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**UCC**

**University College Cork, Ireland**  
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Clíona Ó Gallchoir

“Whiteness and the Racialization of Irish Identity in Celtic Tiger Children’s Fiction”

This essay examines a small selection of novels for young readers published between 1993 and 2004 which deal in a variety of ways with themes of race and migration in Ireland. Pádraic Whyte has drawn attention to “the manner in which children’s texts engage with complex cultural discourses in contemporary Ireland and the significant contribution that children’s novels and films can make to broader debates concerning Irish identity at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.”<sup>1</sup> The novels under discussion here, John Quinn’s *Duck and Swan* (1993), Mark O’Sullivan’s *White Lies* (1997), and Patrick Devaney’s *Tribal Scars* (2004) appeared during a critical period in Ireland, the earliest being published immediately prior to the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger. The term “Celtic Tiger” was coined in 1994 by the economist Kevin Gardiner, and that year marked the beginning of a period of unprecedented economic growth and social change in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> While the social and economic changes of the period were accompanied by a marked liberalization of attitudes and significant legal reforms such as the introduction of divorce and the decriminalization of homosexuality, it has been argued that this period also saw a new racialization of Irish identity, and a conscious affirmation of

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<sup>1</sup> Pádraic Whyte, *Irish Childhoods: Children’s Fiction and Irish History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), xii.

<sup>2</sup> For a critical discussion of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, see Colin Coulter, “The End of Irish History?” in *The End of Irish History? Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*, ed. Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

the “whiteness” of that identity.<sup>3</sup> My discussion of these novels is therefore focused on the extent to which they engage with or reflect on this process of racialization, and the extent to which they could be said to challenge the identification between Irishness and whiteness.

One of the changes that characterized the Celtic Tiger period was rapid population growth, amplified in part by inward migration.<sup>4</sup> This was a phenomenon new to post-independence Ireland, a state characterized up to this point by a steady outward flow of emigrants. Migrants were made up in part of returning Irish emigrants, but also to a considerable extent of foreign nationals drawn by growing employment opportunities. A feature of this period was also a significant increase in the number of people making applications for asylum and refugee status in Ireland. The number of people who sought asylum in Ireland in 1992 was 39, and 10 years later in 2002 the number peaked at 11,634.<sup>5</sup> The vast majority of those seeking asylum were from Africa, from countries including Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and DR Congo and the presence in Ireland of a small but highly visible number of people of color triggered an escalation of racist discourse in which issues of color, race and

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<sup>3</sup> See Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh, eds., *After Optimism? Ireland, Racism and Globalization* (Dublin: Metro Eireann Publications, 2006) and Steve Garner, “Ireland: from racism without “race” to racism without racists,” *Radical History Review* 1004 (2009).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Census figures on the Central Statistics Office website, the population grew from 3,626,087 in 1996 to 4,239,848 in 2006. Accessed June 9, 2016, <http://www.cso.ie/multiquicktables/quickTables.aspx?id=cna13>. 2007 saw the peak of immigration, with 151,100 migrants arriving in Ireland in that year. This compares with a figure of 30,100 immigrants in the year 1994. Accessed June 9, 2016, <http://www.cso.ie/multiquicktables/quickTables.aspx?id=pea15>. For a summary of demographic changes over the period 2002-2011, see ‘Central Statistics Office. Profile 6: Migration and Diversity’. Stationary Office, Dublin. October 2012, accessed June 9, 2016, <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011profile6/Profile,6,Migration,and,Diversity,entire,doc.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, *Annual Report 2013*, 54, Table 1, accessed 9 June, 2016, [http://www.orac.ie/website/orac/oracwebsite.nsf/page/AJNR-9LED5Q1029825-en/\\$File/Office%20of%20the%20Refugee%20Applications%20Commissioner%20-%20Annual%20Report%202013.pdf](http://www.orac.ie/website/orac/oracwebsite.nsf/page/AJNR-9LED5Q1029825-en/$File/Office%20of%20the%20Refugee%20Applications%20Commissioner%20-%20Annual%20Report%202013.pdf).

legal status were frequently confused and conflated.<sup>6</sup> Hostile and misinformed media and public discussion of the asylum issue lead firstly to the introduction of a system of “direct provision” for asylum seekers which cut them off from the wider community and forced them into a highly restrictive and institutionalized existence.<sup>7</sup> This hostile discourse also culminated ultimately in the decision to amend Article 2 of the constitution which guaranteed citizenship to anyone born in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> In 2004, a majority of the electorate supported the amendment, which restricted Irish citizenship to those born in Ireland who had one parent who either was or was entitled to be an Irish citizen.<sup>9</sup> The decision to make such a fundamental change to the basis of Irish citizenship was taken in the context of the granting of residency to thousands of asylum seekers who had Irish-born children. As Eithne Luibhéid has pointed out, the fact that more applications for residency were granted on this basis than was the case in actual applications for refugee status could be read in terms of a highly restrictive interpretation of the Geneva Convention on the part of Irish officials.<sup>10</sup> Popularly, however, the idea of childbirth as a “backdoor” to residency for “illegal” migrants (invariably assumed to be from Nigeria) dominated public discussion and was the major factor driving the decision to restrict access to citizenship in Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Steve Loyal, “Welcome to the Celtic Tiger: Racism, Immigration and the State,” in Coulter and Coleman, *The End of Irish History?*; Steve Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 156-7; Amanda Haynes, Eoin Devereux and Michael Breen, “Public Exercises in Othering: Irish Print Media Coverage of Asylum Seekers and Refugees,” in *Facing the Other: Interdisciplinary Essays on Race, Gender and Social Justice in Ireland* ed. Borbala Farago and Moynagh Sullivan (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See Loyal, “Welcome to the Celtic Tiger,” 78-9.

<sup>8</sup> See Lentin and McVeigh, particularly 36-57.

<sup>9</sup> See the website of the Referendum Commission: “Irish Citizenship: Referendum on the Twenty-Seventh Amendment to the Constitution Bill 2004 (Irish Citizenship),” accessed June 9, 2016, <http://www.refcom.ie/en/past-referendums/irish-citizenship/>

<sup>10</sup> Eithne Luibhéid, “Childbearing against the State? Asylum seeker women in the Irish Republic,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 27, no. 4 (2004): 338. See also Ronit Lentin, ‘From Racial State to Racist State: Ireland on the Eve of the Citizenship Referendum’ *Variant* 20, accessed June 9, 2016, <http://www.variant.org.uk/20texts/raciststate.html>

<sup>11</sup> Luibhéid, “Childbearing,” 339-40.

2004 also witnessed a massive enlargement of the European Union. On 1 May of that year, 10 countries including 3 former Soviet republics (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia) and 4 former satellites of the USSR (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia) became members of the EU. Ireland, still experiencing strong economic growth and expansion, was the only western European state aside from Sweden to impose no restrictions on the freedom of movement of citizens from the new member states, including access to social welfare. 2004 thus marked a decisive shift in Ireland's self-definition and self-image. Defined against the image of the black asylum seeker or "bogus migrant," Irish citizenship was affirmed as implicitly white, while the open door policy to migrant workers from eastern Europe confirmed Ireland's booming economy and its welcome to newcomers whose color did not threaten national integrity. This is, according to Steven Garner, typical of what he calls the "Racial state:" one that "profess[es] multiculturalism and official equality discourses while introducing new racialized shifts in the access to rights and resources."<sup>12</sup>

It is in this context of increasing racialization in Ireland that I wish to locate my discussion of fiction for young readers that addresses race in a contemporary setting. The three novels discussed in this essay belong to a small group of texts focused on race and migration that I have identified in this period. All are authored by members of the white majority population in Ireland and as such are necessarily limited in their ability to challenge what has been called the "pervasive whiteness" of children's literature.<sup>13</sup> Eoin Colfer's *Benny and Omar* (1998) deals with the more

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<sup>12</sup> Garner, "Ireland," 47.

<sup>13</sup> Brynn F. Welch, "The Pervasive Whiteness of Children's Literature: Collective Harms and Consumer Obligations," *Social Theory* 42, no. 2 (2016). In addition to the concern about the paucity of representations of ethnic and racial minorities in children's literature, the representation of minority populations by white authors has been the focus of controversy since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and there is now a heightened awareness of the issue of cultural appropriation. In the case of

historically familiar Irish experience of emigration and its representation of the friendship of Benny and his new Tunisian friend, Omar, explores the meanings ascribed to race from the perspective of the white Irish child protagonist. Siobhán Parkinson's *The Love Bean* (2002) and Vincent O'Donnell's *Out of the Flames* (2002) both address the experience of African asylum seekers in Ireland, and depict protests against asylum-seeker accommodation. Both texts explicitly challenge racist attitudes and thus seek to counter the hostile media discourse around asylum seekers described above, at a point at which it was reaching a climax. In broad terms, these three texts can be understood in terms of the response to increased immigration and racial diversity that John Stephens describes in the case of Australian children's literature in the 1970s and 80s. Surveying the texts for young readers that addressed immigration in these decades, he notes that all were written by members of the majority "Anglo-Saxon-Celtic" population and were also focalized by characters from the majority community, and as such he says they "construc[t] migrant minorities as narrative objects and the alien 'Other' to whom the representatives of the dominant group extend understanding."<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the novels by Colfer, Parkinson and O'Donnell, *Duck and Swan*, *White Lies* and *Tribal Scars* are not primarily concerned with attitudes to racial minorities; instead, I argue, they display an awareness of race as a shifting rather than a stable category. As we have seen, the period 1994-2004 witnessed a significant increase in the public articulation and attempted justification of racist attitudes in Ireland, together with an explicit and, as Garner and Lentin and McVeigh argue,

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children's literature, texts which have been the focus of some criticism include Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day* (1962) and, in a Canadian context, W. P. Kinsella's *Dance Me Outside* (1977).

<sup>14</sup> John Stephens, "Advocating Multiculturalism: Migrants in Australian Children's Literature after 1972," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1990), 181. See also Sharyn Pearce, "Messages from the Inside? Multiculturalism in Contemporary Australian Children's Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 27 (2003).

*newly* racialized limitation on the concept of Irish citizenship. There is therefore more at stake than simply providing a corrective to racist attitudes. In the period in question, the potential for a racially inclusive construction of Irish identity was briefly articulated and, it would seem, quickly extinguished. In this context, it is highly significant that these three texts feature a mixed-race central protagonist: in each case, the central character has one African and one Irish parent, and was either born in Ireland or brought up in Ireland from infancy.<sup>15</sup> These texts are thus not primarily concerned with the “Irish” response (sympathetic or otherwise) to “outsiders;” instead that they offer a more profound reflection on the processes of racialization that emerged in the Celtic Tiger period, during which whiteness became an explicitly asserted aspect of Irishness, just at the point when Ireland’s population became more racially diverse than ever. Kimberley Reynolds, arguing for the radical potential of children’s literature, acknowledges that it is “undeniably implicated in cultural integration,” but that “it is also about developing individual potential suited to a future in which societies could be different in some significant ways.”<sup>16</sup> These three novels, published at a time of unprecedented social change in Ireland, illustrate some of the ways in which children’s literature can contribute to the imagination of different futures.

Equally as significant as the projection of a different future in Ireland is the reflection on the legacy of the past. As I will outline, these texts locate their reflections on race in a wider Irish historical and social context, challenging the simplistic but widely aired claim that race was a wholly novel and indeed “alien” concept in the Irish context, a problem effectively foisted on Irish society by migrants

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<sup>15</sup> Although it is largely focused on attitudes to African asylum seekers, *Out of the Flames* also features a mixed-race protagonist: Maria is both an asylum seeker and a potential Irish citizen: her father is African and her mother, murdered by terrorists in a fictional African country, is Irish.

<sup>16</sup> Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fictions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1, 2.

themselves.<sup>17</sup> In all three novels the representation of race is interwoven with tropes that recall both the distant and recent Irish past, thus embedding the issue of race in a multilayered context, rather than associating understandings of and responses to race solely with the period of increased inward migration that began in the mid-1990s. In *Duck and Swan* and *Tribal Scars* the Big House, a powerfully ambivalent symbol in Irish culture and history, is invoked in such a way as to position the racialized protagonists in relation to existing narratives of otherness, tradition and dispossession. And in all three novels the issue of racialized otherness is aligned with the extraordinarily punitive treatment in post-independence Ireland of women who became pregnant outside of marriage, and with the policing of women and female sexuality more generally.

Definitions of belonging, of insiders and outsiders, have very long historical roots in Ireland and arise chiefly from the historical distinctions between settler and native, colonizer and colonized. The Big House functioned as an architectural and spatial symbol of the ideological constructions that underpinned the power relations of the quasi-colonial system that prevailed in Ireland, but its meanings are not limited to the assertion of dominance by a minority elite. Describing the Big House in symbolic terms as “the crucible in which two civilizations failed to melt and yet became inseparably bound together,” Guy Fehlman registers the notes of loss and regret which can accrue around these reminders of the violence and division of the Irish past.<sup>18</sup> Vera Kreilkamp observes acutely that a number of significant social and cultural changes in the late twentieth century, including “revisionist interpretations of the Anglo-Irish landowning class, together with the persistent nostalgia that

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<sup>17</sup> See Lentin and McVeigh, 5; see also Maureen Reddy, “Talking the Talk: Codes of Racialization,” in Farago and Sullivan, *Facing the Other*, 220-231.

<sup>18</sup> Guy Fehlman, “An Historical Survey,” in *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation*, ed. Jacqueline Genet (Dingle: Brandon Books, 1991), 18.



characterizes modern consumer societies” contributed to a shift in the perception of the Big House and its inhabitants, whereby “the nationalist’s alien colonizer [was transformed] into a complex Chekhovian figure – Ireland’s new dispossessed.”<sup>19</sup> A further layer was added to the cultural meanings of the Big House when, during the economic boom, these symbols of “alien” power were bought and redeveloped by the wealthiest of Ireland’s business and financial elites, either as private residences or as exclusive resort hotels.<sup>20</sup> In the words of Fintan O’Toole, the acquisition of the houses of the former ascendancy by men such as Michael Smurfitt and Tony Ryan was greeted in some quarters an achievement, the arrival of “our own gentry.”<sup>21</sup> Echoes of these various resonances can be found in *Duck and Swan* and *Tribal Scars*, as well as evidence of the significant changes that reshaped the meaning of the Big House in the Celtic Tiger period.

The character of Martin Oduki (“Duck”) in *Duck and Swan* is consistently represented as inhabiting a position of extreme marginality. He appears first, described as “a dark bundle,”<sup>22</sup> hiding under the seat of a bus, which is taking a group of schoolchildren home to their Galway village after a trip to Dublin. Duck, the child of a white Irish mother and a Nigerian father, has run away from a care home, in which he was placed following episodes of shoplifting and truanting, and also because of his mother’s drug addiction and inability to care for him. The contrasts between Duck and his new-found friend, Emer, are thus set up partly as contrasts between the rural and the urban, between the troubled modernity of the city and the seemingly

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<sup>19</sup> Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>20</sup> See Terence Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001), 278-9.

<sup>21</sup> Fintan O’Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), Chapter 4: “Our Own Gentry.” See also his discussion of Paddy Kelly’s feeling of “historic triumph” in redeveloping Castletown estate, Co. Kildare: 98.

<sup>22</sup> John Quinn, *Duck and Swan* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1993), 7. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

cohesive and tranquil nature of Irish rural life. It is also evident, however, that these contrasts are racialized, in a way that is not fully addressed or explored. This implicit racialization is troubling because of the role that Emer assumes as protector, benefactor and teacher in relation to Duck. Not only does she help him to hide, she brings him food and, discovering he is unable to read, starts to teach him, using books she read as a much younger child. She also acts as a mediator between Duck and other characters in the community, encouraging him to come to the local school.

The children's differing relations to space and movement are also interesting to consider. Children's movements are highly regulated by adults, a fact which is very clear in the account of the trip to Dublin, during which the teacher constantly shepherds, monitors and reprimands the children.<sup>23</sup> Emer is at first an obedient participant in this activity, but she chooses however to defy the demands for compliance when she takes on the job of helping Duck, telling lies to explain her absences and concealing where she is going – transgressions of which, as an ordinarily well-behaved child, she is acutely aware. Duck's difference from Emer is starkly evident in his refusal to stay where he has been told to stay (the care home) and his hidden and unsanctioned presence on the bus. Duck's marginal status is thus reflected in his much more circumscribed relationship to space: he is effectively confined to the space of the care home and is therefore a transgressive presence in any other space. This marginality is underlined when he hides in an unused private chapel on the grounds of a Big House, the demesne of Dunrickard House.

The house, grounds and chapel are deserted and semi-dilapidated, and it is only in this abandoned, unoccupied space that Duck can find even temporary refuge. The racialized nature of Duck's social marginality is ultimately acknowledged when

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<sup>23</sup> See Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1996), 75-6.

Emer reflects on the fact that he is unlikely to stay hidden for long: “He couldn’t stay on the run forever. Especially not someone who was – black” (27). The color that marks Duck as not belonging is also foregrounded when he is spotted by other children, who tell their teacher the following day that they’ve seen “a blackie” (41), which gave them “a terrible fright” (42). The idea of Duck being “frightening” is of course on one level an indication of a crude racism, but it also links him to the eerie space to which he has fled as a refuge – the chapel is for instance home to a number of funeral vaults which make Emer distinctly uneasy. Duck’s simultaneously marginalized and threatening presence is thus linked to the former inhabitants of the Big House, now represented only by means of the unsettling vaults in the chapel. The local inhabitants avoid and seemingly ignore the demesne of Dunrickard House, but once Duck has been sighted in the grounds, it is clear that his presence will not be tolerated. He is woken in the chapel by the sound of a hurling ball repeatedly thudding against the door. Observing the “arrogant saunter” (45) of the boy who is apparently engaging in practice and hearing the “mocking tone in his whistle” (46), Duck realizes he has been discovered and that he must leave. His next place of refuge is, highly symbolically, a thatched cottage owned by the Flynns, a childless older couple. The Flynns’ home is on one level “the cabin” that stands in opposition to the Big House, symbolizing the divisions of the Irish past and the seemingly stark and unbridgeable nature of those divisions. The Flynns’ cottage is also representative of an idea of tradition; in area known locally as “the island” because it is cut off by floods during the winter, it is “cut off” in other ways too, a hold-over from what seems at first to be an idealized vision of Ireland’s past. The apparent idealization of traditional ways of life is however radically disrupted when Nan Flynn reveals to Duck her experience of institutionalization as an unmarried mother in an Ireland

dominated by the ideology of the Catholic church. As noted above, the theme of the policing of female sexuality is one that links *Duck and Swan* with *White Lies* and *Tribal Scars*, and will be fully discussed in the second half of this essay.

The eerie, dilapidated and deserted demesne of Dunrickard House is in stark contrast to Cherryfield Estate, the Big House at the center of the plot of *Tribal Scars*. Aidan or Adesima, the central teenage protagonist, is the child of a white Irish mother who met her child's African father while he was studying medicine in Dublin. Aidan's mother Jakki is from a highly privileged upper middle-class family, and when she finds herself ostracized by her family because of the "disgrace" of her mixed-race child and then loses contact with the boy's father, she decides that her son "would be more Irish than anybody,"<sup>24</sup> and she uses Irish as the first language of their home. When the novel opens she has reluctantly agreed to live in the grounds of Cherryfield estate, recently bought by her father, Senator Tadhg Higgins, a Haughey-esque figure known satirically by locals as "the Squire." The estate is at the center of local controversy, as Higgins intends to develop it as a golf course and holiday village, against the opposition of people such as the idealistic and nationalist teacher Tom Keating, and ultimately Jakki Higgins, who is an occasional writer and photographer for *Gael Glas* (Green Gael), a fictional magazine whose title captures an alliance between nationalist and left-wing and environmental concerns. This is represented in the novel as the opposition to the self-serving and self-interested maneuvers of Higgins and local councilor Mick Neary, and as a set of values opposed to those of the "Celtic Tiger," a term used explicitly and negatively in the text.

The estate is in a constant state of construction and destruction throughout the narrative – scaffolding surrounds the house, which is being restored, while bulldozers

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick Devaney, *Tribal Scars* (Dublin: Mentor Books, 2004), 20. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

and chainsaws destroy the landscape; its outer walls are partially demolished by a group of ecowarriors in order to gain access to the land and occupy it as a means of preventing further development. This unsettled, threatened and precarious location acts as a spatial metaphor for Aidan's unsettled identity. Having thought of himself simply as Irish, he is taken aback to hear himself described by an African schoolmate, a recent immigrant, as "Black like me" (82). Having not known who his grandfather was, he is then shocked to discover that he is the "direct descendent" of Senator Higgins, a powerful member of the Irish establishment. The novel uses the estate and its history to posit different forms of legitimacy and ownership in Ireland. It refers to the Anglo-Irish origins of the estate, and the passing of one power in Ireland, and suggests that Higgins, representative of current Irish establishment although legally in possession of the estate, lacks legitimacy. Aidan and his mother are granted the residence rights by Higgins, but Aidan subverts this by firstly stealing from the Big House and then by asserting a different kind of legitimate presence, in his concern and love for the natural environment around him. Significantly, an otherwise model pupil, he "mitches" from school in order to explore the animal and plant life in the estate, and also joins forces with the illegal occupation by the ecowarriors. At the novel's conclusion, Jakki Higgins and Tom Keating, disillusioned by the developments in Celtic Tiger Ireland, determine to leave Ireland for Africa. Aidan however establishes independence from both his mother and his grandfather and foresees a future in Ireland.

Far from assuming a monolithic and normative Irish identity against which black characters are positioned as "other," *Tribal Scars* explores race alongside the class and ideological divides in contemporary Ireland. In the text, "race" is not a static marker of difference, but a shifting discourse, one that inflects and is inflected by

other key discourses in Irish society, such as class, colonial history, tradition and progress. Aidan's discovery of his powerful white grandfather does not determine his future path and the novel also reminds us that perceptions of race and belonging are far from fixed – as his African classmate reminds him, in the context of increasing inward migration from places like Nigeria, Aidan becomes more “black” in the eyes of some in the community.

As we have seen, Jakki Higgins's relationship with an African man was the trigger for the breach with her parents and particularly her estrangement from her father and ultimately from the class and social position she had previously occupied. This points to the theme that links *Tribal Scars*, *Duck and Swan* and *White Lies*: the extraordinary measures taken to control female sexuality in the service of a particular construction of Irish national identity in the post-independence Irish state. Gerardine Meaney has argued that “the extent to which issues of reproduction and sexuality dominated public debate and anxieties around modernization ... are in the Irish case ... powerfully linked to residual anxieties around race and Ireland's postcolonial position as a white European nation.”<sup>25</sup> The connection between race and gender that Meaney highlights is expressed in a variety of ways in the three texts.

In *Duck and Swan*, Duck's racialized identity is represented at first in the context of a troubled urban modernity. His lone mother neglects him, has “lots of boyfriends” (23) and ultimately starts using and dealing drugs, which leads to his institutionalization in a care home where the staff range from being verbally abusive to sexually predatory. Duck's “blackness” is thus aligned at the outset with the “anxieties around modernization” that Meaney describes, anxieties that include unregulated female sexuality that is portrayed as immoral and damaging. This

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<sup>25</sup> Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 6.

configuration is however radically overthrown when Duck meets Nan Flynn. Her reaction to him is one of immediate identification: “You’re a home child, aren’t you? ... You come from a home, an institution. I can see it in your eyes.” (50). Nan’s identification with Duck is based on her own experiences of institutionalization in a Magdalene Laundry: “It was a home for bad girls like me. ... In everyone else’s eyes I was [bad]. I was an outsider like yourself.” (53). The reference to the Magdalene Laundry system in this text is noteworthy not least because of its very early date: it predates the late 1990s investigation and reportage of the abuses women suffered in the laundries that eventually lead to a commission of inquiry and the publication of its report in 2013. Nan’s empathetic response to Duck implicitly challenges the narrow and exclusive definition of Irish identity that, as Meaney has argued, relied on rigid codes of gender and sexuality as a means of upholding a “white European” Irishness.

The identification that Nan feels with Duck and her sense of what they have in common as “home children” provides a basis from which Duck can begin to feel a sense of belonging. It is in the Flynn’s home that a process of integration begins, symbolized by Duck’s discovery of a talent for hurling and his key role in helping the Tubberfin club team win their first title since 1949. The refuge found in the Flynn’s thatched cottage is however, as Duck himself denominates it using a phrase learned from a fairy tale, a “house of straw.” He is still officially on the run from the care home and he remains a fugitive and a marginal figure. He is persuaded to return to Dublin following an appeal from his mother, who is dying from AIDS, a consequence of her drug use. The novel concludes with Emer’s return from Dublin with her younger brother following a trip to the Zoo and the ambiguous suggestion to the reader that Duck has, once again, stowed away in order to return to Tubberfin. In spite of his Irish birth and upbringing, therefore, Duck’s mixed racial heritage, his

blackness, clearly positions him as not fully belonging. His membership of the winning hurling team suggests the possibility of an inclusive Irish identity that is not defined by whiteness, but this possibility is never fully realized in the text and ultimately Duck's racialized otherness leaves him outside the structures of belonging, of community and family life.

The central character in *White Lies*, Nance, occupies a very different position to the neglected and disadvantaged Duck. Nance describes herself as “the perfect daughter of a perfect family. ... A nice detached house in a good part of town. ... Tom and May never wasted time on anything that wasn't useful. And I played my own part to perfection.”<sup>26</sup> Nance is the mixed-race adopted daughter of Tom and May, a couple who fit the stereotype of middle-class, Irish liberals. Of a piece with that identity is the fact that they met in Kenya as volunteer teachers – and it was while in Kenya that they adopted Nance, the child of a mixed-race couple killed in a car crash. In spite of her privileged social position, as “the only colored person in a town of seven thousand” (3) Nance is at times unavoidably reminded of how “different” (3) she is, as she is forced to listen to casually racist remarks and jokes about “white boy saves black girl” in the film *The Bodyguard* (5). She experiences a crisis of identity when she finds a photograph of Tom and May standing in a group with another couple, a black man and white woman, who is holding a brown-skinned baby. Convinced that she is the baby and the unidentified woman is her mother she determines to find her, and also to find out why May concealed her birth mother's identity. The revelation that comes in the closing pages is that May herself is Nance's birth mother. When she returned to Ireland from Kenya with Tom, she simply pretended that they had adopted a mixed-race orphan.

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<sup>26</sup> Mark O'Sullivan, *White Lies* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Dublin: Little Island, 2010), 36-7. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.



May claims unconvincingly that her deception is not borne out of shame that she had a child outside of marriage or that the child's father was black – she offers instead the explanation that she has been protecting Nance from the knowledge that her father became a violent drug addict who attacked her stepfather, Tom, and then was killed in a car accident caused by his own recklessness. This is presented to Nance as the source of the shame from which May sought to protect her. The issues of violence and addiction are, she claims, what caused her to make the “sacrifice” (188) of denying that she was Nance's natural mother: “I was afraid of what people would think of me, of what my mother would have thought of me if she'd ever known” (188). It need hardly be pointed out that May's fear of “what people would think” resonates powerfully with the discourse of shame and concealment that persisted around nonmarital pregnancies in Ireland as late as the 1990s, while the convoluted and melodramatic story she tells strains the reader's credulity.

Earlier in the text, Nance reflects on “what a strange threesome we made, posing as the ideal family. Tom, the perfect caricature of the red-headed, brown-eyed Irishman, his Mediterranean wife; his daughter, darker still” (54). This strangeness is made acceptable through the fiction of the adoption, but the truth paradoxically has the potential to undermine the family, even when the truth is that Nance is biologically related to her mother. This clearly reveals I think the identification between Irishness and whiteness: Nance is somehow *more* acceptable when it is imagined that she is not biologically related to her white mother, but instead the beneficiary of (white) Irish benevolence, expressed both in terms of Irish development work in Africa and also in the adoption of an “orphan.” Tom and May's identity as middle-class Irish people is bolstered and reinforced by the “adoption” of Nance and, conversely, this identity is threatened by the truth of May's prior

relationship with Nance's father, Chris Mburu. The paradox that May is perceived as a "better" mother in the case where the fact that she has actually given birth to Nance is concealed is illuminated by Meaney's argument as to the conflation of the Virgin Mother and Mother Ireland in the service of "Irish (racial) purity."<sup>27</sup> Meaney argues that this function "could only be performed if the maternal body was idealized out of existence"<sup>28</sup> – in precisely the same way that May is an "ideal" mother to Nance as long as the unacceptable facts of Nance's conception and birth are concealed.

In its depiction of a secret that is brought to light, the novel of course suggests that the fiction of racial purity that May created, her own unwillingness to admit the mixed nature of her family, is wrong, and that the truth must be acknowledged. And, equally obviously, the fact of her having had a child outside of marriage must similarly be acknowledged. The damaging nature of concealment and lies is underlined by other secrets that are revealed: Nance's school friend Seanie Ryan tells her that he is gay, and prepares to tell his parents, and Nance learns from her mother's old friend Heather Kelly that she is in a relationship with a former priest she met while in Africa.

At the same time, however, the weirdly inverted fairy tale or family romance structure of the novel gives a very instructive insight into the difficulty with which Nance's blackness can be imaginatively incorporated into an Irish family. The photo that Nance finds triggers a preoccupation with her "true" parents and creates tension in her relationships with Tom and May. In Freud's theory, the development of the family romance is a neurotic response to a normal developmental process in which the individual establishes independence from her family of origin. The neurotic, dissatisfied with or "slighted" by her parents, fantasises that she is adopted, and

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<sup>27</sup> Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

creates a fantasy family of origin that is inevitably superior to the actual family.<sup>29</sup> For Nance, however, raised as an adopted child, the preoccupation with her origins is far from neurotic. Her dissatisfaction with her parents is rooted in their failure to provide her with answers to legitimate questions and her conviction that they have hidden vital information from her. On the cusp of adulthood, she decides to take matters into her own hands and undertakes a journey, together with her friend Seánie, in order to find out the truth for herself.<sup>30</sup> The connection between the idea of obscured origins and the journey away from the family home is also found in the structure of many traditional fairytales in which “the hero of the tale is so often portrayed as a stepchild, a child whose paternity or maternity is in a sense not firmly established.”<sup>31</sup> Fairy tales of this type conclude with the hero being restored to his or her rightful place, and this is also, in a sense, what transpires for Nance. The “secret” that has been concealed is however that Nance is in fact her mother’s child: her racial heritage has resulted in her being symbolically cast out from her home and family and she must be “reinstated” into the family she has always known, but which now must be radically reconfigured.

As we have seen, concealed origins are also central to *Tribal Scars*, in which Aidan is shocked to learn of his relationship to his grandfather, the powerful Senator Higgins. The two novels are however quite different in that Devaney appears to articulate an emphatic rejection of the equation between whiteness and Irishness. This is accompanied in the novel by a rejection of the highly conservative attitudes to sexuality and reproduction that we see reflected – although not uncritically – in both

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<sup>29</sup> See “Family Romances,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908): Jensen’s ‘Gradiva’ and Other Works, i-vi*, ed. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1959). Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing, accessed June 9, 2016, <http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=se.009.0000a>

<sup>30</sup> Pádraic Whyte discusses *White Lies* largely in terms of its treatment of “characters who learn to become active agents in their own lives.” “Young Adult Fiction and Youth Culture,” in *Irish Children’s Literature and Culture: New Perspectives on Contemporary Writing*, ed. Valerie Coghlan and Keith O’Sullivan (London: Routledge, 2011), 74.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Tatar, “From Rags to Riches: Fairy Tales and the Family Romance,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1982), 32.

*Duck and Swan* and *White Lies*. Jakki Higgins does not conceal her pregnancy and lives as a single mother. She also actively decides to keep any information about her son's Irish family background from him and brings him up with an effectively invented identity, central to which is the Irish language but also left-wing environmental politics. He is thus "more Irish than any of them," but not by virtue of belonging to or identifying with his family inheritance. The character of Aidan thus represents the need in twenty-first-century Ireland not only to move beyond race-based definitions of national belonging, but also to challenge the patriarchal family unit as the basis of Irish society.

It is tempting to frame a discussion of *Duck and Swan*, *White Lies* and *Tribal Scars* in terms of rapid social change and liberalization in terms of both race and gender. The construction of the black Irish child "progresses" from the institutionalized child of a drug-addicted single mother, to the middle-class adopted child, to the confident and successful Aidan; attitudes towards sexuality and reproduction undergo similar shifts. There is however a very real danger in charting attitudes towards race in terms of this narrative of progress: convinced of the benefits of social liberalization, middle-class liberals run the risk of assuming that groups such as racial minorities are beneficiaries – but this is in fact far from the truth. As we have seen, the year in which *Tribal Scars* was published, 2004, was also the year of the Citizenship Referendum, which, according to Lentin and McVeigh, "was a crucial point in turning Ireland from a racial state to a racist state in which citizens are differentiated from non-citizens."<sup>32</sup> Lentin and McVeigh point out that the 1990s and early 2000s were years in "a whole new constellation of Black Irish or minority ethnic Irish communities" developed and that "not accidentally, therefore, Irishness became

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<sup>32</sup> Lentin and McVeigh, 55.

consciously equated with whiteness precisely as it became manifestly inappropriate to make the equation.”<sup>33</sup>

Since 2004, it is a curious but I think highly significant fact that no works for young readers that deal with race or with migrant communities have appeared in Ireland, with the exception of the ‘Bridges’ series of four picture books published by O’Brien Press.<sup>34</sup> As black Irish communities grow in numbers, the sense of a need to create a truly inclusive state appears to have waned. Factors in this phenomenon include the introduction of the direct provision system for asylum seekers, which successfully rendered them largely invisible; the Citizenship Referendum which, as has been observed, endorsed the construction of Ireland as “white” and thus (apparently) obviated the need to challenge racialized constructions of identity; and the financial collapse, which has created a climate of opinion in which “looking after our own” has gained legitimacy as a response to any protests about racism or the human rights of refugees. Hostility to migrants and racism are unquestionably growing. In 2010, 20% of respondents to a survey said they were not in favor of immigrants “from different ethnic backgrounds or from poorer non-European countries” coming to Ireland.<sup>35</sup> The direct provision system, introduced as a “temporary measure” in 2000, now houses nearly 4,300 people, of whom 1,600 are children, and a similar number who have lived in the system for over five years; it has been widely condemned by human rights organizations.<sup>36</sup> A report published in

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<sup>33</sup> Lentin and McVeigh, 37.

<sup>34</sup> “Bridges,” O’Brien Press website, accessed 9 June 2016, <http://www.obrien.ie/childrens/bridges>

<sup>35</sup> Judith Crosbie, “The Growth of Intolerance,” *Irish Times*, June 29, 2013, accessed 9 June, 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/the-growth-of-intolerance-1.1446566>

<sup>36</sup> Carl O’Brien, Sinéad O’Shea, Bryan O’Brien, Paul Scott, “Lives in Limbo,” *Irish Times*, accessed June 9, 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/lives-in-limbo>. See also Corona Joyce and Emma Quinn, *The Organization of Reception Facilities for Asylum Seekers in Ireland* (Dublin: European Migration Network/ESRI, 2014). <http://humanrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/IE-The-Organisation-of-Reception-Facilities-for-Asylum-Seekers-1.pdf>.

March 2015 confirmed the widespread experience of racist abuse by racial and ethnic minorities, with people of “black African” origin facing the most racism.<sup>37</sup>

The texts discussed in this essay indicate that authors of novels for young readers in the Celtic Tiger period engaged critically with race and its relation to Irish identity, and offered at least a partial challenge to the prevailing phenomenon of racialization and the installation of whiteness as a key marker of Irishness. The optimistic and radical conclusion of *Tribal Scars* is however in stark contrast to the racialized redefinition of Irish citizenship in 2004. The relative silence in the field of Irish children’s literature on the subject of race since 2004 is moreover arguably suggestive of a lack of faith in a truly inclusive Ireland. This is certainly a moment in which children’s literature could fulfill its radical potential and help us to imagine “a future in which societies could be different in some significant ways”, not least by representing the experience of Irish children of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and challenging the privileging of white perspectives.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kitty Holland, “‘Black Africans’ face the most racist abuse in Ireland, says report,” *Irish Times*, 20 March, 2015. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/black-africans-face-most-racist-abuse-in-ireland-says-report-1.2146079>.

<sup>38</sup> Reynolds, *Radical Children’s Literature*, 2.