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## Performing hyphenates: a study in contemporary Irish-American identity and cultural performance

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PERFORMING HYPHENATES:  
A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH-AMERICAN IDENTITY AND CULTURAL  
PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College

in partial fulfillment of the  
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Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by  
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For my mother and father, in honor of all their support.

And for James McCoy, my great-uncle, without whom my understanding of Irish-America would have been so much the poorer.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the issues and contradictions of identity formation found in contemporary Irish-American cultural performances. Using a theoretical language grounded in post-structuralism and cultural studies, this examination hopes to demonstrate the primacy of performance and theatre in the formation of culture, Irish-American specifically, or otherwise. The performances featured in the study are: Riverdance, St. Patrick's Day parades, pub performances, and improv theatre.



## INTRODUCTION

At a Decatur Street intersection on St. Patrick's Day, 2000, the Downtown Irish Club of New Orleans decided to stop their parade and dance. The parade itself is not a closely patrolled affair and the street barricades that are so ubiquitous during Mardi Gras are notably absent. In this intersection the marchers were handing out beads, flowers and other "throws." Dressed in their white tuxedo shirts, emerald ties and cummerbunds, black tuxedo pants, green, white and orange sashes and black bowlers the parade members looked like the very model of St. Patrick's Day parade participants. The marchers invited the observers to join them in the intersection and dance to the music being played from the back of a float that had accompanied them along their cross-city march. The parade-goers gladly complied, and to the strains of Kid Rock's "I Want To Be A Cowboy," everybody danced. Middle aged men, twenty-something college students, blacks, whites, young and old, all danced in the middle of this intersection, while the rest of crowd smiled, laughed, and looked on with amusement.

This moment embodies a notable change in the ever-shifting game of Irish-American identity politics. We see the failure of the traditional binary structure of Irish-American identity to fully explain the performance on Decatur Street. Simply, no model hoping to prove authenticity or purity of culture would have room for such a playful and multi-dimensional moment as

this. To the strains of a song written and performed by a white man from Detroit, rapping in a style created and developed by African-American youth in Brooklyn in the late 1970's, singing lyrics that employ the mytho-poetic street slang of pimp culture as well as the equally mythic language of the Wild West, a large group of individuals danced their own unique dances in a French Quarter street, inviting all those present to join them in their celebration of "Irishness."

The joyous Celtic carnival ignores the existence of the militaristic marches of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians (AOH) so prevalent in the Northern United States. The collected crowd could be forgiven for easily forgetting the exclusionary tactics of the New York and Boston parades as well as the racial tensions that sometimes exist between Irish-Americans and the city's other ethnic identities. Replacing these historic legacies was a sense of limitless self-invention ready to be negotiated and re-engineered on the next street corner. And yet the latent racism and bigotry of the nation's AOH organizations still exist in a very real way; the New York and Boston parades are still the most obvious examples of Irish-American identity in the United States today, and one could easily question the self-awareness of the parade participants and observers in the continually metamorphosing game of identity creation.

A new model that accounts and allows for the flexible interplay between cultures and acknowledges the constructed-ness

of identity is required in order to "make sense" of Irish-American moments such as that described above. A brief moment experienced in the French Quarter on St. Patrick's Day hardly makes for a "paradigm shift." However, this kind of cross-cultural free-play appears to be occurring on many different levels and in many different places. Such activity obviously has its positive and negative consequences. A conception of Irish-American identity that can account for and negotiate the interplay and the resulting affects must be developed.

This dissertation will present an argument demonstrating the problematic issues involved in employing a monologic and binary reading of Irish-American culture. Furthermore, this study will argue that an understanding of Irish-American culture grounded in the dialogistic and pluralistic theories of Joseph Roach, Homi Bhabha, Greil Marcus, Richard Schechner, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton provides a more efficacious method of interpreting hyphenated cultures. Following such a methodology inherently complicates the already complex area of identity formation and representation. That, however, is the point. Until recently most histories and analyses of Irish-American culture utilized a polarizing model in formulating an understanding of Irish-American culture. In such a model, Irish-American culture must always be considered in opposition/relation to Ireland as a singular "source" culture. By allowing the complications of the

hyphenated identity to exist messily alongside each other, this study hopes to create a more porous, flexible and accurate rendering of Irish-American culture.

Contemporary Irish Studies texts and journals rely heavily upon a conception of Irish-American identity and culture as an experience still grounded in 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives. Such an intellectual tactic only reinforces the monologic and essentialist history making and identity formation that this study attempts to address. One recent and telling example of the tone and methodology employed by Irish Studies scholars should help explain more fully the dynamic that dominates much of the writing on Irish-American history.

The Spring/Summer 2002 edition of the Irish American Cultural Institute's journal Eire-Ireland dedicated all of its material to Irish-American issues since 1900. This special edition (called such by the editors) featured ten articles by scholars from Ireland, Canada and the United States. Of the ten articles, no less than three dealt with the memory of the 1843-1853 Famine and only two articles even attempted to wrestle with Irish-American history or culture as it has existed in the past thirty years. Notably, in an edition dedicated to Irish-America since 1900, not one article examined Irish-American culture as it manifests itself in the Southern, Western or Mid-Western states. Furthermore, any study, or even mention, of theatre or

performance as an active part of Irish-American life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century remained entirely absent.

The editor of the "Irish-American" edition of Eire-Ireland seems to recognize the over-reliance of 19<sup>th</sup> century materials in the telling of contemporary Irish-America's stories. In his introduction to the edition, Kevin Kenny writes:

We know much more about nineteenth-century Irish America than we know about any period of Irish settlement anywhere in the world. But in recent years the most dynamic period in Irish-American scholarship, as indeed in U.S. historiography more generally, has arguably been the twentieth century. The field is young compared to the nineteenth-century scholarship, but this very imbalance made it all the more pleasurable and important to compile the current issue (5).

Kenny seems to make something of an apology for the lack of attention paid to 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish-America while simultaneously acknowledging that much work needs to be done in bringing the realm of Irish Studies into the more recent events of history. Ironically, Kenny wrote this introduction for an edition appearing in the year 2002, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leaving one to wonder how long it will take for Irish Studies scholars to begin examining contemporaneous Irish-American culture.

In spite of the Irish American Cultural Institute's desire to refocus Irish Studies toward the 20<sup>th</sup> century (even if only for one special edition), the pull of 19<sup>th</sup> century "origins" remains very strong within contemporary Irish Studies. In an article that appears in the above mentioned edition of

Eire-Ireland entitled, "In the Shadow of a Grain Elevator: A Portrait of an Irish Neighborhood in Buffalo, New York, in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," William Jenkins describes, over the course of 23 pages, the rise and fall of an Irish-American neighborhood in Buffalo. The first 17 pages of Jenkins' article examines, solely, the neighborhood's demographics from 1820 to 1899. While Jenkins' title certainly announces his intentions to explore both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it strikes me as peculiar that the 20<sup>th</sup> century would receive such short treatment in an article appearing in a journal dedicated to studying Irish-American history and culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In spite of Irish Studies scholars' dedication to nineteenth century, originary models of Irish-American culture and history, contemporary Irish-America still grows and evolves. Generally speaking, Irish and Irish-American culture, over the past ten years, has enjoyed an incredible rise in popularity. Not only has interest in Irish culture increased, but the kind of event or product falling within the traditional realm of Irish culture has opened up as well. The pages of *Bon Appetit* provide one small but telling example of this phenomena: a few years ago the magazine devoted an entire issue to celebrating Irish cuisine and, rather than focusing on soda bread and stew, actually spent pages covering the gourmet offerings of the tiny island's much maligned culinary tradition. Perhaps this change is due to a fresh influx of native-born Irish individuals into the U.S. over

the past two decades. As Pete Hamill notes, "Over the past twenty years, more Irish men and women have arrived in the United States than at any time since the 1920's" (qtd. in O'Hanlon, ix). Potentially, the presence of a younger and better-educated diaspora has forced a radical re-evaluation of Irish-American identity by Irish Americans. The change has not gone unnoticed, as The New York Times declared in an article entitled, "The Irish are Ascendant Again" (qtd. in O'Hanlon, 3). This new "ascendancy" in a globalized and digital world, however, raises new questions about the hegemony of any culturally based identity as well as the socio-political gains and losses of a porous conception of the "hyphenate."

Herbert Gans has called this type of cross-cultural mixing and matching "convergence" in his work Popular Culture and High Culture. Gans describes convergence as one of four ways in which cultures morph and develop over a period of time. According to Gans, cultures also evolve through the processes of gentrification, divergence and omnivorousness. Perhaps the recent wave of Irish-American cultural production and its apparent "newness" exemplify Gans' terms collectively in action. Irish-American culture merely has reached a point where it must converge with other cultures, slough off antiquated elements, and look to other traditions for inspiration. This phenomenon, according to this model, though, eventually leads to a globalized "grayness," in which one culture, bears a striking resemblance to

every other culture, and the historically traditional source of identity, difference, becomes nothing more than semantic wordplay. Irish-American culture, therefore, becomes nothing more than an empty label different from all of the other empty labels only by the most superficial differences.

If Gans' approach leads us to a fruitless strategy then perhaps the notion of hybridity may serve as a more useful way to explain the rise in popularity of Irish and Irish-American cultures. Hybridity, in the sense used by Homi Bhabha, can be described as a method of resistance employed by non-mainstream cultures against the "absorption" that can occur in the Gansian model of culture. In place of the convergence that leads to a large, generic, and widely accepted superculture, hybridity provides a "third space" between the mainstream and sub-altern cultures that allows for resistance and new dialogues. By experimenting with cultural identity in this hybridized space, the sub-altern culture has the ability to create new and previously unrecognized cultural products that have the potential to turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of the dominant (Sarder, 120).

Regardless of whether the strategy employed in thinking about a hyphenated identity is Bhabha's model of hybridity or a Gansian cultural omnivorousness both lead ultimately to a discussion of subversion and resistance within diasporic practices. In an effort to build or protect an ethnic community



within the larger context of the United States and its system of free-market capitalism, virtually all efforts in community building run the risk of emphasizing an "us versus them" mentality. As Shane Phelan has observed:

The construction of a positive identity requires a community that supports that identity. Building such a community requires both a withdrawal of support or belief in the values and structures of the prior community or culture and the creation of new values and structures (59).

Obviously some need within the Irish-American community has gone unmet by the primary cultural structures of the U.S. Possibly, the shallow choices of the American consumer wonderland don't supply the comfort of Celtic familial tribalisms. Perhaps, Irish-Americans seek a refuge from the ahistorical wanderings and constant reinventions that define so much of contemporary American life in the imagined securities of an ancient and admired culture.

Yet thinking of hyphenated cultural identity in such terms still seems inadequate specifically as related to Irish-American culture. Indeed, in cultural models that strongly rely on an antagonistic, competitive strategy of identity formation the strong binary definition remains firmly intact. The Irish-American identity as embodied in such public figures as Bill O'Reilly and Pat Buchanan provide fine examples of such a dynamic at work. Us versus them, homeland versus exile, mainstream

versus sub-altern all reinforce a binary structure perhaps unsuited for a digitalized and increasingly globalized world. Is it accurate to say that the Irish-American revelers on Decatur Street during St. Patrick's Day were caving into the pressure to converge their culture with that of the mainstream? Is it accurate to describe Riverdance as a sly example of hybridity in which the producers are creating a space of resistance on stage in which the worlds' cultures are reflected by an Irish mirror? Why does the answer have to be one or the other, and why does the cultural practice of a people have to be reduced to an act of resistance or acceptance? It is the contention of this study that the cultural practices of Irish-Americans today exemplify a post-structuralist both/and construction, and that the old binaries no longer adequately define the dynamic at work in Irish-American identity formation.

A principle binary that historically served as the core of Irish-American identity and its cultural products has been that of diaspora/homeland. This binary provided the source of virtually every major Irish-American cultural product for the past one hundred and fifty years. From the "mother" songs of Chauncey Olcott in the early years of the 20th century to the existence of the St. Patrick's Day parades, this binary has remained central. As a result, Irish-Americans have largely taken their cue from the "auld sod" in matters cultural.

Irish-Americans have looked to the homeland as both a real and imagined place that provides the origins of difference necessary to a cultural identity.

However, Ireland during the past ten years has undergone a remarkable change. The Irish economy has grown to such an extent that it is commonly referred to as the Celtic Tiger. The "brain drain" that had taken so many of Ireland's best and brightest from their homeland and placed them in distant countries has largely subsided. And the image of an elderly farmer leading his horse drawn cart to the local market is practically non-existent, except on post-cards.

Obviously, the shifting political and cultural contexts require new identity formations for Irish-Americans. Looking to the homeland in the manner of a 19th century famine survivor or an economic exile of the 1920s simply no longer remains sustainable. Techno-industry and bistros are quickly replacing the mythic locus of pubs and thatched-roof cottages. With the removal of the "land" as the primary source for Irish-American identity the task of cultural affiliation must seek new inspirations: specifically, to the more fluid act of participation in performances of Irishness. As Ray O'Hanlon has argued, the notion of the Irish as a global culture is not new; however, the notion of Irishness being detached from Ireland is fundamentally different (3). The concepts of "home" and "land"

have been disassociated from each other. Unlike a Great Hunger exile for whom "land" and "home" were synonymous, the millennial generation of Irish-Americans no longer look to "the auld sod" as home or even as an originary source of identity. The idea that the identity of Irish-Americans has potentially become detached from all but the act of performance strikes me as even more radical, and the crux of the problem of investigating contemporary Irish-American cultural identity.

This dissertation, then, looks to the act of performance as a seminal moment in the development of a multileveled and polysemous reading of Irish-American culture. Of course, by opening the binaries and seeking new sources for identity in performance, a new dynamic comes into play and unique situations and conditions are created. For example, the site at Decatur Street becomes considerably less hegemonically celebratory, and the many signs and signifiers of that moment clash and compete not necessarily under the banner of Irishness but rather in an occasionally "noisy" and dissonant fashion. Also, the political strength of a solidly hegemonic identity rooted in a diaspora/exile binary becomes softened in a rivalry with the inherent multiplicity of the performative moment. Additionally, the search for new sources of diasporic identity not necessarily tied to the "Homeland" often leads to new and occasionally contradictory historical representations of Irishness. This

multiplicity of new identities can end up begging the very question of the possibility and desirability of an identity rooted in anything other than the most concrete experiences. And, if we have become in Gans' term, "cultural omnivores," what then of the political power of cultural identity or the sense of affiliation we seek in order to protect us from our fear of our own mortality (to borrow Cornel West's explanation for the need of a cultural identity) (Sarder 126)? Is the new search for identity and its concurrent cultural manifestations nothing more than an attempt on our part to "cover all the angles" or is there something else at work? Perhaps, as Gans suggests, the search for cultural identity comes down to a shared system of aesthetic preferences, and we are left with mere "taste cultures."

Largely influential in my conception of a theoretical *modus operendi* are Joseph Roach's ideas regarding vortices of behavior in a circum-Atlantic world. Rather than interpreting the development of cultures as a product of trans-Atlantic pollination, Roach sees performances and ritualized social behaviors as vortices that collect many influences from throughout the entire Atlantic basin. Thus West Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean or the Gulf of Mexico territories have as much influence on Irish-American culture, in this model, as England. Another significant intellectual influence on my theoretical methodology is that of Terry Eagleton and his intellectual

mentor, Raymond Williams. Both scholars search for processes that lead to investigations of specific moments of historical intersection rather than tracing a causal path to origins and ultimate destinations. In so doing they create a holistic approach to culture that depends more upon the many forces acting upon a cultural representation than the illusory image of a "finished" cultural product. In Irish-American cultural identity, this means an investigation of the recurrence of the Stage Paddy can tell us more about the complex workings of Irish-American identity than any totalizing narrative positioning a metaphysical and ideal Irish-American experience.

Central to the strategy of this work is an understanding that the processes of multiple forces constantly act upon a culture or an identity. By positioning the process of cultural identity rather than a finished cultural product, a core idea of this study emerges; any given moment or cultural representation betrays an intricate matrix of influences simultaneously co-existing. This notion forces certain changes in how a scholar approaches the analysis of an event. Raymond Williams understood this change well when he wrote,

If it is pointed out, in traditional terms, that democracy, industry, and extended communications are all means rather than ends, I reply that this, precisely, is their revolutionary character, and that to realize and accept this requires new ways of thinking and feeling, new conceptions of relationships, which we must try to explore (Williams xiii).

The process of change that Williams describes includes the triumph of process over product. He calls this shift "the long revolution" and central to this change is creative activity. Through creation, Williams breaks free of the Platonic ontological conceptions that have governed so much of the discussion on artistic and cultural representations. Creation consists not of imitation of "reality" but rather the act of making a new reality (8). Williams takes the importance of creative activity even further when he quotes biologist J.Z. Young; "[W]e literally create the world we speak about. [W]hat we see and what we say depends on what we have learned; we ourselves come into the process" (qtd. 17). In other words, there is no external "real" that gives us true facts to be recorded and stored. Instead there exists an ongoing process (change, creative activity) into which we enter when we learn (language, gestures, cultural matters). Creative activity, therefore, is our active, self-conscious entry into the "long revolution." Culture and identity become means for navigating the world's messy existential conundrums not static, a priori categories.

This dissertation thus forwards Williams' performative view of identity through a distinctly Irish-American lens. Williams once wrote, "We create our human world as we have thought of art being created" (Williams 37). The thought of a constructed

world, for many people of any hyphenated culture, remains synonymous with falsity or inauthenticity. For Williams, however, this idea does not mean falsity but, instead, a holistic perspective in which there exist no outsiders, no positions outside of the ongoing process of creation and a self-awareness of this status. The individual develops a way of thinking and being that gets called an identity. This identity comes from observation, participation and learning. It also develops as a result of describing these feelings and thoughts to other individuals. As a result of these descriptions between individuals a network of relationships develops. This process begins, however, with the interaction between the individual and a community's common standards and modes of communication. Thus, the multiple descriptions of experience that compose the networks of relationships and, indeed, all communication systems, including the arts, are literally part of an associative and holistic life process (Williams 38).

The present project intends to explore the network of relationships that rests below the surface of certain Irish-American cultural manifestations. By interrogating the desires, needs, attitudes and interests that comprise the performance of a hyphenated identity, this work hopes to apply a holistic, process-based perspective to Irish-American performances of identity. In choosing such a conceptual framework, I intend to



also explore the associative network of needs and pressures that inform today's Irish-American cultural representations. I have intentionally chosen to follow a more post-structuralist, cultural studies path in order to take up the challenge presented by commercial post-modernism's empty simulacra and traditional monologist's erasures.

Commercial post-modernism, as I will be using the term, embraces many of the traditional issues of academic post-modernism: the validity of historic causality undergoes a rigorous challenge; the persuasive power of images is investigated; and the concepts of pastiche and collage are creatively applied to culture. Commercial post-modernism, however, has a different purpose than academic post-modernism. Whereas scholarly attempts at using post-modernism aim to challenge the totalizing effects of modernism, commercial post-modernism uses post-modern tools as methods of marketing. Commercial post-modernism drops the self-conscious challenge of academic post-modernism and simply embraces the triumph of the empty image in service to the capitalist impulse.

Specifically, I want to examine the issues of contemporary Irish-American identity that are evident in a type of creative action, which I have defined as participatory performances. These performances allow (knowingly or unknowingly) for the observers to actively participate in the slippery game of

identity politics and create a situation in which the producers leave open the discourse to unpredictable voices. The either/or method of cultural identification is forced to open up to other conversations regarding cultural definition.

These participatory performances can also be considered non-traditional or pop culture because of their rejection of the bonds of traditional theatre and the trappings of a "high culture" vocabulary. They are populist in their dynamic and eschew the customary boundaries of the audience/performer binary. Understanding the lack of "objective" distance in these performances locates these events squarely within the realm of Joseph Roach's vortices of behavior, Greil Marcus' secular spectacles, Homi Bhabha's interstices and Raymond Williams' creative activities that form the theoretical backbone of this study. These performative nodes of discourse within Irish-America demonstrate the network of relationships that construct the associative life commonly lumped together as "Irish-American Culture."

It is the contention of this study that Irish-American cultural representations (like all cultural representations) are motivated by the inseparable forces of memory, erasure, and surrogation. As Joseph Roach has so eloquently elaborated, by searching for the relational networks contained within certain Irish-American vortices of behavior, one finds that a tension

develops between a monologicistic, absolutist impulse to create a totalized and essentialized narrative and a circum-Atlantic model of interrelated, dialogistic hybridization. However, by using such terms and concepts as "network of relationships," "associative life," and "interstices," in the analysis of Irish-American cultural representations, this study squares itself soundly with polysemous, circum-Atlantic arguments and logic. This perspective offers a possible alternative space that allows and encourages the navigation between the pitfalls of both monoculturalism's erasures and chauvinism and commercial post-modernism's vacant, eternal present.

In order to accomplish the goals of this dissertation I have divided this work into seven chapters. The first two chapters provide a more fully realized theoretical and historical context. Chapter One details the theoretical genealogy of this study and creates a conceptual methodology applicable to the following chapters. Chapter Two will give a brief history of the Irish in America, the traditional sources of identity, and the resulting cultural manifestations, in order to give the study a temporal context and a sense of the changes that are now underway. Obviously entire books and careers have dealt with these two topics alone. Regardless, without understanding the traditional ways in which the Irish-American community has been represented and conceived of in the past or the philosophic heritage that

informs this mode of cultural analysis, will render any following discussions about Irish-American cultural representations unnecessarily slippery and potentially unrewarding.

The four performance sites that compose the body of this study are: the St. Patrick's Day Parades of New Orleans and Baton Rouge; Flanagan's Wake - an improvisatory theatrical event; the orature of pub performances; and Riverdance. Each of these performances depends upon the active and direct participation of the audience, in one way or another, for their success. The first three performances listed above were also used in this study because all have within them an improvisational "feel," an atmosphere suggesting an unfinished process. Riverdance can not claim such a dynamic. However, in that show's "slickness" I am provided with an excellent, contemporary counter-example of the improvisational openness that defines dialogic modes of identity creation. Additionally, the selection of these four sites was, to a certain degree, arbitrary. For example, had I not been living in South Louisiana while working on this study, I would never have been introduced to the St. Patrick's Day parades of the region or its Mardi Gras culture.

Beyond any arbitrariness or improvisational elements, however, I believe that each of these performance sites have something unique to offer a study of contemporary Irish-American culture and identity. The St. Patrick's Day parades of South

Louisiana offer the opportunity to explore the processes by which traditional perspectives of Irish-American hyphenated identity can be made unfamiliar. The hyphen, in this case, is at the mercy of the polis and must respond to the tensions and pressures exerted by rival traditions. Flanagan's Wake provides this study with an example of the improvisatory process of identity making manifesting itself as an improvisational theatrical event. Resultantly, Flanagan's Wake allows me to explore the traditional stage-Irish stereotypes in an arena wherein those stereotypes call into question their own efficacy. No where else in my research have I found an event quite so explicit in its self-reflexivity. The pub performances allow me to explore how hyphenated identities "educate" future generations in a culture's history. This process stands as unique because the history being transferred is not linear and ordinary but rather imagistic and ambiguous. Finally, Riverdance, supplies this study with an image of Irish-American culture that has reached a truly global audience. This performance also opens up questions regarding the calculated selection of historical remembrances, not out of a need to forget a painful past, but in a bid for a more marketable image.

The four performances could and typically have been read in traditional monologic fashion. Yet all four have a depth and contradictory complexity that ultimately demonstrates the ever

evolving and fluid nature of cultural identity. The hyphenated union between "Irish" and "American" has often been abrasive, rarely mutually consensual, and certainly remains unfinished. In such performances, the hyphen that simultaneously joins and divides the words "Irish" and "American" contains the key to interpreting the loaded and volatile intersections that form Irish-America.

In Chapter Three I will examine the power of the St. Patrick's Day parades of South Louisiana. South Louisiana offers these parades an environment unlike anywhere else in the United States. With its long and proud tradition of parades and carnival the region has done as much to shape the parades and their unique nature as much as the Irish-American producers. This dynamic ultimately affects the parade and its purpose. For instance, the Irish-American community of South Louisiana must negotiate the tension between acceptance and resistance regarding the desire to conform to the format of traditional St. Patrick's Day parades and the cultural power and baggage of that form. Multiple identities are developed, encouraged, and renegotiated during and as a result of these parades and their locations.

The next chapter will explore one of the "ethnic" improvised performances that have become increasingly popular over the past decade. In 1996, a Chicago improvisation troupe brought their entry into this genre to Cleveland, Ohio. The play, entitled

Flanagan's Wake, was conceived by Irish-Americans and originally debuted at the Zeitgeist Theatre Company's home base in Chicago on a St. Patrick's Day weekend. While the original audiences in both Chicago and Cleveland consisted primarily of Irish-Americans other audiences could not necessarily claim that demographic. Yet the piece did contain many stereotypes and employed humor that, had it not been created and performed by Irish Americans, could have been labeled culturally insensitive. This chapter investigates how Flanagan's Wake acts both transgressively and supportively of traditionally held mainstream opinions of Irish-America and how improvisational theatre fosters an inclusive model of cultural identity that allows for "in-jokes," doubleness, and multiple and co-existing identities both in the actors and the audience members.

Chapter Five explores what is perhaps the most effective means of transmitting a cultural identity from one generation to the next: the concept Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls "orature." Within the Irish-American community a tradition of orature still exists, most strongly in the songs and stories told in pubs, during festivals, or on the occasion of a ceilidh. In certain respects, these songs and stories told in pubs and festivals create the most influential body of work in the formation of Irish-American identity. Yet, their ephemeral nature and connectedness to an oral tradition make them the most difficult to chart and examine.

This "smallest unit" of Irish-American identity formation operates on both a personal and generalized level. Chapter Five looks into why this form of orature remains uniquely "Irish" and central to any hyphenated identity formation, especially in an era pervaded with digital technologies.

Chapter Six concludes the body of this dissertation and examines one of the more recent variants of Irish-American cultural performance: Riverdance. With its mix of New Age mysticism, amped-up, Celtic inspired music, and sheer spectacle, Riverdance has delivered its brand of Irishness to millions of Irish and non-Irish alike. In fact, with the possible exception of the annual St. Patrick's Day parades held around the world, Riverdance may be the single largest and most visible performance of Irish culture extant today. In Chapter Six, I will explore the purpose or need Riverdance fulfills in the Irish-American community and what cost to historical memory the slick performance exacts. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I put forward my summation and concluding remarks.

Much of the research for this dissertation comes from directly experiencing and documenting the performances that are the focus of this study. In order to do so I have participated in or attended all of the events that stand at the core of this work. In using such a method for gathering data, I realize that I am placing myself "inside" a subject I am supposed to be



considering from "without." However, as Dwight Conquergood has so persuasively argued in his article "Performance Theory, Hmong Shamans, and Cultural Politics," attendance and participation in performative acts allows the researcher an access and understanding simply not possible through other methodological means. Writing specifically about Hmong shamans, Conquergood observes,

they are our contemporaries, and their performances stretch and challenge more than they romantically confirm received notions about theatre and aesthetics or about the boundaries between performances and politics (42).

Conquergood's insight can, I believe, act as a justification for such research methods in the case of Irish-American identity as well. Through my participation and attendance in the events that create the body of this study, I hoped to avoid the trap of presenting Irish-American culture and identity in a hierarchically subservient fashion or as an essentialist object waiting to be reified through the scholar's "objective" lens.

For the purposes of this study, I approached my participation/attendance in these performances with a type of "double-vision." On the one hand, I engaged these performances as an Irish-American taking part in the performative acts that help define the identity of "Irish-American." In the case of my participation in Flanagan's Wake, much of the research had to be done *ex post facto* as I appeared in that show years before I had

even conceived the present study. As such, my participation in that play was undertaken fully as a professional improvisational actor. Simultaneously, I approached the four performances of this study with an eye to finding specific moments of cultural intersection, confluence, remembrance, and erasure. By using such a process, I do not feel as though I merely sought out supporting material for specific preset answers. Rather, I approached my attendance/participation in these events with the idea of applying specific theories and analytical methods to four sites rich with interpretive possibilities and rewarding insights into the workings of contemporary Irish-American identity.

Thanks to the generous assistance of the Celtic Society of Louisiana, I was able to march in both the Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day parades of 2001, as well as sit in on the planning meetings of both events. Additionally, in the summer of 1996, I was an original cast member of the Cleveland production of Flanagan's Wake. My familiarity with Riverdance comes from seeing the show on video in its various incarnations, live on stage, and from the word of mouth generated by its debut in Dublin while I was visiting that city. In a supreme sacrifice to the scholarly pursuit of knowledge, research for the chapter on orature largely was done by visiting pubs and Irish music festivals.

In developing a strategy for thinking about identity I am indebted to the works of Homi Bhabha, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, and Joseph Roach. Bhabha's The Location of Culture and Eagleton's The Idea of Culture were of particular use. The concept of performance that I employ also was developed from my readings of Williams and Roach, as well as Richard Schechner. Roach's Cities of the Dead very much stands out as one of the major theoretical works supporting my attempts at analysis. Greil Marcus' Lipstick Traces also played a central role in my use of the term "performance." The research on Irish-American history has been culled from many different sources. A few works stand out as particularly helpful and influential: Roy O'Hanlon's excellent survey of contemporary emigrants, The New Irish-Americans; the essays collected in Being Irish; and Thomas Keneally's exhaustive examination of 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish exile, The Great Shame.

A far less tangible type of research falls a bit outside the realm of traditional scholarship but nevertheless offers as influential a source as any of the texts or performances I have studied. Growing up as a third generation, Irish-American Catholic in a family that cherished its heritage shaped me in ways I have still yet to discover. Personally, I still vividly recall attending my parish summer festival during my youth and being brought to the music tent to listen to The Irish Brigade, a

local traditional Irish band. The words to songs such as "The Moonshiner" and "Give Ireland Back to the Irish" quickly became part of the soundtrack of my youth. In between songs, as the musicians changed instruments, one of the band members would tell a story in order to pass the time. These memories are a substantial part of my personal cultural genealogy.

The third category (perhaps it should be called personal interests) must also contain my interest in seeking out the places in the "everyday" where performance and theatricality manifest themselves. I cannot claim that para-theatrical performative sites have also held such a fascination for me. However, my stay in Louisiana has introduced me to a culture proud of the "theatre of everyday life" found on its streets and in its fairgrounds. The examples of performances such as Mardi Gras and "festival season," as well as the work of my faculty mentors, led me to investigate more deeply the rich and untapped para-theatrical performances that have acted so influentially upon myself.

To conclude, this dissertation exists in a millennial America containing a very different cultural matrix for Irish-Americans: one in which the very term "Irish-American" has become problematized. With many Irish-Americans actually three or four generations removed from the land of their ancestry (re)claiming the hyphen has become a matter not of genetics or

genealogy but rather of performance. By participating in performances of "Irishness," contemporary Irish-Americans claim and shape a multiplicity of identities open to re-definition even as the performance event transpires. Moreover, Irish-American identities shaped in this manner become poly-vocal and dialogistic entities more open to "non-Irish" influences and more available to "non-Irish" individuals. This study hopes to examine four such sites of performance and in what ways contemporary Irish-American identities are being shaped by (and are shaping) these events. Ultimately my goal with this study is not to give the definitive answer on the subject of Irish-American culture and its many identities. Assuming to give **the** answer seems to fall into the trap of the "only interpretation." Rather, the significance of this study appears to me to be the application of contemporary theory to an Irish-American culture undergoing a great deal of change. As was earlier noted, many in the realm of Irish Studies have chosen to focus their energies to examining the events of the 19th century and its legacy. And while some of this research utilizes contemporary theories, very few studies apply that theory to contemporary events and cultural manifestations. By looking at the current status of the Irish-American community, and by choosing sites outside of New York City or Boston, this study will examine forgotten or ignored sites.

Furthermore, the analytical method used in this dissertation can be applied beyond Irish-American identity. The theories employed in creating a fluid, polysemous, dialogic, and performative model of identity creation could just have easily been applied to other hyphenated identities in the U.S. While the performances and loci may change, this study contends that all hyphenated identities undergo a similar process as the one observed within the identity performances of Irish-America. Whether the culture being studied is Italian-American, Welsh-American, or African-American, dialogistic, performative models of identity formation allow for a greater understanding of the hybridized nature of identity and the creolized constructions of the hyphenate in contemporary American culture.

In addition to my attempts at fashioning a more dialogic way to read hyphenated identities' cultural performances, the work of this dissertation places a strong demand on performance. As has been noted, theatrical activity and performance have often been relegated to a secondary or tangential status by the more monologic strategies used in understanding identity. Hopefully by emphasizing the central role of performance and theatrical activity, this study will also offer a model by which certain biases against the idea of performance can be surmounted.

This study provides the opportunity to bridge the gap between culture as conceived in the abstract world of theory, and

culture in its most tangible manifestations. This demands, on my part, a negotiation of the gap between metaphysics and phenomenism, as well as between flux and becoming, by applying a theory of identity and culture to consequential and actual events. Much of the theory that I have reviewed to date positions the theory and the abstract over the material world. But as Shane Phelan notes, this dynamic has its root in "the search for a meaning that transcends the phenomenal world - the quest for metaphysics" (60). She goes on to state that the first move by any metaphysical approach is to posit an ideal free from the messy reality of flux and, hence, deny "the claims of the world" (60). By examining the participatory performance events of a specific culture, I can possibly provide an escape from this nihilistic tradition by forcing the theory to work with the body in an exploration of many-sided, poly-vocal cultural practices.

## **A SURVEY OF THE THEORIES**

In the work of the theorists who inform the language of this study, performance assumes a primary role. By prioritizing performance these scholars move from a dualistic and oppositional way of seeing and reading cultures to a more fluid and porous method. As a result, the definition of performance may have to be expanded in order to account for its primacy. Understanding performance simply as an activity that takes place in the theatre or as a form of playful pretending and imagination certainly would be inadequate for use in a dialogistic model of identity formation. Performance must be understood as a creative act on par with speaking or writing. Certainly in Western culture there exists a bias against all things performative which are often viewed as false or untrustworthy. But in discussing performance, we must shift our perceptions to consider it as a form of communication, and if we take Raymond Williams' definition of communication as "the transmission of valued experience" then performance ceases to be a code name for lying or pretending and becomes a valid method of cultural interchange (26).

By prioritizing the role of performance a situation develops wherein a simple claim to Irish "blood" loses much of its meaning and usefulness in the formation of an Irish-American identity. Blindly accepting an assumed genetic ethnic coding, while unquestioningly participating in Irish-American cultural spectacles, simply reinforces a monologicistic sensibility



regarding the "nature" of identity. This study hopes to provide a method of investigation that avoids such a trap and employs instead a materialist model that always assumes that Irish-American identity is constructed and multi-vocal at its very core, that the spectacles and performance events of Irish-America contain the traces of its own convoluted histories, and that by exposing the historic-performative strategies employed within the Irish-American culture a clearer picture of the processes of identity formation can be discerned.

Historically, Irish-American identity has been understood through a modernist lens that favors 19<sup>th</sup> century, either/or binaries. The immigrant or immigrant's child could either be an assimilated American or an Irishman/woman. Attempting to meld the two identities or understand cultural identification in a more Creolized or plural fashion often ended in ostracism from both groups. Considering the turbulent history of Irish-America and the success Irish-Americans have achieved through employing methods rooted in a monologicistic and undisrupted narrative, the desire to maintain such a strategy seems more than justifiable.

However, a method of cultural identification grounded in monologism and 19<sup>th</sup> century modernism also contains certain problems and inadequacies, particularly in a 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized culture. Certain historical erasures must be enacted in order for the traditional method of Irish-American identity-making to operate successfully. Additionally, the

insulated "us vs. them" mentality bred by monologicistic strategies carries with it a destructive energy most frequently manifested as bigotry and intolerance. This study offers a critique of such thinking and seeks to find a post-monologicistic method of conceiving cultural identity. Rooted in the thinking and methods of Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Joseph Roach, Homi Bhabha and Greil Marcus, this dissertation presents a mode of thinking about hyphenated cultures that prioritizes performance and addresses the complexities of the pluralized manner in which a contemporary cultural identity functions. This chapter, thus, provides a theoretical "engine" that will power the arguments of this study through the performances at its core.

Understanding identity in dialogistic and fluid terms begins with post-modernism's critique of narrativity and historicity. If one understands post-modernism as an attack on the Enlightenment project, then the destruction of all totalizing and unified narratives of progressive (in the Hegelian sense) history must be shown as a necessary result. This disruption of Narrative, though, proves the death-knell of a traditionally conceived identity, especially such a diasporically-rooted one as that claimed by many Irish-Americans. By negating the primary position of totalizing narratives (narrative history included), the common source for most identities must also be re-examined. If the individual at one time sought identification and reification through birth into a cultural narrative or through

the intersection of political geography and personal history, the effects of the post-modern critique has disabled those sources or at the very least made them suspect and potentially dangerous.

Such a monologic use of history had been the primary source for the modernist conception of individuality and self-hood, the very notion of "self" also becomes complicated by the post-modern project. We begin to see that post-modernism's attack on totalizing narratives has its roots in a distrust of any kind of Grand Unity or Absolute Telos. Therefore, a cohesive self, rooted in an identity of a singular and complete nature, must be conceived of as a deception in the post-modern context.

However, identity still plays a vital role within post-modern thought. The solitary, totalized, Enlightenment "I" that has come under question in post-modernism has become multiplied and divided. The question "Who am I?" shifts to "Who am I at this moment within this context?". Post-modernism, therefore, does not discount the existence of Irish-American cultural identities, but rather the existence of one, solid, absolute identity which fits neatly into another, more solid, larger narrative. Post-modernism's problem with identity is not with identity *per se* but rather with the Romanticist and Enlightenment conceptions of identity and the self. The porous self replaces the knowable and unchanging self, and the concept of identity ceases to be understood as a fixed entity and must be re-imagined as a constructed, invented entity within a plurality of

identities, both on a social level and a personal level. Here, one of the great complexities of post-modern identity reveals itself. Post-modernism does not dissolve "discreet identities" so much as multiply them beyond count (Eagleton 15). Self-knowledge and self-identity, therefore, become inextricably linked with this notion of plurality and its cousin hybridity.

Hybridity as well introduces new wrinkles into the post-modern identity game. As Terry Eagleton observes, "Strictly speaking one can only hybridize a culture which is pure" (15). But the idea of a pure culture or, to transpose Eagleton's idea to the Irish-American issues at the core of this study, a pure identity is impossible in a post-modern ethos. Edward Said notes, however, that no culture is ever truly pure and is, in fact, made up of many different influences and interactions. Said's insight leaves us to wonder about the actual radicality of the hybridized and plural conception of identity (Eagleton 15). What does seem truly radical in the post-modern conception of identity is that identity has been freed from essentialist origins and re-seeded in a formalistic pluralism in which the act of creating a self-identity becomes a creative act, performed with a sense of reflexivity and awareness. In this sense, post-modernism rejects the "blood-lines" that had at one time defined traditional identity in favor of a liberating doubleness and a multiplicity of equally valued choices.

I am reminded of Benedict Anderson's discussion of "imagined communities," in his book of the same name. In that study, Anderson defines community as a deep horizontal comradeship distinguished not by a falsity/genuineness binary but by the style in which the communities are imagined (6). This definition strikes me as singularly important in understanding Irish-American identity in a post-modern world. Identity still can find its source in community as defined above. But the removal of the falsity/genuineness polarity causes the violence of totalizing narratives and notions of "blood" transmission to be largely neutered. The way or style in which the Irish-American community imagines itself and the way or style in which an Irish-American individual imagines him or herself takes on a sort of personal responsibility. Following the constructive paths of identity then becomes a matter of some importance, first of all because it can be constructed and, secondly, because this construction is always ongoing. Identity never becomes fixed in this world-view; rather identity must be considered a process of always becoming. The creole or the actor becomes a role model in this conception, and the pureblooded noble reveals itself to be a laughable antique, fit only for sentimentalist lapses into nostalgia. Competing identities synchronically exist in an act of oppositional definition that forever continues toward no other end than its own means.

The notion of agency complicates matters further. The above model of Escher-like identity re-creation seems to imply an agency on the part of the self. The self, however, is not autonomous, for that would tacitly support a totalized view of the self and its identity. The self and its concurrent identities are located within the context of a society which is forever applying pressure in an attempt to keep alive the politically efficacious idea of a unified self actively positioned within the march of history. Pluralistic identities, therefore, become both a political resistance against the mainstream power discourse and, also, a product of the very discourses that one is attempting to subvert. Ironic detachment, at times, seems to be the only answer to this condition. On the other hand, by at least acknowledging the absurd condition of identity in this context, one may be able to move beyond the absurdity and seek the unity (regardless of its illusionistic properties) that an identity affords and the potential for political resistance that exists within the rejection of absolutes and grand narratives and the embracing of a formalized plurality.

For the Irish-American individual, this means a both/and dynamic in regard to identity; culture receives prioritization. Such a dynamic rises directly from the fragmentation inherent in contemporary theorists' attempts at understanding pluralized identity. The ramifications for cultural performances of

identity are weighty and complex. As Christopher Murray observes, "The more problematic and fragmented identity becomes the greater the need for imagery of wholeness" (246). "Images of wholeness" may seem a fairly innocent phrase; however, the creation and reception of such images resonate potentially in ways that reinforce monologicistic grand narratives. Riverdance engages in such a tactic when, in Act II, the performance reinforces the notion of a happy, smooth, and playful assimilation of Irish immigrants into the "melting pot" of U.S. life. Alternatively, the image of wholeness presented by Riverdance successfully brings together a number of people under the cultural banner "Irish-American" who otherwise would have remained fractured and solitary. Thus, Riverdance creates and partly fulfills a need for an image of cultural wholeness and unity: an image with political and social capital. Nevertheless, such an image remains constructed and, partly, illusory.

That identity is produced, meaning that it is created or assembled, should be evident. In what manner an identity is constructed seems to be a much trickier issue. An appeal to psychology seems one way to begin speaking of the assembling of identities. It would seem that in the individual there is a need for a sense of belonging and group identification. Modern psychology has exerted a great deal of energy in trying to prove and normalize such processes. A conflict with post-modern thought has already become apparent, however. These notions of

individuation and belonging are as rooted in a psychological grand narrative as any modernist theory. They also provide a final purpose towards which all life should move. The above motivations, then, within the context of post-modernism are nothing other than later day manifestations of Hegel's notion of history. In spite of such criticism, the idea of belonging is obviously not without validity. If these processes are viewed as exactly that, processes rather than end products, born out of a specific cultural language, then we may be able to reclaim belonging and individuation as a motivation for the production of identity.

As the noted Irish Studies scholar Charles Fanning observes, "Ethnic identity is first of all a family affair; it grows from customs and attitudes, stated and unstated that are grounded in family life" (328). For Fanning, there is no reason to assume that the family that he mentions in the above quote must be taken to literally mean a biological family. The point seems to be that "customs and attitudes" (i.e. the language of identity) are something that can be transmitted from generation to generation based not on a genetic pre-disposition, blood memory, or even a cultural zeitgeist but rather through the common and "universal" act of inter-personal interaction.

The concept of interaction is not as innocent as it may seem. The language needed for building an identity may be transmitted through a family (traditional or non-traditional),



but this leaves the impression that the individual may be autonomous in his/her choices of interaction and, therefore, in identity construction. Within the post-modern context, however, autonomy and free will are problematic concepts. There are always cultural, societal, commercial and political forces simultaneously at work on the individual.

Terry Eagleton's idea of culture seems particularly relevant regarding the tension between "autonomous" identity formation and external societal forces. Eagleton argues that nature is an external force separate from human consciousness and language, which then enacts its power on the human subject. Through this interaction between an indifferent nature and the human subject comes culture. Culture then, a product of nature and humanity, turns itself on nature and re-forms or re-creates nature through language. Or as Eagleton concisely states it, "Nature produces culture which changes nature" (Idea 3).

Much the same occurs with identity. We are placed into a context that largely controls us. Through our interaction with this context or environment a certain awareness is born, after which we re-configure the original context in light of the experience and the tropes we have inherited through the original interaction. Resultantly, we have choice and non-choice in every aspect of our identity. The either/or binary conception of identity is obliterated by a simultaneous presence/absence in every one of our identity (non)choices. Identity, therefore, in

the post-structuralist context is produced entirely through *la langue*.

A rather lengthy but prescient quote from novelist William Kennedy will help introduce what may be unanswerable in a strictly post-structuralist conception of identity:

I believe that I can't be anything other than Irish American. I know there's a division here, and a good many Irish Americans believe they are merely American. They've lost touch with anything that smacks of Irishness as we used to know it. That's all right. But I think if they set out to discover themselves, to wonder about why they are what they are, then they'll run into a psychological inheritance that's even more than psychological. That may also be genetic, or biopscho-genetic, who the hell knows what you call it? But there's just something in us that survives and that's the result of being Irish, whether from the North or South, whether Catholic or Protestant, some element of life, of consciousness, that is different from being Hispanic, or Oriental, or WASP. These traits endure (qtd. in Fanning, 312).

This unspoken and felt conception of identity, rooted not in a paradigmatic experience but rather in a sensed difference or perception, can not be accepted by post-structuralist thought as anything other than illusory. And although post-modern philosophers would probably dismiss this notion as sentimentalist nostalgia, to do so strikes me as foolish and as potentially dangerous as believing blindly in totalizing narratives. Post-modern thought does not seem to treat "felt" ontologies in any way as valid in the conception of identity. Concerned as it is with language and power within a cultural context, the idea that

one may have an experience or a feeling of "rightness" about an identity or a culture that transcends the constructivist boundaries of language has no place in post-modernism. This denial of phenomenological experience or cultural metaphysics seems to me as big an assumption on the part of post-modern thinkers as the belief in *a priori* truths was to the modernist philosophers.

Hyphenated identities, like Irish-American culture, therefore, face a Scylla-and-Charybdis-like situation. Irish-American culture, having historically created itself through 19<sup>th</sup> century, modernist strategies, cannot depend upon the traditional notions of ultimate sources and absolute origins as they did before. However, to fully embrace post-structuralist fluidity seems, at least superficially, as a denial of the strength derived from a "felt" tribalism and a rejection of the pride a group derives from its historical triumphs. An event as deceptively simple as going to the local pub to hear a band play Irish trad becomes a site full of doubt, interrogation, and cultural uncertainty, while remaining an equally strong reinforcement of an image of cultural wholeness.

For all of the rhetoric concerning the (non)existence of difference and the linguistic nature of identity within the post-structuralist debate, it seems that contemporary thinkers are now more concerned with identity than perhaps at any other philosophical moment. By declaring that identity is not an

essentialist creation or a golden, untouchable absolute, post-modernism shook off the bonds of the Enlightenment teleology. But by arguing that identity does not exist outside of the individual's interactions with language, these same thinkers have shaken loose the foundations for the fundamental philosophical question, "Who am I?".

The ramifications for this shift are, understandably, monumental. Historically that question, ("Who am I?") could be solved with an answer steeped in gender, race, ethnicity or nationalism. "I am an American" or "I am black" or "I am an Irish-American." But each one of those categories (race, ethnicity, and nation) depend upon a totalizing narrative to one degree or another and therefore are problematized as sources for identity. These categories turn out to be arbitrary genres, potentially real in their affects/effects but deceptive in their basis. These divisions are products manufactured by a language beyond the control of any one individual. By accepting the arbitrary nature of such categories, one finds that membership in these categories also becomes, to a certain degree, arbitrated. The flow of tropes and customs between previously segregated divisions opens up to such a point that the more chauvinistic aspects of difference are forced into non-existence. The resistance to racial, ethnic or nationalistic based identities is also the resistance to the dangers of a totalizing narrative and the trap of singular identification.

Many different philosophers and critics have responded to this idea in many different ways. Baudrillard is occasionally, mistakenly, regarded as a founding father to post-modernism's deeper excesses. Baudrillard actually despises what post-modern tenets have done to the world. He feels we have fallen victim to the belief that the "I" and the rest of the imagistic world is not real, that nothing but what has been reproduced on television or film is real. He also writes critically of the replacement of otherness with false sameness. Left in the place of otherness, a mere illusionistic difference exists. Baudrillard, however, does not give us a method of correcting what he imagines to be the wrongs of post-modernism. The closest he comes to offering a solution or a method of resistance is in the following: "Against the perfection of the system, hatred is a last vital reaction" (Revenge 147). While hatred may be an understandable response to the excesses and circular traps of late-capitalism's simulacra, it seems a poor basis for a new system and absolutely destructive in the game of identity formation.

Benedict Anderson seems to have a more moderate approach to the issue of identity formation in a post-modern world. With his idea of imagined communities, Anderson allows room for both the necessity of identity and the arbitrariness of its creation. Heavily indebted to the Foucauldian concept of power discourses, Anderson suggests that identity shaping is neither good nor bad. Rather, identity/community building is simply another way in

which to enter into the discourses of power that are neither good nor bad but the basis for cultural movement and history. In this conception, identity becomes another way of expressing a will to power. Identity may be based on arbitrary groupings defined by shared values and cultural aesthetics, but the unity of the imagined community allows for a greater control of the discourse and of the community's representations. The individual seeking identity enters into the group in a manner not wholly unlike the Hobbsian social contract.

Not unlike Baudrillard, Terry Eagleton has demonstrated a deep concern and understanding regarding the interweaving relationship between modern culture, identity, and the effects of late capitalism. According to Eagleton, modern Western civilization's earliest ideas regarding the role of culture focused on culture as a tool of social critique. Culture as critique offered an idealized world that could be placed next to the corrupt, messy, and "real" one (Idea 3). From this idealized Culture, individuals gained their sense of community and identity and strove to develop systems that would bring them closer to this idealization. Culture, in this sense, could still be considered a construct, but it was a construct that existed in a space outside of day-to-day life; it functioned on a pseudo-Platonic Ideal.

As a cultural materialist, Eagleton sees the impact of late-stage capitalism as a primary force behind the development of

what is usually called "post-modernism." The developments of post-modernism have crippled some of the most vital and positive aspects of these earlier ideas of culture. For one, localized peculiarities, which Eagleton considers to be porous and open-ended, are turned into the basis for post-modern conceptions of identity. This would be bad enough by itself but in so doing these localized peculiarities, as a result of their openness, are not really all that local or peculiar. Rather they are much more common than one might care to admit, particularly in the globalized world of mass media. Advertisers and marketers, with the complicitous help of post-modernism, have seized upon "the accidental particulars of existence" and converted them into the bearers of necessity (Idea 55). This, in turn, results in the creation of illusionistic differences between faux-cultures simply for the purpose of political pandering or a greater market share.

Eagleton argues that culture and identity, in actuality, operate on a much more complex and fundamental level. Culture and identity are part of a basic human impulse, that of becoming. This process of becoming gets metaphorically hog-tied by the niche-making tribalism described above. In order to better understand and evaluate cultures and identities one needs to develop a comprehension that cultures rarely work on dialectic opposites because these opposites are actually in service of one another (Idea 82). This view creates a both/and approach to

examining cultures and identities and strives to eliminate the divisive aspects of the "us versus them" mentality found in the cult of localized peculiarities.

Additionally, Eagleton hopes to provide some resistance to the "eternal present" created by commercial post-modernism. A type of historical amnesia, the "eternal present" erases the complexities of the processes that go into making a culture. In Eagleton's view, the four primary forces that forge a culture are: civility, identity, commerce, and opposition. In the eternal present, these forces are erased so that all that remains are the fetishistic empty images of a culture ready for mass consumption.

Culture, then, is a force acting upon and acted upon by individuals seeking self-hood and belonging. Such a definition makes the search for an identity (hyphenate or otherwise) part of the basic behaviors by which we define ourselves as human. The search for an Irish-American identity becomes part of a larger search that all of us are, in one way or another, a part of. Furthermore, understanding culture and identity in this manner forces scholars to abandon absolutist and monologic attempts of definition and analysis in favor of dialogistic models which have room for a "both/and" understanding of a process engaged in by everyone.

Eagleton's intellectual mentor, Raymond Williams, defines ecology as "the study of the interrelation of elements in a



living system." Eagleton goes on to note that this definition bears a close resemblance to Williams' own description of culture (Idea 134). What greatly worries Eagleton is that most contemporary cultural representations are trying to hide the very interrelations and forces that brought them into existence. By erasing the interrelations and networks of forces that make up a cultural representation, an eternal present takes its place. This eternal present is in the service of an unchecked cosmopolitan commercialism that has as its goal the emptying of history's signs for the purpose of easier and wider consumer consumption. Through the critical act, the restoration of these interrelations to the foreground of cultural representations and identity could begin to occur and the empty and eternal present that marks insinuating post-modern commercialism can be challenged.

A move toward awareness in regard to the network of forces underlying Irish-American culture would be a truly radical shift. As historian Christopher Murray notes in his 1997 survey of Irish drama, "it is probably only in metropolitan centres abroad (among diaspora) that the metaphysical Ireland, the *patria* claiming urgent allegiance, has a claim now" (246). Such a move would also reflect one of the major preoccupations of contemporary Irish dramatists. Which is not to say that Irish-America should simply follow devotedly the cultural moves of Ireland. A basic principle of this study is that Irish-American culture can and

should be considered on its own terms, through its own history, and as an unique entity. However, this study also contends that such status can not be fully achieved until a reflexive awareness of the interrelations of history, performance, and desire are confronted. In other words, Irish-American culture, like any hyphenated identity, must become aware of its basic impurity.

A vital aspect of a post-structuralist reading of Irish-American culture is understanding that cultural identities or narratives are never "pure." As Homi Bhabha notes, "the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood" (5). He calls this process of death and erasure, "the psychosis of patriotic fervor." In place of such essentialized cultures Bhabha, echoing Williams, would like to see a model of participatory cultures. In fact, this concept of culture as participatory, not absolute, makes up the actual dynamic at work in culture and identity building. The perverse and unnatural route is actually the essentializing one. To view culture and identity as participatory requires the disintegration of essences and absolutes and an embracing of confusion. But unlike the message inherent in essentializing and "pure" narratives of culture, the participatory, hybridized model reminds us that there is no shame in being confused.

However, narratives of cultural identity have chiefly been created upon absolutist and hierarchical models. Particularly in the case of ethnic "hyphenates," a cultural collective was encouraged to sublimate one (or a set) of identities for the language and gestures of the dominant group. The choice was made primarily because of the political capital gained from such action. But identities rarely behave so smoothly and as much was lost as was gained. Additionally, to say that these identity and cultural choices were just that, choices, ignores the coercion and ambiguity that also played a part in how a culture's story interacted with larger and more influential narratives. The analysis of a culture, in light of the above, can no longer be examined as a simple dialectic process constantly moving towards a finished product or an ultimate telos.

Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity provides a model that avoids many of the traps of essentializing processes. Hybridity assumes a fixed identity; however, this fixity cannot be considered permanent. Rather, "fixed" means fixed for a moment, ready to be changed. Between fixed identities there exist interstitial passages, overlaps of "domains of difference," that allow for the possibility of communication between cultures without the burden of imposed hierarchies (Bhabha 4). The interstices not only exist as a method of communication, but they are the very places in which "nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha 2). Through these

interstitial interactions, an individual or a culture develops an estranged sense of relocation. This "condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" creates a feeling, according to Bhabha, of unhomeliness (9). This notion of unhomeliness might best be described as a feeling of confusion or displacement linked directly to the blurring of the traditional boundaries of culture and identity: the private and public realms or the borders between the home and the world. But it is exactly this feeling of unhomeliness that leads to the depth and richness of the interstices and makes them such excellent locations for studying and examining the cultural representations of a "hyphenate" culture such as the Irish-Americans.

The interstices, while ubiquitous, may best be seen in acts of creative imagination; which Raymond Williams defines as "the capacity to find and organize new descriptions of experience" (26). The act of creative imagination *par excellence* regarding cultural identity is performance. These performative and reconstructed acts of identity formation and cultural composition become legitimated through speech and action written in the public sphere. Joseph Roach calls these performances "vortices of behavior." Roach describes the behavioral vortex as a combination of built environment and performative habit that simultaneously reproduces cultural transmissions and displaces them (Cities 85). The vortices of behavior inhabit and provide a ludic space in which commerce, entertainment, politics, law,

identity construction and tradition negotiate and engage in an improvisatory dance for primacy and for the public's attention. Through these behavioral vortices, difference is constructed, historical memory and forgetting play out their unique roles, and a culture's identity and stories are forged.

For Roach, attempts at discovering "descriptions of experience" are found in the vortices of behavior that make up circum-Atlantic cultures. Bhabha finds the metaphor of the "Third Space" helpful in approaching the import of performance. "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively," according to Bhabha. The location of these engagements is the aforementioned Third Space, neither the "You" or "I" positions, but the general conditions of language in which the specific implications of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy play out. In Bhabha's own words, "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (37).

To apply the above language to Irish-American culture allows one to declare (however contradictorily) that there is and there is not such a thing as an Irish-American identity. The identity can be said to exist because we can see and participate in

parades and ceildhes and dance performances. This identity, simultaneously, does not exist because every time we see a performance it has changed yet again or has been reimagined and reinvented. Constant reinvention or reification (necessary to any identity) betrays the non-existence of a solid monolithic and absolute identity. There is a presence and absence in every act of identity formation and every cultural utterance within the Third Space. Each act of performance is only here once and contains the re-imagining power to renew and create, for the first time, an identity. For this same reason, each performance is utterly meaningless, because it will be usurped or surrogated upon the occurrence of the next performance. In a nod to Milan Kundera, we have the unbearable lightness of identity and cultural formations. Performance, therefore, carries within it the catalytic energy to forge an identity in the public eye because of its "lightness" and constant re-invention.

Richard Schechner, like Roach and Williams, also notes the increasingly important role performance and creative activity must play in the act of cultural identity formation. As Schechner defines it, performance is "an active situation, a continuous turbulent process of transformation" (142). The process of transformation does not stop nor could it if one wanted it to. This self-invention and eternal becoming cannot be considered good or bad but rather the natural state in which individuals and cultures operate. In Schechner's model, we

return to something akin to Eagleton's "nature-culture-nature" cycle.

The theorists mentioned throughout this chapter not only foreground performance in the creation of identity and culture. Equally situated in their work is a desire to find an alternative to the monologicistic erasures that inform so many traditional conceptions of hyphenated identities. Roach, like Bhabha and his notion of cultural hybridity and Williams and his theories of creative activity, actively seeks to avoid the violence of creating an essentialized cultural narrative. In fact, Roach's mission redresses the excesses of just such activities. To achieve this goal, Roach encourages his readers to envision a new direction of cultural transmission in America. Rather than the linear and normalizing processes commonly called trans-Atlantic culture, Roach offers a view rooted in circum-Atlantic models. This shift is a significant one if for no other reason than it forces us to question the normalizing processes that posit Anglo-Saxon Christian narratives as superior to all other culture's narratives in the United States. As Roach has written, "normality does not happen by accident. It thrives on exposure (and construction) through extraordinary performances" (213).

Irish-American cultural performances are sites rife with extraordinary performances of normalization. Glancing at the books displayed by bookstores in March reveals scores of works with titles such as, "How To Tell If You Are 100%

Irish-American." The parades of March 17 in New York City or Boston remind the public that "100% Irish-American" means Catholic, drunk, and heterosexual. Pubs reinforce and invest the Irish-American trope of happy, singing Paddy in the eyes of Irish-Americans and non-Irish-Americans alike. Such sites also remind observers that Irish-Americans are still newcomers to the white Anglo-Saxon Christian hegemony and are still, partly, the "barbarians at the gate." However, all of these sites also contain traces of the elements and forces that have been erased or submerged from their smooth surfaces. By recognizing such sites as constructed performances, the normalization process that unfairly limits Irish-American definitions of itself can be directly addressed.

Taken as a whole, the above theories place a great deal of import upon the "extraordinary performances" of cultural normalization. Analyzing and understanding the polysemous power of such events therefore offers a valuable insight into a culture. In his 1989 book, Lipstick Traces, Greil Marcus offers just such a model of analysis and scholarship. Marcus takes his title from a 1950's pop song lyric, "lipstick traces on a cigarette." The traces of which Marcus writes are the remnants of performances and ideas that, for whatever reason, refuse to be erased or absorbed comfortably into larger systems of discourse. The performance or historical event (if indeed these things are separate) leaves a mark not unlike the cosmetic remnants left



behind on a cigarette after it's been smoked. As for critics and historians, these traces are all that we have left in our pursuit of knowing or understanding.

The role of ancestry in the culture making process is a curious and ambiguous issue, and Marcus understands this:

The question of ancestry in culture is spurious. Every new manifestation in culture rewrites the past, changes old maudits into new heroes, old heroes into those who should have never been born. New actors scavenge the past for ancestors, because ancestry is legitimacy and novelty is doubt - but in all times forgotten actors emerge from the past not as ancestors but as familiars (21).

The past, Marcus recognizes, can be used to legitimize and normalize the ideologies of the present. This notion can hardly be considered anything new; many have written extensively on how the past creates the present and, in turn, the present re-imagines the past.

A prime location in which ancestors become familiars is the spectacle. Spectacle, for Marcus, is "capital accumulated until it becomes an image" (99). By capital, I understand Marcus to mean influence, and not merely financial assets. Within a given society's spectacles are found the traces of previous spectacles' ideologies, histories and knowledge. These traces may bear little resemblance to their previous incarnations and, in fact, may have been appropriated with little or no care for their past contexts. But they are present all the same. As a result, an astute observer of a cultural spectacle may feel overwhelmed by a

feeling of social glossolalia, or as Don DeLillo describes it, "white noise." In Marcus' work, one intuitively more than just a small sense of Jean Baudrillard's description of the simulacra. One also senses a certain desperation on Marcus' part that such spectacles are irresistible regardless of the individual's agency.

The implications of Marcus' notion of the spectacle eventually leads us to realize that passivity and apathy to the spectacle's ideological and normative power are the very things that allow it to go unchecked. The feeling of social glossolalia eventually wears us down, and the surface reality that so concerns Baudrillard, Eagleton and many others becomes accepted as the only reality. The twin forces of critical examination and participation, however, provide a disruption in the hegemony of the spectacle and this discontinuance in the operative smoothness of a given cultural representation allows one to peek at the psychogeography of an event. By picking up on the serendipitous traces of performance linking together seemingly disparate elements the surface smoothness of a cultural representation may begin to fade and its complex genealogy might begin to reveal the hybrid and creole character of cultural identity. Just as "Everyone is the son of many fathers," (a quote from French Situationist Michele Bernstein as told to Greil Marcus) so too is every cultural identity performance born of many ancestors. The lipstick traces (behavior vortices, interstices) of these

performances, therefore, become the source points for a successful genealogy. By understanding that we are only getting the "traces on a cigarette" the critic's duty becomes to posit varying interpretations not pronounce fixed readings, to open discourses of a truly public life as compared to codifying regulations and shaping ideological manipulations. Or as Homi Bhabha writes, "the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" (12).

The normalizing secular spectacles of Irish-America, therefore, contain the tools needed to read Irish-American culture in a more dialogistic and pluralistic fashion. The lipstick traces of Irish-American cultural performances allow us to answer the absurdity of discussing any culture in terms of 100% purity. A method is also created that opens the idea of "membership" into a culture as something more than an accident of birth.

Normalizing performances usually aspire to the creation of a monoculture, which in the circum-Atlantic interculture must compete with the material fact of diasporas. This creates a tension between the monologicistic, manifest destiny of Anglo-Saxon Christianity and the performative orature of the many diasporas that actually form the population of the various circum-Atlantic nations. As a result, many performances are introduced (on all sides of this tension) that hope to negotiate the acts of

surrogation, assimilation and delineation that have become inevitable. "Secular spectacles" and "theatre-in-life" events such as parades, ceildhes, improvisational theatre and dance reviews become dynamic opportunities to "demonstrate the permeable, negotiable and fluctuating boundaries of social environments" (Cities 190). Not only are these performances and vortices of behavior examples of a decentered and dialogistic mode of analysis, but Roach goes further by writing that they are in fact the very foundations upon which a culture (any culture) is structured. By opening up the performances that are the space in which contact and exchange occur we can begin to understand America as "an ever-shifting ensemble of appropriated traditions" (Cities 184). In so doing, the binaries that have so long defined traditional hyphenated cultures, such as Irish-America, can be circumvented and a move towards a multivocal and dialogistic model might be attempted.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF IRISH-AMERICAN CULTURE

In his play Richard's Cork Leg, Brendan Behan wrote:

*Prince:* The Irish are proud of their nationality.  
*The Hero:* Other people have a nationality. The  
Irish and the Jews have a psychosis (263).

Comparing Irish conceptions of a cultural identity to a mental illness may seem a bit extreme and certainly an exaggeration, but a review of the culture's history shows that Behan was only half joking. Irish-America can easily lay claim to its ancestral "psychosis" as well. Torn between the dissonant voices that present themselves to all diasporic communities, Irish-Americans often find themselves having to make uncomfortable choices regarding identity and cultural loyalty. This condition, however, is hardly new. Throughout the history of Irish-America, the unique challenge of negotiating cultural identity has presented itself and demanded solutions. A recent example from the 20<sup>th</sup> century adequately illustrates such a moment.

1991, New York City, St. Patrick's Day, a young man stands on the curb of 5th Avenue. St. Patrick's Cathedral stands close enough that its shadow casts itself across the gathered audience. On the other side of the street one of many gay rights organizations hold up signs and wear rainbow sashes over their Irish wool fisherman's sweaters. The young man, joined by friends and other like-minded individuals, yells at the group, calling them names and threatening violence. On the young man's calf, underneath his denim jeans, resides a tattoo. The tattoo

is of a small leprechaun facing profile. Its fists are raised and its stance suggests the old photos of John Sullivan or Gentleman Jim Corbett. The leprechaun wears a green suit, green hat and black broghans. Printed on the hat are the initials "ND."

The reason for this conflict between the young man and the gay rights organization (known as ILGO) lies in the Ancient Order of Hibernians' St. Patrick's Day Parade and Celebration Committee's rule book. The rule book states, "No marcher will be permitted to wear a garment which is of a burlesque or ridiculous nature or *which violates the moral codes of public decency* [my emphasis]. Drum majorettes sparsely dressed, at the heads of bands, will not be permitted in the line of March" (qtd in O'Hanlon, 136). This code had been written in 1959 and for all intents and purposes was largely disregarded by 1991. In the 1990's, ridiculous hats and costumes could easily be found in the parade, and if a majorette wore a slightly more modest costume it had more to do with the March weather in New York than the code of decency of the AOH. However, that code, in conjunction with the guiding Catholic principles of the Hibernians, provided grounds for the AOH to ban a group of gays and lesbians who wanted to celebrate both their sexual and ethnic identities. Simultaneously, ILGO wanted to force open the discourse regarding how Irishness was defined in America. The young man with the "Fighting Irish" tattoo, joined by a chorus of angry parade

attendants, would never awake to the irony of his choice of tattoos. While yelling at members of ILGO, condemning them for corrupting the purity and respectability of Irish culture, he never once considered the racism and oppression that constructed the 19th century stereotype he so proudly wears on his leg.

Irish-American identity and culture, as can be gleaned from the previous example, proves to be anything but simple or straightforward. In all of the vortices of behavior that create Irish-American identity real consequences can be observed as resulting from the contestation inherent in their respective performative sites, leading one to conclude that the only thing that can be said with certainty regarding Irish-American culture is that it has always been hotly contested and categorically resistant to simple definitions. In fact, Irish-American history, identity, and culture intertwine to form an ever-shifting image of Irish-America often at odds with itself and uncertain of its place within the larger American discourse.

This chapter hopes to demonstrate just how primary the tension between assimilation and tribal loyalty has been and continues to be in understanding Irish-American identity and cultural performances. By reviewing the Irish-American negotiations of this tension in history I hope to prove that Irish-American culture has always been a site rich in multi-voiced performances and that performance has always been the principle method for cultural/identity experimentations. At the

same time, this chapter will try to explicate the importance of performance in renewing and/or re-forming Irish-American culture based upon social and political exigencies and forces.

Performances, therefore, become barometers of the Irish-American cultural condition. Simultaneously, these same performances stealthily blend into the cultural circumstances to which they were trying to adjust.

Supporting this investigation into Irish-American history and performance is a belief in the efficacy of dialogistic models to explain and interpret hyphenated identities. Monologicistic thinking tends towards a teleological and absolutist conception of history. Such a model ultimately conceives of performance as a product of identity and historical forces. Performance, essentially, becomes an interesting afterthought and a historical by-product in monologicistic analyses of identity. Dialogistic strategies try to account for the fluidity and ambiguity that exist between history, identity, and performance. Due to this more "open" approach, performance not only can be considered as an influence on the act of identity creation but as a primary way in which a cultural identity is formed.

Rather than presenting a history of Irish-America that charts and records all of the significant movements of an entire people, this chapter will focus on four crucial and specific moments of flux and the concomitant performances and politics. The four moments are: colonial America, the Great Hunger and its



diaspora, *fin de siècle* America, and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Each of these moments contain spectacles and performances ripe with cultural survival strategies developed out of the unique circumstances of a bifurcated identity. In the four historical moments listed above, Irish-American culture renews its importance and significance while also undergoing an evolution.

The story of Irish-Americans begins, so many authors tell us, in the 1840's. During this decade, of course, the Great Hunger ravaged Ireland, and literally millions of Irish born individuals braved the Atlantic for a new start in the New World. This version of history, however, betrays a Catholic bias as well as a reluctance to acknowledge Irish contributions to American culture in pre-Civil War United States. In three prominent histories used for this study (all of them excellent works, The New Irish Americans by Roy O'Hanlon, The Great Shame by Thomas Keneally, and A Different Mirror by Ronald Takaki) not one mentions the existence of an active and productive Irish-American community during the Colonial period of U.S. history.

Yet Irish-Americans contributed heavily to the formation of the United States and figured into the performative culture of the young country throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. St. Patrick's Day celebrations had long been accepted and anticipated events in Colonial America with the earliest of these celebrations dating to 1737 in Boston. Other public acknowledgements of Irish contributions to early American society could be found in cities

as diverse as Philadelphia, New York City and Savannah. The influence was mutual. Eighteenth-century Irish nationalist figures such as Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmett were enormously influenced by the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin and Thomas Paine. Admittedly, this early cross-cultural exchange was predominantly friendly. Most of the figures involved were members of the Anglo-Ascendancy and the introduction of the "Catholic problem" would have to wait for more than fifty years. Nevertheless, much that has been both successful and contentious in the interactions between Irish-America and American mainstream culture can find precedent in this era.

One figure who stands out as representative of the tensions at the core of the Irish-American experience during the Colonial era is that of John Daly Burk, author of Bunker Hill: or the Death of General Warren. The cultural dynamics of this era led to the formation of oppositionally positioned representations of Irish-America. Anglo-Americans, feeling their uncontested power threatened, developed an image of Irish-Americans as wild and uncontrollable. Irish-Americans, desiring to demonstrate their legitimacy as American citizens, fashioned a noble and patriotic image of themselves. These competing impulses provide a context for Burk's work as a playwright.

First performed in 1797, Bunker Hill "occupies a landmark position on our early theatre" as a "spectacle extolling and demonstrating in action the gallant stand of our warriors" and as

a "highly approved and applauded theatrical diatribe on the glories" of things American (Moody 69). Richard Moody's testament to national patriotism aside, Burk created a work which contains a strategy that has largely been ignored by traditional histories of American theatre and Irish-American culture.

Bunker Hill attempted to achieve three goals: first, and perhaps most importantly, the play acts as a mouthpiece for the author's rich political philosophy. Burk, an Irish revolutionary exiled from Ireland for his rebellious activities and controversial beliefs, was also persecuted while in America by President John Adams for many of the same Republican beliefs under the Federalist's Alien Friends Act. The famous Battle of Bunker Hill, already twenty years old when Burk choose to dramatize it, was already fading in the public's memory; however, the battle between the Federalists and Republicans was current. The era following the American Revolutionary War inspired considerable political debate in the United States, and Burk, with the memory of Ireland's woes fresh in his mind, emigrated into the middle of this debate.

Secondly, Burk's appearance corresponds with the first large wave of Irish emigration to the U.S.A. This first wave of immigration is notable because it represents the first time that the Irish would bring their political struggle for freedom to the shores of the New World. Indeed, just before Burk's arrival in America, the Irish revolutionary Theobald Wolfe Tone was touring

Philadelphia and New Jersey attempting to gain support for the United Irish uprising. Finally, Burk stands out as the first example of an Irish playwright working in the young United States. Burk does not create characters or plots typical of later Irish-American playwrights. He does, however, utilize themes that recur throughout much of Irish literature.

During his life, Burk witnessed despicable abuses of power; this directed his passion for freedom and his hatred of all things monarchic and British into his writing and politics. The elitism and aristocratic behavior of the Federalists provided Burk with an obvious target. He chose a twenty year old event for his first play because he saw the reflection of his own Irish cause in the fight between the Federalists and the Republicans. Further credence can be given this idea by Burk's leadership of the Republican Party in Petersburg, Virginia. If any doubt were left about Burk's attitude toward the Federalists, his son, John Junius Burk clarifies that by explaining that his father was aware that General Warren (American General and battlefield martyr at Bunker Hill) was a Republican in the revolution but that the General "reserved the monarchical bias in his heart and hoped for it in the country" (Wyatt 7). Burk, John Junius explains, was obliged to make Warren a fully Republican revolutionary hero. In other words, Burk felt it necessary to co-opt this well-known Federalist figure as the mouth-piece for his considerably more radical, Republican ideology.

Throughout Bunker Hill, Burk subtly draws comparisons between the cause of American independence and its powerful rhetoric and the similar elements of the United Irishmen movement of which he was a part. Burk made clear that the Irish cause for independence and the recently successful American fight for freedom were ideological and cultural cousins. General Warren's speeches often sound like both Tone's and Burk's rhetorical style reinforcing Burk's comparisons. In Act II, Scene I Gen. Warren declares,

At length the sun of freedom 'gins to rise  
Upon the world: a glorious dawn of day.  
Breaking in lucid streaks of every hue.  
Shedding its incens'd breathing on the mind:  
And the deep night, where tyrants sat enthron'd  
Shrouding their horrid forms from the world,  
Now passes on, like mists before the sun (Burk 38).

In a speech Burk made on the occasion of Thomas Jefferson's election Burk similarly states,

I turn with disgust from the times of frantic tyranny  
to repose my weary and indignant spirit on characters  
rich in every great and noble qualification: my  
imagination hastens with gladness from this dreary and  
comfortless midnight to sport itself in the solar beams  
of freedom: to taste the sweetness and fragrance of  
Elysium (Wyatt 15).

American freedom and Irish dreams of a Republic are joined and Burk begins a tradition of Irish interdependence on America for its inspiration in seeking sovereignty.

Burk continues to re-focus Irish political issues through his new American lens in Act III. Gen. Warren engages the

Englishman, Harmon, in a debate about unjust British laws, civil disobedience, and the just reasons for revolution. Warren says, "When nations lose their rights, words of best sense are tortur'd to mean what the rulers please" (Burk 60). Warren continues, "Instance obedience, which in the earliest sense, desing'd submission to the wisest laws, is made to mean a base, unmanly fawning, and abject acquiescence under wrongs" (Burk 60). Concluding, Warren says that rebellion is a "glorious act of a whole people, bursting from their chains." Tone in his essay, "Argument on Behalf of Catholics in Ireland," employs a similar rhetorical logic while arguing for the freedom of Irish Catholics. Tone writes,

Is liberty a disease for which we are to be prepared as for inoculation? But can we believe that our wise and benevolent Creator would constitute us so, that it would require a long institution to prepare us for that blessing, without which existence is but a burthen? Do we prepare our sons to view the light of Heaven, to breathe the air, to tread the earth? Liberty is the vital principle of man: he that is prepared to live is prepared for freedom (Cronin 115).

In both Warren's argument and Tone's, we see the same depiction of the inherent stupidity of the monarchy and the Anglo-centric power structure. Simultaneously, freedom is posited as a birth-right for all, not just the privileged.

Significantly, Burk never forgot his homeland as he was writing Bunker Hill. Rather, he seemed to have desired to use the mythos surrounding Bunker Hill in the American mindset as a method for making clear the similar injustices suffered by the

Irish at the hands of a common oppressor. Furthermore, Burk maintained an antagonistic position to the Federalist party, an organization known for their Anglophilic sympathies and anti-immigrant policies. In Act III Warren makes what appears to be a direct reference to the Insurrection and Indemnity Acts (passed by the British Parliament in order to maintain control over the Catholic population of Ireland) when he says accusingly, "All laws and usages are made to bend before the magic influence of an act, and ordinance of your parliament" (Burk 60). I think it is fair to claim that Burk felt the Federalists were not much better than the British in matters democratic. Certainly, Burk's co-opting of Warren helps support that sentiment. So does the only direct quote about John Adams we have from Burk. Adams, according to Burk, was, "the eulogist of the British form of government: the pretended defender of the American constitution" (Wyatt 15). Burk is caught between two cultures, both of which he cares for deeply. Considering this, we may be able to say that Burk was not just writing about the British and the Americans but also the British and the Irish, and the Federalists and the Republicans.

There is another reason why the cross-cultural interplay of Bunker Hill is interesting. During this era, Ireland brings its political situation to the shores of the United States for the first (but certainly not the last) time. The Irish had been in the U.S. before 1790, of course. Between 1771 and 1773, it is

estimated that 21,600 immigrants came to America from Northern Ireland alone (Eid 39). During the Revolutionary War approximately fifty percent of the soldiers fighting for the U.S. were Irish or of Irish descent. This estimate is supported by George Washington Parke Custis, who said, "Up to the coming of the French, Ireland had furnished in the ratio of one hundred to one of every nation whatever" (Roberts 31). And in 1781, George Washington was "made a member of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick" (York 13).

However, unlike the desperate masses that would appear on America's shores in the middle part of the century, these immigrants, while lacking options in Ireland, were far from lacking in education or employable skills. Many of the Irish immigrants of this era were the second sons of property owning farmers and landed gentry. Unfortunately for these young men, Irish law allowed the father to pass on all property and wealth to the first-born son. This condition resulted in the lowering of standards and opportunity for the younger sons of the family. The options left open to the dispossessed sons were either the clergy or a life of servitude to the eldest brother. Some young Irish men, however, were quick to discover that the city provided one with ample opportunities for self-advancement. They also discovered that the long voyage to America provided an ambitious person with more social mobility and chances at financial success than could ever be found at the family farm or even in the nearby



Irish or British cities. Burk and Tone and the immigrants of the post-colonial period act as a reminder that many of these émigrés had been exiled due to the Irish political situation as well. In this respect, the immigrants of this era set a precedent for Irish and American political issues by conceiving of the fates of either culture as interrelated. Such a model would eventually act as a blueprint for 20<sup>th</sup> century political figures as diverse as Eamon DeValera, Sean McBride, Bernadette Devlin, George Mitchell, and Gerry Adams.

The introduction of politically active Irish-Americans like Burk created a potent backlash. The 1807 elections in New York featured vitriolic rhetoric against the new Irish-Americans. The Federalists blamed the woes of their party and practically every societal ill on the Irish. This racist nativism became a campaign tool throughout the 1807 election season. The tactics were not fully successful in getting more Federalists elected but it did help in the creation of two stereotypes that would quickly make their way onto the stage. The first was the "Wild Irishman," an image created by the Federalists who is permanently drunken, prone to fighting, and represents all the undersided elements of city life. The "Noble Irish Patriot," the Irish-American response to the nativists prejudiced representations, was not a teetoler but recognized that there was a time and a place for everything, including fighting for your country's rights and an individual's freedom.

Comparatively speaking, however, the early 19th century Irish-American immigrant population co-existed well with the rest of the populace of the United States. Largely, although not exclusively, Protestant, these immigrants were not so much fleeing tyranny as they were simply seeking a better possibility at a life they could call their own. Additionally much of this generation of immigrants, like most of the United States' population, took their cultural cues from England. Tastes in music and theatre were imported almost directly from London and with these Anglophone tastes came Celtophobic fears. The Irish immigrants of this era were quick to acculturate American styles. If we think of these people as running from a country in which a bleak and immobile future awaited them then their willingness to distance themselves from their homeland seems a little less strange. Taken together these conditions help to explain the mainstream acceptance of the Wild Irishman stereotype and its performative metamorphosis into the Stage Irish caricature. Known as either Paddy or Biddie depending on gender, the Stage Irish type exemplified everything the Anglocentric United States feared concerning the Wild Irishman/woman.

The Stage Paddy/Biddie on the American stage resembles virtually trait for trait the Stage Irish type found on the British stage. Often drunk, the reckless and feckless Stage Irishman/woman displayed a voracious appetite for things corporeal. The character also was most frequently portrayed as

Catholic, complete with "papist" declarations rife with pleas to the Virgin Mary. As Ronald Takaki has observed,

anti-Irish stereotypes emphasized nature over nurture and descent over consent. The Irish were imaged as apelike and "a race of savages," at the same level of intelligence as blacks. Pursuing the "lower" rather than the "higher" pleasures, seeking "vicious excitement" and "gratification merely animal," the Irish were said to be "slaves" of "passions." Since sexual restraint was the most widely used method of birth control, the large families of these immigrants seemed to indicate a lack of self control" (Takaki 149).

Additionally, the Stage Irish, like the "real-world," Catholic Irish, were considered to be inferior forms of humanity, somehow lacking in a civility that was inherent in the Anglocentric members of society. The famous 19<sup>th</sup> century actress Fanny Kemble addressed this dynamic in an entry in her journal, "the Irish are not only quarrelers, and rioters, and fighters, and drinkers, and despisers of niggers - they are a passionate, impulsive, warm-hearted, generous people, much given to powerful indignations, which break out suddenly when not compelled to smoulder sullenly" (qtd. in Zinn 170). As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford has noted, the Stage Irish figure, reflecting the actual social status of Irish Catholics, typically existed on the fringes of a play's plot (Cullingford, 288). Most often the character could be found as a servant or comic rustic offered as a minor sub-plot within the larger action of a play.

That the British and Anglocentric American culture would find this character enjoyable should not come as too much of a surprise. However, that the early 19th century Irish immigrants and the Anglo-Irish theatregoers of Dublin also found pleasure in Paddy and Biddie might take some observers aback. The Irish Americans of pre-Civil War America, it must be remembered, sought a new beginning. The culture they had left, although still an active part of their memories and celebrations, was also the cause of their exile. The early 19th century Irish immigrants were ready to accept their new home in its entirety. In order to make this transformation complete an effigy had to be offered to the new culture. That effigy was a mock rendering of the pre-modern world they had left behind. The Stage Paddy and Biddy, grotesque in their appearance, allowed the early 19th century generation to define itself against something it never was, while distancing itself from the poorer Roman Catholic Irish. Pete Hamill has noted, "A new identity was impossible; only a system of masks could bring comfort and safety. The Stage Irishman was the creation of people who needed masks" (O'Hanlon, Foreword). These masks would not be worn by the early generations of Irish immigrants, however. Instead they would be placed and activated within the safe confines of the stage. It would take a tragedy of epic and soul-shattering proportions to move these masks from the stage to the city streets of America.

The Colonial era of Irish-American history features tensions and dynamics that recur throughout all of Irish-American identity; most notably, the oppositional images of the Wild Irishman and the Noble Patriot. To a certain degree, this general tension between "wild" and "controlled" is one all hyphenated identities face. Irish-Americans of the era, however, were in a position in which the most negative consequences of the contestation between these cultural impulses were fairly smoothly navigated. In the era of Irish-American history centered around the Great Hunger, Irish-Americans would not find such a relatively comfortable path.

Volumes have been written concerning the Famine and the Potato Blight. The effects of this catastrophic series of events might be the most analyzed and pondered aspect of Irish history. And yet, the full power and loss of the years between 1843 and 1853 still cannot be fully evoked. To the poor, Irish-speaking people of Ireland, the time became known as *an Gorta Mor*, the Great Hunger. Sometime this era was understatedly called *an droch-Shaol*, the Bad Times (Keneally, 107). In regards to the sheer size of this event Thomas Keneally offers a gripping statistic, "The brute fact was that Famine and other forces had by 1851 reduced the population from a probable eight and a half million to six and a half million. Irish population was in a free fall unique in Europe, one that would not be arrested until modern times, if then" (293). Between the years 1849 and 1851,

nearly 45,000 families were evicted from their homes. That translates to approximately a quarter of a million people left homeless in three short years (Keneally 293). These numbers barely account for the death and disease encountered in Ireland during this period. Nor do these statistics factor in the psychological damage and legacy of shame fostered by the Great Hunger. Joseph Roach offers a lengthy but compelling account of this painful moment in Irish history:

Part of the experience of starving to death is the shame of it. The skeletonized exterior betrays the internalized cannibalism of the famished body digesting its own organs. By disclosing the secret of such a Thyestian feast (a body so abject as to be denied any source of nourishment except itself), starvation stigmatizes the afflicted, condemning them to social death. This mortification, which is both reflected in and produced by the averted gaze of the living, especially if the living are themselves well fed, occurs before physical death but then lingers on after it, ensuring that the starving seem to disappear both before and after they die. But they do not disappear entirely. The terrible images that make witnesses not want to remember what they have seen also make it impossible for them to forget what they have felt (Barnumizing Diaspora, 39).

The ravages of the Great Hunger, coupled with the incompetent and racist responses of the British colonial authorities, only made this "social death" that much more bitter. Left with only a few terrible options, many in Ireland found they had no other choice but to emigrate, bringing with them the clothes on their back and the shame of an involuntary exile.

Between the years 1815 and 1920 more than five and half million people emigrated from Ireland to the United States (Takaki 140). The vast majority of this number made the Atlantic crossing during the decades of and around the Great Hunger. The effects this Irish "Exodus" had on the tiny island were catastrophic. Roach recognizes the true magnitude of this era's events when he writes, "the great premodern culture of rural Ireland became a sacrificial offering to circum-Atlantic modernity. Its language, its oral tradition, and many of its collective memories were sacrificed to a fatal combination of a natural disaster, the potato blight, and an unnatural one, the application of Malthusian political economy to a vulnerable and despised population" (Barnumizing Diaspora 41).

The journey across the Atlantic was at best a life threatening tribulation. Many Irish immigrants, barely able to afford the fare, were placed in the ships' cargo holds and used as human ballast (Roach 41). These were the "coffin ships" and as disease ridden, corrupt, and dangerous as they were, they became the primary mode of transport for Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. The wave of immigration was so large that by 1850 the United State had over four million citizens of Irish birth or parentage. A statistic like this is staggering considering that the national population at this time was approximately twenty-four million (Keneally 249). The land that

they emigrated to, however, in no way resembled the land of milk and honey promised on Irish docks:

many of them lived downtown in unspeakable fire-trap tenements either side of Broadway. Cartage and laboring were the usual occupations for males, domestic service and garment making for the females. The sons and daughters of Innisfail could also be found above 59th Street, living with their domestic pigs on irregular streets in wooden huts under conditions hardly advanced on what they had known in Ireland (Keneally 249).

Economic hardships would not be the only challenges faced by the Irish immigrants of the Famine generation. The new Irish Americans of this era were young; their average age in 1850 in the city of Philadelphia was under thirty (Takaki 144). Additionally, they were almost all Catholic in faith and Gaelic in both culture and language. Unlike the Irish that had emigrated during the Colonial period or the first half of the 19th century, this group of immigrants included whole families, elderly parents and relations, single women, and orphaned children. The level of education of this group of people was well below the average American's and literacy was practically non-existent. These untrained, undereducated, tribal people would be the first large group of Catholics to settle in a devoutly and fiercely Protestant United States. Considering the above list of traits and features, the Irish immigrants of an *droch-shaol* represent the first major challenge to the Anglo-Christian ascendancy that controlled American politics and



culture. They would also be the first large immigrant group to meet with violent and pervasive nativist hostility (Takaki 9).

The political hostility the Irish-Americans met with during this period came primarily in the form of organized actions by the Know-Nothing Party. The Know-Nothings were at their most powerful in the early years of the 1850's and provided a voice for nativist extremists in the years leading up to the formal organization of the Republican Party. The Know-Nothing Platform contained planks such as: "War to the hilt, on political Romanism," "Hostility to all Papal influences, when brought to bear against the Republic," and "The sending back of all foreign paupers" ([www.scriptorium.lib.duke.edu](http://www.scriptorium.lib.duke.edu)). Dedicated fully to the protection of the "purity" of America, the Know-Nothings managed to muster a convincing twenty-one percent of the vote in the 1856 presidential election with their candidate, Millard Fillmore ([www.gi.grolier.com](http://www.gi.grolier.com)).

Criticized as lazy, corrupting forces within American life, the Irish seemed to have left one oppressive and futile situation for another equally unjust set of circumstances. However, in spite of the prejudices and violence of American nineteenth century life, Irish Catholics were still afforded more opportunity for social mobility than was available in Ireland. Perhaps the most opportunistic moment for this young and desperate generation came at the moment of greatest crisis for the United States.

The Civil War offered Irish-Americans of all classes a chance to prove their devotion to their new homeland. Additionally, it was the hope of many Irish-Americans, in particular the exiled leaders of the 1848 Rebellion, that the battle experience and weaponry of the War between the States might lead to an armed return to Ireland and a final confrontation between a battle-hardened, Irish-American army and the British oppressors. This desire is hinted at in a verse from the Irish-American folk song "The Opinions of Paddy Magee,"

John Bull, ye ould divil, ye'd better keep civil!  
Remimber the story of 'Seventy-six,  
Whin Washington glorious he slathered the tories;  
Away from Columbia you then cut your sticks.  
And if once again you're inclined to be meddling,  
There's a city that's called New Orleans, d'ye see  
Where Hickory Jackson he drove off the Saxon -  
Now that's the opinions of Paddy Magee (Kincaid 8).

The Irish, nevertheless, greeted the opportunities of the Civil War with hesitation. Unsure of their place in the United State, many Irish-Americans believed that by fighting for the Union they were merely creating more competition for the limited job opportunities that existed. They also felt that many of their own people were simply being used as cannon fodder by racist generals and politicians. These concerns were voiced in a Civil War era song, "Pat Murphy of Meagher's Brigade,"

Jeff Davis you thief! if I had you but here,  
Your beautiful plans I'd be runnin'  
Faix! I'd give ye a taste of me bauonet, bedad!  
For thrying to burst up the Union:  
There's a crowd in the North, too, an' they're just as

bad:  
Abolitionist spouters so scaley -  
For throubling the naigers I think they deserve  
A Whack from the Sprig of Shillaly! (Kincaid 32).

In spite of these concerns, a great many of the Famine era Irish-Americans fought in the Civil War, the most notable group of these being the 69th Brigade from New York led by Thomas Meagher. The services rendered by the Irish-Americans during this period of crisis and division earned the culture a begrudging acknowledgement from the heretofore unaccepting American nativists. Although far from welcomed as equals, the Famine generation of Irish-Americans had started on the slippery path of acceptance and assimilation.

The move towards cultural acceptance and assimilation was reflected in the stage representations of the era. Irish-American immigrants now featured more prominently in the imaginations of the American people than ever before. Images and representations took on a viciousness never seen previously. Irish-Americans also encouraged this negative development in their own way. It was, after all, an Irish-American ("Big Daddy" Thomas Rice) who developed and popularized the figure of Jim Crow. The Irish-Americans of this era learned the importance of the power of controlling an image in the public's imagination. Irish-Americans desperately needed an image of themselves that featured positive traits and presented their culture as something more than just a collection of bestial, incorrigible drunks.

Perhaps most exemplary of this shift was a man of mysterious origins who ultimately made America his home. Dion Boucicault stands as a looming figure in the history of the 19th century American stage, and his contributions there are matched by the changes he made in re-presenting Irish and Irish-American culture to mainstream United States. Boucicault, in works such as The Octoroon, The Shaughran, Arragh-na-Pogue, and The Colleen Bawn, offered an altered vision of Irish and Irish-American stage types. Calling Boucicault a reformer of the Stage Paddy/Biddie would be an exaggeration. The dramatist trafficked heavily in such stereotypes and made a fortune by playing and authoring such creations. Contemporaneously, Stewart Parker deals with this legacy in his play Heavenly Bodies when a character confronts Boucicault and says, "you conjured up a never-never emerald island, fake heroics and mettlesome beauties and villains made of pasteboard, outwitted through eternity by the bogus grinning peasant rogue as only you could play him" (qtd in Cullingford 290). While this criticism holds true, it does seem to deny the difference Boucicault brought to the contested sites of stage identities and cultural manifestations.

Boucicault, for the first time on the American stage, presented Irish and Irish-Americans as central to a plot. Not only were many of his Irish characters centralized in the narrative, they were frequently presented as virtuous and honorable people, often because of the very traits that had so

recently been regarded as loathsome. When an Irishman or woman is represented in a "negative" fashion, the character becomes so as a result of an act of treachery against his/her own people. The informer and traitor became the new models for negative Irish stereotypes and the singing, drinking, loving Stage Paddy/Bridie undergoes a theatrical transformation into admirable rogue following a "true" course of action.

Boucicault, born to a Protestant mother and ever unclear of his true paternity, was raised for the first nine years of his life in Ireland. Afterwards, he would live in England or America for the rest of his life (Cullingford 290). The dubiousness of his claims of an Irish Catholic identity, however, seemed to matter little when faced with the performative body of his work. His plays and performances were seen in London, Dublin and the United States and in all these locations the strength and charisma of his plays erased concerns over degrees of Irishness.

Boucicault's attempts at re-writing Irish stage types into positive representational forces can be seen as resulting from two equally strong elements. Boucicault almost always presented to his audience a world of extreme social mobility. An observer of his plays could virtually be guaranteed that the characters that started from a lofty social position during the exposition would not remain esteemed for very long. Likewise, the lowly Irish immigrant family might find itself thrust into a position of middle-class respectability by play's end as a result of their

"virtuous" behavior and "inherent" Irish cleverness. This model of Irish and Irish-American culture must have been thoroughly tempting and refreshing when it was first presented. After the long and tragic years of the Great Hunger and the bloody divisiveness of the Civil War, a representation of American and Irish life arose that celebrated not the mean-spiritedness of nativism but rather the glories of American social mobility and the clever ingeniousness of the nation's immigrants.

Another possible reason for the phenomenal popularity of Boucicault's work, especially with the Irish-Americans, may be the placement of the English characters in the narrative structure of the play. For this reading of Boucicault's work, this study is indebted to Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's monograph "Boucicault's Stage Englishmen." Cullingford notes that while Stage Irish had long been relegated to the fringes of Anglo dramatic plots, reflecting the position of the Irish within the worldview of Anglos throughout the Circum-Atlantic world, Boucicault forces the English stage types (landlords, militaristic authority figures) to the periphery of his plots as a way of declaring their irrelevance to the brave new world of American and Irish social interaction and mobility. While never portraying the English as completely unflattering (that would have been bad box office), Boucicault nevertheless found a way to dismantle a traditional English stage tactic using the very strategy that enabled it in the first place (Cullingford 290).

A renewed sense of tribalism seemed to mark much of the late nineteenth century, Irish-American community. The St. Patrick's Day Parades of the era reflected the bifurcated tension of belonging and dispossession present in Irish-American culture of this era. The parades became more wholly Catholic affairs during this time, and the Nationalist fervor so notably absent in the early nineteenth century banquets and balls manifested itself doubly. Moreover, The Vatican added theological rationalization to Irish-American cultural segregation. In 1864, Pius IX issued the Syllabus of Modern Errors in which he rejected all modern thought as deviant and heretical. The Index of Forbidden Books grew to include essentially all of the founding philosophers of the American republic including: Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Rousseau, Voltaire and Mill (Kung 162-163). This amazingly bold move on the part of the Roman Catholic Church could only have reinforced the separateness of the post-Hunger American Irish and provided fodder for nativists and bigots. The Syllabus would remain in effect until 1891 when it was repealed by Leo XIII. However, The Syllabus (complete with an anti-modernist oath) and its resulting *Kulturkampf* would return in 1907 and remain a part of Catholic dogma until the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's (Kung 173). The Catholic Church unknowingly added to the confused multiplicity of Irish-American identities by positioning a displaced but loyal diaspora philosophically at odds with church, state, and modern society.

The tension between competing tribal loyalties and cultural identities gripped the political arena as well. The Urban Democratic Machine had greeted the Irish immigrants at the docks during the 1840's, and their influence and place within the Irish-American community was rivaled perhaps only by the Catholic Church. The Democrats realized quickly that the central loci for community building within the Irish-American community was the pub or saloon. There deals were struck, relationships strengthened and futures decided. The Democrats re-created the tribal aura of the rural village in Ireland and were repaid with a voter loyalty unparalleled during the nineteenth century (Keneally 249). The political voice gained by the Irish-American community, however, proved to be something of a pyrrhic victory. Even as late as 1890, 65 percent of Boston's Irish community performed the lowest of the City's manual labor. Democratic politicians realized that the phrase "A friend to the Irishman" was often enough to get him elected. Unfortunately, such phrases often only meant tolerant treatment or lip service instead of true representation (Keneally 513).

A dualistic mode of conceiving Irish-American culture can be detected throughout the nineteenth century narratives of Irish-America. Ireland/Britain, Celtic/Anglo, Catholic/Protestant are the poles through which Irish Americans traditionally navigated identity. By the later half of the 1800's this dualism also took on the absolutism of dogma. A person was either one or the



other, and a gesture towards reconciling these opposites was often frowned upon by all sides of the issue. Not surprisingly this polar perspective fails to fully explain the multivocal forces at work on Irish-American culture. Within Irish-America itself this dualism proved unsustainable in light of the history of Irish immigration. A brief glance (such as this chapter) at Irish-America shows that the earliest immigrants to America's shores from Ireland were largely Protestants and a few Catholics seeking an economic and political future. In the 1840's the immigrant experience changed forever with the arrival of the Catholic poor. As the Irish of that generation gained a foothold in American life they called for their relatives or later generations to leave the financial and political oppression behind and join them in their new home.

The emigrants of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century largely succeeded because of their numbers. Millions upon millions of Irish-American exiles simply could not be ignored or dismissed by the Anglo-American ascendancy. In the face of such a powerful force, representations had to change, modes of thinking had to adapt, and methods of definition had to evolve. For the *fin de siecle* generation of Irish-Americans, a path to mainstream acceptance had been created. Acceptance and assimilation, however, have their own problems for a hyphenated identity. In the case of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish-Americans, isolationist tactics became more and more tempting while the complexities and

ambiguities of past generations slipped into the forgotten recesses of historical memory.

Even as the transformation from hated immigrant to productive citizen worked its way through the Irish-American culture, an equally strong desire to retain the traditions of a Celtic past took hold. In *fin de siecle* America, more Irish immigrants arrived daily into an Irish-American community firmly established as an element of the American cultural landscape. This Irish America, growing in wealth and confidence, looked to their constructed memory of "the auld sod" for cultural support of their version of Irish-American culture. Stories and songs, plays and novels, "reminded" younger Irish-American generations of their heroic and noble lineage. Meanwhile new modes of technology and new immigrants kept the Irish-American culture frequent concerning the Gaelic Renaissance and the Home Rule efforts of Irish politicians. Lost in the new found ethnic pride was the pain and oppression of the Great Hunger. Largely converted into a romanticized melancholy, the coffin ships, starvation, and colonial oppression must have seemed like some other culture's past when viewed from the relative comfort of a newly built American life.

Although emigration from Ireland continued, the Irish-American culture of the *fin de siecle* largely drew their numbers from people who were born in the United States. These Irish-Americans had greater access to the American education

system than their parents or grandparents. According to Ronald Takaki, by 1900 "Irish Americans were attending college in greater proportion than their Protestant counterparts. They had even begun to enter Harvard University in substantial numbers" (161). The Anglo-Protestant Ascendancy that controlled most of American culture and education at this time could hardly be called altruistic for tolerating this move. As Harvard President Abbot Lawrence Lowell explained to his contemporaries, "What we need is not to dominate the Irish but to absorb them" (qtd. in Takaki 161). Lowell would go on to explain that the Irish were worthy of assimilation because, unlike the Jew, the Irish were culturally Christian and could therefore "become 'so merged in the American people' that they would not be 'distinguished as a class'" (Takaki 161).

Due to the economic and social changes felt by the Irish-American culture at the *fin de siecle*, the most telling aspect of Irish-American culture in the years surrounding the turn of the century was that Irish-American identity remained highly contested and resistant to easy definition. In Ireland, a similar condition existed (thanks to the Home Rule fight, the Gaelic renaissance, the emergence of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the labor movement). Responses to such openness understandably reflected a variety of perspectives and performative strategies. By looking at three performances from the era, three different tactics for navigating late 19<sup>th</sup>/early

20<sup>th</sup> century Irish-American culture are revealed. While all three performances are very different in form and content, they all shared a desire to ignore or erase the complexities and unpleasant aspects of Irish-America's recent past.

Chauncy Olcott (1860-1932) opted for a strategy of Romanticization. As the writer of such songs as "My Wild Irish Rose," "When Irish Eyes are Smiling," and "Mother Machree," Olcott effected the construction of Irish identity in America as profoundly as any of the great Irish writers or any Boucicaultian stock type. His life's work and contributions are still felt today. On any given St. Patrick's Day (that nexus point of Irish-American identity) in any given bar in America, at least one of Olcott's songs will eventually be played. But Olcott's influence reaches deeper than St. Patrick's Day and saccharine songs about mother and the Emerald Isle.

Olcott largely perfected the stage identity of the Irish Romantic Hero. The Irish Romantic Hero rarely drank and never cursed. He abstained from any unseemly activities, especially those that might lead to sexual temptation, and loved his mother more than any woman in the world. This image quickly became a favored Irish stage identity with Irish and Irish-Americans alike and led to problems for the Abbey Theatre Company when they toured the United States in 1911-12 with J.M. Synge's The Playboy of the Western World. One could also argue, convincingly I believe, that John F. Kennedy was elected, at least in part, on

the strength of this image. As long as an Irish tenor belts out "My Wild Irish Rose," the story of Olcott's life and influence will be an important one to remember.

Olcott was well suited to the task of popularizing a new Irish-American image. The grandchild of immigrants, he knew the stories and songs of Ireland without having to know the pain of actually immigrating. This allowed him to display nostalgia for a place he had only visited, an emotional posture many Irish-Americans of the time would also claim. Olcott's singing style, though, carried the distinct imprint of European chamber music. This, perhaps, allowed Olcott a greater credibility with his audiences. Many Irish-Americans began to view their own culture through the lens of the Protestant mainstream in America. Part of that "lens" included the so-called superiority of European-style classically based music. If the Irish were to be fully inducted into the mainstream then they must have a culture (and music) that can be a part of the mainstream as well. Olcott's songs, the way he sang them, and the plays within which they were featured, certainly fit that requirement. Olcott also managed to move the structure and rhythm of the older Hibernian dramas from that of the *ceili* to the European well-made play. In so doing, he presented the Irish audiences with a "culturally approved" icon.

Most importantly, Olcott made these changes to the "Stage Irishman" intentionally. Although Olcott recorded no known

statement in which he declared his intention to radically shift the existing paradigm, enough evidence exists to strongly reinforce Olcott's place in the shaping of Irish stage representations. Perhaps one of the strongest pieces of evidence can be found in the manner in which Olcott presented his own persona to the public. Beyond the stage image he created, Olcott felt it necessary to carry over the "heroic" persona" into his off-stage life. Rita Olcott relates a story about Olcott's performance in Pepita with Lillian Russell. Apparently, Olcott was to kiss Russell in a scene in the opera. However, Olcott had never kissed anyone on stage before, and, when the moment came for the kiss, Olcott froze and Russell had to act as the aggressor (Olcott 100). A trivial story to be sure but the moral is clear. Our Irish Catholic hero is about as far removed from a drunken, crass, sexual being as one could get. In other words, a new "Stage Irishman" had arrived.

In another story from Rita Olcott's biography of her husband, we get a much more clear statement of Olcott's intentions regarding the formation of Irish characters on the stage. When in rehearsals for The Rivals, Olcott and the director/producer George Tyler heatedly argued about the character of Sir Lucius O'Trigger. Tyler desired Olcott to shout out many of O'Trigger's lines and thereby create a blustery and rambunctious character. Olcott refused and offered to withdraw from the show if that was indeed the way Tyler wanted O'Trigger

performed. Tyler persisted and argued that Olcott was confusing the role with the actor. Olcott countered, "I believe that Sir Lucius is somewhat of a gentleman, Mr. Tyler. If he's an Irishman he couldn't possibly be as rough as you want me to play him. It's not in the Irish blood. If I am to play Sir Lucius, I'm going to play him as I know he is, and not as you believe he is" (Olcott 239).

The shift Olcott effected in his work becomes quite clear when viewed in light of the work that preceded it. In an Irish-American folk song ("My Father's Gun") that dates from the 1860's, the lyrics go as follows:

Come, listen now, I'll tell you how I came to leave  
Killarny, O,  
I'm one of the boys that fears no noise, and me name is  
Paddy Killarny, O,  
My father's name it was the same, and my grandfather  
before him, O!  
He carried this gun in "'98," when the green flag  
floated o'er him, O.  
Then, O what fun to see them run, and to leave a name  
in story, O!  
With my father's gun I'll follow the drum, and fight my  
way to glory, O. (Kincaid 19)

When the above lyrics (fairly typical for the era) are contrasted to Olcott's lyrics for "My Wild Irish Rose" the change Olcott helped foster becomes obvious:

My wild Irish rose,  
The sweetest flower that grows;  
You may search everywhere,  
And find none that compare  
With my wild Irish rose,  
My wild Irish rose,  
The sweetest flower that grows,

Some day for my sake  
She may let me take  
The bloom from my wild Irish rose (Olcott 189).

In a tension filled period of identity politics, Olcott offered the burgeoning Irish-American Middle Class a new, more "socially acceptable" version of themselves. As Fielder writes, "Olcott's tuneful grapplings with the crucial issues of gender, of race, of cultural maintenance, of the tug between family obligation and individual freedom clearly mirrored those of his generation's" (24). More than just mirrored, though, Olcott perfected one of the more powerful and effective images that would play a primary role in his generation's navigation of the tricky terrain of "Irish-ness" in the turn-of-the-century United States.

George M. Cohan chose an entirely different strategy for navigating the "up-for-grabs" world of *fin de siecle* Irish American identity. While certainly unafraid of sentimental and romantic images of Irish-America, Cohan primarily followed assimilationist tactics in his performances and writing. Cohan was enraptured with the idea of America as a land of endless and unchecked opportunity. His jingoistic portrayals of the exuberant "new America" were his vehicle for achieving success onstage and culturally.

Cohan's "seamless" American persona, however, necessitated its own type of erasures. Born to Jerry and Nellie Cohan while on the Vaudeville circuit, Cohan was every bit the child of Irish



minstrelsy. The characters he played and wrote often had Irish surnames and employed traditional Irish-American oaths or utterances and yet he often would pronounce his own last name, "Cohen," if the change would help. In many ways, George Cohan was an ethnic opportunist of the highest order. But the characters, songs and plays he created achieved unprecedented popularity with his audience, both Irish-American and otherwise. His optimistic views of American and Irish-American identity and culture seemed and seem lightweight and shallow. Nevertheless, Cohan gave the audiences an Irish-American figure untethered from a bleak European history filled with oppression and pain. Instead this new Irish-American image was fully qualified for "Americanhood" and impatient to prove his worth. Perhaps as Terry Golway observes, "Before there could be an Eileen Carmody, not to mention a Tyrone family, there perhaps had to be such happy-go-lucky Cohan creations as Ned Harrigan and Hap Farrell, affable characters who dispelled fear and even won a measure of affection" (196).

Meanwhile, The National Theatre of Ireland (better known as The Abbey Theatre) outright dismissed the need for such characters. Choosing rather to follow a satirical and unsentimental rejection of the sacred cows of 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish and Irish-American cultural identity, The Abbey ignored the powerful effects of Olcott's and Cohan's respective cultural strategies. In so doing, The Abbey's founders laid bare the

tenuousness and fragility of Irish-American identity during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The attitudes of the Abbey Theatre towards romanticized views of Irish culture would have mattered little to Irish-Americans had the Abbey remained in Dublin. However, during the years 1911-12, Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats and John Millington Synge, brought their fledgling National theatre to the home of the largest Irish Diaspora, hoping to bring their message (and raise their profile and box office) to the exiles of Erin. The plays they ran were varied, and often appealed to the nationalistic and patriotic fervor of the day. Works like Shaw's John Bull's Other Island, and Lady Gregory's Spreading the News appealed to the Irish desire for a Republic free from British tyranny. The tour would have been an unqualified success if it had exclusively presented works strictly of this nature. However, the centerpiece of the tour was Synge's Playboy of the Western World, a play that had already been the cause for rioting in Dublin. The play's reputation preceded it to the United States, and when the Abbey Theatre attempted to present the work in New York City and Boston, the show was interrupted with rotten vegetables, bricks and stink bombs.

The reaction to The Abbey's presentation of The Playboy of The Western World, then, turned into a performance of Irish-American identity in and of itself. Newspapers reported the goings on at the theatres in lurid detail. Rival factions of

Irish-Americans staked out positions at the theatres in order to denounce or support The Abbey's work. Entire performances were halted while Irish-Americans bombarded the actors and each other in an attempt to prove who was the "better" Irish-American. While in the United States, The Abbey's position mattered little as the National Theatre of Ireland in the face of the particular brand of radical nationalism the rioting Irish-Americans displayed.

The Playboy controversy surrounded the portrayal of Irish womanhood in the figure of Pegeen Mike and Irish gentlemanhood in the figure of Christy. The rioters, all of whom were Irish Americans tipped off to the content of the plays by the Nationalist rioters of Dublin, were solidly convinced that no Irish woman married or unmarried would run around the house in her shift and she certainly would not discuss such matters with a man. Equally angering to the protesters was the less-than-noble behavior of Christy. Lying, cowardly and undependable, Christy superficially embodied every stereotypical vice the Irish American community had been trying overcome. Synge, Yeats and Lady Gregory, were stunned at the violent reaction they received in the United States. Although this response would not recur in every city they visited, and much of the feedback they received was positive, the puritanical and outraged behavior of the New York City and Boston Irish-Americans largely colored their feelings towards the entire Irish-American community and would

greatly influence Irish perspectives about Irish-American culture for years to come.

Irish-Americans' reaction to The Playboy of The Western World performances signaled a radical change in the relationship between "homeland" and exile. So too did the work of Olcott and Cohan. Whether the process was one of romanticization, assimilation, or radical nationalism, the effect was to further erase the complexities of hyphenated identity and present an Irish-America unified in its self-image. Perhaps in *fin de siecle* America such a cohesive image was necessary in order for Irish-Americans to hold onto their hyphenated tribalisms. With more and more Irish-Americans going to college, leaving the "old neighborhoods," and embracing Modernist America, maybe these erasures were needed in order to present a successful front to the rest of American culture; an image that said, "we have left our tragic history behind but not our sense of tribe."

The irony of keeping a cultural identity while discarding the culture's history seems to have been lost on most Irish-Americans of the *fin de siecle*. However, for Irish-Americans of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, monologic thought would not go unchallenged. Presented with levels of success undreamed of a mere one hundred years prior, Irish-Americans achieved the most influential positions possible in the United States. Success, however, always has a price and for Irish-Americans that price

would be their comfortably held notions of a cohesive and unified Irish-America.

As the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century approached, Irish-American Catholics were finally making cultural and social inroads thanks to success in politics, business and entertainment. The long, fractious fight for acceptance would come to a testing point on the eve of the Great Depression. In 1928 Al Smith ran for President of the United States as the Democratic Party's nominee. Smith had been Governor of New York State and was known as a reformer and a populist. He also was an Irish-American Catholic raised in the Irish enclaves of New York City. When he lost the election to Herbert Hoover, many blamed the smear campaign run by Hoover's people that focused on Smith's Catholic and Irish background. Smith and many Irish Catholic Americans never fully recovered from the insulting manner in which Smith was treated during the election. Smith himself became something of a conspiracy theorist and demagogue and many Irish-Americans followed this path making such proto-fascists as Father Charles Coughlin household figures and frighteningly popular.

The renewed tribalism partially inspired by the events of 1928 would influence Irish-America until 1960, when the election of John F. Kennedy to the Presidency would forever alter the concept of a hyphenated Irish-American identity. As Democratic strategist Robert Shrum has written,

John F. Kennedy's election completed the long march of the Irish to the center of the Oval Office. They were no longer sitting outside as petitioners; they were no longer just T.S. Elliot's "attendant lords," with power as derivative as Farley's. An Irishman was president; his staff was nicknamed the Irish mafia. He might be a product of private and not parochial schools, of Harvard and not Holy Cross; he might be urbane and not urban; but he was fiercely, proudly Irish, combining the pol's sense of power with the Irish love of language, turning political prose into poetry...the Kennedy presidency was a unique Irish passage, the end of second-class citizenship in America for the Irish and for Catholics in general (qtd in Golway 104).

This sense of security and acceptance had been a long time in coming for the Irish-Americans and the Kennedy presidency is best thought of as the culmination of this work and not the source of a change in perception. However, the new found acceptance of Irish-America in the mid-20th century made the old forms of Irish-American representation seem worse than old-fashioned, they seemed irrelevant. What could romanticized Stage Irish caricatures offer a culture that had just placed a person in the Oval Office? The inevitable cultural reckoning can best be charted through the work of Eugene O'Neill.

While considered one of America's greatest and most influential dramatists, O'Neill's Irish-American heritage often gets forgotten. He himself considered his Irishness the one aspect of his work most frequently missed by critics and audience members (Golway 181). Like Cohan, O'Neill was born into a theatrical family led by an Irish immigrant father. Also like Cohan, O'Neill strove to find a modern American form for his artistic creations. However, the similarities end there.

O'Neill, from his earliest sea plays to the later semi-autobiographical works, could not engage in the historical erasures that Cohan so easily participated in. For O'Neill, Irish-American heritage was not the stuff of comic routines and patriotic heart tugging. Rather, O'Neill seemed to approach his Irish heritage with the hesitancy and fear one might approach a phantom. He hints at this tentativeness in the dedication he wrote to his wife, Carlotta, as a preface for Long Day's Journey Into Night:

I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play - write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for **all** the four haunted Tyrones (714).

O'Neill suggests in the dedication that recuperating an Irish-American heritage will take understanding and forgiveness. Conceiving of hyphenated identity as something that will require its members to forgive its oppressors, rough treatment, and its own historical transgressions is truly radical. In the works of Boucicault, Harrigan, Olcott and Cohan, to say nothing of the St. Patrick's Day Parades, there is nothing that approaches the idea that a hyphenated identity might require forgiveness and tolerance.

O'Neill had planned on taking this very issue on directly in a nine play cycle called "A Tale of Possessors Dis-Possessed." The cycle would begin in the 18th century and end with a son

becoming President. O'Neill for reasons still fully unknowable destroyed the plays before anyone could see them (Golway 200). The only surviving elements of the cycle are A Touch of The Poet and the unfinished More Stately Mansions. In these two works and the title of the cycle one can sense a much darker and critical interpretation of Irish-America than had been offered before by an Irish American. O'Neill's Irish-American ghosts all seem to have once possessed the secret to happiness and remembering that secret may have something to do with embracing the Celtic traditions left behind in the search for American-ness. However, the search for that tradition seems as harried and dangerous and foolish as the quest for acceptance by the American mainstream.

Throughout the action of the Long Day's Journey Into Night, the Tyrones participate in the destruction of their family, helpless in the face of this disintegration. Central to the action of the play is the relationship between Tyrone and his boys, Jamie and Edmund. Arguments over drinking, health, and finances consume their days and evenings. Underlying these disputes and conflicts is a generational gap informed largely by the act of immigration. O'Neill never makes the Tyrone's Irish-American identity a principle plot point, and yet that identity explains so much about the nature of their destructive behaviors. From the first image described by O'Neill, the audience is given hints as to the depth of the chasm between Tyrone and his sons. Edmund's bookshelves are the first piece of furniture mentioned



by O'Neill in his stage directions. On the bookshelves can be found copies of "Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, philosophical and sociological works by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Max Stirner, plays by Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, poetry by Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, etc" (O'Neill 717). In effect, a list of the authors banned by the Catholic Church through the Syllabus of Modern Errors. O'Neill, in turn, describes the contents of Tyrone's shelves, "sets of Dumas, Victor Hugo, Charles Lever, three sets of Shakespeare, The World's Best Literature in fifty large volumes, Hume's History of England, Thiers' History of the Consulate and Empire, Smollett's History of England, Gibbon's Roman Empire and miscellaneous volumes of old plays, poetry, and several histories of Ireland" (O'Neill 717).

The first page of text demonstrates the showdown between 19th and 20th century thinking, between a Global and an Anglo-Celtic perspective, and between young and old. This tension plays itself out in scene after scene in the play and a dichotomy is soon established. Throughout the action of the play, we see that Ireland and Irish culture are elements that manifest themselves during periods of unguarded happiness or remembrance. Both generations are united in this cultural memory and both participate in its language. A reader also develops a sense that the characters have an awareness regarding the special place of Irish heritage in their family and that Ireland, in some degree,

is a sacred subject best left out of the moments of discord. The younger generation refuses to let this "sacredness" alone and instead feels compelled to point out the changes and differences between the two worlds, not as a malicious tactic but as a way of trying to get the older generation to understand his more "modern" way of viewing the world.

The quest for mainstream acceptance while still attempting to maintain "tradition" serves as the source of tragedy for many of O'Neill's Irishmen and women, but for O'Neill it seemed to hold the key to salvation and self-acceptance. In act IV of Long Day's Journey Into Night Tyrone delivers a heartfelt and bittersweet speech describing his own disappointments. At one point in this speech he says, "I educated myself. I got rid of an Irish brogue you could cut with a knife. I loved Shakespeare" (O'Neill 809). Tyrone has given up his accent, the only outward sign of his Irish culture, in exchange for an Anglocentric defined success. Edmund, who has been listening raptly feels closer to his father after the speech and feels he understands a little bit more about his father and his own heritage.

The true tragedy of Long Day's Journey Into Night, lies in the characters' unwillingness and inability to bridge the gap that lies between the immigrant past and unknowable future; a gap which defines so many "hyphenated" American families. It is this dilemma between the homeland and all of its connotations and the forces of modernity that stands at the very core of a diasporic

identity. Exile, historical memory, and cultural traditions must be conveyed and transmitted for Irish-American identity to survive but to do so means to partially deny the claims of the present and to acknowledge the frightening uncertainty of the future. However, in writing the play, O'Neill is making his own attempt at understanding these traditions. This damaged Irish-American Catholic from the early twentieth century had finally reached a point where he could revisit the painful memories of hybridization and hyphenation. The gap between generations may not have been fully transversed but O'Neill, by creating this play, offers one possible pathway through the chaos.

Somewhere between Cohan's assimilative strategy and O'Neill's existential predicament lay the vast majority of contemporary Irish-Americans. As Irish-Americans achieved acceptance and assimilation into the American mainstream, they have had to temper their social gains with caution and loss. This process, dating back to the earliest days of the United States, always contained a paradoxical element. The Naturalization Law of 1790 granted full citizenship only to "whites" and set in motion a precarious balancing act for the Irish immigrants (Takaki 9). Viewed as bestial and non-white, Irish Americans had to prove their "whiteness" in order to become legal residents. Color was easy enough to prove but as so many other scholars have successfully argued, the concept of "whiteness," especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries,

consisted of so much more than an individual's skin. The Irish-American strategy for existing in the United States, then, rested on the ability to prove "whiteness" while simultaneously rejecting the very definitions of that concept. This strategy requires great energy, ends in frequent failure, and can lead to some peculiar manifestations of Irish-American culture.

This chapter has attempted to present a few examples of Irish-American culture navigating the complex realm of hyphenated identity. To a certain degree, the history of Irish-America is circular in structure; from the relative success and social mobility of the Colonial era, through the agonizing tribulations of the Great Hunger, onto the tense negotiations of tribal loyalty and assimilation at the turn of the century, and back to the success and social mobility of contemporary society. Of course, by presenting Irish-American culture as such, I fall easily into the same monologic trap that my ancestors have. The moments presented in this chapter are windows into a never-ending process of identity formation and cultural (re)creation.

Today, Irish-America finds itself presented with a cultural circumstance unique to its history. The days of the coffin ships and Know-Nothings remain but distant memories, and technology has made extinct the American Wake. As Roy O'Hanlon accurately observes, "An Irish America solely dependent for its cultural base, its sense of unique self, on third, fourth and fifth generations is an Irish-America as yet unseen" (231). Previous

generations of Irish-Americans did indeed seek their "cultural base" across the Atlantic. As historian Dennis Clarke has observed, "The history of the Irish in the United States is a subject without which modern Irish history itself simply cannot be made intelligible" (qtd in O'Hanlon, 231). The structure of traditional theatre and movies reflect this seemingly omnidirectional and linear model of Irish-American culture and influence: from Ireland to America, through bloodlines and biological generations. However, hybrids, active unembarrassed searches, and an awareness of mutual pathways of influence create multidirectional models of simultaneous influences, networks of relationships and circum-Atlantic transferences.

Hyphenated identities are often grounded in the sanctity of the family, genealogy, and the concept of "home." Bloodlines and family ties fade, however, but cultural memories and performative legacies linger on. As Joseph Roach has noted, "Cultural dislocation on the diasporic scale brings with it an unstable and contingent conception of "home." The dispossessed must imagine the home from which they have been exiled even as they try to inhabit the one in which they find themselves unwelcome. The pain of this experience - of nostalgic imagining, of anxious inhabiting - tends to produce a powerful repertoire of cultural performances" (Barnumizing Diaspora, 42). Performance always renews. So as the younger generations of hyphenated cultures move chronologically away from their geographical sources, active

participatory performances, such as the performative cultural sites that make up this study, become more important to the Irish-American community not just as entertainments or public manifestations of ethnic pride, but as preservational rituals of cultural renewal and vitality.

**THE ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE HAS NO KING: ST. PATRICK'S DAY  
PARADES IN NEW ORLEANS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IRISH-AMERICAN  
IDENTITIES**

Parties start here on March 14 and run through March 18.  
...almost one half million participants indulge themselves over  
the 4 day period. Some people say it will soon replace Mardi  
Gras!

-Blake Mooney

It's New Orleans and we love to parade!

-Anonymous Internet observation

The story of Irish-Americans is a story of oppression and triumph. Generally speaking, an Irish person arriving in America had very little to lose and was often confronted with fierce prejudice. The rural ethos that traditionally governed the Irish notion of community was forced to adapt to the ways of urban industrialization. In America, the new Irish-Americans quickly learned that an organized group with a clear identity was much more powerful and, therefore, less likely to be subjugated. Simultaneously, Irish-Americans discovered a social mobility hitherto unknown to their family members still living in troubled Eire. This diasporic shift has not been simple, clear, or for that matter, completed.

The questions at the center of this dissertation focus on the creation and viability of a hyphenated identity in a society that thrives on homogeneity. Though the Irish-American community has created identity in many different ways, one of the most important and obvious methods has been the St. Patrick's Day Parade. As social historian Kenneth Moss writes:

In the case of the Irish-Americans, one such site clearly outstrips all others in power of its symbolic resonances: the St. Patrick's Day celebration in America constitutes the "memory-site" par excellence because the majority of Irish-Americans, for whatever reason, came to believe that the ceremonies of the day could and should serve as reflections of Irish memory and identity, even - perhaps especially - when they disagreed over what form these ought to take (130).

In other words, the St. Patrick's Day parades act as public evocations of cultural identities, as well as symbolic spaces of remembrance.

An equally plausible interpretation of the role of the parades depends on a central concept of the circum-Atlantic model of cultures. The circum-Atlantic world, as do all worlds, continuously undergoes a process of reinvention necessitated by the geographic and psychic closeness of cultures. As a result, citizens of the circum-Atlantic world are presented with a superabundance of identities and cultures. In mainstream discourses of nationality and patriotism, however, the monocultural impulse takes a primary role. For such an impulse to have consequence a series of occasionally violent erasures must take place. Contradictory stories and events from history get displaced, groups discordant with the monoculture are oppressed, and individuals are reminded through the vortices of behavior of the benefits of assimilation with the reigning monoculture (Roach, Cities 122-123).



Considering the above, the St. Patrick's Day parade might be read as a performance of waste or a superabundant display of cultural identity. For one brief period during the year, the uncomfortable hybridity of identities within the circum-Atlantic world finds its stage. The mantle of Anglo-American monoculture is sacrificed on the altar of Irish-American identity through a process of surrogation and re-imagined memories. An Irish identity emphatically jumps to the forefront of the public's attention where it can exist as "king for a day." On this one day, all parade participants are Irish because, momentarily, the Anglo-American monoculture does not "exist" and the possibility of voluntary cultural identification becomes realized.

However, in the circum-Atlantic world, no culture or vortex of behavior ever gets totally erased, and the superabundant identity in this dynamic is not that of the monoculture but of the immigrant. In other words, the hyphen between Irish and American does not protect the Irish cultural identity within the assimilative context of American monoculture but rather points out a non-essential surplus. The parade goes through their signs of Irishness to the clambering crowd, and as the parade route continues the signs and symbols of this "surplus" identity are depleted. Finally, the route comes to its end and the seeming triumph of a hyphenated ethnic identity within America wastes its last set of beads. The "profitless expenditure" has been the burden of an overabundant cultural identity set "right" by its

"wasteful" use within the safe confines of a parade. However, the expending of cultural energy without a profitable cultural gain may not be the true end of the parade. Potentially, an alternative route through this maze of cultural identity can be demonstrated.

It will be the purpose of this chapter to examine the St. Patrick's Day Parades of South Louisiana, specifically, the parades of New Orleans and Baton Rouge. I have chosen South Louisiana for two reasons: First, New Orleans, thanks to its status in the 19th century as the second largest port of call for Irish immigrants in America, has a large and varied Irish-American population; second, thanks to South Louisiana's cultural, "gumbo," the St. Patrick's Day Parades in New Orleans and Baton Rouge are loaded with ironies, cultural concessions, and multiple messages that make the event truly unique. Ultimately, this event allows one to see how the complexities of a hyphenated identity function when confronted with the energy of the polis, as well as how that energy can make a familiar event unfamiliar.

Initially, this chapter will provide a backdrop for the contemporary incarnation of the parade by offering an overview of the history of the St. Patrick's Day parades in America, in general, and New Orleans, specifically. Following that, I will offer a description of a typical St. Patrick's Day Parade of South Louisiana. The description of the parade will provide

material needed to examine the ironies and quirks contained within the event. Finally, with this chapter I hope to demonstrate how the folkloric procession, in this case the St. Patrick's Day parades of South Louisiana, plays a role of unique primacy in the continual forming and re-imagining of an ever fluctuating Irish-American identity.

The notion that a culture sets aside one day for self-congratulatory celebration is not rare. With the St. Patrick's Day Parade, Irish Americans voluntarily accept one day to "be Irish." The other days of the year are spent constructing and maintaining an "American" visage. This setting aside performs a beneficial task because it allows for a central point of pride in the Irish-American community and, therefore, an obvious method for creating identity, unity, and meaning. On the other hand, this temporal categorization can be considered debilitating because an implied monocultural prejudice remains fully functional within the event itself. By establishing a specific time and place to "be Irish," Irish-Americans and non Irish-Americans imply that it is acceptable to be Irish on March 17th, but an active, daily demonstration of that identity exists as a source of cultural dissonance throughout the rest of the year.

Changing as the social context demands, St. Patrick's Day celebrations have been the touchstone for an ever shifting Irish-American identity for centuries. A participant in the first New Orleans' St. Patrick's Day celebration in 1809 would

hardly recognize the contemporary manifestation of the holiday. Gone are the militias, social help organizations, and volunteer fire companies. These have been replaced by floats, fire-eaters and sundry festival paraphernalia. But, perhaps, the early Irish-American celebrant would not be quite so lost. St. Patrick's Day celebrations still provide an outlet for "all things Irish" and still support a nationalistic view of the Irish-American community.

Principally reflecting the largely Anglo-Irish heritage of the earliest Irish-American immigrants, the first St. Patrick's Day celebrations in the United States can be traced to Boston in 1737 and New York in 1762 (Wittke 199). These early celebrations consisted of an elaborate banquet followed by a series of rhetorically baroque toasts and declarations. The participants were often both Catholic and Protestant and considered "respectable" members of the cities' populations. The Irish-American population of this era proved so acceptable and non-controversial that General George Washington recognized the holiday during the American Revolution. By the turn of the century, St. Patrick's Day was celebrated in all of the major cities throughout the young republic (Wittke 199).

St. Patrick's Day commemorations would serve many different purposes before finally evolving into its current incarnation. The origins of St. Patrick's Day celebrations stretch back much further than the 18th century introduction of Irish individuals

to the New World. The earliest mention of a civic St. Patrick's celebration can be found in the Dublin Assembly Roles of October 24, 1466. The Assembly offers this ordinance,

Item hit is ordeynet & graunt by the Seide Semble that ffro thens forward suche persones as will cum to the Citte in the ffestes of Corpus Christi Seint George Seint Patrik for procession and pylgrymage and hors for Ryding at Corperaunt {'Shrove Tuesday'} be fre with oute enny Wexacion {'hinderance'} cummyng Goyng and abydyng a day befor and a day after so that thei bryng no man his horse of the Citte with them the wich was stoll (Fletcher 226).

In this dictum the religious observance of Saint Patrick's Day still dominates the meaning of the day ("procession and pylgrymage"), but a suggestion can be gleaned that the feast day is more than just a religious holiday with the reference to "Ryding." Additionally, a hint of the rowdyism so vocally condemned by contemporary critics as a corruption of the "original intent" of the St. Patrick's Day parade can be sensed in the last lines of the Assembly's order, which warns festival goers about the illegality of appearing at the celebrations with a stolen horse.

In 1567, another reference to Saint Patrick's Day as a civic holiday appears in Kilkenny's Corporation Book. The city's assembly requires that for such joint civic and religious holidays as Christmas, Easter and St. Patrick's Day, during which the Lord Deputy would participate in procession, doorways must be cleared of "dung or filth" (Fletcher 348). Many of these same kinds of laws and statutes can be applied to any of the number of

religious and civic festivals of 15th and 16th century Europe. These statutes also contextualize the early St. Patrick's Day observations in Ireland as part of a larger network of cultural performances involving pageants, processions, and mummings that reinforced the inseparable connection between civic and religious life at that time.

Echoes of these medieval and Renaissance activities can still be found in today's St. Patrick's Day parades in such acts as when the parade walkers of the Downtown Irish Club of New Orleans stop the march in order to visit a bar. Here the parade participants take over an establishment for a brief amount of time, replenish their drinks, playfully harass the owners of the bar and move on their way. Not only are echoes of the mummers and the Feast of Fools found in such activities, but a fascinating intersection also arises between the St. Patrick's Day parades of South Louisiana and the Courir de Mardi Gras of the Cajun Triangle. In the use of floats and the dispensation of throws and flowers, the St. Patrick's Day parade also calls forth the performative memory of the royal pageants and entrance processions that once dominated the celebration of St. Patrick's Day in pre-Modern Ireland.

By 1639, evidence appears that suggests the St. Patrick's Day celebrations were losing their cultural cache as religious/civic holidays and becoming a more secularized event. Henry Burnell's play Landgartha debuted on March 17th of that

year. The performance of this play was notable for a couple of different reasons. First of all, the court of Charles I had attended the opening of the Dublin Assembly in the days preceding St. Patrick's Day. The play was being offered not only as a way of marking the observation of Ireland's patron saint but also as an entertainment to the Crown's entourage. Secondly, St. Patrick's Day always falls within the Lenten season. Observations of St. Patrick's Day, as a result, certainly had a much more subdued and solemn tone than those before or after Lent. In this case, however, the solemnity of Lent was outweighed by other, more pressing, cultural factors. Finally, the subject matter of the play seems to have very little to do with Catholic sainthood or the figure of Patrick himself. Rather the play opens with a "prologue delivered by an Amazon with a Battle-Axe in her hand" (Fletcher 451). Later plays offered during Saint Patrick's Day celebrations would follow this trend. For example, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's work St. Patrick's Day, which did not premiere on said day but appeared as such later, merely has its events occur on March 17th. Otherwise the play is a "slight but very effective exercise in traditional *commedia dell'arte* knockabout, featuring the usual elements" (O'Toole, Traitor's 194). For nearly two hundred years, St. Patrick's Day existed as a holiday acknowledging Irish nationalism, Irish relations with the Crown, and the religious significance of the first Bishop of Ireland but only when St. Patrick's Day emigrated

to the United States would the celebration become a central feature of hyphenated identity politics.

The first recorded New Orleans' celebrations of St. Patrick's Day occurred on March 17, 1809 and followed that era's trend of "gentlemanly" nationalism and secular celebration. The commemoration of the holiday was given full coverage by the city's newspapers, which declared that "a respectable party of Irishmen of this city" organized the gathering. The banquet was attended by some of the most important members of New Orleans society, including two distinguished judges and Territory Governor Claiborne (Neihaus 12). A typical example of a toast offered during the evening goes as follows:

The People of Ireland: May they be as successful in establishing their own independence as they were conspicuous in aiding the accomplishments of the independence of the United States (Neihaus 12).

The toast provides an interesting insight into the nature of early St. Patrick's Day celebrations. The toast wishes "the People of Ireland" success in their future endeavors and appreciation for their contributions; however, the toast does not imply that the New Orleans Irish feel a duty to fight for the cause of Irish independence. Obviously, the early 19th century Irish of New Orleans no longer considered themselves direct participants in the destiny of Eire.

In 1811, on the eve of the War of 1812, a parade became a part of the St. Patrick's Day celebration in New Orleans. A



common practice for immigrant groups of the era (especially Irish-Americans) was that of forming a militia. This militia would open membership to anyone who could afford the cost of a uniform and arms. The parade of 1811 probably more closely resembled a full dress military drill than a contemporary celebration of Irish-American pride. It should be noted, however, that a display of martial prowess by an Irish-American militia in New Orleans and the rising anti-British sentiment of the War of 1812 can not be read as purely coincidental.

As early as the 1820's the St. Patrick's Day parade and banquets had become major events on the social calendar of the New Orleans elite regardless of ethnic affiliation. The banquets and balls were elaborate affairs, attended by governors and senators. Often the theatres of the city presented special St. Patrick's Day bills. One such theatrical notice ran as follows:

On Wednesday Evening, March 17, in compliment to that day so fondly cherished by a sister country will be performed the admired Petit Comedy of St. Patrick's Day. After which the Admired Opera of The Poor Soldier. To conclude with O'Keefe's admired farce of Love in a Camp, or Patrick in Prussia (Neihaus 14).

St. Patrick's Day commemorations of this era were reflections of the generally respected status of Irish-Americans in New Orleans. The celebrations still had close ties to the religious origins of the observation, and because most New Orleans Irish were financially and socially successful the balls, banquets and parades were not politically tumultuous. As Earl Neihaus writes,

"Irish-American nationalism in the 1820's while certainly in existence, was not yet the intense and sensitive emotion of the later years" (14). In other words, the Irish-Americans celebrating St. Patrick's Day in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely Protestant, genteel, and wealthy.

With its focus on balls, banquets and symbolic shows of militaristic pride, the St. Patrick's Day celebrations of the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century largely reflected the needs and wishes of that upper middle class of New Orleanians. However, a dramatic rise in the Irish population between 1830 and 1880 brought about the "intense and sensitive" emotions noted by Neihaus. One historian has called the transformations of this era no less than a "sea-change." Because of the increasing political inequality in Ireland as well as the Famine of 1845-1853 a flood of poorly educated and technologically unskilled Irish entered the United States. During this period the population of New Orleans skyrocketed from 49,826 in 1830 to 116,375 in 1850 making New Orleans the third largest city in America at the time (Neihaus 23). For the first time the Irish diaspora in South Louisiana met with forceful and organized resistance. The increase in Irish immigrants to the city also created a division within the Irish American community. The Irish of long-standing in New Orleans who organized the earliest St. Patrick's Day celebrations considered themselves to be the "very old" Irish. The wave of immigrants that immediately

followed the "very old" Irish were considered "old" Irish and the famine refugees, when considered at all, were the "new" Irish (Neihaus 26).

These divisions are important because they are reflected in the St. Patrick's Day parades. The parade, during this era, became "clearly ethnic and was designed to appeal to the Irish masses" (Neihaus 114). The polite banquets and lavish balls of the early 19th century no longer met the needs of the Irish American community. Faced with the growing animosity of the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s, and with exclusion from mainstream American events such as Fourth of July parades, the Irish diaspora required a show of community that both unified and commanded respect from their fellow citizens (Wittke 198, Moss 137). The St. Patrick's Day parade became that display. The images of the parades became more militaristic and partisan in nature. Benevolent icons of St. Patrick were replaced with banners featuring the warrior-goddess Hibernia. The toasts featured greater political reach than those earlier, more gentle toasts and, very significantly, the day now began with a Catholic mass.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century approached, the Irish in America slowly began to be identified more as "Americans" and less as "Irish." There are many reasons for this change, not the least of which was the increase in immigration from other European countries. The Irish acted, if not quite voluntarily, as an avant-garde for

the millions of European immigrants who would pour through American ports in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The identification of more and more Irish-Americans as "American" must also be traced to the power of performances like the St. Patrick's Day parade. The parades now demonstrated the success and new-found power many Irish-American Catholics felt in regard to their hyphenated identities. For instance, the 1915 San Francisco parade featured a letter from President Wilson's secretary, the 1921 New York parade was one of the largest ever as thousands of participants protested the British treatment of Ireland, and the 1953 Cleveland festivities culminated with the U.S. and Irish flag being flown over the Public Square (Wittke 200).

Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in New Orleans, the parades remained popular, if rather uneventful, celebrations of "Irish-ness." Ironically, the New Orleans St. Patrick's Day parade may have been a victim of its own success. James McKay III, one of the Ancient Order of Hibernians' national directors, explains:

Lots of us remember our parents or grandparents participating in the big Hibernian Parade they had in New Orleans for years on Canal Street. But after World War II, the parades stopped. The returning soldiers moved out to the suburbs and other parades took its place - the Irish Channel Parade, the one out in Jefferson...  
(Times-Picayune, 17 Mar. 1996).

The last Ancient Order of Hibernians Parade in New Orleans was on March 17, 1941. McKay's comment tells a familiar story. Irish-

Americans who had once identified themselves more fully as Irish now identified themselves almost completely as American, complete with a home in the suburbs.

John F. Kennedy was elected to office in 1960 and "the long march of the Irish to the center of the Oval Office" was completed (Shrum 104). In Robert Shrum's words "the Kennedy presidency was a unique Irish passage, the end of second-class citizenship in America for the Irish and for Catholics in general" (104). Not surprisingly, the contemporary manifestation of the New Orleans' St. Patrick's Day festivities originated in 1960. In that year Parasol's, a popular Irish bar in the Irish Channel neighborhood, organized its first "block party" (Times-Picayune, 15 Mar. 1996).

Moving from its earliest history in the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of its "modern" era in 1960, the St. Patrick's Day parade has fulfilled various roles in the creation and support of the Irish-American identity. In its earliest incarnations, the parade offered Irish-America a way to celebrate class privilege and the fresh start granted to the largely Protestant immigrants. With the arrival of uneducated, Catholic immigrants stunned and suffering from the disastrous years of the Great Hunger, the parade re-formed into a display of nationalist pride often at odds with the monologic pressures of a nativist United States unwilling to concede a place in the cultural fabric. As those Famine generations developed

strategies for negotiating the American cultural landscape, the parade once again evolved. Serving the middle class aspirations of a group of people with assimilative desires, the parades of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries became demonstrations of the place of the Irish-Americans within the accomplishments of the United States. Kennedy's election to the highest office in the land marked a final step into the American mainstream for the Irish-Americans. Holding onto a status as the underprivileged or unwelcome would be ridiculous in light of such an event. More troubling for Irish-Americans was the realization that the "specialness" of their culture was at risk of being completely absorbed into the larger American story. The parades from this point in history become demonstrations of remembrance and performances of uniqueness.

The Irish Channel, a section of Adele Street between St. Thomas and Tchoupitoulas, gained its name thanks to the massive influx of Irish emigrants in the middle part of the 19th century seeking work and an inexpensive place to live. Unable to find work in the predominantly Creole city of New Orleans, many Irish moved just outside of the city of New Orleans proper to what was then the suburb of Lafayette. The neighborhood offered close proximity to the city and the riverfront and many of the residents of the Irish Channel made their living as stevedores and longshoremen. Thanks in part to the Channel's working class attitude and the isolationist disposition of 19th century

immigrant neighborhoods, the Irish Channel quickly developed a reputation for "toughness." Nowadays, the Channel, thanks to "white flight" and the appearance of low-income Federal housing projects in the 1950s and 1960s, boasts few if any of the Irish residents after which it was named (Saxon 51).

Today, the Irish Channel/Parasol's block party and parade constitute just one of the many events that take place in South Louisiana commemorating St. Patrick's Day. In 1997 alone there were six different parades in the New Orleans metropolitan area occurring over four days. This statistic reflects not only the diversity of the Irish-American community in New Orleans but also the influence the structure of Mardi Gras has had on the St. Patrick's Day celebrations. South Louisiana, as far as the available information suggests, holds the distinction of being the only geographical region in the United States to celebrate St. Patrick's Day with multiple parades over three or four consecutive days.

Anthropologist James Fernandez distinguishes between two forms of civic procession. One form falls within the realm of "folkloric procession," and focuses on the crafts and special skills of a specific group. The other form can be described as a "military parade," and its emphasis is on national power and the instruments and skills the nation has for its use in maintaining that power (Cities 203). Fernandez describes this concept further,

A folklore procession is, by definition, a show of local culture and a manifestation of local identity, just as a military parade is a parade of national culture and national identity....The military parade is a parade of the "instruments of violence" of which the nation-state enjoys the role of possession and legitimate use, just as a folklore parade is a parade of the instruments of conviviality (qtd in Cities 203).

The dynamic pull between these positions plays out throughout the entire history of St. Patrick's Day parades. In the parades of the 19th and early 20th centuries, a decided emphasis was placed on emulating the military processions of the larger and more dominant American culture. Irish-Americans, inspired by their sub-altern status, largely focused on displays of power and demonstrations of latent potentialities for violence and organized military actions. This veiled threat of aggressive action remains in the St. Patrick's Day parades of New York City and Boston, where the processional organization still resembles that of the 19th century's template. South Louisiana's St. Patrick's Day parade, as will be shown later, has exchanged the militaristic "instruments of violence" for the folkloric "instruments of conviviality."

The St. Patrick's Day parade, with its rambling, start-and-stop structure, carries with it the distinguishing signs of the folkloric procession. The Downtown Irish Club of New Orleans presents one of the more popular parades of South Louisiana's St. Patrick's Day festivities. I had the opportunity, in 1994 and again in 2000, to attend this club's parade. The parade, unlike



some of the region's other St. Patrick's Day observations, occurs on March 17 and traditionally starts at 6:30PM. The Downtown Irish Club's march comprises one of the two parades that are located in the French Quarter, the other being Jim Monaghan's Decatur Street Irish Club's St. Patrick's Day Parade, a traditional French Quarter walking parade. The parade starts at

the corner of Burgundy and Pauline Streets, going along Piety and then Royal Streets into the Vieux Carre, where it turns onto Decatur Street, North Peters and Bienville Streets, then along Bourbon Street and ending with a dance...at the Bourbon Orleans Hotel (Times-Picayune, 15 Mar. 1996).

By the time the parade has finished at approximately 10:30PM, the participants have paraded through the Bywater, Fauberg-Marigny, and French Quarter districts of the city and have stopped at approximately six to eight bars along the route (Times-Picayune, Lagniappe 3).

The differences between this St. Patrick's Day Parade and those I witnessed as a youth in the Northeast United States are striking and immediately felt. In the Northeast, the parades are cold in temperature and in tone. The police typically march within the parade as a representative group, combining their demonstration of force with that of the Irish-American culture. Fights frequently break out on the street corners. The cities' important politicians "glad hand" the public and the marchers. The time of the Southeast Louisiana parades couldn't be any more different in appearance. The parade, as I witnessed it from my

position on Decatur Street, started with a man eating and breathing fire while marching on stilts down the center of Decatur. The stilt-walking, fire-breather tells me he is from Dublin, Ireland and returns to New Orleans annually specifically to participate in this parade. By his own admission, he has taken part in this event for approximately fifteen years. The Celtic fire-breather was followed by a police escort that made sure the route was clear for the ensuing parade.

Next, a succession of floats, convertibles and marching troupes took over the street. Again, the easy-going, carnivalesque mood of this celebration of the Irish-American hyphen stands out as a radical departure from the traditional, quasi-militaristic tenor struck by virtually all other St. Patrick's Day Parades in the United States. Most of the riders of the floats were young women wearing emerald green evening dresses. These women tossed beads, doubloons potatoes, Moon-pies, cups, and cabbages from their vantage points high above the crowd. The audience responded with what may fairly be called a typical French Quarter reaction. The convertibles carried local celebrities, the parade's grand Marshall, and the clubs' "Irishman of the Year."

The walking troupes were generally older male members of the club, although there were female and mixed gender marching groups. The men in the marching troupes wore either green or black sport coats and dress pants, as well as bowlers. The

marchers also often displayed a regalia or sash that declared with which troupe they were marching. These marching troupes rarely walked in the center of the road, choosing to stay close to the onlookers where they could hand out beads, doubloons and cups emblazoned with the Club's moniker, often at the cost of a kiss from waiting female parade attendees. The parade ended with no fanfare or finale; rather, the procession just moved further along its route. The last image I have of the parade consists of two young boys playing soccer with a cabbage in the wake of the marchers. This description of the Downtown Irish Club's march conveys just how different and unique the St. Patrick's Parade remains compared to other cities' festivities. The cultural heritage of New Orleans and the rest of South Louisiana has, quite obviously, put its fingerprint on the Irish-American parade.

The St. Patrick's Day parade manufactures identity in many different ways. As stated earlier, one such way, common to many cultures in the U.S., involves setting aside a time on the calendar with the purpose of honoring a specific heritage. The performances of "Irishness" that make up the St. Patrick's Day Parade, a temporally and spatially specific event, provides individuals with the justification for the hyphen in "Irish-American." Through the days' parades, Irish-Americans "rhetorically and symbolically" ground "their present in a remembered and constructed past" (Moss 130). Prescribing

"Irishness" to one event a year allows for a central rallying point in the often confusing game of identity politics. Patrick Ford, in an 1874 St. Patrick's Day address spoke to that point:

On this one day in the year an Irishman is a MAN. During the other three-hundred and sixty-four days, an Irishman feels himself curtailed of his fair proportion. But on this one day he attains to his full height. He does not slink into a corner: he does not conceal himself in the shade, lest people may think he is Irish (Moss 139).

More recently the Time-Picayune addressed the same point in a slightly more truncated manner, "To many Americans, St. Patrick's Day is a license to express they're Irish" (Times-Picayune, 17 Mar. 1997). However, cultural expressions that spill over outside the traditional boundaries of St. Patrick's Day into the everyday life of America are not always so warmly greeted.

Evidence of the possible friction created by identity boundary transgression appears in Conor Cruise O'Brien's 1995 article for the National Review, "The Wearing of the Greenbacks." In the article, O'Brien describes St. Patrick's Day as solely "a fun thing, for the most part; a thing of leprechauns and green beer, broad grins and slaps on the back" (26). O'Brien goes on to define the holiday as "best seen as one of a number of ethnic celebrations, along with Pulaski Day for Poles, Columbus Day for Italians, and Steuben Day for Germans. Together, all these celebrations make up a multi-ethnic celebration of America itself" (26).

That would be the final word for O'Brien except that 1995 was the year Gerry Adams was allowed entry into the U.S., and marched in the New York City parade. O'Brien describes how Adams was allowed access into the U.S. because of the influence of a few politically motivated and "radical" Irish-Americans who have as their goal the destruction of U.S.-British relations, the glorification of the I.R.A., and the "Irish" politicization of otherwise good Americans. O'Brien's article demonstrates quite ably the tension that forms when the politeness of once-a-year-Irishness reaches for an affect beyond one day. O'Brien's fear seems to be that good, apolitical Americans will be converted into politically radicalized Irish-Americans if the forces of Irish republicanism have their way with the sacred tradition of the St. Patrick's Day Parade. O'Brien conveniently erases the fact that the St. Patrick's Day Parade has always been political in one way or another, and that the very attempt at forging and reinforcing a hyphenated cultural identity in the city streets is necessarily a political act.

O'Brien also fails to understand that the actual process of preparing an event celebrating a hyphenated identity forces a group to recognize the opposite forces of self-segregation and general public acceptance. The politics of cultural identity demand great energy for the navigation between the impulse that brings people into like minded groups and the desire to have that group recognized as valid and necessary. Through my strong

relationship with the Celtic Society of Louisiana I have had the opportunity to witness firsthand the preparations that go into such an event. The Celtic Society participates in many regional multi-cultural events and produces such activities as Tartan Day celebrations, Burns Day celebrations and Irish music concerts. They are also one of the primary forces behind the Baton Rouge St. Patrick's Day parade. In 2001, I rode with the Celtic Society in the parade and attended the preparatory meetings as well. The full energy and dedication of the group is evident in their preparations for the parade. Decisions are made concerning everything from who will be riding on the floats and who will be walking next to them to what decorations will bedeck the floats to matters of security and public perception.

Most interestingly, perhaps, are the reminders and warnings that seem to take up a great deal of the Society's meeting time. During these preparatory meetings the dialogue inevitably turns to what image will be presented to the public. Many members want to include American emblems or signs or, occasionally other Celtic cultures emblems or signs. In response another Society member politely but emphatically reminded the rest of the Society that St. Patrick's Day is an Irish celebration; not Celtic, not American but Irish. The other members of the group shake their heads in acquiescence and the meeting moves on. At other times there are jokes made concerning alcohol use or inebriated conditions. This type of banter results in an even more stern

response than that concerning the inherent "Irishness" of the day's celebrations. In fact, the walkers (people who walk next to the floats making sure the public does not run under a tractor while grabbing for beads) are required to attend a specially called meeting in which they are told expressly not to drink alcoholic beverages before or during the parade. The reasons given for this are two-fold: one, walkers are there as security and insurance, and two, the parade is a "family event" in which the Society hopes to present a civically responsible and sober face. These warnings are uniformly not present in the Celtic Society's preparations for the Baton Rouge Spanish Town Mardi Gras celebration in which they participate mere weeks before St. Patrick's Day.

A parade in Baton Rouge, according to city law, can be no larger than 75 floats. The 2001 St. Patrick's Day parade probably contained one or two more than that, a fact told to me proudly by one of the parade organizers. On each of those floats rode approximately 35 people and next to which walked another ten. Each of the riders and walkers gave throws and beads to the crowd. This grand extravagance all takes place as the result of two warring needs. Like a Roman Senator vying for the public's adoration and votes, the Celtic Society hopes to gain the public's trust and admiration as a unique and desirable ethnic culture, a group whose cultural manifestations rise above the others. Also, like a politician, the Celtic Society equally

seeks to reassure the public that the apparent differences are not that great, that negative suspicions and stereotypes about Irish culture have been exaggerated, and their place as fully assimilated members of the community can be counted upon. Or, as was seen embroidered on the shirt of one of the parade participants, "American first, Irish always."

Walking such a fine line raises questions regarding the stability of a hyphenated identity. For example, the parades of South Louisiana should not however be understood as exercises in temperance. Riders and viewers alike still approach the day as a perfect excuse for a party. This unstated but understood goal forces to the surface questions regarding stereotypes of Irish-Americans as inveterate drinkers and as a generally uncontrollable segment of the American population. Simultaneously subverted and supported by the behaviors of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the "Wild Irishman" stereotype has both haunted and enticed the Irish in America since at least the early 19th century. One of the reasons St. Patrick's Day Parades were created was to combat this negative image. If a group of people were organized and disciplined enough to produce a major parade through the city center, the reasoning went, they certainly did not deserve a reputation of shiftlessness and irresponsibility (Moss 137).

In South Louisiana, this dichotomy between trustworthiness and ludic behavior only becomes more amplified. The



Irish-Americans of the region organize not just one large and successful parade but several, and two of the parades occur in the French Quarter, an area infamous for its bacchanalic behavior. A local, weekly columnist, describing the planned events for a regional parade, mentions "beer" or "drinking beer" no less than seven times (Stroup, B1). So the formation of an Irish-American identity has to confront an interesting tension. Part of the significance of a parade results from the power one particular group demonstrates by controlling a popular civic space. In New Orleans, one such space is the French Quarter. But a parade in the Quarter has its own rules that must be followed in order to ensure success, including drinking, dancing, singing, throwing beads and other so-called "wild" behavior.

Neither does this dynamic stop at the boundaries of French Quarter. As both Leslie Wade and Joseph Roach have noted, the entire city of New Orleans has been resituated as a "pleasure zone," **the** "ludic space, the behavioral vortex, for the rest of the nation" (Roach, Cities 231). One could even, without stretching the limits of plausibility, declare that New Orleans stands as the capital of a much larger behavioral vortex called South Louisiana; a notion that only gains credence when one reads state tourist literature that foregrounds the region's casinos, festivals, Zydeco music, cajun food, football, and "good times." Staging an event in South Louisiana, therefore, demonstrates an impressive administrative skill on the part of the organizers,

while staging a successful event for the public in this ludic, civic space forces the organizers to engage in behaviors decidedly counter to the image of a responsible and sober citizen. As a result, the very location of the Downtown Irish Club's St. Patrick's Day parade (as is true of all the area's parades) assists in the simultaneous destruction and creation of the "Wild Irishman" image within the Irish-American identity.

A hyphenated identity above all must remain open to change and influence. Arguably an identity that has lost its ability to adapt has died. The "throws" of the South Louisiana parade offer the viewer a glimpse into the adaptability hyphenated identities must demonstrate in order to remain current and vital. Certainly the "throws" (thrown objects from a float, e.g. beads, vegetables, etc.) furnish one of the most distinguishing features of the South Louisiana parades. The tossing of beads and doubloons to parade spectators holds a special place in the hearts of South Louisianans. The tossing of cabbages and potatoes, however, only occurs during a St. Patrick's Day Parade. The throwing of these stereotype-laden signs echoes one of New Orleans' most famous Mardi Gras traditions, the Zulu Parade. During this parade the all-black Zulu Krewe tosses gold colored coconuts to the imploring crowd. New Orleans history reminds us that the Zulu's organized their parade because of the racist exclusionary policies of the city's other krewes. To further their point, the Zulu's appropriated the racist stereotype of the

"black savage" and the outward gestures of that bigotry. Now, in an act of performative manipulation, the coconuts distributed during the Zulu Parade are one of the most prized Mardi Gras keepsakes. Similarly, the Irish-Americans of South Louisiana have taken a mainstream, American, stereotypical symbol of Irishness (potatoes and cabbages), appropriated that sign, and created a new, ironic signification for that symbol. Keeping the identification of the cabbage with the Irish-American culture, parade riders turn this inexpensive and not-altogether desirable vegetable into a treasured throw and enviable catch.

A hyphenated identity, however, can't be so amorphous and flexible as to entirely assimilate into a region's prevailing culture. To that effect, certain resemblances between South Louisiana and the rest of the United States remain. One interesting and very telling similarity between the St. Patrick's Day parade in New Orleans and the parade throughout the rest of the U.S. is the common use of a Grand Marshall. For all the influence that Mardi Gras has obviously had on St. Patrick's Day in New Orleans, the Irish parade does not use the Mardi Gras tradition of the "King." Pat Gallagher, founding member of the Covington St. Patrick's Day Parade in St. Tammany Parish, relates an anecdote that may explain why the New Orleans Irish-American community never incorporated the "King" into their parades. Apparently in the mid-1990's, an organization attempted to stage a St. Patrick's Day Parade and asked Gallagher if he would be

their first king. Gallagher responded, "Excuse me? The first king? The Irish have had a little problem with kings and queens" (Stroup, B1). The fledgling parade never materialized.

This may seem like a slight, even apocryphal, story; however, the tale nicely serves to illustrate a point about the formation of the St. Patrick's Day parade in South Louisiana and identity construction among the Irish-American community. In creating the performance of identity known as the St. Patrick's Day parade, South Louisiana Irish-Americans made a choice to deviate from the traditional method of staging a St. Patrick's Day Parade by assuming methods generally regarded as Mardi Gras conventions. However, South Louisiana Irish-Americans, whether in a nod to an anti-monarchical bias or as a way to maintain a cultural link with other Irish-American parades, stopped short of utilizing all the devices of Mardi Gras. When faced with the choice between a king and a Grand Marshall the various parade organizers all chose the latter.

While South Louisiana Irish-Americans have deliberately incorporated aspects of Mardi Gras into their understanding of the Irish-American hyphen, a certain deliberate resistance to the spirit of Mardi Gras must also be considered. Ultimately, Mardi Gras and the St. Patrick's Day parades must be considered two very different entities, forging two very different identities. Having participated often in Mardi Gras and the St. Patrick's Day parades I have personally witnessed these differences. The most

readily apparent divergence can be found not within the parade but at curbside. At a typical Mardi Gras parade event, the crowd is strongly encouraged by the police to remain behind barricades and temporary fencing erected strictly for this purpose. The crowd constantly shifts and pushes in order to obtain a better vantage point or for better chances at throws. Alcoholic beverages seem to achieve a presence beyond ubiquitous. Nudity is not unusual and the humor of the krewes' floats often contain scatological references or, at the very least, pseudo-Classical renderings of the nude human form. The energy of the crowd feels competitive and uncertain, a feeling that makes you believe that a fight or riot may break out at any moment.

St. Patrick's Day parades, however, while possessing a raucous and unpredictable energy, rarely "feel" as if the unpredictable will actually happen. The crowds, often as large as those at a Mardi Gras parade, rarely appear as claustrophobic, and, while alcoholic beverages are certainly consumed in great quantities, the presence of alcohol does not seem to have the primacy that it does at a Mardi Gras celebration. Nudity, expressly forbidden in the Baton Rouge St. Patrick's Day Parade, rarely even becomes an issue, and scatological humor is virtually absent in the region's celebrations. Whereas the krewes of Mardi Gras toss trinkets and doubloons to the clamoring public from high atop mammoth floats, the masses and parade riders of St. Patrick's Day parades, sans barricades, often meld into one large

accumulation of revelers and machinery. Here we see a fundamental difference between Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day. South Louisiana Irish-Americans, having been on the receiving end of exclusionary policies for so long are given the chance to correct that slight. So instead of the semi-anonymous masking and privileged mayhem of Mardi Gras, South Louisiana Irish-Americans present a parade that features a gregarious inclusiveness.

Perhaps the greatest variance between the two events can be found in the laws regarding parades and public spectacles. According to Louisiana State statutes any form of masking or disguise is expressly against the law. Exceptions are made for the purposes of Halloween (for children only), entertainments, and Mardi Gras. All parades and processions require an expensive bond to be posted and, if the parade occurs within the city of New Orleans, the cost of police protection must also be paid for by the producing organization -- unless, of course, that parade or procession is a part of the Mardi Gras celebration. Furthermore, Louisiana law extends the "assumption of risk" clause in order to virtually guarantee that a spectator injured as the direct result of a Mardi Gras parade or a krewe's actions during a parade cannot seek civil or criminal redress.

Needless to say this extension of the law does not apply to St. Patrick's Day parades. Rather, the producers of the St. Patrick's Day parades are keenly aware of the assumed legal risk

they are taking by presenting such an event in the public sphere. In the Baton Rouge parade, for example, the number of people walking beside a float is nearly doubled, and their purpose is much more clearly that of security than celebrant. Masks are absent, alcohol kept in check, security tightened, bonds paid in full, police protection purchased and only then does the St. Patrick's Day parade ride.

Hyphenated identity inherently must seek renewal and the St. Patrick's Day parade assists in that process. A common view held by many observers of contemporary St. Patrick's Day Parades notes that the parade no longer has its original meaning, that the Irish-American community has "forgotten their past and romanticized the 'good old days' that never were" (Godfrey 62). John Leo's comments typify the charge against St. Patrick's Day parades, "Along the way, the St. Patrick's Day parade, once a defiant show of strength against Protestant power, gradually declined into a pointless annual march of aging suburbanites and drunken collegians staggering along in funny hats" (16). Considering that recent St. Patrick's Day parades throughout the U.S. have featured Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, battles between the Gay and Lesbian community and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Famine, opinions like Leo's seem misguidedly one-sided. Leo's comments hardly qualify as unusual when examined in the context of other writings on St. Patrick's Day either.

Be that as it may, such notions concerning the "nature" of the various St. Patrick's Day observations around the U.S. display a singular lack of understanding regarding the performance genealogies and ancestrage of this annual Irish-American cultural event. Typically a commentator, ignoring the complex historical development of the St. Patrick's Day parades, will take the celebrants to task for ignoring the solemnity or sacredness of the occasion. Granted, St. Patrick's Day is indeed recognized by the Catholic Church as a feast day, and it is also true that throughout the later half of the 19th century and two-thirds of the 20th century, the day expressly existed as an Irish-American Catholic cultural node of resistance to the dominate White Anglo-Saxon Protestant powers. However, embedded within the St. Patrick's Day parades is an ongoing negotiation with the very nature of hyphenated identity; a negotiation that has never, nor could ever, settle on one simple solution or definition.

The abstract process of identity formation, with its intangible psychological and anthropological elements, finds in the parades a concrete manifestation of its very processes. Arlene Stein has written that all identity-based movements yearn "for a totalizing identity, for a master key which unlocks every door of reality" (144). But yearning for that "master key" and actually finding or creating such a device are two very different processes. The culturally creative activity on display before



the public eye in the St. Patrick's Day parades hardly remains hermetically sealed. Rather a "give and take" occurs and the parade's participants, curbside or street side, are presented with a crack in the façade of the monologic discourse of blind (Irish and American) Nationalism.

Through this "crack in the façade" an alternate cultural route, avoiding the pitfalls of self-segregation, total assimilation, or the profitless expenditure of cultural energy also declares its presence. Borrowing a concept from Charles Fanning, I argue that this alternate strategy might best be called a "liberating doubleness," a feeling of belonging to many cultures and a refusal to see oneself solely through the lens of an omni-assimilative paternalistic monoculture. By employing a model of liberating doubleness the hyphen becomes endowed with a social and creative power not often granted by other ways of thinking. The hyphenated identity, in this case, maintains the contribution of the unassimilated immigrant thereby avoiding the trap Greil Marcus writes of, "Complete assimilation really means complete acceptance. The immigrant who is completely assimilated into America has lost the faculty of adding whatever is special about himself to his country" (Mystery Train 144).

In using the notion of liberating doubleness to counter the effects of blind Nationalistic monologism, not only is a creative power granted to the hyphen but the place of the St. Patrick's Day parades must be re-evaluated as well. Sites like New Orleans

and Baton Rouge become the more explicit models of identity creation in the United States. The give and take of identity creation becomes the central tenet of these parades. The hyphen remains valid and vital because it is unafraid of what awaits at the next street corner. The popularly sited loci such as New York City and Boston become examples of the hyphen gone stagnant, an identity creation process consumed with protecting itself from its own monologism and ultimately sacrificing itself on the altar of cultural superabundance.

Roach recognizes the metaphorical slipperiness of parades within the context of cultural identity construction.

The parade, however obdurately resistant to integration it may see itself as being - and many parades have seen themselves in just that way - is nevertheless vulnerable. It is vulnerable because the participants literally succeed themselves before the eyes of the spectators. As the sound of one band dies, another arrives to lift the spirits of the auditors. Generations of marchers seem to arise and pass away. Because it is an additive form, passing by a point of review in succession, its ending is always an anticlimax, a provocation, and an opening (Cities 285).

The creation of a "collective identity is a production, a process" (Stein 150). As we have seen in the St. Patrick's Day Parades of South Louisiana, that process constantly negotiates an ever-shifting cultural matrix in its search for the necessary space to lay claim to a liberating doubleness.

**TWO IRISHMEN WALK INTO A BAR...: FLANAGAN'S WAKE AND THE  
IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY**

Author Terry Prone in an essay for the collection Being Irish, writes of an incident from her youth that proves insightful when considering the unstable constructs of cultural identity:

The late sixties. A group of young actors at a master class given by one of the greats of Irish theatre, Ray McNally. He requires the girls to do an improvisation. No words. He just wants us to act the part of a very beautiful woman. One by one, we climb onto the stage and shimmy across it. One slowly smooths imaginary clingy satin over her hips. One tosses back her hair and consults a non-existent mirror. One prances to a couch onstage and flounces into it as if the other pieces of furniture weren't up to her at all. When the last has gone through the exercise and returned, red-faced, to the group, the old man of the theatre lets us down gently, "A very beautiful woman doesn't get out of bed in the morning and preen," he says. "Her beauty isn't a surprise to her. It's a given. An *assumption*." Being Irish should be an assumption, but, for me, it's a constant improvisation, exploration and reconfiguration. I am less sure of it the older I get (Logue 239).

Prone wrestles with the question of identity for another two pages until she ultimately concludes, "For me, it's [being Irish] an improvisation in search of a certainty" (Logue 241).

Prone's thoughts on identity, searching, and certitude have a contemporary catholicity about them. Much of the writings that have been published pertaining to identity strike a similar pose suggesting that we are all improvisatory actors seeking certainty in an unstable world of contradictory meanings. Conceiving identity through the metaphor of improvisation endows seekers with a rich and fruitful language for understanding the

complicated topic. All of the fluidity and process-oriented rhetoric so common to 20th century discourses concerning cultural identity find a comfortable home in the nooks of the improvisatory metaphor.

Prone suggests a need to find an absolute meaning through her improvisatory search for cultural identity. But the "identity as improvisation" model, when explored completely, reveals that a certainty will only exist whilst we are engaged in that particular improv. As soon as that "game" ends, the improv actor must move on to the next set of circumstances. Cultural roles and identity are exposed to many of the same risks as an improv scene, and within the search for cultural identity one will always find a "ham" who does not understand the "productless" process of cultural improv but rather seeks to establish his or her own certainties and "gags" as absolutes and universal building blocks for all improvisational searches. In such moments, violent and transgressive actions become the mode of operation, and the very purpose of conceiving a cultural identity as an improvisation becomes useless.

In hyphenated American cultures, the self-invention and fluidity required to think of cultural identity as an improvisational process may be less of a luxury and more a necessity. Negotiating the hyphen in such cultures (and to one degree or another all cultures in the U.S. are hyphenated)

requires a jumping back and forth between different worlds of perception.

So perhaps it should be of little surprise that one of the most popular theatrical forms in the United States today is improvisation. Groups such as Second City, The Groundlings, The Committee, and Loose Moose and television programs like Who's Line is It Anyway, present the American public with a theatre rooted in process and porousness. A variation of this form has also been growing in popularity throughout the last decade of the 20th century: the "ethnic-event improvisation." Thanks, in part, to the success of Tony 'n Tina's Wedding, this mixture of text, improvisation, environmental theatre, and uniquely American hyphenate cultural event has established itself firmly in the repertoire of the popular American theatre.

I believe we can declare improvisational sketch comedy, and its variants, as more than just an entertainment; also as a cultural site wherein the very concepts that form a culture's identity are argued and defined. An evening with an improv comedy sketch troupe can easily be described as a performance of spontaneity. The actors have virtually no idea of what the impending scene will be about, and for that matter, neither does the audience. A performance of spontaneity requires that both actors and audience shift their perspectives away from culturally preconceived notions as inescapable and begin to understand a culture's "givens" as malleable and a source of play.

Also, in the improvisational model, the audience takes over much more of the dominion of the author than has ever been granted an audience. In so doing, the audience has a very direct say in what the cultural content of a performance site will be for each specific event. The acting troupe shares this authorial responsibility with the audience and if the actors do not "author" a piece to the audience's satisfaction, the actors quickly receive feedback and criticism. The actors, in turn, often feel justified in castigating the audience if the audience's suggestions are not "creative" or "original." In this way the ongoing debate over the "proper" or "improper" handling of a culture's signs gets bantered back and forth.

For example, in many improv performances an audience member, when asked for a suggestion for a character, will shout out the phrase, "porn star." Any improv actor who has done more than three professional performances will have heard this suggestion at least three times before. In this instance, the actor may make a remark to the audience member, commenting on the lack of originality on his/her part. The audience in turn may agree or disagree with this remark. Underlying this banter is nothing less than a debate over the appropriateness and usefulness of such a cultural sign in the realm of one culture's definition of itself and the performances through which it is defined.

Circum-Atlantic cultural dynamics thrive on such sites of contestation as well as the unpredictable play between cultures.

To introduce the notion of play into the ever-so-serious world of cultural identity creation may seem irresponsible or insensitive. However, one aspect of cultural manifestations and performances that go largely unmentioned and unrecognized by the majority of scholars in the field is the pleasure that comes from cultural playfulness. Engaging the signs of ones' culture with the energy of a child approaching a pyramid made of building blocks holds its own sweet rewards. The cultural materials of a society, one finds, are malleable and often interchangeable. The new creation rarely resembles the old but the materials are the same. Terry Eagleton hints at this sort of play when he writes, "The most uninspiring kind of identity politics are those which claim that an already fully fledged identity is being repressed by others. The more inspiring forms are those in which you lay claim to an equality with others in being free to determine what you might wish to become" (Idea 66).

The suggestion here is that we have a sort of freedom in choosing the cultural identity that helps answer the question, "Who are you?". When he uses the phrase, "being free to determine what you might wish to become," Eagleton also seems to suggest that an individual has a multitude of choices in regards to cultural identity. For better or worse, the world is one large buffet of cultural choices of equal standing, each with its positives and negatives. He also implies that the only way one can make this kind of choice is through exploration, openness,

and healthy skepticism. As Eagleton also writes, "We would know if a cultural identity had been securely established by its ability to engage in irony and self-criticism" (Idea 66). In other words, a cultural identity could be determined "firmly established" by the fact that it has room for play.

This chapter will look at the ability of the Irish-American identity to engage in such cultural play. Taking as its performance site the ethnic-improvisation, Flanagan's Wake, the chapter will investigate the improvisational processes at work in the formation of a hyphenated identity. By using an improvisational performance to foreground issues of improvisation in identity creation, culture-types and nostalgic exchanges are made more self-aware and, if at least in a playful way, self-critical. The clichés and stereotypes that, for so many years, negatively effected Irish-American identity are given new life in a performance like Flanagan's Wake; this time as fodder for parody and as symbols of past pain surmounted through humor. This chapter will demonstrate that Flanagan's Wake, ultimately, stands out as a site in which history, culture and surrogated memory meet in a forum that favors the anti-essentializing logic of dialogism.

Created in 1993 by the Zeitgeist Theatre Company in Chicago, Flanagan's Wake began its run as a St. Patrick's Day experiment by the Zeitgeist actors. Founded by members of ImprovOlympics and already established as one of Chicago's more dependable



improv troupes, the Zeitgeist Theatre Company had been presenting short and long form improv to theatre goers for years. A typical evening with Zeitgeist would start with a first act containing short-form improv games reliant upon the audience's suggestions for their content. The second act often revolved around a longer improv satirizing a popular genre of theatre. One of Zeitgeist's more frequent second act staples involved a long form, mock-Tennessee-Williams-drama. Audience members would offer suggestions that would in turn be used as "deep, dark secrets" for the stock Williams characters and would ultimately be revealed in proper Williams-esque form.

On St. Patrick's Day 1993, the Zeitgeist actors decided to try something new: a long-form improv grounded in the structure of a traditional Irish wake. Each actor would take a stock type (the parish priest, the long-suffering fiancée, the drinking buddy) and, with the audience's suggestions, develop a comic mock-wake. The first performances of Flanagan's Wake proved successful, and the actors found that word of mouth had brought an even larger audience to their theatre the following weekend. Flanagan's Wake (minus the St Patrick's Day holiday) was performed again to equal success. The members of Zeitgeist knew they had something special and set about developing the long-form improv into a full-length evening of theatre. The show evolved into a two-act play in which approximately sixty-five percent of the action was scripted while the rest relied on nightly

improvisations. In addition to the Chicago company (which has changed its name to Noble Fool, and after eight years is still producing the play), Flanagan's Wake has also enjoyed extended runs in Cleveland, Detroit, and Minneapolis.

The interactive and participatory dynamic that propels the improvisatory cultural play of Flanagan's Wake is announced from the earliest moments of the performance. As the audience enters the theatre, several members of the cast greet them. Condolences are passed and the audience members are welcomed as though they were long lost American cousins returning to the "auld sod." Everyone, except for the cast, gets a nametag at this time as well. All of the female names are given an additional "Mary" and all of the male names are given an extra "Patrick." For example, a woman who tells one of the cast members her name is Jennifer would have her name written on the tag as Mary Jennifer and so on. During this half-hour pre-show, the theatre's bar is open to patrons. The cast continues to greet audience members, and the actor playing the priest engages the audience in such lazzi as mock-confessions, and absurdly twisted, psuedo-comforting proverbs. As curtain time approaches, one of the actors announces that the bar will be closing for the first part of the wake and the ceremonies shall be commencing momentarily. Final drinks are purchased and the actors take their places throughout the house.

Because so many of our cultural models rely upon monologic energy, individuals often feel reluctant to actively contribute to the improvisational form of a more dialogic, participatory event. Audience participation is absolutely vital to the success of any improvisationally based performance and overcoming an audience's initial hesitation to break down the "fourth wall" becomes the company's first task. In order to get the audience involved from the first, an actor announces that they would like to begin the wake with one of Flanagan's favorite songs. The song, typically, is one of the traditional, turn-of-the-century, immigrant numbers of Irish-America such as "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." As the song reaches its melodic climax one of the actors holds the highest note for as long as he or she can. The song quickly ceases to be a nostalgic sing-a-long and turns into a contest to see how long the actor can hold the high note. Already the traditional clichés of Irish and Irish-American behavior are being played with. The song is used for its nostalgic capital only insofar as it gets the entire crowd singing together and participating. Once the song has brought the audience into the world of the performance, the singer mocks the song itself by stretching out its climactic note to a point of self-referential mockery. When the actor finally lets the note drop, the actors lead a round of applause, make a few jokes pertaining to lung-capacity and "Irish" long-windedness, and the wake begins.

An opening speech is made by the character Patrick Boyle in which the audience discovers most of the exposition that it will need for the rest of the evening. Boyle also functions to explain the basic "rules" of the improvisation. Through his initial interaction with the audience, Boyle establishes that the playful suggestions and participation of the audience are not only desirable but essential. Flanagan has passed away, Boyle tells the crowd, and the Mayor has been kind enough to let the town use his pub for the observation. At this point, Flanagan's fiancée for the past nineteen years tries to mount the casket. Patrick and two or three others pull her away and the action continues. There are still some details that must be cleared up, it turns out. First of all Flanagan's death remains somewhat of mystery and Patrick looks to the audience for the cause. Secondly, Flanagan's death occurred while he was on a vacation and the audience must provide this as well. And finally, Flanagan's death is most tragic because he was unable to fulfill his dream. Once again Patrick must find out what this dream was from the audience. With these basic elements established, Flanagan's best friend, Brian Ballybunion takes the dais.

The setting of the staging is simple. A raised stage space of about ten feet wide by six feet deep holds a coffin at the back of it. In front of the coffin sits Mother Flanagan, a male actor dressed in drag who speaks indecipherable Gaelic and commits acts of slapstick violence on the other cast members.

Onto this set steps Brian. He has been asked to eulogize his best friend. The actor playing Brian must now take two of the three suggestions offered by the audience, how Flanagan died and during what vacation, and tell the audience (and the rest of the cast) the story of Flanagan's final moments. Brian begins his comic tale about as far removed from Flanagan's method of demise as possible and works the tale back to the audience's suggestions. The moment is crucial in a performance of Flanagan's Wake. This story is the first fully improvised moment of the evening and lets the audience know what quality of improvisation they can expect. Secondly, Brian's story will provide the cast with its surplus of jokes for the rest of the evening. If the improvised story falls flat, the entire evening risks failure.

A certain parodic and playful tone has already been set by this point in the performance. Stock characters have been presented to the audience and in turn have shown themselves to be self-referencing exaggerations. But, perhaps the stock character most ready for such a "tongue-in-cheek" treatment is the parish priest. When Brian's eulogy ends with a toast, the priest, Father Fitzgerald, comes to the stage in order to offer the benediction. A hard-drinking character with some rather pagan views of the Catholic faith, Father Fitzgerald begins his prayer with a bible story. This part of the script offers one of the few fully developed and textually established parts of the show.

The actor playing the priest improvises very little during this speech, although it should be mentioned that the speech was developed through a series of improvisations and audience experiments. The priest tells a story from the gospel of Kevin, the unknown fifth apostle. The story focuses on the trials and tribulations of Jesus' life between the ages of 12 and 30. When the priest's benediction finally begins to come completely undone the rest of the cast stops him and he blesses the casket with some "holy" beer from his bottle.

Evoking the popular Irish-American culture-type of the abandoned and long-suffering lover, Flanagan's fiancée, Fiona Finn, next approaches the coffin. She begins to tell the story of how they had been together for so many years without ever having tied the knot. During her time with Flanagan, he revealed his deepest wish to her, which is the dream Patrick got from the audience at the beginning of the show. Fiona then sings a song about Flanagan's dream. The song's lyrics are improvised to a pre-established melody, which evokes the heart-rending ballads commemorating Famine emigration and the Irish losses during their many battles with the British. At the end of the song, Fiona becomes so consumed with grief and loss that she climbs back on the coffin. This action sends Mother Flanagan, no supporter of Fiona to begin with, into a garbled, ear-splitting tantrum, and, while the rest of the cast struggles to regain control of the

situation, Patrick announces to the audience that now might be a good time to re-open the bar and take a brief intermission.

Like Act I, Act II opens with a song in order to reclaim the audience's attention and participation. This time, however, the singer is a volunteer from the audience and the song is "Danny Boy." If the audience member shows an aptitude for singing, the cast will let him/her sing and offer such encouragements as "Good on ye," and "What a lovely voice." However, if the volunteer, proves shy or, perhaps, a little too inebriated, the cast will join in the singing and motion to the audience to join in. By always letting the audience member finish the song, the cast subtly gives the whole audience greater confidence to participate. If the cast were to shut down the less than accomplished (or less than sober) singer, the audience could possibly take this as a sign regarding their potential treatment if they give a "wrong" response. However, a strong cast of improvisers will know that only in the most extreme circumstances will a response be "wrong," and the only truly negative thing that could happen to the performance would be for the audience to stop participating.

The selection of "Danny Boy" itself is loaded with cultural significance and nostalgic capital. Perhaps the archetypal Irish-American anthem, the song remains a standard for Irish-American singers in the same way "When the Saints Go Marching In" always will appear on the set lists of New Orleans' Dixieland

bands. The melody of the song dates back hundreds of years to 18<sup>th</sup> century Derry (McCourt 21). In fact long before "Danny Boy" existed the "Derry Air" was a standard for pipers and harpists. Not until 1913 would the melody have lyrics. Those famous lyrics, however, were not written by an Irish person or member of the Irish Diaspora. Instead "Danny Boy" was the creation of an English barrister and amateur songwriter named Frederick Edward Weatherly (McCourt 35). The song itself, arguably, has nothing whatsoever to do with Irish culture. But the singers who adopted the song in the years surrounding World War One certainly were Irish. With its evocation of loss and exile, combined with the haunting melody created by the musicians of Derry, "Danny Boy" quickly was adopted by Irish-Americans as their own anthem and creation.

Furthering the cultural play and nostalgic trade that the actors have begun in the introduction of Act II with *Danny Boy*, Flanagan's Wake pushes the image of the singing, sentimental Irishman into the realm of self-parody. Following the singing of "Danny Boy," Patrick and Brian engage in a song competition. The audience is asked for the title of Flanagan's favorite song and receives encouragement from the actors to give the name of a popular song on the radio. The suggestions might range from "Material Girl" to "Freebird" to "In a Gadda da Vida" (a particularly nasty favorite of audiences and vengeful cast members alike). Brian then sings an up-tempo melody evocative of



Irish drinking songs that incorporates the title given by the audience. Then Patrick must sing. His song's title also comes from the audience in exactly the same way as Brian's. To vary the game, however, the cast gets to add three things that the song is about. For example, the song title may be "Smoke on the Water." The cast will then "remind" Patrick of some of the content of the song. One actor might say, "You know, that's the one about the angry penguins." To which another actor might respond, "Sure, the angry penguins and the meatloaf." A third actor will then chime in, "And don't forget the Popeil Pocket Fisherman." (This last one, by the way, was an honest-to-God suggestion I once received from the actor playing the priest. He was good to enough to at least buy me a beer afterwards.) Patrick must then create a song with a generic, Irish ballad melody about the angry penguins, meatloaf, and the Popeil Pocket Fisherman entitled, "Smoke on the Water."

What follows is perhaps the "purest" moment of participatory behavior of the evening. Following the song, the cast decides the time has come for the reading of the will. Father Fitzgerald leads the reading of the will and asks if any one in the audience wants to make a claim on the estate. This is one of the more interesting moments in the performance. There are no established jokes or textual hints as to what the cast should do with the audience member. The audience member who decides to "make a claim" has nothing to rely on except his or her own wits. Any

jokes or humor during this scene comes directly from the audience member's imagination or the actor's ability to quickly react to the volunteer's improvisatory offering. The most remarkable aspect of this scene is that it rarely failed to play very well. Usually the audience volunteer came up with some very funny (and often risqué) suggestions and the actors were almost always able to match the audience joke for joke.

Suddenly, with the will reading barely finished, Mother Flanagan has an attack and must be rushed out of the bar. The actor playing Mother is pushed off stage by the actress playing the batty, old, woman Katherine. In the uproar the absence of these two actors typically goes unnoticed and Patrick fills some time with a few last thoughts on the meaning of life. He asks the audience what life is like and they respond by completing the metaphor. Suggestions of "life is like a box of chocolates" are met with mutual derision from the cast and audience and Patrick must try and find a witty explanation as to why "life is like" the audience member's suggestion. The performance is nearing its end and Patrick and the other audience members prepare for the final prayers. At that moment, a strange noise comes from behind the coffin and a leprechaun (the actress playing Katherine, after a quick change) springs on top of the casket. She utters a charm that guarantees that all of the beer will be free for the rest of the night and with that Flanagan (the actor playing Mother Flanagan, also after a quick change as well as a tight fit

through a trap door) opens his own coffin, spilling the leprechaun to the floor, and inquiring where one might find that free beer. This "punch line" comes directly from the last verse of the song "Flanagan's Wake." The cast assembles onstage, sings one last song, and joins the audience at the bar for one last drink before the evening concludes.

The humor of the evening obviously trades in stereotypes of Irish and Irish-American culture. From the pub owner/mayor to the near-do-well drinking buddy all of the characters are modeled on a stock type that might seem offensive if not presented so broadly. Additionally, much of the humor and meaning of the show can only come from the audience being complicitous with the action and recognizing the stock types for being just that, types. Much of the pleasure the audience gets from this style of theatre counts on the audience to get the "in-joke." This tongue-in-cheek approach to the material may also help explain why the show has a fair number of "repeat offenders." Possibly, some of the audience members returning for their second or third time are present in order to witness new corruptions of old styles and different audiences' reaction to the same "in-joke." There also can be found an indictment of the audience's own behavior in the awareness that makes the show work. The stereotypes of this performance only act stereotypically if the audience guides the actors in that direction. If the audience suggests that Flanagan died as the result of drowning in Guinness

the stereotypes are set into full motion and usually can only be adjusted through another suggestion. If on the other hand, Flanagan dies as the result of a physics accident at MIT then, to a certain degree, the stock types have to adjust and proceed in a direction that may prove subversive to the traditional types.

Considering the primacy of improvisation in both the performance at the center of this chapter and the creation of a hyphenated identity, a few assumptions regarding the inner dynamics of improv should be reviewed before progressing further. Improv sketch comedy usually comes in one of two forms: the improvised sketch "spontaneously" created from an audience suggestion, or, a more formalized "skit" created in rehearsals but still using the suggestions of observers. The core of the improvised sketch, comic or otherwise, is the scene. The scene, simply stated, is "a short, theatrical piece comprised of character, environment, and plot that is able to stand on its own" (Goldberg 6). Each of these scenes lasts approximately three to six minutes, although in recent improvisational experiments "scenes" have been developed into full evenings of theatre (the heretofore mentioned, long-form). Improv sketch comedy most often occurs in alternative theatre spaces such as bars, pubs or converted storefronts and has as its simple goal making the audience laugh.

Improv sketch comedy in America has always had vaguely political underpinnings. The "mother" of Improv in America,

Viola Spolin, created the basis of almost all of today's Theatre Games while developing a theatre program for impoverished and immigrant Chicago children during her work with the Depression-era WPA and at Hull House (Sweet xvi). Spolin's theory was that immigrant children would better grasp the nuances of their new language and the basic behaviors of their new culture through play instead of rote learning. When her son, Paul Sills, and his University of Chicago friends turned Spolin's games into professional performances, they were done so by a group of performers familiar with Brecht and Weill, the Commedia dell'Arte's populist tradition, and the liberal, counter-culture philosophies of Post-World War II America. In the America of Eisenhower and McCarthy, these young actors fashioned a theatre that must have seemed like something of an antidote to the conformity and complacency of the society that surrounded them. Significantly, this type of theatre was also able to escape the many methods of censorship available to the authorities and entertainment brokers of the day. With no script and a performance born from the suggestions of the audience and imagination of the company, a tradition of subversive and political humor developed. Additionally, out of the seeds sown by the Compass Players, Second City, and the Committee has grown a rich and varied tradition of improvisational performances held together by a more or less common set of "rules."

A typical improv sketch traditionally unfolds along the following lines: a "director" or "M.C." announces what the next game or sketch will be; he or she solicits suggestions from the audience that will act as the environment and motivation for the sketch; the "M.C." makes sure that the actors are clear about the suggestions and are prepared to begin the scene; the actors start the scene and attempt to fulfill the parameters of the game and the audience's suggestions; after the requirements of the scene have been completed (or the "director" realizes that the scene has become hopeless) the "M.C." shouts out the word, "Scene," and the game comes to an end.

An important element to remember when thinking of improvisational performances as a site of cultural contestation rests in the matter of "rules." Unlike traditionally mainstream performances, the improv sketch makes its "rules" explicit to the audience. An audience does not need to study the language of pastiche or Lacanian criticism in order to take part in the discourse of the improv sketch. The "director" figure explains the basic set-up of each game, and the audience is often asked to participate in the creation of the scene. By allowing the audience the opportunity to understand the "rules" and partake of the performance, the audience cease to be observers to a product and start to become participants in a performative process realized through local and pragmatic terms.

An example from Flanagan's Wake may help to further this observation. During the first act, Patrick Boyle asks the audience to suggest the way in which Flanagan died. This moment always proved very insightful into the audience's willingness to play with cultural types. Frequently, an audience member would yell out, "He drowned in a vat of Guinness." The cast would respond with an enthusiastic "Yes, yes. Right, right!". However, underlying that affirmation was a great sense of disappointment. This request was heard approximately fifty percent of the time and the actors of Flanagan's Wake would brace themselves for the cliché. However, improv does not solely rely on an audience's suggestions and quite often, the cast discovered, the audience would throw a clichéd response back at the actors simply to find out if the improvisers could do something original and unique with a tired suggestion. The sheer sense of wonder created by the improviser when he or she could get him or herself out of a hackneyed suggestion and then turn that suggestion into something heretofore unheard often received the loudest laughter and warmest applause. The audience was clearly willing to sponsor a clichéd stereotype, in this case the drunken Irishman done in by his own devices, in order that the stereotype could be altered through the playfulness and imagination of the actors.

The act of participation on the audience's part also signals a willingness to play and actively join the ironic role-playing of Flanagan's Wake. While most theatrical events encourage a

certain passivity on the part of the audience, Flanagan's Wake like many other improvisational performances, desires an awareness and involved energy from the audience. This energy finds its way into the very fabric of the performance and into the act of meaning making. Audience members (Irish and non-Irish alike) sing along, put on Irish accents, seek out favorite cast members in order to tell them jokes, and in other ways fully embrace the role that they have been offered for the evening. In the audiences' actions there seems no malice or intention of offense in this role-playing. In fact, there seems to be a significant level of self-awareness and irony in the act. A role is put on as one would put on a mask at Mardi Gras. The Irish and Irish-American culture on display at Flanagan's Wake offers itself up to the criticism inherent in role-playing and in turn assists the audience in trying on a different cultural position simply for the pleasure of trying something new.

This playfulness raises many questions. The stereotypes and jokes contained in Flanagan's Wake at one point in history were considered offensive and detrimental to the assimilation of the Irish into mainstream American life. Now, at least within the context of the performance, these stereotypes are offered up, through the combined energies of the actors and audience, in the name of ironic role-playing and tongue-and-cheek joking. In regards to the Irish-American culture that helped create the performance, an originary inquiry might be made. Is it "play"



that has rendered these types less destructive or the success of the Irish-American community that has opened up space in the culture for such playfulness? I believe the answer is both. The type of cultural play in Flanagan's Wake has existed for as long as Irish-American performers have taken on the Stage Irish role. As early as the work of Dion Boucicault we can find the stereotypes and clichés of the Irish diaspora being used in playful and ironic ways. Such activity undoubtedly served the Irish-American community by rendering those stereotypes less powerful and repressive both in their own eyes and in the eyes of non-Irish-American viewers. However, until the Irish-American community had enough political and social capital to gain a voice in which they could effect the shape of clichéd representations, the type of play that permeates Flanagan's Wake could not become so pervasive.

Throughout the history of Irish-American cultural manifestations there has always been a strange and at times strained relationship between Irish-American performers and the roles thrust upon them. Often times, Irish-American actors would gladly "give the people what they want" and embrace the Stage Paddy or Bidy fully. Equally strong have been the protests to these very types. Within the Irish-American culture, however, there has always been an odd ambivalence to this dynamic. One might possibly conclude that the Irish-American community has learned throughout the years that these images are to a degree

uncontrollable and best left unanswered. Possibly, Irish-American performers have taken on the Stage Irish role in an attempt to have some input into its formation: a "better to have some say than no say at all" attitude. Both of these hypotheses have historically been a part of the Irish-American cultural strategy.

On the surface, the actors and creators of Flanagan's Wake seemingly have resurrected these stereotypes for the simple purpose of making a profit through a tired and one-dimensional portrait of Irish culture. But that comment, in and of itself, is surface and one-dimensional. The stock types employed by Flanagan's Wake are presented as empty forms in need of content and meaning. The interaction between actor, text, audience, history, and nostalgia supply this content. When the energy of that interaction meet the "rules" of improvisation, the construction of the stock type is exposed. In a tactic not unlike that of Bertolt Brecht, a mask or type finds its way onto the stage only to be inverted and re-directed. In the use of stock types in Flanagan's Wake, the humor no longer rests on the tension between foolish, "Irish" behavior and proper, "American" behavior as it did traditionally on the American stage. The humor shifts to pre-existing stereotypes, long past their expiration date, being corrupted and re-imagined through audience/actor interplay.

As a result, Flanagan's Wake avoids the qualities and offensiveness of a minstrel show. Unlike a minstrel show, the stereotypes in Flanagan's Wake are not offered as a vision of "reality" or as mimetic interpretations of Irish culture. Rather, thanks to the improvisatory game playing of the performance, the stock types are recognized as stock types or, in other words, as social constructs open to the powers of performance and language. The savvy audience member also recognizes that the improvisational structure of the evening virtually guarantees the types on display for one performance are destined to appear differently in the next. In this sense, Riverdance, with its slick surface history of Irish culture and sorrowless tale of immigration and circum-Atlantic cultural interaction, approaches the dangers and offensiveness of the minstrel show with much more abandon than Flanagan's Wake. The stock types in Flanagan's Wake don't so much as cover up their origins and constructions as make such a mockery of them as to render the stock types as good for only satiric purposes.

The culture-types can be used in such a way because they are, in fact, doubles or effigies of the once powerful figures of Paddy and Biddy. In this process Rene Girard's monstrous double is recalled, and the vital role of the stock types of Flanagan's Wake are revealed.. Joseph Roach summarizes Girard's explanation of the monstrous double excellently,

Girard delineates the contradictory impulses that create the "monstrous double": the sacrificial victim must be neither divisive nor trivial, neither fully part of the community nor fully outside of it; rather, he or she must be distanced by a special identity that specifies isolation while simultaneously allowing plausible surrogation for a member of the community. This occurs in a two-staged process; the community finds a surrogate victim for itself from within itself; then it finds an alien substitute, like an effigy, for the surrogate. This is the "monstrous double" (Cities 40).

The performative setting of Flanagan's Wake provides the distance needed for such a process through its fictive and constructed world. Within this safely distanced performative space the stock types simultaneously deflect and absorb the negative or oppressive products of the mainstream's gaze. After one final (literal) resurrection and a celebratory sing-a-long, the actors take their bows. They then join the audience for a parting drink not as stock types but as themselves, released from the masks they have worn for the past two hours. The sacred monsters are stored until the next performance, which will end in exactly the same manner. The wake reveals itself as a recurring farewell not for Flanagan but for Paddy and Biddy: a farewell that brings them back to life only to celebrate their death.

An argument could be made, however, that this type of performance could only be made in America by a diaspora that has long ago assimilated and lost its identity as a hyphenated culture. Trading in the mere shells of stereotypes and cultural signs, Flanagan's Wake treats the historical context of these items as playthings and tools of commerce. A comic simulacrum

replaces the blood, sweat, and pain that went into triumphing over these stereotypes and their inherent repressions. Terry Eagleton speaks to this aspect of American culture, "If European determinism springs from being suffocated by history, American voluntarism comes from stifling for lack of it. You may thus reinvent yourself whenever you want, an agreeable fantasy which Richard Rorty has raised to the dignity of a philosophy" (Idea 91).

Thus the myth of self-invention that stands at the core of American culture is considered the historical product of a lack of history. Taking Eagleton's remark further suggests that perhaps the hyphen in hyphenated identities like Irish-American are the result of a European determinism rooted in a suffocating inescapable history colliding with the equally daunting liberty of American self-invention. In this interpretation, the hyphen must step in and act as the tool of negotiation between these two powerful forces. Eagleton seems to suggest, however, that by embracing the hyphen, individuals are in actuality giving up responsibility for who they are and the very fabric of their culture. But Eagleton misses the mark in his generalized indictment of American diasporic cultures. Hyphenated performances, like any vortex of behavior, create history and culture. In these sites the very forces that Eagleton sees as intractable are undergoing shifts and re-definitions. It may be that America merely provides a landscape in which these

performances are less tied to a stifling tradition masquerading as history. Flanagan's Wake provides one such performance in which history, culture, and surrogated memories intermingle. Judging by the audience reaction to Flanagan's Wake, they too are well aware of the contradictions of history, difference and identity. The contradictions, however, are sources of laughter not confusion.

Flanagan's Wake, because of its improvisatory structure and ludic use of stock types, may open itself up to criticism regarding its respect for history. But the lack of cultural "respect" inherent in its structure also may be the show's greatest strength. In the complicated game of identity creation, Anglo-Saxonism has often triumphed. Rooted in a desire to normalize whiteness and set the standards by which all cultures will be judged, this Anglo-Saxon desire for "one blood" has been the source of unspeakable acts of violence and oppression. More typically, however, the repressive acts of Anglo-Saxon normativity work their erasures through subtle means. The evidence of diaspora and "impure" origins are strategically forgotten and stories of mixture are translated as tragedies so that the myth of "monocultural autochthony" can remain dominant (Roach, Cities 109). Flanagan's Wake, however, adapts the experience of exile, emigration, and impurity into carnevalesque comedy wherein the grounding for a monoculture has been eroded.

In spite of the improvisatory nature of identity creation, many Irish-American stories still fall into this exact same trap of origin-thinking and, in turn, cause similar acts of violence to be perpetuated. The behavior of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in New York City and Boston regarding the inclusion of homosexuals in the St. Patrick's Day parades or the "we-come-from-the-river" silliness of Riverdance offer ample proof of this. But not all performative manifestations of cultural hyphenation make this mistake. Improvisatory performances such as Flanagan's Wake offer an anti-essentializing model of cultural performance encouraging the formation of what Homi Bhabha terms, "participatory cultures." For this reason a cultural performance like Flanagan's Wake will never achieve the level of financial and popular success of a Riverdance. Essentializing and originary, the superficial, "one-blood" narrative of Riverdance makes for comfortable viewing. Flanagan's Wake, fun and ludic, exposes the constructions and narcissism of totalization and encourages leakage, hybridization, creolization and instability through the "rules" of its game. The accidental particulars of our births are not turned into the bearers of necessity but into objects of play and interchange (Eagleton, Idea 55). Irish-American identity, in the context of this performance, is something that can be put on and taken off. This attitude stands in stark contrast to the false permanence of being encouraged by the discourses of monoculturalism and chauvinistic superiority.

Austen Morgan, a barrister in Northern Ireland, writes the following about identity, "Identity is fluid, not fixed; it flows with the course - courses - of human history. When it does not, it becomes fundamentalist, nasty and dangerous. This has been the case, in my experience, in Ireland, with the strong relationship between identity, nationality, citizenship and nationalism" (Logue 188). Morgan strikes a familiar chord with this observation, one that reverberates in Joseph Roach's definition of modern nationality: "an insular ethnicity organized by the historic fiction of race into an imagined community" (Cities 103). This definition could just as easily be applied to modern hyphenated cultures like the Irish-Americans. Flanagan's Wake, however, turns the above processes on their heads. In the realm of the performance, modern nationality can be purchased for the price of admission. Insular ethnicity opens through audience suggestions and the notion of an Irish or Irish-American race as a historic fiction looks rather obvious. An imagined community materializes nightly at 8:00PM. A secular spectacle remakes itself at every performance "out of the deeply mysterious play of ethnic identity and difference" (Roach, Cities 153). Flanagan's Wake, through its employment of the unique dynamics of improvisational performance, stands as a populist acknowledgment of the flexibility, impermanence and renewability of cultural identity.



## **SPEAKING INTO BEING: THE ANCIENT IRISH ORAL TRADITION AND ITS LEGACY IN IRISH-AMERICAN CULTURAL PERFORMANCE**

In 1961, Irish author and historian Seamus MacManus wrote the following concerning the Irish oral tradition:

Storytelling is the oldest and surely one of the loveliest of the arts, and when the world was younger, lustier and, in not a few ways, better, than today, it was necessarily one of the most prized, so largely did all the peoples depend on it for their nightly entertainment. But today storytelling has become all but a lost art in almost every country. But my country, Ireland, cherished it most, brought it to greater perfection and held to it longest of all the western nations. The shanachie (storyteller) and the Bard, oftentimes one, held the most honored place at court of every Prince and Chief, as well as in the hearts of the people. Long and hard years of learning for the noble profession they served in the Bardic schools, and rare were their rewards when at length they were vested with the cloak of their profession (vii).

In this excerpt, one can practically hear the Barry Fitzgerald, "faith and begorra," brogue dripping from the page. Mr. MacManus does, however, nicely present to us a commonly conceived image of the Irish storyteller. The storyteller in MacManus' interpretation of him (and make no doubt that MacManus' storytellers are all male), held a respected place in ancient society, studied long and hard at his profession, charmed and advised Kings and Chieftains, recorded history, made laws, won the girls and, still, managed to exist as poor "cousins" living on the periphery of society.

The ancient Irish storyteller MacManus refers to was indeed a very real part of Celtic society. The filidh held a position

of great power in the Iron Age Celtic culture and functioned as a combination poet, historian, judge, advocate and entertainer. The filidh would maintain this power and position well into the Christian era of Ireland. Eventually, though, the filidh's role became unnecessary in Irish society and evolved into other forms. Those forms still evoke power in contemporary Ireland and amongst the Irish Diaspora. Because the filidh still remains a mediating force within Irish cultures, an examination of the ancient Irish oral tradition strikes me as a particularly valid.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, will be to examine the oral tradition of ancient Celtic society as it is understood today and how vestiges of that oral tradition have been saved throughout the centuries. More to the point, the legacy of Celtic orality still functions as an active influence in contemporary Irish-American culture. Central to this idea is the concept of orature; the gray area that exists between literature and orality. Furthermore, the concept of orature serves a possible solution to the basic conundrum facing the contemporary Irish-American hyphenated identity: namely, how can the hyphen exist without a direct claim to blood or biology (i.e. monologic thought). At the very least, orature must be considered as a primary factor in the transmission of a cultural identity in the dialogic models that make up the central theories of this study. For the purposes of this chapter, the example of orature that stands out in Irish-American culture is that of the pub

performance. The pub supplies an ideal loci for such an inquiry because it provides the Irish-American community with a common gathering place and a source of *communitas*. The pub and the performances that occur within, nourish the present Irish-American culture with the songs and stories of the past. However, this study hopes to show how this "nourishing" is done in a non-monologic, performative manner. Ultimately orature, in the form of pub performances, offers a way for the Irish-American culture to embrace a contemporary hyphenated identity without making an appeal to bloodlines or purity and without emptying Irish-American history of its complexities. In other words, orature plays a principal role in the process of cultural reinvigoration that is so absolutely vital to the formation of a cultural identity.

Understanding the cultural legacy functioning within the process of orature, however, requires a basic knowledge of the ancient Celtic tradition from which it springs. Tracing a genealogy of the ancient Irish oral tradition may prove to be akin to the alchemical experiments of the Middle Ages: interesting, mysterious, highly intellectual, and a fool's pursuit. According to legend, a mythic tribe of giants called the Tuatha De Danaan once ruled Ireland. The name literally means "tribe of the goddess Danu" and, as in most myth, there seems to be some truth behind the legend. The Tuatha De Danaan may not have been giants, but before the Celts invaded Ireland

and made it their home these mysterious and unknowable people probably populated ancient Ireland and existed in a fashion similar to the manner of the Celts. By proxy of their nomadic lifestyle, the Celts defy all attempts at temporal historical location. The word "Celt," by all accounts, has very ancient roots, some scholars estimating its age at 800 to 1,000 years prior to the Christian era (Hyde 3). Part of the problem with identifying the age of the Celtic people rests in this very word. No one seems particularly sure which group of ancient nomadic peoples were the actual Celts.

Undoubtedly, there existed a group of people who would answer to the name of "Celt." Actually describing these people or locating them on a map proves more problematic. Part of the confusion over the Celts identity also results from their success as warriors. The Celts, from approximately the 5th century BC to the 1st century BC, enjoyed a place of cultural primacy on the European continent that would only be checked by the rise of the Roman Empire. During that period of control, however, Celtic (or Galatian) influence reached as far as present day Spain and Italy to the west and south and as far east as Asia Minor. The defeat of the Celtic tribes by the Romans on mainland Europe in the 1st century BC resulted in the Celtic retreat to the protected island of Ireland (MaCana 12). Far away from the influence of Rome, and relatively protected from the tribal warfare of northern Europe,

the Celtic people enjoyed approximately 500 years of comparative solitude.

Like many ancient cultures, Celtic society was divided into three classes. At the top sat a king selected from the ruling warrior class, while the third and lowest class consisted of farmers and slaves. The middle caste in Celtic society were the priests or druids. Perhaps as much as the storyteller, the druids have become victims of idealized or romanticized cultural interpretations. Images of cloaked figures moving mysteriously among imposing rock formations of ritualistic meaning while chanting odes to dark gods over the frightened body of a sacrificial virgin have become mainstays of B-grade horror movies and fantasy novels. Such "mythology" has even found its way into mainstream Irish entertainments such as Lord of the Dance. Although one of the duties of the priestly caste indeed included the supervision of sacrifices, the role this class served was more educational than anything else.

This second class could be further divided into three sub-groups: druids, vates, and bards. The druids enjoyed the highest social status of the three and presided over sacrifices and other religious ceremonies. Their responsibilities also included enforcing tribal law, advising chieftains on the viability of warfare, and operating some system of education (Gantz 10, MacCana 14). The role of the vates remains unclear but evidence points to the vates as the members of the druidic class expert in

divination. Although, the vates may possibly have been subordinate druids serving in something like an apprenticeship. The third part of the priests' class were the bards or filidh. These were the educated members of the Celtic society that controlled the literature of the culture. The filidh often were described as singers of praise-poetry but their duties were much farther reaching than that of mere poets. The filidh recorded histories, told of great deeds, disseminated mythologies, entertained the rulers and the ruled, settled legal matters, witnessed contracts, and viciously satirized those who angered them (MacCana 15).

The ancient Celtic social role most influential in the development of an Irish-American tradition of orature is, of course, the filidh. As mentioned above, the filidh represented the keepers of the word in Celtic society. They had the power to decide the fates of tribes and seemed quite willing to exercise such power. In that they concerned themselves with the preservation of tribal history and language, the filidh existed in a Turner-esque state of liminality. In Joan Radner's words, "They belong to this world and the other; they serve the king but cannot be controlled by him; they uphold law and order at the same time that their supernatural powers threaten to introduce chaos; and the same powers by which they promote fertility, health, and wealth can also be deadly" (185). Although the filidh made up a part of the druidic class, it becomes obvious

that they were only controlled by their own and enjoyed a social position unrivaled in its ambiguity. The power the filidh maintained in Celtic society rests largely on the role of the spoken word held at this time. It is a power that the filidh would bestow upon later Irish cultures.

To understand why the Celts imbued the filidh with such power it may help to examine the role of the spoken word in Celtic culture. For the Celt, the act of speaking (in the form of poetry) could accomplish five things. In the Middle Irish manual of poetry, the Auraicept na n-Eces, we are told the following, "There are five crafts of poetry: poetry that nourishes and poetry that sings and poetry that impels and poetry that judges and poetry that establishes" (Radner 175). In Celtic society, poetry nourished the spirit in the same way that food or drink sustained the body. Poetry could be used as a vehicle for spells and curses as well as a method of teaching. The filidhs were also advisors; therefore, poetry could impel the advised to follow the filidh's suggestions. Filidhs also acted as judges and advocates, as a result poetry was used to judge and deliver judgments. Finally, poetry established the order of things and had the power to create and maintain the official alignment of Celtic power structures (Radner 176). As is made clear, in the Celtic world order, the spoken word had a power of almost "magical" strength. The Celts went so far as to believe the filidh to be capable of speaking something into being. Their

ability was so great that the Celts believed the power of a filidh's satire could kill a person. This capacity to either kill by satire or sustain through praise also explains the source of the word filidh; *fi* translates as poison and *li* as splendor (Elliot 23). Taken together, the overarching function of the filidh in Celtic society becomes explicit: poison and splendor, satire and praise.

In hindsight, the unchallenged position of the spoken word is surprising only in how long it lasted. The tensions that would arise with the arrival of literacy and Christianity provided the catalyst that would carry Irish oral culture into the future. Around the 5th century AD Christianity gained a permanent foothold in Ireland. The early Catholic Church had a much more developed structure and set of rules than the tribal Celts, making the written word more important in the fledgling Christian movement than in the Celtic culture. As we are reminded in the Gospel of St. John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The "Word" in question here refers, in part, to the written words of the prophets. The written word could be transferred with a certainty not available to the spoken word. In this new, Christian perspective primacy was granted to the concrete certainties of the written word, and the vagaries and ambiguities of the oral traditions were moved to a place of secondary importance, if not complete distrust. Even today, the primacy of



the written word affects the Church in such forms as the vow of silence.

In spite of the polar opposition between the early Christian Church and the Celtic tribes, and because of the creativity and adaptability of early evangelists like St. Patrick, Christianity gained popularity relatively quickly in Ireland. The early missionaries in Ireland discovered that one of the easiest ways to earn the confidence of the Celts was to offer them the training needed to read and write. The initial efforts of these early Christians must have been substantial. The filidhs and druids refused to write anything down as they considered such a thing improper and, also, for fear outsiders would corrupt the substance of the information. One may assume, as well, that the filidh were also protecting their very special position in the society by monopolizing the cultural dialogue in such a manner (Gantz 11). Ironically, this exclusivity on the part of the filidh may have been the primary cause for their undoing. In the pre-Christian Celtic society, the filidh had almost complete control of the cultural discourse. Any attempts at wresting away control of the discourse would result in a satiric "death." By introducing literacy to, at first, the king's family, and then, the lay person, the Christian Church democratized the information that the druids had so feared would be corrupted by outsiders.

By the end of the 5th century AD the Roman Empire had been demolished and the few individuals who cared for such things salvaged the documents that had been stored in the Empire's libraries. Many of these individuals, and their scrolls, found their way to the newly formed monasteries of Ireland. Once there, the monks copied the manuscripts and stored them for posterity's sake in the libraries. However, throughout this period of immense activity the filidh remained in existence and still carried enormous influence with the people of Ireland. The figure that would bridge the gap between the filidh and the Church and ultimately (perhaps, unintentionally) bring about the demise of the filidh would not appear until the 6th century.

Columcille, or Dove of the Church, was born in 521 AD into a privileged family. Columcille received training in the Celtic bardic tradition and, according to legend, could have been a chieftain of a tribe. He instead chose to follow a life dedicated to the Church. Columcille founded monasteries at a rapid pace, according to some accounts 41 by the time he was 41 years of age (Cahill 169). Amongst Columcille's long list of accomplishments, it is his battle with King Diarmait that would decidedly shift the power from the filidh's oral tradition to the Church's written one. Columcille desired a psalter held in the King's possession and so took possession of the text. Columcille was forced to return the psalter but not before one of his own followers was killed by King Diarmait. This affront gave

Columcille reason enough to take to the battlefield against the king's army. After the battle was over, Columcille and his followers had destroyed the king's warriors and reclaimed the contested psalter.

The important aspect of this story rests on the fact that the battles being fought in Ireland were now contestations involving control of the written word and not cattle or land. The filidhs did not inspire this battle and seemed to have little or nothing to do with its outcome. Columcille, and those like him, had taken the filidh's once privileged place. Not given the hospitality he felt he deserved (the psalter) Columcille asserted the filidh's right to attack the offending party. In this act a great shift had occurred. The death involved in this action no longer could be defined as the satiric "death" of poison words but a very literal death at the end of a sword. Merely coercing the king through ridicule into granting Columcille his wish could no longer suffice in this newly literate world. With the arrival of the certainties of the written word came a degree of loss for the ambiguities of the spoken. Adding to the irony of the situation, Columcille appeared to be supportive of the filidh. He was after all trained in the traditions of the bard as a young man. In 575, as mentioned above, he negotiated a treaty between the filidh and King Aed allowing the filidh to exist. Obviously, if the filidh needed arbitrators to do their own work then the power of the filidh had already slipped away.

Performances may fade away but they rarely disappear entirely. As Greil Marcus and Joseph Roach have both noted, traces are left to act within new forms; new forms which the traces are partly responsible for creating. Therefore, one should not jump to the conclusion that with the erasure of the filidh's power went the entire oral tradition. The ancient, Celtic, spoken texts survived with the assistance of both literature and orality. The monks and scribes who copied the great works of Athens and Rome were surprisingly liberal in their process. They seemed to be willing to copy and record anything placed before them. Whether the text was pagan or Christian seemed to matter little. A few church fathers were aghast at this idea but the Irish scribes copied all in the name of preservation (Cahill 159).

Inevitably, the pagan myths of pre-Christian Ireland were also transferred to the more permanent literary form. More surprisingly, the Celtic myths were recorded in the vernacular with no apparent attempt to translate the text into the more "appropriate" Latin or Greek or to censor heretic or improper material. The creation of these written texts marks a truly unique moment in time. Laid out before us are the coffin nails for the oral tradition in Ireland as it had existed at the height of the Celtic tribes. The stories created and propagated by the filidh achieved a state of permanence they were never meant to have. It is true that the filidh spent many years learning the

intricacies of the myths, but these stories were never frozen in time or passed on in any way other than orally. If they were, we could somehow trace their prior existence. All we have are the shadows of a once powerful people. As soon as the filidhs' works were recorded, whenever that first moment occurred, the filidh were written out of being. And here is where the harshest irony comes into play. The filidh, as an actual, historic, entity, could not be discussed today without the very thing that stripped them of their power. Without the literacy that rendered them unnecessary, the story of the ancient Irish oral tradition could not have been pieced together and proliferated.

Orality in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora continued in spite of the damage inflicted upon it by the powers of literacy. After the extinction of the filidh, the oral tradition simply adapted and the shanachie were created. Shanachie comes from the Irish word, *senchus*, which means history (Murphy 12). And that is basically what the filidh metamorphosed into, oral historians. The Catholic Church gradually took over the duties of law-giving and myth-building while the official histories were controlled by the monastic scribes leaving the history of the people and their entertainment to the shanachie. In yet another historic irony, the once elite filidh had become the unrecorded/able voices of the masses.

Due to the vital tradition of the seanachie some semblance of the performance of the ancient storyteller and his/her craft

survives into the present. Such a tradition can be seen in the Irish theatre's continuing concern with the power of language, or in the unique adaptations the Irish culture has made with the form of stand up comedy. The presence of the shanachie alongside the written records of the stories of the people also guarantees the existence of what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls "orature." This concept of orature helps to explain why an oral tradition can still have relevance long after its historic moment has seemingly passed.

Joseph Roach defines orature in the following manner: Orature comprises a range of forms, which though they may invest themselves variously in gesture, song, dance, processions, storytelling, proverbs, gossip, customs, rites, and rituals, are nevertheless produced alongside or within mediated literacies of various kinds and degrees. In other words, orature goes beyond the schematized opposition of literacy and orality as transcendent categories; rather, it acknowledges that these modes of communication have produced one another interactively over time and that their historic operations may be usefully examined under the rubric of performance (12).

In other words, the role of the shanachie in combination with a written Irish body of literature collaborated to keep both oral and literary traditions alive and mutually influential through the centuries. In regards to identity, this process of orature has enabled contemporary Irish-America to connect with cultural traditions that otherwise would have died centuries ago.

One doesn't have to look far to see the influence the oral tradition has in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora today. As

hackneyed as it may sound, the ability to tell a good story while sitting in a pub is still an admired skill. I have personally spent evenings in pubs and restaurants, in the city square or in a living room listening to individuals tell their stories, either personal or historical, and sometimes both. My own family places the value of telling a story in a skillful manner very highly. But beyond these dangerously sentimental and personal clichés, I feel the ancient Irish oral tradition plays an important role in the process of cultural re-invigoration necessary to contemporary Irish and Irish-American identity.

Perhaps the most obvious location of this performative tradition can be found in the pub. The pub, in Irish and Irish American life, holds a place unlike any other in the culture's lexicon. While traditionally thought of as a dark, smoky room with dusky, wood paneling and a claustrophobic ambiance, the pub, as I am using the word, might best be thought of as the neighborhood living room. Not solely a place to drink, the pub serves the community and culture by acting as a clearinghouse for information and a transmission center for the unwritten stories of a culture. Many pubs, particularly today, offer evenings of traditional Irish music and storytelling. Other pubs offer this same activity but often it only appears on a jukebox or at a barstool. The pub, however, might best be described not by the product it sells but by the activities that take place within its walls. While in the United States pubs are generally only found

in the largest urban centers, a possible parallel may be the "bar and grille" establishments that cater to food and drink and offer a "family atmosphere."

One of the strengths of the idea of orature is that it allows for many styles of performance under its banner. In the realm of the pub, the orature performance style that is most familiar and efficacious is that of ballads and music. An evening of traditional Irish music (or "trad" as it is sometimes called) typically proceeds in one of two ways. The musicians and performers may be given a stage space on which to perform. This mode more closely resembles a concert wherein the performers are segregated from the audience. The songs are often determined before the performance and the audience may join in singing on a few numbers but rarely break the traditional audience/performer boundaries. The other method in which an evening of trad might progress involves a great deal more slippage between the audience and performers. The musicians are generally given a table or a corner of the room exclusively for their use. The musicians who attend this kind of event are usually not paid except with the occasional complimentary drink. The songs have rarely been determined before the performance for the simple reason that the musicians cannot be sure exactly who will show up. There is a decidedly improvisational feel to the evening and so long as someone has a song to sing or a melody to be played, they are welcome to join the group of performers in their ever-shifting



space. The first performance I described might best be called an Irish music presentation while the second more closely resembles a *ceildhe*. Both, however, are rooted in the same legacies of orature. Both, also, depend upon a written and performative form for their transmission. Additionally, the two forms have similar functions: firstly, communication of cultural values, secondly, entertainment, and, finally, bringing together and developing community.

George's Southside, a bar and grille in Baton Rouge, provides an ersatz pub experience for its patrons. As such, it offers a nice example of the functioning of orature in a public forum. George's Southside opens its doors on Tuesday nights to a collective of musicians who call themselves Celtic Gumbo. They set up around four or five tables and throughout a three hour performance the line-up of players may be as little as a soloist or as large as eight musicians. People arrive, listen to the music, eat their suppers and talk with the musicians. The musicians frequently begin conversations in the middle of numbers with other patrons and when their solo draws close, they will politely pause the conversation, finish off the song, and resume their respective discussions. The time between numbers usually is filled with talk concerning the next number. Occasionally, the inter-song discussion focuses on an instrument and how best to play it. At this point the evening can sometimes become an impromptu music lesson for both the musicians and the listeners.

With the instruction over and the next song decided, the players launch into their next performance. The songs themselves signal just how "loose" and experimental an evening like this can be. Focused often on the traditional songs and arrangements of Irish music, the playing resembles any number of like-minded performances. However, the most traditional song can often shift suddenly in a new and hybrid direction. On one particular evening, the musicians of Celtic Gumbo began a traditional Irish reel that later revealed itself to be a re-arranged version of "When the Saint's Go Marching In." As the audience appreciatively laughed at the blending of musical styles and content, the musicians re-directed the song one more time by incorporating the chorus of the popular polka "In Heaven There Ain't No Beer, (That's Why We Drink It Here)." Once more the audience voiced its approval and even some of the musicians had to laugh at being surprised by this contribution. The musicians then returned to the reel and finished the number.

A blending of styles and songs such as the one described above, demonstrates the power of orature to navigate the dialogic processes of cultural formation. Regional and international influences play out in a local setting. Heretofore unblended cultures meet and mingle, not as competitors fighting over superiority but rather as equals finding a way to freshly interact. Polka meets Dixieland meets Irish trad not in an act of "impurity" or cultural heresy but through the open exchange of

dialogism. All of which is done, however, under the imprimatur of a pub performance. The visit to the communal cultural well, the pub in this case, reveals the many influences shaping the Irish-American hyphen and the influence Irish-American culture can have on other cultures.

Like the seanachie or filidh, these performers and performances have the power to bestow the cultural signs of an identity, as well as the talent to read these signs, to the next generation. Furthermore, the dynamic energy found in live performances like those at George's seems to owe much of its power to the spoken act of creation (as compared to the written or literate act of creation). The tension between the two acts form one of the basic forces in Western Civilization. Co-existing tenuously, this tension replays throughout the pub performances of storytellers and musicians. These performances demonstrate a trust in the spoken act rare in the Anglo-Saxon Christian mainstream that dictates so much of the discourse in the United States and Ireland. To many Irish and Irish-Americans the written word still carries with it the stigma of legislative coercion and corrupted meanings employed in the years of cultural oppression. Writing a history often resulted in that history being used against the author. This left the spoken act as the sole method of safely transmitting a culture often outlawed by the written acts of various governments. Brian Kennedy responds to this legacy when he writes, "songs and poetry were really the

only safe way to record history because for the longest time it was too dangerous to write anything down" (Logue 95). Kennedy takes this notion even further, "It's interesting too how sometimes the most difficult words are easier to sing than to say.... Songs are a safe place to visit how you really feel, regardless of the intensity" (Logue 95). Not only does the spoken act offer a safe location from the authority of the Word, the spoken or performed act also offers a cultural sanctuary in which to safely explore emotions and thoughts that otherwise might be considered foolish or dangerous.

In the other performances investigated in this study, a large public engages Irish-American culture in a type of dialogue. Pub performances remain slightly different. Firstly, such performances require that the audience seek out a pub, ersatz or actual. Keeping in mind the unique role the pub plays in Irish-American life also reminds us that the location itself is as much a safe haven from the authority of the mainstream as the psychic space of the songs themselves. Thusly, the orature of the pub performance offers a safe zone for Irish-American identity. A loci into which Irish-American culture can invite other forces and energies. But at the same time it is a space that remains surreptitious and slightly out of the gaze of the general public. Unlike Flanagan's *Wake*, pub performances are not critical or ironic performances. Similarly, pubs are not the glaringly public search for approval found in St. Patrick's Day

parades. Most assuredly, pubs avoid the commercialization and superficial history making of Riverdance. Pubs, rather, provide Irish-American identity with a space that brings the past coterminous with the present without denying the very real existence of the present.

The spoken "histories" of pub performances also offer an alternative to the rationalist causality of written histories providing Irish-America with its own manner of history making outside the ownership of Anglo-American authority. When a group of musicians begin to play a song commemorating the Famine years or a ballad lamenting the losses of the American or Irish Civil wars, these events are not typically referred to in the past tense. Rather, the actions and events of songs of this nature take on a renewed present and presence. The events of 1847 or 1863 or 1920, no longer hibernate behind a wall of written abstractions but come alive for the performers and listeners with the force of an event that all present have experienced. Comparatively, proscribed into the very act of writing and literacy is a certain linearity. Marshall McLuhan addresses this comparison,

Certainly the lineal structuring of rational life by phonetic literacy has involved us in an interlocking set of consistencies...for example, consciousness is regarded as the mark of a rational being, yet there is nothing lineal or sequential about the total field of awareness that exists in any moment of consciousness. Consciousness is not a verbal process. Yet during all our centuries of phonetic literacy we have favored the

chain of inference as the mark of logic and reason  
(87).

Spoken acts, such as singing and storytelling, operate in a more associative and non-linear method. By performing the songs and transmitting the stories of Irish and Irish American culture through the performative act, the linearness and rationalist chronologic historiography so prominent and authoritative in contemporary Western culture becomes momentarily de-prioritized. Such a process does not displace Irish-America from the realm of influence of Western civilization. Rather, Irish and Irish-American culture is given an alternative method of defining itself other than solely as an acted-upon object of Western culture.

The performances also involve a level of community not found or possible through written acts of literative culture. During a ceildhe or fleadh those in attendance are not merely Irish music aficionados seeking a virtuoistic display, nor is the audience filled with drunken, sentimental suburbanites hoping to re-claim ethnic authenticity. These events, while possibly containing audience members as described above, are first and foremost social events in which the ties of community and cultural identification are formed, re-formed, and reified. Gossip concerning the neighbors, news pertaining to relatives, transitions in the life of family and friends are all fundamental elements in this oral performance. As such, these performances fulfill the need of two communities at once; the Irish-American

community as a defining performance, and, the community-at-large as a *communitas* forming event.

While it is true that the music and songs and stories of the performance form the central unifying element of the evening, the spoken acts occurring tangentially to the performance are equally important. McLuhan offers up a telling story in his work Understanding Media. UNESCO appeared in a small Indian village in order to create a plumbing network for fresh, running water. After an initial trial time, the villagers asked that the water pipes be removed. It seems that the arrival of plumbing virtually eliminated the need for the villagers to visit the communal well. With these visits rendered unnecessary, a cornerstone of the village's social life also evaporated. The villagers preferred the visit to the communal well to the convenience and isolation brought about by its technological extinction. The orality of the pub performances is directly responsible for the sense of community created within them. They are an Irish/Irish-American visit to the communal well in an era of advanced plumbing.

Performances of Irish and Irish-American songs and stories, like those at Molloy's or George's, become more and more difficult to ignore as mere entertainments or pseudo-authentic ports of ethnicity when viewed through the tensile dynamic that exists between oral and written cultures. Of course these two impulses can work together as easily as they function

competitively. Regardless, the written power of phonetic literacy has altered and shaped all cultures of the West at their very cores. In the notion of orature, we find a concept that allows for the import of spoken acts to rise to the surface. The authorizing and controlling impulses of written acts take a proverbial "back-seat" just long enough for performative acts of orality to claim legitimacy. The pub performances do this as well. In the face of a written and literate culture the legacy of Celtic orality has very little chance to survive. But through these acts of performance survival seems apparent.

In his essay "Form and Ideology in the Anglo-Irish Novel," Eagleton observes that the classical model for the well-formed realistic novel depends principally on the producing culture's sense of historical holism. A society able to produce and maintain a cohesive history consisting of evolutionary and causal elements also will be able to duplicate this feat in its prose. Ireland's writers and narrative builders, offers Eagleton, have a much more difficult task before them in achieving such a holistic narrative body as a result of the interruptions and disruptions that identify Eire's own historical events. Eagleton further states,

The disrupted course of Irish history is not easily read as a tale of evolutionary progress, a middle march from a lower to a higher state; and the Irish novel from Sterne to O'Brien is typically recursive and diffuse, launching one arbitrary narrative only to abort it for some other equally gratuitous tale, running several storylines simultaneously, running



pedantically ingenious variations of the same few plot elements. Christopher Morash has even detected this anti-linear prejudice in the fragmented prose style of the Young Irelander John Mitchel (Heathcliff, 147).

Without too great a cognitive leap, these same observations can also be made of the Irish-American narratives. In fact Pete Hamill makes a similar comment upon this issue when he writes, "In the end, one large truth separates us. Our parents, the immigrants, were the products of an interrupted narrative" (qtd. in Golway 92). Hamill goes on to explain how he tried to bridge that interruption in his own, personal searches but, "Of course, I failed. There were too many blank places in the story, too many names that meant nothing to me, too many people who had died" (qtd. in Golway 93).

That the stories of the Irish and Irish-American cultures are rife with interruptions can hardly be thought of as a surprising discovery. Neither can Eagleton's thoughts regarding the Irish novel, insightful as they may be. What proves most surprising is that Eagleton completely ignores the deep-seeded influence the structures and tactics of the Irish oral tradition have on all aspects of Irish and Irish-American cultural manifestations. Hamill does as well when he laments his failure to bridge the historical interruption between his generation and his parents'. The ability of orature to bring the past coterminous with the present is exactly what makes it so important in the formation of Irish-American hyphenated identity.

While the process may not be linearly causal, a contextual, historo-cultural continuity still remains.

Just as the constructed continuity of Anglo-Saxonism defines large sections of European and American culture, the interruptions and disruptions of Irish and Irish-American cultures act as defining tactics. However these interruptions only achieve a level of debilitating permanence to those observers analyzing Irish and Irish-American cultures from a position of causal superiority born from an over-dependence on the power of the Word. Through the legacy of the *filidh* and the *seanachie*, the historical connectivity that has been so often interrupted by Famine, violent oppression and exile is momentarily re-formed through acts of performance such as songs, poetry and storytelling or through the "anti-linear" narratives of prose. The past is "spoken into being" and re-presented in the present through the synchronous power of the spoken word. When a trad band starts into the popular folk song, "Thousands are Sailing," the full promise and betrayal of the Great Hunger exile comes rushing back to the forefront of the listeners' and players' experience. A cultural and experiential gap is partly bridged, and a historical memory once threatened with being nothing more than a dry and lifeless fact recorded in a textbook springs into performative life for all present to participate in.

This idea also finds roots in the American Catholic Church. Catholic scholar James T. Fischer posits Irish-American culture

within a larger American Catholic culture in which the somatic knowledge of an oral tradition has never completely faded into the forgotten memories of the past and in which the members of the culture think "analogically" (Lost Generation 617).

Perceived in this way, Irish and Irish-American pub performances are connected to a much larger tradition of non-linear conceptions of history and cultural continuity. These vortices of behavior, far from containing an "anti-linear prejudice," actually reify the centrality of a non-linear, analogical, and synchronous conception of history and culture.

Eagleton hardly stands alone as the only scholar to comment on the effects of an interrupted historical narrative on a post-colonial culture. In fact, this seems to represent something of a trademark for such cultures. Nevertheless, the prioritizing of rationalist causality over somatic associativeness stealthily sneaks into all discussions on cultural representations. This hierarchical structure springs directly from the project of phonetic literacy. As McLuhan has observed, "Separateness of the individual, continuity of space and of time, and uniformity of codes are the prime marks of literate and civilized societies" (86-7). Later he furthers this comment, "As an intensification and extension of the visual function, the phonetic alphabet diminishes the role of the other senses of sound and touch and taste in any literate culture" (87). The danger in such a statement resides in the desire simply to re-organize the

hierarchy mentioned above so that orality becomes superior. In so doing, one merely slips back into the "noble savage" arguments that are so uniquely Western and rooted in logocentricism. However, pub performances do not have the power to re-arrange a hierarchy resistant to re-arrangement. Instead pub performances offer the possibility of placing the dynamics of orality on par with the powers of literacy within temporally specific spaces.

McLuhan also notes that with literacy comes a separation. A rift forms not only between sign and sound but also between individuals. The tribal member grounded in orality who achieves literacy gains the freedom "to separate from the tribe and to become a civilized individual, a man of visual organization who has uniform attitudes, habits, and rights with all other civilized individuals" (McLuhan, 85). Concurrently, the power of the written word also allows for the "translation and homogenization of cultures" (McLuhan 89). Tribal differences once so prominent and integral in oral cultures can be successfully surmounted though the act of writing. Lost, however, is the plurality and heterogeneity found in this orality. McLuhan surmises that these two forms might be reunited in the new electronic media *a la* a Bergsonian technological collective unconsciousness. McLuhan, however, seems to be so attracted by the effects of the "new media" that he fails to recognize a cultural location in which the written and the spoken reunite regularly: performative acts of orature.

Live performances, particularly the pub performances discussed in this chapter, negotiate the gulf existing between the forces of Western literacy and the forces of Celtic orality. Performance suggests that these two forces are not dualistic or contentious but actually dialogic in their interplay. The import placed on live performances of songs, poems and stories in the Irish and Irish-American cultures suggests a similarly revealing acceptance of this dynamic. If we can deduce that phonetic literacy in the form of written cultures has largely been responsible for individualist humanism and if we can accept that an oral culture principally existed through pluralistic tribalism maybe it is in this tension that Irish and Irish-American culture develops its uniqueness. Irish and Irish-American cultures, in this perspective, exist at the intersection of these two radically different but equally strong traditions. Furthermore this cultural wisdom finds its mode of transference through performances of orature largely transmitted somatically (ie. an identity just "feels" Irish). Nevertheless, this form of identity creation is every bit the product of acts of performance. Performing Irish-American identity, in this case, also means forming Irish-American identity. Performing the hyphen means creating the hyphen. In orature, the hyphen between Irish and American springs from the historicized re-experiencing of the oral tradition in a literate world.

Irish playwright Conor MacPherson knowingly has taken the tradition of the storyteller and decided to play with it and allow it to inspire his work. As he states in his "Preface to St. Nicholas":

St. Nicholas is a play performed by one actor. He only plays one character and he doesn't act anything out. He just tells a story. And for me, that's full of mischief.

When two or more actors talk to each other on stage, it's easy for us to pretend they're not actually in the theatre. If it's good they could be anywhere. Up a mountain, in a football, under the sea, anywhere. But with one actor talking only to the audience, what we have in front of us is a guide. He's telling us about somewhere outside the theatre, not trying to recreate it indoors. The theatre is simply where we meet him. And if it's good we're reminded that we are in the theatre and we like being there. And that's full of mischief because we collude with the actor in a very direct way. Especially when we have a well known actor in front of us pretending to be someone else in a small theatre. It's a case of "Who's fooling who here?" And that can be a very rich and liberating experience. Because we've all started playing (i).

MacPherson's theatre and, more directly, the instances of pub performance by singers, musicians, poets and storytellers appear to me as contemporary manifestations of the ancient Irish oral tradition passed on from century to century through the surrogate, complementary and complex process of orature. Through the combination of the literary tradition (novelist, playwright, scribe) and the oral (actor, storyteller, singer) the filidh finds his/her way back in front of an audience once again,

articulating action into being, and speaking its presence into  
yet another generation.

### **RIVERDANCE: IRISH PORNO**

"You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are  
ever flowing upon you."

-Heraclitus

Historical remembrance can be an especially complicated and controversial process for the hyphenated identity. Issues of nostalgia, authorial ownership and representation all intersect within the realm of cultural memory. Commercialism and co-modification complicate this issue further. Due to these forces contemporary Irish-American culture finds itself in the midst of a sort of "tug-of-war" between a superficial view of itself custom-made for global consumer consumption and a dedication to the complexities of an uneasy history.

In this chapter I focus on one particular performance which I believe embodies the tensions mentioned above in a particularly rich and rewarding fashion. The Irish song-and-dance spectacle, Riverdance, offers a view of Irish and Irish-American culture unlike the other performances at the core of this study. In a strictly economic sense, Riverdance stands as one of the most successful cultural exports out of Ireland in the past fifty years. However, Riverdance is more than just a huge financial success. In the process of selling the "hyphen" to the world, Riverdance raises issues of cultural representation and historical remembrance with which the Irish-American community has yet to truly wrestle. Post-modern in its aesthetic and ambitiously commercial in its intent, Riverdance marks a



problematic shift for Irish-America into the superficial realm of commodifiable culture. The problem of such a shift is not Marxist in nature (i.e. who has the right to sell a cultural product, or, should culture even be sold at all) but, rather, the model of identity formation reinforced by the shift. Unlike the more dialogic models presented in performances of Flanagan's Wake, St. Patrick's Day parades or pubs, Riverdance virtually demands a return to the erasures of monologism. Furthermore, Riverdance does so on an international scale.

The origins of Riverdance belie its commercial intent. Riverdance was originally created by TV producer Moya Doherty for the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest with the help of her husband (also a TV producer) John McColgan. Doherty, the executive producer for 1994's Eurovision broadcast, had to find a seven-minute inter-act filler for the program. Doherty and McColgan enlisted the help of composer Bill Whelan and choreographer/lead dancer Michael Flatley. All four creators have a lengthy resume of film, TV, and theatre credits (Duffy, 92). The Eurovision competition is a strange amalgam of talent show and nationalist posturing. Each country in Europe sends a representative singer who competes in front of a live crowd, a panel of judges, and an approximated international television audience of 300 million. At the end of the evening, a winner is selected and a new Eurovision champion is crowned. The country of the winning singer then assumes responsibility for hosting the following

year's competition. The host country, therefore, goes all out to demonstrate the superiority of their location and culture. In 1994, Dublin was once again hosting the song competition and out of this context Riverdance was born.

Doherty, McColgan, Whelan and Flatley all realized after that seven minute performance in 1994 that they had a moneymaker on their hands. In March of 1995, Riverdance opened at Dublin's Point Theatre and immediately created a sensation, selling out for virtually its entire four and half month run. The show's producers then decided to take the revue to London. Most observers felt this move to be foolish considering the tense relationship between Irish and British culture and the relatively obscure appeal of an Irish step-dancing concert. The production, however, was as much a box office hit in London as it was in Dublin, selling out its run at the Apollo Theatre in Hammersmith (a space legendary for hosting concerts by The Beatles and The Rolling Stones). By now Riverdance had grown from its initial cast size of 26 to an enormous 85. Bigger, better and with an international reputation, Riverdance immigrated to the United States in March of 1996 for a sold out run of the 5,854 seat Radio City Music Hall (Gladstone 8). Since then, the Irish dance spectacle has returned to Radio City Music Hall for three more sold out runs in 1996, '97 and '98. "To date, more than eight million people have seen it in theatres around the world, and more than six-and-a-half million video versions have been sold.

The show's album has sold more than two million copies," and in 1997 the album won a Grammy for best show album (Rothstein 8-9). In the spring of 2000, Riverdance opened on Broadway at the Gershwin Theatre, in a slightly re-vamped version, where it ran for approximately a year.

The success of Riverdance understandably has left a few people scratching their heads. Here is an entertainment that features a form of dance found only in Ireland and small, tight knit communities of the Irish Diaspora. The show, in spite of its phenomenal financial accomplishments (from its debut in 1995 to December of 1996 Riverdance earned \$78 million in ticket sales and \$71 million in video sales), was panned by every critic of every newspaper in Dublin, London and New York City (Gladstone 8). Riverdance now has three touring companies circling the globe simultaneously, two in North America and one for the rest of the world. One is inclined to look to the Irish Diaspora for the show's success but that does not explain the sold out and enthusiastically received tour of Japan that the Riverdance company recently completed. Nor does the Diaspora explain the ubiquitous appearance of Riverdance on PBS during pledge season.

A partial answer for the show's appeal obviously lies outside the realm of Irish-American cultural identity. The sheer spectacle of 30 plus dancers step-dancing in unison helps to explain the success of the dance concert, but spectacle only offers a limited explanation for Riverdance's success. Looking

to the "story" told by the entertainment also proves problematic. Riverdance does not have a traditional narrative structure. The evening is a conglomeration of song, dance, and instrumentals constructed more along the lines of a vaudeville entertainment or a rock concert than a traditional theatre event. Yet a certain thematic connectedness in the entertainment's organization can be gleaned. The first act presents an "unspoiled," mythic Ireland. The imagery of Act One comes from the ancient world of pre-Christian Ireland. The step dancing is more traditional as are the costumes and songs. Act Two evokes the Diaspora, and as a result the imagery and the dance become more and more "creole-ized." Irish imagery and music mingle with Slavic, Spanish and African-American cultures. Exoticism, nationalism, patriotism, nostalgia, sentimental love, spectacle and sex all come together under the trendy and marketable banner of "Irish" for the express purpose of selling the Irish diasporic experience to an international market.

But Riverdance does play straight to the heart of Irish-American identity and the complicated figures of history therein. By offering images of Irish-American assimilative triumph and a superficially uplifting combination of claptrap and pseudo-multiculturalism, Riverdance offers itself up as a millennial, mythic retelling of Irish-America's origins. As such, the Irish signs and symbology employed by the producers lead to some potentially unintended and telling interpretations of the work.

For example, the Women of Ireland sequence begins with a lyric air entitled *The Countess Cathleen*, and the first appearance of principle dancer Jean Butler, who, we can safely assume, represents the spirit of Yeats' heroine. According to Smyth's summary of the action (see Appendix A), this solo dance number means to evoke Yeats' metaphor for "maturing Irish womanhood."

Yeats actually uses the figure of Cathleen twice in his dramatic work. The first appearance of Cathleen in Yeats' oeuvre occurred in 1899 in The Countess Cathleen, one of his folk plays. In this play, Yeats tells the story of a woman who stops two demon-merchants from buying the souls of peasants by offering up her own soul. However, because of her purity and virtue Cathleen does not go to hell but ascends to heaven. In 1902, Yeats wrote Cathleen Ni Houlihan, a play that many credit with partially inspiring the actions of Easter Sunday 1916. In this work, an old peasant woman, Cathleen, convinces a young man to leave his comfortable life and fight for Ireland's freedom. When the young man chooses to follow the old crone she is transformed into a beautiful and noble woman (Sternlicht 59). The figure of Cathleen, it turns out, has little to do with mature sexuality but rather Yeats own metaphor for a free and independent Ireland.

Eight women and three men then join Butler/Cathleen on stage. The women dance in a circle around Butler who remains center stage. The three male dancers begin circling the circle of women dancers attempting to penetrate the inner sanctum and

gain access to Butler/Cathleen. The men succeed and the eight women, defeated, exit the stage. Each male dancer takes a turn at approaching Butler/Cathleen, and successively each male dancer is vanquished by Butler/Cathleen and forced to leave the stage. The dance is quite sexually charged and the innuendoes and overtones obvious. But how much does Butler/Cathleen really have to do with the sexually pure, Yeatsian, nationalist creation? Cathleen has metamorphosed from a patriotic symbol that helped launch a revolution to the quintessential, Boucicaultian colleen resisting a few untoward advances. Riverdance thus re-forms this figure of Irish independence and feminine strength into an image of Irish womanhood in need of protection. An Irish and Irish-American Catholic dogmatic representation replaces Yeats' complex revolutionary figure and the red-haired, virginal, damsel-in-distress emerges as the performances' notion of Irish and Irish-American womanhood.

The creators of Riverdance continue their tour through the significant nationalist representations of Ireland in the next number. Immediately after the rejection of the male dancers' advances and the "triumph" of Butler/Cathleen comes the Lament for Chuchulain. Cuchulain is the hero of The Tain (the epic Irish myth) and, like Cathleen, a favorite figure of Yeats. Cuchulain was also a larger than life figure, impervious to the attacks of his enemies and fellow tribesmen alike. In the grand tradition of such mythic figures, Cuchulain's fate was foretold

years before it actually occurred and involved a wronged love avenged, blood oaths, and supernatural efforts. Chuchulain in both mythology and Yeats' work recurs as an image of Irish heroism and masculinity. It was Cuchulain who was able to hold the provinces together in unity and after his death, the perfect union of all the tribes of Ireland was never again accomplished. Although Riverdance is supposedly an unconnected series of acts, the placement of a song mourning the loss of Chuchulain (Yeats' favorite masculine symbol) immediately after the triumph of Cathleen (Yeats' favorite feminine symbol) seems to seriously undermine any assumption of mere randomness of structure. The creators of Riverdance, instead, introduce to their audience a strategy that governs their entire work. Repeatedly, Riverdance will present an iconic image from Irish and/or Irish-American history, ignore the slightest complexity lying behind that image, and re-package that image into a feel-good picture of Irish-American sentimentality and spectacle. Resultantly, the show's spectacular nostalgia replaces all other sources of identity formation.

Cathleen and Chuchulain are not the only nationalist symbols used in Riverdance. The confusion and erasures of Riverdance are not limited to esoteric figures from Irish literature and myth. Historical erasure, spectacle, nostalgia, and commerce all come together in Riverdance's use of imagery from The Troubles in Northern Ireland. This problematic and confused use of signs

occurs when dancer Michael Flatley appears on stage. To announce the arrival of the "hero" of the piece, four drummers enter the stage and begin pounding what resemble the large bass drums used by American marching bands. The drums, however, are not bass drums; they are Lambeg drums. The Lambeg drum is as loaded an image as one can find in Ireland.

On July 12, 1690, James II and his Catholic troupes were defeated and forced to retreat after meeting William of Orange at the river Boyne (Hayes-McCoy 214). The Battle of the Boyne signaled the end of any large-scale resistance to English rule in Ireland for at least 100 years, during which time the British Empire firmly established its law in Ireland and began the systematic destruction of the indigenous culture. The anniversary of the Boyne, however, is remembered quite fondly by the Loyalist Protestants of Ulster.

For the Loyalists, July 12 is akin to the Fourth of July in the U.S. However, where July 4th is the celebration of the removal of oppression, July 12th is a celebration of superiority and the "right" to repression. The Loyalists celebrate July 12th with what has become known as parade season. For two weeks before the 12th, Loyalists begin parading through Irish Catholic neighborhoods celebrating the defeat of the Jacobite Catholic forces. The parades are intended to frighten and intimidate the Irish Catholic population and part of this strategy includes the use of the Lambeg drum. Protestant Loyalists will stand outside



of Catholic areas and pound the Lambeg throughout the entire parade season in order to remind the Catholic population of its defeat at the hands of William of Orange some 400 years ago. Some of the worst acts of violence in the rather violent history of the Troubles have occurred during the parade season. 1998's events at Portadown, in which Protestant Loyalists, forbidden from marching through Catholic neighborhoods, threw a firebomb into a house thereby burning alive three, small children, is proof enough of this.

Attempting to reconcile the dissonance of the use of such culturally charged symbols in such an ahistorical manner proves troublesome. The audience is presented with the image of the Irish "hero" dancing merrily to the rhythm of the Lambeg drum. In one particular piece, *Riverdance*, Flatley engages the Lambeg drummers in a sort of perverse and joyous "dueling banjos." On the one hand we have Flatley dancing a dance associated with Irish Catholic culture and the Gaelic Renaissance of the 1890's; on the other we have a primary sign of Protestant militarism. The moment is brief, and soon the entire company has joined Flatley on stage for a Rockettes style finale, but the confusing echoes linger. The creators of Riverdance effectively empty some of the most charged historical signs in Irish and Irish-American history in order to create a slick on-stage effect. Just as disturbing, the majority of audiences relish such displays.

Riverdance's ludic reel does not contain itself to Irish culture alone. The creators of this spectacle have a decidedly global world-view and the show owes as much to Irish America as it does to Ireland. Act II of Riverdance begins with a number called *American Wake*, in which the narrator tells of the pains and tragedy that led to the millions of Irish men and women emigrating from Ireland. This narration is followed by a dance number of amazing zeal and joy. The dancers, men and women, engage in an elaborate set of reels, jigs and Celtic *pas de deux* interspersed with occasional phrases of melancholy singing. But as soon as the melancholia begins to take hold of the mood of the piece, the dancers re-launch into their expertly executed dance steps, and the prevailing tone is one of celebration.

An American wake, however, was an occasion of great sadness. An American wake was a less celebratory, more despairing variation of the Irish wake. Unlike traditional wakes, the American wake observed a metaphorical death, the "death" of exile. The term, of course, suggests death, and in the case of the American wake the "death" the (usually) young emigrant awaited could be considered worse than the eventual death that awaits us all. The American wake did not inherently hold the promise of a better life in a heavenly location, regardless of the propaganda offered by the operators of the coffin ships. In the eyes of many family members left behind in Ireland, their departing son or daughter, by choosing to leave Eire, had chosen

a path filled with mortal danger and soul-damning sin at every step. The American wake also virtually guaranteed that the emigrant would never return to Ireland, not even to be buried. The emigration to the New World was in every way a death for the Irish and hardly had the air of commemoration and celebration that could be found in the Irish wake. A person even only remotely familiar with the differences between an Irish and American wake would not be unjustified in asking him/herself if the people who made this number even knew what an American wake was. The American wake was not only a 19th century performative ritual for Great Hunger exiles. Well into the 20th century the permanence of emigration could still be felt, as evidenced by such plays as Brian Friel's Philadelphia, Here I Come. The Act II opener of Riverdance, however, presents to its audience a dancing, singing Irish-America, ecstatic at the thought of continuing their up-lifting, can-do ethos in the New World.

Following on the heels of *American Wake* is *The Harbour of the New World* and the song "Heal their Hearts - Freedom." The harbor of the New World, we are led to believe by the elaborately painted backdrop, is New York City. The further adventures and successes of the Irish emigrants will take place in this brave new world. Riverdance, at this point, moves the action of its performance to a "melting-pot" United States of America. But, like its versions of Irish myth, literature and history,

Riverdance's representation of immigration offers an easy and over simplified route for hyphenated identity.

Riverdance gives the superficial appearance of working very hard at establishing its global-perspective pedigree. Throughout the performance the audience is treated to poetry in which they are reminded that "we come from the river" and "we travel across the sea to establish our own rivers." Yet the image of emigration portrayed on stage flows in only one direction, from Ireland to the U.S.A. In doing this, Riverdance reinforces a trans-Atlantic, monologic model of emigration, cultural influence, and hyphenated identity that obscures the historical record.

For example, between the late 1820's and mid-1830's, two-thirds of Irish emigrants landed and settled not in the U.S. but in Canada (Keneally 33). After 1835, three of every five emigrants would end up in Canada's southern neighbor but even so, by 1843 approximately half a million Irish people would be living in England (Keneally 33). In the New World, the numbers don't tell a very optimistic story. New York City in 1856 held almost 200,000 Irish-born people. This number does not count the children of the Irish-born citizens. On the lower East side neighborhood called Sweeny's Shambles, one in every five Irish adults died due to the unsanitary and dangerous conditions (Keneally 296).

These statistics don't even begin to account for the thousands of Irish people voluntarily or non-voluntarily sent to Australia and New Zealand. However, emigration, in Riverdance, ends up being a promotion of sorts. From the pastoral Ireland of the first act to the cosmopolitan promise and American success of the second act, the Irish immigrants make the transition with nary a famine, sorrow, coffin ship, Liverpool slag heap, Australian prison or disease infested shanty town. Irish Diasporic history ends up the product of a simple and straightforward move from Ireland to America completely lacking in complications, ambiguity or hardship.

Riverdance's continuing formation of an easy cultural collective memory extends into all aspects of Irish history, including issues of assimilation and race relations. At the start of the second act of Riverdance, a large, African-American male greets the Irish. He stands tall and proud in the middle of the stage and begins to sing, "Heal their Hearts - Freedom" with a voice and a presence that instantly evokes Paul Robeson. This prayerful greeting, complete with open arms, awaits the Irish immigrants/dancers, and they accept the graceful invitation of the African-American singer with equally gracious behaviors. The Irish introduction into American culture is presented by the creators of Riverdance as a smooth and easy assimilation in which all cultures find common ground in their various native acts of performance. And while it is true that many emigrant cultures

were to find a common ground through performance in the USA, to present the interaction between African-Americans and Irish-Americans as harmonious and divertingly entertaining seems insulting. The occasions of racial violence between these two groups in the 19th century alone is uncountable. In the New York Draft Riots of 1863, the Irish-Americans reacted to the unfairness that created a disparate number of their own people drafted into the Union Army. When the riots occurred, Irish-Americans did not seek out the Republican politicians or the Democratic generals who had created this situation, they sought out African-Americans whom they felt were the cause of the war and their economic underclass status. In New Orleans, the history of Reconstruction can not be told without including the stories of how Irish-American and African-American street gangs fought for control of the Mississippi River docks and the resulting employment as stevedores. Instead, Riverdance offers its audience a surface multiculturalism in which difference can be erased and/or negotiated through a pretty song and some clever choreography, an optimistic and "global" philosophy that can only exist if these signs and signifiers are emptied of their historical resonance and offered back to the audience as superficial commodities ready for use in a revised history of cultural assimilation.

All of the above criticisms of Riverdance may seem to some as so much whining for cultural "authenticity." If French critic

Jean Baudrillard is correct, and the stereophonic/pornographic hyperreality of the simulacra accurately describes the contemporary condition of the world, then this kind of ludic use of (un)loaded signs is merely the "way things are." Doherty and company should not be made to justify their choices on stage because they were only presenting a simulation of Irish culture made possible because Irish culture does not really exist. The idiosyncratic uses of the figures of Cathleen and Chuchulain are nothing more than mythological kitsch, and the Lambeg drums should not be considered as symbols of deferred civil rights and oppression because the whole notion of cultural oppression needs be suspect in a de-centralized system. In Act Two of Riverdance, African-American tap-dancers, after engaging in some friendly competition, dance in unity and harmony with some Irish step-dancers in a demonstration of cultural triumph over mutual sublimation. Who cares that the history between Irish and Black (especially in America) is a sad, bloody, complicated story of failed communication and capitalist longings? We have the free-play of signs to entertain us. Baudrillard's analysis, in this case, proves sadly accurate. Riverdance is the kind of show only possible in a post-modern and simulated world.

Riverdance certainly offers strong evidence that the simulacra of Irish and Irish-American culture does in fact sell very well. But the selling of a culture's emptied signs carries with it an insidious side. Namely, the consumption of such signs

by Irish-Americans is motivated primarily by a longing for social status and a need to fulfill a sense of nostalgia, a misguided nostalgia for a past that never existed. In participating in the Riverdance experience, Irish-Americans are demonstrating a longing for a smooth history of assimilation that still allows them to claim the hyphen without acknowledging the historical interruptions or complexities. Irish-Americans are re-formed as a people who worked hard, played fair, and got the success that was their due. Riverdance then sells this comfortable "self-image" back to Irish-America. In the words of Baudrillard, this condition leads to a "spiraling negativity," about which he writes:

But if the entire cycle of any act or event is envisaged in a system where linear continuity and dialectical polarity no longer exist, in a field unhinged by simulation, then all determination evaporates, every act terminates at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and been scattered in all directions (Selected Writings, 174).

In other words, as soon as the empty Irish or Irish-American sign has been "filled" by a process of collective dramaturgy and used in order to fulfill a societal cycle, the sign returns to a pseudo-empty state awaiting its next brush with meaningful non-meaning.

Irish-American culture and identity in this process becomes hyperreal, to borrow another term from Baudrillard. Hyperreality offers the audience an image of "reality" so well crafted and persuasive as to convince the viewer that the simulated image is



the only reality. The example par excellence given by Baudrillard is that of pornography. Porno offers the viewer a perspective of sex that one could never hope (or even wish) to see. Porno specializes in extreme close-ups of male and female genitalia interpenetrating each other with a ludic abandon that leaves the viewer both cold and dizzy. Through porno, sex is emptied of its sexuality so that it can be re-packaged and consumed by the lowest common cultural consumer. Sex is rendered more sex-like by emptying the act of all sexuality in favor of "money shots" (Baudrillard, *Revenge* 146). In the realm of Irish-American identity, *Riverdance* performs a similar function. Emptying the signs of Irish Diasporic history, *Riverdance* renders Irish-America identity to a few well chosen "close-ups" ready for mass consumption.

Significantly, the Irish and Irish-American audiences maintain a certain culpability. As British critic Christopher Norris sees the situation, media-makers are indeed guilty of misrepresentation in this process, but the public also must face its own complicity. In other words, *Riverdance* gets away with its pornography because the audience, in part, lets the producers get away with it. The historical complexity that exists behind the signs has not vanished. The producers and audiences have chosen to erase and ignore it. However, to say that the audience chooses is probably too strong a phrase and, in turn, erases the hypnotic power and thrilling beauty that many people experience

when attending a performance of Riverdance. Filled with moments of seductive claptrap and rock-concert style lighting, the audiences devour the show and at some point stop acting as traditional theatre patrons and begin to behave as though they were indeed taking part in a rock and roll show.

I attended a Sunday matinee of Riverdance at the Saenger Theatre in New Orleans in June of 2000. The sold-out crowd looked unlike any matinee audience I had ever seen at that venue. A fairly even number of men and women filled the hall, and the age range definitely favored the Baby Boomer generation. The audience also seemed fairly balanced between Irish-Americans and non Irish-Americans. Throughout the show itself, a constant stream of audience members moved around the theatre; going to the bathroom, getting more snacks, or seeking a better vantage point the movement maintained a steady pace. Additionally, there seemed to be a low rumble of running commentary by various audience members. One gentleman three rows behind my seat loudly muttered the word "wonderful" after every complex dance step or kick line. A pair of middle-age men at intermission could be overheard speaking favorably of the first act. One man said to the other, "They sure was flappin'," with great awe and appreciation in his voice. Yet another couple were also commenting on the first act during intermission. The wife turned to her husband and said, "This is about as good as the Rockettes or the Blue Angels." The husband responded with an emphatic

"Yup." Accumulatively, reactions such as these created a feeling that we, the audience, were not passively viewing an elaborately staged dance review. Rather, the audience felt the freedom to clap along with the rhythms and participate in ways that might have been more commonly found at sporting events. In fact, there should be little surprise that when Riverdance last played in Cleveland, OH in the fall of 2000, the show was held not in the Playhouse Square Theatre District, but in Gund Arena, the home of the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers.

Completely dismissing Riverdance as an empty and commercial evocation of Irish and Irish-American culture however, may be a bit inaccurate. Perhaps it is possible that through these favorable responses one might observe a long forgotten power present in the form of Irish traditional dance that has been restored or at least re-imagined through Riverdance. A possible argument could be formed in which it is contended that Riverdance, in fact, enacts its own act of performative, historical re-constitution *a la* the orature of pub performances.

The Irish cultural critic, Fintan O'Toole, seems to believe this to be the case. Irish dancing, in pre-DeVelara Ireland, still held to its roots as a community event and as a method for young men to meet young women. Sex and sexuality, community and culture intertwined in the Irish dance held at a barn or at a crossroads. The twin forces of puritanical Catholicism and fervid Nationalism managed to quell these early meanings. In

1935, the Republic of Ireland passed the Public Dance Hall Act, which required "all dances to be licensed and operate under strict supervision" (O'Toole, Ex-Isle 147). The law quashed "unofficial" dancing, and although the act was created, nominally, to control unlicensed dance halls in the cities, its use was much more effective in the countryside where the Catholic Church used it to stop what it perceived to be unlicensed sexuality. This move permanently altered the place of Irish dance in Celtic culture. Irish dance now existed almost wholly as a construct of the nationalist theocracy controlling Ireland and all of the "glamour, seduction, sexual display, urbanity, modernity, all that was immodest or indecent" was eliminated or excluded (O'Toole 147). Cardinal Logue, a powerful clergy member in the early Republic, went so far as to declare,

it is no small commendation of Irish dances that they cannot be danced for long hours. That, however, is not their chief merit. And while it is not part of our business to condemn any decent dance, Irish dances are not to be put out of the place that is their due in any educational establishment under our care. They may not be the fashion in London and Paris. They should be the fashion in Ireland. Irish dances do not make degenerates (qtd in O'Toole, Ex-Isle 147).

O'Toole ultimately concludes insightfully, "all Irish Dancing was liturgical. It was an act of piety, a homage to the holy trinity of Catholicism, Irish Nationalism and sexual continence" (147).

Forms change, however, when they are removed from their place of origin and re-located in unfamiliar settings. According to O'Toole, Irish dance ultimately found salvation in the act of

emigration. One of the very causes for its undoing (or re-doing) in Ireland carried with it the seeds of its re-imagining. In the U.S.A., Irish dancing would manifest itself in vaudeville and on Broadway, sometimes in its traditional form but, more popularly, after it had hybridized with African American dance steps and rhythms.

According to O'Toole, within this process of hybridization lies the cultural impulses that gave rise to Riverdance. A form primarily grounded in the cultural life of rural, agrarian Ireland moves to the urban centers of America and, in an act that reflects the journey of the Irish emigrant, finds freedom and new found energy in the forces of multicultural interactions.

Perhaps most surprising, in the US, Irish dance regains its potential for sexual expression. More accurately, when Irish dance returns to Ireland in the 1990's after its stay in the USA, the dancers and choreographers have forgotten or ceased to care about such things as the 1935 Public Dance Hall Act and the puritanical dictums of the Catholic Church and feel free to present a truly unusual stage creation, the sexualized Irish man and woman. Perhaps the audiences of the world, particularly those who are Irish or Irish-American, have embraced Riverdance as a response to the "sexualization" of Irish traditional dance; a shift that truly is radical, especially to any one who has ever sat through a traditional Irish dance concert prior to the Riverdance era. Irish people have been presented as many things

within American culture but positively sexualized figures of the American musical theatre and pop culture cannot necessarily be claimed as one. The spectacle also, in O'Toole's interpretation, can be read as an act of dismissal of the Catholic sexual and cultural repression that defined Irish cultural manifestations for so many years. This gloss could partially justify the ubiquitous presence of pagan imagery (ogham stones, Celtic knots) used in the scenic design of Riverdance. Additionally, O'Toole notes that the embeddedness of Irish culture within American culture (and vice versa) displayed in the show subversively relocates Ireland's cultural identity from within the European Union to North America (Ex-Isle 150). Riverdance positions Ireland and Irish-America as integral and active players in the creation of circum-Atlantic performances. This cultural spectacle, then, becomes an act of cultural reclamation.

O'Toole's enthusiasm for Riverdance however, seems to cloud his thinking in regard to the show's cynical approach to identity and culture and offers an excellent example of just how attractive the hyperreal/pornographic image of Irish and Irish-American culture can be. Evoking the razzle-dazzle of countless Broadway shows as well as the 1989 Abbey Theatre production of The Cuchulain Cycle directed by Jim Kennedy, Riverdance "suggests that Irish popular culture is now so adaptable that it can put together almost any number of contradictory influences and elements" (Ex-Isle 150). And yet, in spite of this ludic use of

signs and signifiers, O'Toole continues, "*Riverdance* could not have worked without an underlying respect for Irish traditional music and dance, without its implicit acknowledgement that folk culture has a life, and a truth of its own, and that while it can be adapted in any number of ways, it does not exist merely in order to be adapted" (Ex-Isle 152). O'Toole also observes that Riverdance is much more than just an "international show business product" because it "liberated" previously repressed aspects of Irish culture and in so doing "self-consciously" became "a parable of the modernization of Irish culture" (Ex-Isle 153). O'Toole reserves his vitriol and anger for Riverdance's progeny, Lord of the Dance. Described with terms such as "cultural idiocy," "post-modern Irishness," "de-politicized," and "de-contextualized," O'Toole takes Michael Flatley to task for creating such an exercise in ego and greed. According to O'Toole, Flatley's errors range from spotlight stealing to the (ironically) misappropriation of a *sean nos* song in an offensive and historically "inappropriate" manner.

Hyphenated identities are in many ways fragile creations, the historical remembrances at the center of a hyphenated identity perhaps even more so. O'Toole's defense of Riverdance and categorical dismissal of Lord of the Dance seem an excellent proof of this facet of identity formation. O'Toole, otherwise an extraordinarily insightful cultural critic, seems unable or unwilling to see the same "faults" of Lord of the Dance in

Riverdance. When O'Toole writes that folk culture "does not exist merely to be adapted" he seems to ignore Riverdance's ability to engage in exactly that same process. Rather, O'Toole appears so pleased that "sexuality" has returned to an Irish stage representation that all of the other erasures and decontextualizations can be justified. O'Toole, following the examples of both Baudrillard and Norris, gets angered by the appropriation of a *sean nos* song commemorating the tragic deaths of a mass drowning in Lough Corrib. Flatley uses this song in Lord of the Dance strictly as a pretty bit of stage dressing. And yet, O'Toole finds no fault with Riverdance when it uses the Lambeg drums for the purpose of a "dueling rhythms" number. He also glosses over the gross erasures in regards to Irish-American and African-American race relations and his indignation seems curiously absent from issues concerning the decontextualization and shallow re-appropriation of Black, Spanish or Slavic cultures within Riverdance. There remains in his writing on Riverdance a sly feeling that the reason he prefers one to the other simply rests on an issue of geographical and chronological placement. Riverdance came first and was created by an international production team dominated by Irish citizens whereas Lord of the Dance very much exists as Flatley's own creation.

What Lord of the Dance showed is how easy it is for Irish culture, in its adaptation to a global, commodified entertainment business, to teeter over the edge of boldness and into an abyss of banality, to mistake liberation from a repressive past for crass



ignorance of the collective memory locked up in traditional forms, to lose the core of awkwardness and resistance without which any piece of art must be either insipid or destructive (Ex-Isle 155)

So O'Toole warns us, in regards to the excesses of Lord of the Dance, and yet the exact same paragraph could be written concerning the effects and messages of Riverdance. O'Toole fails to see the stealthy insidiousness of the processes of the simulacra and proves unwilling to follow the cultural logic of this style of analysis to its disconcerting end.

The metaphorical tug of war facing contemporary Irish-American identity formation plays out amongst multiple forces. The process of authentication and simulacra are uncomfortably close. Normalizing the idea of a hyphenated identity in a capitalist world can often seem identical to selling the very signs of identity to anyone who has the price of admission. Words like "history," "truth," and "cultural honesty" often end up sounding false and suspect. Riverdance, ultimately, provides such a fascinating example of a cultural performance because its response to the basic conundrum of identity formation is not to face it head on but, rather, to ignore it even exists. Riverdance replaces the complex "tug of war" of cultural identity with its own slick pornography, partially because that answer sells better but, also, because it, superficially, "works."

The pornographic, according to Baudrillard is obscene. The complicity of the public with this pornography is even more obscene for Norris. So the pornographic employment of signs

(i.e. as found in Riverdance) can be construed as ethically and morally suspect. But the impact on Irish culture and the Diaspora remains ambiguous. The simple use of a cultural element out of its original context does not constitute an outrage. The problem begins when the sign is emptied and then used as a means to prove superiority in a cultural/ethnic pissing contest in which the contestants try to out "Oirish" the other.

Riverdance has been called "a parable of the modernization of Irish culture," and in many ways it is. But the nature of the parable's lesson in regards to Irish-American identity formation confuses rather than instructs. On the one hand, we are presented with a re-imagined culture excited about the prospect of self-invention, developed through an awakening awareness of the intertwining and mutual-embeddeness of Irish and American cultures. At the same time Riverdance offers a systematic surrogation of pleasant memories for bad, of clean and uplifting histories as compared to messy, historic actualities, and a commercially cleansed culture ready for easy consumer consumption and tourism dollars. The simulacra may triumph, but it does not entirely hide the complex and interwoven fabric of history, longing, desire, and culture that are the reason for the simulacra's success as well as the key to its undoing. A feeling persists that the notion of true cultural difference can no longer be treated the same; "a feeling," as the narrator of

Riverdance intones at one point in the performance, "familiar but strange."

Riverdance certainly can't be blamed for creating the first superficial view of Irish-American history and culture. Equally, to accuse Riverdance of simply co-opting and re-imagining the signs and symbols of hyphenated identity is inaccurate. As playwright David Henry Hwang has noted,

Culture is a living thing, constantly changing and evolving; intercultural work has always existed, as artists have incorporated new influences through migration, conquest and commerce. In this light, the very notion of authenticity became much more complex and elusive" ("A New Musical").

But as Hwang observes, authenticity and cultural identity reveal themselves to be more complex and more elusive due to such interplay and exchange. Allowing for this is what makes a performance dialogic and can be seen in moments during St. Patrick's Day parades, Flanagan's Wake and pub performances. Riverdance's response to the vagaries and ambiguities of identity formation not only direct the audience's attention away from the problems of the hyphen, it tries to convince the audience that the hyphen has no problems at all.

## CONCLUSION

In his 1998 novel, This Side of Brightness, Colum McCann created one of the most insightfully resonant characters in Irish-American literature. Treefrog, a.k.a. Clarence Nathan Walker, bears little resemblance to the Irish-American literary and stage creations of the past. McCann sets Treefrog's story in the tunnels of New York City. Treefrog has gone underground to escape his past, his history. He is the product of Irish immigration, Black migration, slavery, Jim Crow, indentured servitude, Catholic and Baptist faiths, racial prejudice and multiculturalism. The weight of this combination, a combination that effects all of America to one degree or another, becomes too great, and it drives him from the sidewalks. As a result of his breakdown, he changes his name from Clarence to Treefrog and gives up his stories and history. Throughout much of the novel, Treefrog categorically refuses to tell his story regarding how he found his way to the tunnels. He re-invents himself in the same way that many Americans, confronted with irreconcilable pasts re-invent themselves; he erases that past and makes for himself a new persona. But self-invention and erasures, Treefrog discovers, require just as much energy as does wrestling with history, and the results are often equally mixed. As he says to himself at his crucial moment of self-revelation, "We all of us got two families no matter which way we think on it" (Brightness, 255).

His situation parallels the circumstances of all hyphenate identities. The tension created by his chosen path of identity navigation becomes too great and eventually he has no choice but to tell his story to a delusional prostitute suffering through withdrawal. The audience doesn't matter to Treefrog as much as the complex act of telling his story. Upon telling his story, his history, in all of its negativity and positiveness, he realizes that he has gained a level of control and acceptance over his story. Treefrog returns to the tunnels one last time and destroys the few trappings of a life he once had there. Through telling his story he reclaims a cultural memory that had refused to be abandoned. In so doing Treefrog is able to begin the reconciliation between the tragic elements of his complex multicultural history and the contentment this same history could potentially bring him. He stares into the darkness and mutters, "What do we do now, son, now that we're happy," and begins to make his way topside (Brightness 283). Finally able to see a glimpse of order in his convoluted history, which is an allegory of all hyphenated histories (loaded as they are with interruptions, doubleness, and issues of authenticity and legitimacy), he moves towards this side of brightness and says to himself, "Our resurrections aren't what they used to be" (Brightness 289).

Shane Phelan observes that the monologicistic impulse found within the trinity of identity, history and culture is basically

a nihilistic dynamic that has its roots in "the search for a meaning that transcends the phenomenal world - the quest for metaphysics" (60). Such an impulse reverberates loudly in a spectacle such as Riverdance, which informs its audience that we all come from a transcendent river of life and culture. Such a dynamic also plays out whenever an individual waxes poetic regarding an inherent Irish love of language, which usually culminates with an ode to "blarney." Regardless of the cultural group employing it, this monologicistic approach has as its goal the creation of a metaphysics of culture - a teleology of universal meanings and attributes derived from materialist events. In order to do this successfully, Phelan states, the first move by any metaphysical approach must be to posit an ideal free from the messy reality of flux and, hence, deny "the claims of the world" (60).

This study has attempted to define an alternative route for understanding hyphenated identity. Ideally, this route functions in such a way as to allow the "claims of the world" their due. The performances that make up this study all feed into defining that model. Admittedly, dialogistic strategies of identity making can be complex and confusingly ambiguous at times. Authenticity, legitimacy, and memory all become troublesome categories in a dialogistic approach to hyphenated identity. However, the erasures and false security of a metaphysics of identity developed through monologicistic strategies provide a

tenuous, inflexible and static cultural identity destined to crumble upon itself at the first sign of dissonance.

Monologicistic models of Irish-American culture have done exactly that throughout the years. Ignoring the contradictions and messiness of culture in its materialist actuality, audiences are treated with Irish colleens and heroes modeled upon an ideal Irishness founded upon "universal" and "inherent" values. In a process that would make Plato proud, prioritizing a universalist, Irish metaphysics, leads cultural performances to be considered as little more than a by-product of an ideal and absolute Irishness. Following the logic of such a model, one could logically conclude that St. Patrick's Day simply springs from an inherent Irish need to celebrate publicly and loudly boast of their achievements or that pub performances derive from an intrinsic Irish urge to drink and carouse. In such a case as this, performance is a symptom of a transcendent experience transmitted magically by blood and genes. Irish-American culture becomes a truly seminal experience.

Not only has the monologic metaphysics of Irish-American culture been expedient politically and socially, but economically as well. To paraphrase an idea from Theodor Adorno, the culture industry requires this method of cultural construction and interpretation. By conceiving of Irish-American culture (or any culture) as a universal ideal awaiting fulfillment, cultural identity can be more easily treated as an objectifiable,

marketable item. The performance of Riverdance becomes less important than having the ticket stub to prove your purchase of a piece of Irish culture. A t-shirt with a Notre Dame logo on its front has equal cultural relevance with any performance or accident of birth in Adorno's critique of the culture industry. Adorno goes on to note that the culture industry, thanks to monologic models of history, convinces individuals that they have no claim to their own stories. History is a universal absolute reigning supreme over the lives of involuntarily actors who are tossed about by the circumstances of the historical moment. But performance is a slippery and unruly enigma that often refuses to play by the rules of the culture industry, and at the corner of Decatur Street and St. Ann, Irish-Americans insist on dancing their own, unique dances.

This same impulse towards a cultural metaphysics rooted in a trans-Atlantic, linearly causal, Roman Catholic, Irish-American-ness also has geographic repercussions for the contemporary Irish-American identity. New York City and Boston stand as singular loci in the Irish American culture. The histories of these cities are often positioned as representative of the history of all Irish-Americans. While it is true that these urban centers represent a highly concentrated population density of Irish-Americans, many of the same omissions and erasures of the linearly temporal model are duplicated in this



geographic/cultural centrality. Perhaps a reason for this urge can be traced to the experience of exile.

The Irish immigrants who came to America up until the 1950's realized that the journey they were making was most likely permanent. An odd dynamic must have played itself out in this process. On the one hand an immigrant left Ireland because the future looked impossible and bleak. In emigration there is a tacit acknowledgement that the immigrant's homeland is somehow lacking or inferior. Equally there is the acknowledgement that the land of emigration must contain a surplus of opportunity and possibility. This places the immigrant in the uncomfortable position of partially rejecting the culture of his/her birth, leaving the emigrant without a homeland. In this can be sensed a very literal application of Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness. The immigrant must burn cultural bridges in order to make the exile's journey but is then left with a persistent memory that demands negotiation. A possible response to this dynamic may be the search for a new cultural nationhood, or as Labor Party minister Michael Higgins has said, "Given that no people can ever fully define itself from within, exile is indeed the cradle of nationality" (qtd in O'Hanlon, 223). The exile's search for viable, working connections with both the adopted culture and autochthonous culture thus becomes the motivating factor in developing the doubleness of a hyphenated identity.

Being with and without a home simultaneously creates both an absence and a surplus of culture, history and significant locations. One manner in which certain Irish-Americans and scholars of Irish-America have responded to such a surplus is by positing New York and Boston as the New World center of Irish culture. Certainly the mainstream of America looks to these two urban centers as "ground zero" of the Irish-American culture. Footage of the St. Patrick's Day Parades shown on national news programs inevitably features rows and rows of fisherman sweater clad Hibernians marching in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral on 5th Avenue or through Southie in Boston. Riverdance starts its second act with a projection of the Statue of Liberty and a port on the backdrop. The Irish Voice, Echo and Irish America Magazine all call New York or Boston their home. While much of this positioning derives from a very real influx of Irish people to these cities throughout the years, this same centralizing of Irish-American culture ignores the geographic complexity of Irish America, specifically, and the truly uncentered nature of the hyphenate diasporic experience in general. The centralizing impulse that centers New York and Boston in Irish-America turns the stories of the Irish-American community in New Orleans into a footnote, and yet New Orleans was the second largest port of call for Irish immigrants in the mid nineteenth century. The Irish who arrived in the States before the famine often found work on the Erie Canal and settled in Cleveland, Albany or Buffalo.

These urban centers also become historical and geographical inferiors thanks to geographic prioritization. Savannah greeted many 18th century Irish immigrants and San Francisco, thanks to the railroads, provided a final stop for many Irish immigrants in both the 19th and 20th centuries. All of these cities and many more have had an equally strong hand in creating a contemporary Irish-America, and yet if most histories are to be believed they are all mere cultural satellites to the bifurcated Celtic sun, New York and Boston. In the positioning of a geographic center for Irish-American culture, the desire for a chronological point of origin required by a metaphysical and monologic strategy of identity formation finds its spatial match.

The models described above produce a myth of a people, cohesive in its experience and cultural memory and rooted in a central originary point. In the case of much of Irish American history that point of origin is posited as Famine-ravaged Ireland. From this starting point, Irish American history moves in a logical and progressive manner, from poverty and subservience towards successes and ascendancy while at the same time moving from East Coast to West Coast in a Celtic parallel to the Anglo-inspired Manifest Destiny. Such a movement from "bad" to "good" is reflected by some of the performances studied in this work. Riverdance reaffirms this notion of progressive historicity with its own construction. The narrator of the piece informs the audience at the start of the performance that "we all

come from the river." At the end of the show, the same narrator intones, "Ireland's children return to her by the river." In between, Eire's children emigrate, find a new (read: better) home in America, become great successes and return for a visit to the country that spawned them. Historical complexities, contradictions, and reversals of fortune are smoothed over like a stone at the bottom of riverbed as the spectacle transmits its feel-good history and message of positive forward progress.

The St. Patrick's Day Parades have something of this same dynamic to them except that it manifests itself in the very act of processing. The paraders are marching through the city from point A to point B. There is a definite point of origin and a definite point of finality or destination. The paraders re-enact the "march of history" through a folkloric march of Irish American culture. Joseph Roach notes that the parade is an additive form in which "generations of marchers seem to arise and pass away" (Cities 285). He also remarks that this additive aspect of parading leaves it vulnerable because "its ending is always an anticlimax, a provocation, and an opening" (Cities 285). The terminus of a parade, however, is also quite definitely an ending. After the St. Patrick's Day Parade rolls by, the only openings are at the end of the line/history or at the riders' final destination. A progressive linearity remains at the parades very heart.

The linear model constantly reifies a historical forgetfulness that plays itself out over and over again throughout the history of hyphenates. Historical forgetfulness seems to be the one constant in the story of Irish Americans and, in a paradoxical way, acts as the connective tissue between generations. This should not be taken as a value judgment. Those who can only remember and fail to see the importance of historical re-invention often end up as the most militaristic and violent members of a society. But for every George M. Cohan who created a happy, dancing, patriotic American with a trace of the "Auld Sod" about his person, there has always been a Eugene O'Neill gazing speechless at the ghosts of a haunted past, unable or unwilling to let go. For every Riverdance filled with historical and cultural absurdities and minstrel-show-like caricatures there has been a Flanagan's Wake ready to punch those stereotypes full of holes and laugh as the river water runs out.

Often times, a performance of cultural identity can straddle both dialogic and monologic strategies of identity formation. St. Patrick's Day parades offer one such example. Created as an exclusive procession designed to show Irish-America as responsible and affable, St. Patrick's Day parades nevertheless open Irish-American culture to the influences of the public at large. The way in which South Louisiana's St. Patrick's Day parades have absorbed the rituals and traces of Mardi Gras provides a fine example of such a process, especially when

compared to the absurdly insulated New York City or Boston parades. Flanagan's Wake and pub performances more completely employ the strategies of dialogism. Their respective uses of improvisation and orature present Irish-Americans with a history and culture alive to the chaos of play and the immediacy of the present. Riverdance, on the other hand, serves as a splendid example of monologism at work in contemporary Irish-American identity. Its superficial multiculturalism and cultural "openness" hide the originary and universalist impulses that give Riverdance its persuasive power.

Omnidirectional and originary models of Irish-American culture provide a level of identitive and psychic comfort, especially in a culture whose foundational stories are rooted in interruption and disruption. The secure knowledge that there exists a "homeland" needs no detailed justification. The causal and linear model of Irish American culture has also proven politically expedient. John F. Kennedy used the story of the Irish Catholics in America to great advantage in his run for the White House. Before him, the Democratic political machines of both Chicago and New York were built on the notion of successful tribalism in the face of insurmountable odds. After Kennedy, Ronald Reagan performed one of the great political acrobatic acts in United States history when he presented himself as the product of Irish-America's level of success and wooed away many of the Irish-Americans who hitherto had strictly voted Democrat. More

amazingly, he was able to convincingly achieve this while being a close ally of Margaret Thatcher's, an individual not friendly to the Irish by any stretch of the imagination.

As we have seen, however, the monologic model, for all its efficiency and apparent success, remains unstable, prone to violent erasures, and, frequently, incomplete. Additionally, this model can only fully function with the use of an oppositional dualism. Most frequently, the dualism sets up a cultural showdown that encourages an Irish versus British and Irish American versus Anglo-Protestant antagonism. This us-against-them mentality extends into even the most scholarly of venues. In his essay "Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History," Bruce McConachie examines the place of Dion Boucicault's The Poor Of New York in 19th century American theatre history. He concludes that the entirety of working class Americans were duped by Boucicault into believing in an economic system detrimental to their own well being. In doing this, McConachie envisions a working class cohesive in its values and needs. He ignores the ethnic and racial considerations of the audience in determining their appreciation of Boucicault's work. For example, although Boucicault was easily self-identified as Irish American, McConachie not once mentions or considers the presence of fellow Irish-Americans in the audience as a cause for his success and the appreciative reading his plays received from these audiences. He ignores folk traditions, ethnic coding or

possible subversive messages in Boucicault's work and chooses to position the playwright as solely a member of the "power establishment," whatever that might be. By performing this kind of analysis, McConachie merely recreates the oppositional dualism of a linearly causal model in Marxist terms.

A dualism that positions Irishness as a concept emerging solely in opposition to Britishness, however, seems to be as incomplete as the linear and causal view of history that it helps support. Roy O'Hanlon has noted that the notion of an internationally influential "Irishness" unconnected to a constantly renewing source of immigrants from Ireland is new, full of confusion, promise, and uncertainty (3). Paddy Logue edited over 100 essays for his "Being Irish" project. While the goal of his book was not to define Irishness, after reviewing the essays he came to this conclusion about contemporary Irishness:

At the risk of abusing my editorial authority, I will mention the point that struck me most forcibly. Several contributors, especially those from the estimated 70 million strong Irish diaspora, make the point that there are many ways of being Irish. We can be Irish by birth; Irish by ancestry; Irish by geography; Irish with European links; Irish by accident; Irish by necessity; Irish with British links; Irish by association; Irish by culture; Irish by history; Irish with American links; and Irish by choice. One writes that he is Irish by "choice of allegiance" and describes the magic in raising identity from the "bloodlines of ethnicity to the lifelines of human rights". Now there's a vision for the Irish in the twenty-first century (xxi).

A dualistic, us versus them mentality simply cannot contain such



multiplicity and in light of the above comments seems outmoded, if it ever were truly relevant to begin with. But if oppositional dualism ceases as a core identitive element perhaps it can be replaced with models of cultural dialogism. Instead of the straight line of history and its polarities, a tapestry of historical networks and associations may be the more effective response to the contradictions and complexities of identity and historiography.

To a certain degree this dialogism has always been an identifiable aspect of Irish-America and all hyphenate cultures. Fintan O'Toole suggests that the diaspora is better equipped to deal with non-linear histories and cultural interruptions because these elements make up its natural environment. Or as he succinctly states, "A history of emigration gave to Irish culture a particularly sharp realization of the fact that a home is much more than a house" (O'Toole, Ex-Isle, 137). The hyphen between Irish and American affects a similar attitude. The perspective granted by a hyphenate identity defamiliarizes the "normal" definitions of cohesive narratives, history, home, and identity. Rather, the hyphenate has to find alternative routes and methods of culture making.

In an essay in which he tries to define what it is to be Irish, Colum McCann address indirectly some of the same issues he grapples with in his novel. He writes, "it is possible that we can belong to no country whatsoever. It is also possible that we

can belong to more than one country. Which begs the question: How do we define ourselves? Perhaps through stories. And the story, as I said, is not quite finished...if it was ever begun in the first place" (Logue 140).

McCann's This Side of Brightness is unique in Irish-American literature for this very reason. Unlike many of the creations of Irish-America, Treefrog and his entire family and tradition are not of a single country. They create their own country and ethnicity through their stories, and yet they are very much a part of a hyphenated tradition. The stories and traditions passed on through the generations are the connective tissue, not a bloodline or a skin color or a brogue. McCann explicitly positions storytelling and performance above genetics and blood. He seems to have made overt Michele Bernstein's quote "We are the sons of many fathers" (qtd. in Marcus, 181). Irish-American culture and identity are likewise the product of many parents, and all of the traditions of both sides of the hyphen compete for attention and contest for space. O'Neill's familial alter egos, the Tyrones, continue their fighting about the traditions and meanings of Irish-ness and somewhere Nietzsche laughs as his big wheel of eternal return rolls down the tracks of performance reliving, re-creating, and re-remembering the memories of the past in new generations. Hyphenated identity, therefore, needs performance as a navigating tool for the contestation inherent in cultural definition.

McCann's message can be summarized simply: performance renews bonds and cultural legacies. Performance can also create these very bonds and ties. When a musician at a pub plays a song, he/she is not only renewing but creating a path into Irish-American identity for the listener. Exactly the same statements can be made about the vortices of behavior examined in the body of this study. The Vegas-style triumph over suffering and repression that is Riverdance leaves audiences standing and roaring for more. Audiences are changed after leaving a performance of Riverdance, and many feel vindicated in their cultural heritage. Even a scholar as astute and critical as Fintan O'Toole walked away from Riverdance proud in the knowledge that his culture could be sexy and marketable. For better or worse, the erasures and the omissions mattered little in the face of the positive, "feel-good" impression left by the dance spectacle; through performance the audiences' ties to Irish-American culture were made to feel real and authentic. The songs sung in pubs and at festivals are another example of this dynamic at work. A connection to history is re-formed through the very act of singing. The Famine or the 1848 Uprising or the 1916 Revolution come to life with an immediacy only possible through performance. The span of history that exists between the writing of the song and the performance of the song is leapt through the power of performance and a small part of a polysemous, historical legacy transmits itself to one more generation.

Good or bad, performance can also legitimate events and attitudes at the same time that it creates these cultural artifacts. Resultantly, performance can also be open to claims of inauthenticity. A historian may look at the re-presenting of history in a pub performance and ask "Why do we need this history passed on to another generation, a generation for whom British oppression has no geographic or temporal or psychic relevance?"; or a cultural critic may walk away from Riverdance furious at the historically revisionist manipulation of a tragic moment in the story of Western civilization for the sole purpose of financial gain. In both cases the scholar has a duty to point out the inconsistencies and falsehoods. However, such discrepancies are not the sole fault of performance. The problems of inauthenticity or simulacra can just as easily be attributed to a traditional literary history and, as often as not, can actually be traced to "official" written histories. The problem lies not with performance but with passivity. Whether the historiography is the result of performance or of more "traditional" methods hardly matters. As Homi Bhabha observes, "they [forms of discourse] produce rather than reflect their objects of reference" (21). This study proposes that the form of discourse most relevant to understanding, creating, and transmitting Irish-American culture are participatory, public performances which eschew the trappings of traditional stage and screen dynamics.

A cultural performance like Flanagan's Wake thrives on the defamiliarization provided by the hyphenated perspective in performance. Before the audience, a menagerie of stock types parade and clown, and yet these stock types are simultaneously biting the hands that created them through ironic self-awareness and ludic improvisation. The stage paddy, while looking vaguely familiar, is seen through a new lens, forcing the audience and actors to question the type and its efficacy. St. Patrick's Day Parades of Southeastern Louisiana celebrate multiple cultural triumphs and simultaneous histories and call into question the linear genealogy coded into a parade's typical structure of procession. Songs sung in pubs often conflate Irish history with American history such as "The Irish Volunteer," which contains the following verse:

Now fill your glasses up, my boys, a toast come drink  
with me,/ May Erin's Harp and Starry Flag united ever  
be;/ May traitors quake, and rebels shake, and tremble  
in their fears,/ When next they meet the Yankee boys  
and Irish volunteers!/ God bless the name of  
WASHINGTON! that name this land reveres;/ Success to  
Meagher and Nugent, and their Irish volunteers! (Bilby  
4).

A song such as the one above celebrates Celtic culture as its own entity: an entity which still manages to thrive and grow as a part of, and alongside, a "host" culture. Homogeneity and demographic cohesiveness become defamiliarized and exposed as incomplete constructs in the presence of hyphenation. This interpretive stance is virtually impossible in the dualistic,

linearly causal model of culture favored by many for so long. Riverdance, for example, ultimately presents its audience with a collective Irish-American identity rising from a single source and historical experience. Glaring erasures are made in Riverdance in order to produce a comforting and marketable unity. A circum-Atlantic model, however, thrives on such associative connections and exposes the erasures and instabilities of the linear model and can encourage and revalidate a hyphenate perspective of culture and history.

Culture and history are much more complex and materialist than linear causality, monologism or the culture industry would lead us to believe. Contradictions abound and paradoxes confuse. Performance is required to negotiate and make sense of the ambiguities and complicated experiences of living. Moreover, performance intersecting with history (vortices of behavior, creative activity) creates culture. Kirk W. Fuoss addresses this powerful aspect of performance in the following passage:

First, cultural performances make things happen that would not have happened in that way, to that extent, in that place, at that time, or among those persons had the cultural performances not occurred. In short, cultural performances are not merely objects of aesthetic contemplation but more importantly sites of sociopolitical competition. Second, cultural performances move the social directions, either toward a further entrenchment of status quo values and relations of power or toward a loosening of status quo values with a redistribution of status quo relations of power. Third, this directional movement occurs as a result of strategies that human agents operationalize, and, further, these strategies operate either in the

cultural performances themselves or in ancillary activities related to them, such as talking about performances prior to or after their occurrence (99).

I would go further and add that the movement of social directions in one of two directions does not necessarily have to be either/or and that traces and evidence can be found of performances being actively and simultaneously multidirectional in their social effects.

The four performances that form the basis of this study are the very reason a person can claim to be a part of Irish American culture and that Irish-American culture can even be said to exist. Culture, as Fintan O'Toole observes, is "a whole set of connections and affections, the web of mutual recognition that we spin around ourselves and that gives us a place in the world" (Ex-Isle 136). O'Toole rightly endows the individual with agency in his conception of culture, a performative agency that nevertheless is negotiated through a much larger network of affiliations and nexus points, and which, in turn, is itself filtered through other cultural performances of identity.

Ex-Congressman Bruce Morrison tells the story of his relationship with Irish-American culture. Morrison was adopted by a father of Scots-Protestant descent and an English-Catholic mother. He was raised Lutheran and considered himself German-American if he considered the issue at all. However, as a result of his 1982 election to Congress Morrison became familiar with many of the Irish-Americans who made up his representational

district. He discovered an affinity with the Irish-American community; he writes, "As much as my infant adoption gave me a family for life, awakening my Irish connections has given me a heritage for life" (Morrison 195). Morrison's cultural identity was "chosen, not given" and for that reason stands as that much more meaningful and fulfilling. A monologicistic interpretation of hyphenated identity would have disallowed such a conception of identity formation. Morrison would have had to be content with an "honorary Irishness" and a place on the selvage of the Irish-American community. Through the secular spectacles and performances that create culture, a conception of Irish American identity could form that contained room for Morrison and others like him. In this case, positing performance as the key to opening cultural identity allows for dialogism and polyvocalness. The accidents of birth and genetics are trumped by performative choices within a larger discourse and routes are positioned over roots. The "rhetorics of exclusion" that are so ubiquitous in circum-Atlantic cultures, to paraphrase Roach, are found to be wanting and open to (ex)change when faced with the ambiguous power of performance.

By recognizing the primacy of performance (vortices of behavior, creative activity, etc.) in the construction of culture and cultural identity, not only do the rhetorics of exclusion and erasure (so vital to monologism) receive attention and redress but also a complementarity between cultures becomes possible.



Comparativity and contestation have governed much of the discourse between different cultures. Complementarity seeks to find the complementary and divergent aspects of different cultures without the encoded supremacy or chauvinism that is spawned by contestual comparisons of cultures. Because of the symbiotic, cyclical relationship between performance and culture, the examination of cultures side by side becomes a search for similar performance tactics. Often the content or the message of a performance may be different but many of the same performance strategies remain recognizable in form. Resultantly, cultural identity reveals itself to be the product of many hybridized performance traditions instead of a universal and absolute metaphysical concept accessible only to those "chosen" by the randomness of birth.

The methodology and philosophies that support this examination of Irish-American participatory performances take the traditional notions of culture and cultural identity beyond the realm of "pure" ethnicity and blind nationalism. Replacing these occasionally violent and often narrow-minded categories are tribes of cultural performance and memory. Understanding these tribes requires a new type of scholar, a genealogist rather than a traditional historian. Joseph Roach writes of this type of scholar and his/her mission:

Genealogists resist histories that attribute purity of origin to any performance. They have to take into account the give and take of joint transmissions,

posted in the past, arriving in the present, delivered by living messengers, speaking in tongues not entirely their own. Orature is an art of listening as well as speaking; improvisation is an art of collective memory as well as invention; repetition is an art of re-creation as well as restoration. Texts may obscure what performance tends to reveal (Cities 286).

Prioritizing the mutual interaction of performance and history as the basis for culture and cultural identity fosters many dramatic changes, not the least of which is nothing less than the redefinition of ethnicity. Ethnicity reconfigured through the lens of performance and dialogistic interpretive strategies finds its footing not in the metaphysics and violence used to justify and universalize the random accidents of birth, but in the somatic wisdom of the individual functioning within a knowable tradition, history, and performative genealogy of memory.

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