy 2001: 30). Through an insurgent act of cultural translation, Harry inverts the traditional, pastoral image of Ireland, subverting essentialist notions of identity. In doing so, he disturbs the dictates of nationalist nostalgia through his use of the ass-shoe as a knuckle duster, which he sardonically describes as a “souvenir from Ireland” (Murphy 2001: 19). The conformity and constraint which such Gaelic notions of identity represent are translated through the rejection of these icons of nostalgic nationalism. This happens to the extent that they become a space of transmutation, where partial stereotypes are performed as (mis)represented stage Irish figures, through their brutality, violence and scornful speech patterns.

*A Whistle in the Dark* is therefore not only an exploration of the complex psychological effects of emigration, but also of the poverty of the mind that has been instilled in Irish society, because of a reductive nationalism which shows how little has changed with the Carneys move to Coventry. The Carney brothers, with the exception of Michael, are the same “iron men” in Coventry who now fixate upon an alternative range of antagonists: “Blacks,” “Muslims” and “bloody Englishmen” (Murphy 2001: 11-12), all of whom come together to form an ever growing derelict population of exclusion and indeterminacy. Harry shrewdly sees that social and racial hierarchies are shifting in post imperial Britain, as a result of immigration from England’s former colonies, and acknowledges that “if they weren’t here, like, our Irish blue blood would turn a shade darker, wouldn’t it?” (Murphy 2001: 11). He recognises their precarious position, and is aware of the shame of being Irish in England. However, he also defensively asserts his Irishness through violence, and in order to perform and protect the value of their identity and self-image the Carneys have to fight the Mulryans, another Irish clan, in order to shield themselves from their true powerlessness. This fight is not merely a result of antagonism, but also a response to their marginal status in England. The new wave of immigration to England from her former

colonies, which includes the Carneys, lacks a sense of community, and therefore any sense of communal identity, existing as they do in ghettoised forms of isolation. Through these new subaltern groups, instead of community, there exists rivalry as they battle to secure their identity.

Michael, especially, merely wants to live a comfortable life, and is content with the basic improvements that come his way. For the other Carneys, particularly Dada, the existence of a stratum of people beneath them provides them with an agency of empowerment that allows them to feel a progression that was denied to them in Mayo. Dada dismisses the dubious roots of this assertion of agency. He thinks only of "respectability when we've showed them," and dreams of a shop with "Michael G. Carney & Sons," over the door (Murphy 2001: 39). They *have* to recognise him through these "triumphant" failures. Dada's desire to build up an identity, in whatever form, can be examined in relation to Bhabha's concern regarding the reconstruction of postcolonial identity. Thus, through hybrid acts of translation poised between the competing claims of seemingly homogenous wholes, it is difficult to determine one's identity.

Typically, one of the ways in which the postcolonial nation forms identity is through the invention of an enemy. Umberto Eco suggests that "having an enemy is important not only to define identity but also to provide an obstacle against which to measure [one's] system of values [. . .] to demonstrate worth" (Eco 2012: 2). Thus, when there is no enemy, an enemy has to be invented, or one risks losing one's identity. In *A Whistle in the Dark*, Michael represents the internal enemy, the person who offers the remaining Carney tribe a sense of cohesion, and therefore a stable sense of identity through their distance from him. In an Irish postcolonial world the English are no longer the ostensible enemy; they are now just "the bloody Englishmen, the lousy Englishmen" (Murphy 2001: 103). Where the English-man or the protestant was the traditional enemy in Ireland, the enemy is now translated along other racial and religious lines, for instance, the "niggers," the "blacks," the "muslims" (Murphy 2001: 100). The enemy also exists within their own ethnicity, in the form of the "Mulryans" (Murphy 2001: 109). However, the enemy is very often not those who pose a direct threat. Rather than representing a real threat, highlighting the ways in which these enemies are different, the difference itself becomes a symbol of what is threatening in its

ambivalence. Such an analysis is arguably used to highlight the construction of colonial subjects as *a priori* historical objects, and therefore historical enemies or “others.”

However, as contact between people becomes more complex through immigration and globalisation, a new form of “enemy” arises. This is the person who remains outside, exhibiting his otherness, but also the person within, who is a stranger, who behaves differently, like Michael, or who speaks the language badly, as Harry does. This complexity is exacerbated by the diasporic nature of identity in *A Whistle in the Dark* through the setting of the play in Coventry, an industrial migrant city in England. Coventry represents a hybrid space indicative of those wandering migrants who “will not be contained within the *Heim* of the national culture and its unisonant discourse” (Bhabha 2000 315). These migrants represent “the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation” (Bhabha 2000 315) bringing into question the continuity of community and tradition as reified by nationalist narratives.

Murphy’s characters, inarticulate in themselves and at odds with reified narratives, do however manage to articulate the “‘death-in-life’ of the idea of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation” (Bhabha 2000 315). *A Whistle in the Dark* is not simply a portrayal of the stereotype of the Irish immigrant in England. Through the vagaries of Hiberno-Irish speech patterns, Murphy displays an unflattering, disturbing image of Ireland that goes beyond the “narcissistic myths” (Bhabha 1994: 40) of Irish cultural supremacy. Through the festering aggression and subdued ferocity, Murphy shows the Carneys’s endeavours to emerge from the colonialist shadow, where they turn from subjugated to subjugators, through a form of mimicry, in an attempt to compensate for their own inferiority complexes. The violence in the play exposes weaknesses in national cohesion, by asserting difference and opposition to the ruling norms. Murphy moves beyond a mere refutation of the colonial shadow to show how the past has so damaged his characters to the extent that their perversities can be explained in terms of psychological deficiencies and social injustice (Griffin 1983: 17). Instead of the “resplendent national life” (Bhabha 2000: 315), in circulation through the pedagogical narratives of the time, Murphy’s characters can be seen to represent a disjunctive discourse that attempts to redefine cultural identities. Through the grotesque nature of the Carneys, the past reveals itself in a transmuted form of identity in the present, revealing a space where

Catholic bourgeois nationalism is contradicted by the repressed discourses of contemporary economic hierarchies. This tells a history of poverty and its psychological consequences of a psychological forgetting of the truth about migration and dispossession, through assertions of positive nationalist "reality."

The setting of Coventry also raises questions of the relationship between the *Other*, the Irish and what defines Irish identity, complicated by the diaspora. Heininge asks the question of "how otherness can be determined when Irishness evidently can't be?" (Heininge 2009: 4). In addressing Michael as a "British Paddy" (Murphy 2001: 15), Harry considers whether those who no longer live in the country are still Irish. Does emigration necessarily mean a forfeiture of national identity for those who want to "fit into a place" (Murphy 2001: 15). Michael is chasing a mythical utopia in Coventry, deferring the day when he must confront his essential homelessness and the indeterminacy of his identity. Paradoxically, moving to Coventry has allowed him to move beyond an Irish society deeply divided by class, to one where all Irish people are seen as the same: "paddies" (Murphy 2001: 15). His Irishness, however, becomes a badge of shame, such that he suffers from disillusionment and rage that no amount of introspection can salve. His search for a "way of being" yields only "puppetry, mimicry and rhetoric" (Harte 2012: 15). Michael's anguished admission: "I want to get out of this kind of life [. . .]. I don't want to be what I am (Murphy 2001: 63) accentuates his desire to fit in, even though he reluctantly recognises that he has more in common with his feral brothers: "We're all Paddies and the British boys know it" (Murphy 2001: 15). Michael's anguish is indicative of the disillusionment with the fading dream of progress and economic success which fuelled Ireland's transformation from "beleaguered colony to postcolonial nation state" (Murphy 2010: 224). For Michael, there is no utopia in Coventry. The economic hierarchies of colonial oppression are as present in postcolonial Britain with its shift to global capitalism. Whether it is in England or Ireland, the psychological violence imposed by the demands of capitalism are reflected in the physical violence that punctuates the play.

This violence in the play represents a savage metaphor of the breakdown of subjective identity, from the deeply intimate to the broadly social, in a way that allows for an understanding of the complexities of determining postcolonial identity through acts of translation. Savagery

replaces discourse, and can be seen as a revealing subtext that highlights the unspoken interaction between characters, and which represents a signal point of identification. Through their performativity, the characters resist discursive conceptualization, and thereby maintain a silence within the interstices of argument (Lutterbie 1998: 468). In this way, “silence” is used to address the question of the subject, and allows for a representation of self through absolute absence. *A Whistle in the Dark* represents this absence in the failure of the State towards the Carneys, in the shadow of economic and social change. They have been alienated from an unyielding and uncompromising Irish society which incarcerates them within a “mythic utopia” (Kearney 1984: 23). Consequently, the translation of identity falls under a fatal strain. The tensions produced cohere in the tortured figure of Michael Carney, and result in a night of violence that both problematises and reasserts solidarities around agency and identity (Merriman 1999: 312).

The violence depicted in the play emerges from a partial representation centred around a perverted version of the traditional faction fight, once a common feature of fair days and markets in rural Ireland (O’Dwyer 1987: 35). For Dada, success in the fight against the Mulryans will restore respect to the Carneys, in their failed attempt at gaining economic status and move them beyond the appellation they been repeatedly given: “Tinkers! Carneys! Tinkers! Tinkers!” (Murphy 2001: 77). This will atone for the various humiliations Dada has had to suffer in life. He is humiliated by being offered a caretaker’s job by those he saw as equals “at the club” (Murphy 2001: 28). He has had to leave his job in the *Garda Síochána* and is now supported by his wife who is “on her knees scrubbing [. . .] floors” (Murphy 2001: 92). In contrast, Pookey Flanagan, the road-sweeper, has educated his own family from the “dirt of the roads” (Murphy 2001: 44), with the result that “one of his sons became an engineer, and there was a girl that became a nun, and another of them was at the university” (Murphy 2001: 44). For the Carneys, their economic failure has resulted in emigration and dubious “enterprises” (Murphy 2001: 38) that involve prostitution, bribes, petty theft, drinking and fighting. The small council house which Dada and his five sons inhabit also contains their violence and frustration. Even Michael, who tries to save his youngest brother from a life of stereotypical *Othering* and abjection, succumbs to violence, when in the end he strikes Des after much provocation by Dada. This results in a

decisive alteration of identity that disrupts the forms of recognition existing within the Carneys, up to this point.

#### IV

*A Whistle in the Dark* explores forms of recognition. It therefore brings into question the binary that marks the moment where collective identity defined by an essentialist narrative, once untranslatable and unrepresentable, is disrupted and now presented in hybrid form. Narratives that were previously silenced or inarticulate are, in Murphy's play, articulated in a performative moment that attempts to translate identity through a moment marked by excessive hybridity. Bhabha claims that hybridisation is a "discursive, enunciatory, cultural, subjective process" (Olson and Worsham 1998: 391), having to do with struggle around authority and its revision. This is reflected in Murphy, who in his own analysis of his characters, claims he portrays "inarticulate people" who "don't belong" (Tóibín 2012b: 6). These are the "ferocious, angry" (Tóibín 2012b: 5) subjects of *A Whistle in the Dark*, who endure the bitterness, stagnation and futility of struggle. As Griffin states: "the Carneys fight the world and each other with a ferocity born of inner emptiness, frustration, and bitterness" (Griffin 1983: 17). The real task for the Carneys, thus, is to figure out how they, as subjects, are constituted in and by mutable discourses, constructed as they are from "the well-worn pedagogies and pedigrees of national unity" (Bhabha 1994: 167). Michael lacks the capacity to define himself, and is therefore defined by others. Dada and his brothers know he is incapable of withstanding the pressures they exert upon him, evident in Dada's declaration that "You can talk a bit, but you can't act. Actions speak louder than words. The man of words fails the man of action" (Murphy 2001: 34). For Dada, words reveal nothing; the disclosure of identity can only come from the deed itself.

However, as Hannah Arendt suggests, disclosure through deed alone cannot form "the unique and distinct identity of the agent" (Arendt 1998: 180), and she argues that action without a specific identity attached to it becomes meaningless. Thus, in what should be an enunciative space, is in fact the attempted emergence of the self in a performative space, where disclosure is through deed, and where the self does not control its performativity (Bhabha 2000: 98). This reflects Bhabha's ambivalent

movement between the discourses of pedagogy and the performative (Bhabha 1994: 149). Bhabha raises the question of where to *find* agency: through moments of recitation and discourse or through performative actions? The Carneys in a sense “perform” identity, and create the self in this borderline community of migrants. By failing to enunciate their identity discursively, they therefore have to resort to violence in their attempt at forming an identity.

Judith Butler, however, argues for agency through language, by invoking Althusser’s understanding of interpellation. She argues that one is not simply fixed by a name, rather a name, even one that is demeaning, gives the possibility for a particular social existence. Consequently, this produces an identity that can give rise to an unexpected and enabling response, by inaugurating agency in the subject (Butler 1997: 2). This allows the subject to use language to counter the offensive name, and thereby allows the subaltern voice the opportunity to resist and interrupt it. Michael Carney is tainted by the appellation of cowardice by his family, and is determined to resist the labels that others put on him, whether it is “tinker,” “paddy,” “jewman” or “jibber.” It is only when Michael neglects to “be” himself, fights his youngest brother and kills him that he finds the agency to remove this taint and define his identity as ascribed by his family. Ironically, it is at this point where he is physically strongest that his self-identity wavers. Through the denial of his self-professed identity that marks him as “civil,” and through an act of abhorrent violence, he ultimately fails to determine the civilised identity he aspires to construct.

Developing this point further, the characters in *A Whistle in the Dark* find themselves set-apart, perceived through the eyes of others, and interpellated as “pig,” “tinker,” and “paddy.” Harry is ambivalent towards his culture but, at the same time, proceeds to consolidate the fixity of the stereotypical Irish man through his violent, drunken, tribal ways, and thereby inaugurate his own agency. These appellations, which have to some degree created meaning and “fixed” their identities through their performative negations, however allow for an enabling response, giving the Carneys’s agency of a sort. Therefore, identity, “Tinker” (Murphy 2001: 77), or “Paddy” (Murphy 2001: 15) creates a supplementary space for the creation of the Carneys as “iron-men” (Murphy 2001: 165). In acting, even if through “mute violence” (Arendt 1998: 179), the Carneys enable the revelation of personal identity. This



moves them from their fixed place of otherness into one of subjectivity and agency that puts others in their places (Drichel 2008: 598). Dada's desire to "show them" is an attempt to valorise what was once demeaned, in order to create meaning, and with it the agency to define identity. However, by filling the supplementary space which this name has created, their identities are in fact indeterminate, as they fill the space of *Otherness*. In doing so, they forego any essential ontological identity that they might claim through their misrepresentations of identity (Drichel 2008: 598). Through the "colonial gaze," the Carneys are at once outside and inside their performed identity. This represents their hybridity and the indeterminacy of their identity, by introducing a split in Irish identity, at the point where they try to articulate it.

By appealing to the nation's authoritative narrative, Murphy draws attention to the historical presence of Irish identity. There are frequent generalisations made against the "bloody Englishmen" (Murphy 2001: 12) through Mush's ballads, which have historically been used as a traditional narrative form to illustrate Irish colonial history. There are many references to Irish stereotypical cultural artefacts, such as "a bonham [pig, which was kept] to run around the kitchen" (Murphy 2001: 8), and the growing of shamrocks. In addition, Murphy refers to religious and superstitious beliefs in the form of fairies and leprechauns, the power of those "Holy Marys pulling strings" (Murphy 2001: 15), and the "pioneer pin" (Murphy 2001: 12). The hybridity of identity through traditional artefacts and narratives is exposed and disrupted in their present reality in Coventry, when Harry plays on "authentic" Irish imagery through his "Souvenir from Ireland" (Murphy 2001: 19), illustrating how contemporary narratives have changed. Harry surreptitiously interrupts fixity from his interstitial location, which simultaneously obscures his powerlessness and articulates his presence. This is achieved through the subjective qualities *acted out* by Harry as agent. Despite the inability of the Carneys to articulate their identity discursively, they have nevertheless become "big names" (Murphy 2001: 37). They have constructed themselves through "spectacular resistance" (Bhabha 1994: 121) to the pedagogical nation's narrative authority, which signifies people "as an *a priori* historical presence" (Bhabha 2000: 297).

Instead of an "enunciatory present marked in the repetition [. . .] of the national sign" (Bhabha 2000: 299), the Carneys construct their

identity through the performance of identity. In their attempts at “trying to be fly” (Murphy 2001: 38) through violence, pimping and extortion, they are the “big names,” the iron men who have “showed them” (Murphy 2001: 39) what performed agency can do. The subject is thus interpellated in action: there is no subjective identity before or after, but only when the subject becomes an agent through public disclosure (Kapoor 2003: 572). Hybridity intervenes in the exercise of “authority,” representing the impossibility of a determined identity and interrupts the collusive sense of symmetry. The Carneys retain their presence as “iron-men,” Irish-men, and have become “big-names.” But they are no longer representative of an essence, and are now instead a partial presence transformed into a liminal signifying space that represents the “tense locations of cultural difference” (Bhabha 1994: 148), which leads to an anxiety within the characters.

The anxiety that follows, particularly evident in Michael and Dada, reveals the vacillating process of translation that lies at the border posts, which Bhabha suggests “designate the double territory where the resolute intention to join a movement turns into the deep, moving current of psychic displacement” (Bhabha 1997: 446). Michael’s identity is split ambivalently between various aspects of his life, where his past encroaches on his present: the washed-up past; the life waiting to happen; that part that needs to find its voice to create meaning, and define his identity. As Betty remarks, Michael’s anxiety is reflected in Dada, when he vacillates between wanting to be “out of it all” (Murphy 2001: 67), and his subsequent declaration that actually he is “proud” (Murphy 2001: 67). Their identities do not, as suggested by Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, live either in the middle ground of difference or by the “straight arrow of emancipation” (Bhabha 1997: 447). In this sense, as Fuss argues, identification is only possible when it is placed in Bhabha’s ambivalent third space (Fuss 1995: 49). However, there is also the risk of multiple identities which compete with each other. An identity that once appeared fixed is now quickly dislodged, making Michael indeterminate to himself. In the breakdown of the familiar binary boundary between those “lousy Englishmen” (Murphy 2001: 13) and the “Paddies” (Murphy 2001: 15) other borderline identities are established. Thus the present opens up to reveal “a rigid class system and the hypocrisy of churchmen and politicians” (Tóibín 2012a: 6) that went further to define identity than any nationalist narrative.

The anxiety that Michael and Dada experience is turned into a rage within Harry, who sees the illusions of a conscripted Irish identity collapse and fall away. Where Mush refers to the “lousy Englishmen,” Harry reiterates the sentiment, but acknowledges the many “lousy Irishmen” (Murphy 2001: 13) too. Harry rejects the notion of a collective sentimentalist Irish identity, when he says these “lousy Irishmen” (Murphy 2001: 13) are not all the same, and differentiates between the “fly shams” (Murphy 2001: 13), and “the holy ones” (Murphy 2001: 14), all of whom he is alienated from. Harry moves beyond simplistic binaries of Irish and English. In the articulation between these two cultures, both can be substantially transformed, depending on what feature they decide to negotiate and articulate between themselves. If it is social stratification or class, which the play indicates, then the coming together of nationality will not be defined by the previously assigned significations of Irish or English. These will be reconstituted in, and negotiated through, a third space which, in a way, disrupts any sense of the two cultures doing any kind of double dealing with each other in their translations. Class will now be viewed through a certain kind of postcolonial migration and resettlement, through traditional Irish narratives of Irishness, but also through the ideas that the migrant community and its location in Coventry brings with it (Olson and Wolsham 1998: 380). Identity is moved beyond its former rigidity to one that resonates with an inevitable indeterminacy with the translation from one place to another.

The final scene in the play is indicative of the indeterminacy portrayed throughout. The drama ends, not with the determination of identity, but, following Michael’s regression to violence and the killing of Des, with the evacuation of Dada’s enunciative power. Thus “the curtain falls slowly through the speech” (Murphy 2001: 96), and with it falls Dada’s final attempt at forging an identity. In his pitiable repetitions, there is in fact an utter failure in terms of forming identity. Murphy presents a vision of Dada isolated in a corner of the stage repeating, what are to him, his final attempts of meaningful resonance in his life. Unable to determine his identity, either through his own efforts, or through his son’s, the true pathos of his situation reaches its climatic expression, where, having just destroyed his family’s sense of identity through his provocation of Michael and Des, he presents an unsettling and pronounced sense of loss and indeterminacy in his final utterances “[. . .] Did my best [. . .] I tried [. . .].” These last words are determined in

their utterance, but their final disproof has just been witnessed in the actions and inarticulations of the characters on stage.

V

The characters in *A Whistle in the Dark* have been shown to specifically represent figures of the dispossessed Irish, both in terms of material dispossession and their moral bankruptcy, which rebukes essentialist caricatures of the West of Ireland peasant idyll, over-determined in Irishry. Instead, through the gross caricature of the Carneys, there is a malevolence in *A Whistle in the Dark* that leads to a cathartic relief where certain forms of feral Irish identity have been left behind. However, this play directly implicates the Irish State in its particular stance toward the poor, the past, and Irishness, in all of its indeterminacy, and raises concerns central to the politics of identity. *A Whistle in the Dark* is not merely about highlighting dispossession, but also the repression felt by those who have been dispossessed, distorting their identity through the construction of an over-determined mode of representation. This emphasises the dualistic nature of the Carneys's existence as both the absence of identity, but which yet contains a presence which is definitely there.

Through the sense of failure that permeates the play, and the desire to escape the confinements of constructed identity categories, which restrict and trap the characters within ascribed identities, *A Whistle in the Dark* explores the boundaries between an essentialising narrative of Irish identity, and a non-dialectical space. This is a space where identity is constructed and performed against seeming fixities, grounded in teleological narratives of postcolonialism. Instead of identity being forged through a grand narrative that unites the past and present, there is a disunity of time and space in which the Carneys move. The characters in *A Whistle in the Dark* are all devoid of purpose and alienated from themselves. There is no determination that connects them. Murphy questions the origins of indeterminate identities as it relates to the extent by which we can trust the nation with the formation of our identities through pedagogical narratives. Murphy pays close attention to Bhabha's interstitial spaces, which are beset by irreconcilables. These are further complicated by the hybrid voices and performances that have been typically silenced, allowing for an indeterminate plurality of identities to

exist. In this liminal landscape a space is created for exhibition, and a conscription that allows for organic change in part, but also for translation and negotiation from one culture to another. This contemplation of liminality, of non-dialectical spaces of hybridity, allows the characters to occupy spaces, where they are forced to make their own private myths fuse with the contemporary public identity they must inhabit. In Michael's own words: "a lot of it is up to a man himself to fit into a place. Otherwise he might as well stay at home" (Murphy 2001: 15).

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