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Asymmetries: South Africa, Ireland, and Postcolonial Comparison

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ABSTRACT:

In introducing this special issue on South African and Irish literature and culture, this article offers a critical overview of the field of comparisons between these two former colonies. Though the cultural output of both sites is often figured as exceptional or incomparable, there is a constant drumbeat of popular comparisons between South Africa and Ireland, and the disciplines of history, political science, and conflict resolution have long compared Irish and South African trajectories in the twentieth century. Comparisons often rely on an assumed solidarity or affinity based on a shared colonial history, but the radically different economic and political realities of the two sites make such assumptions unstable. This introduction suggests that it is time for a more nuanced set of comparative studies that recognize the profoundly asymmetrical relations between South Africa and Ireland, as well as the potential limits of comparative practice, and yet the gains from bringing together two anomalous postcolonial case studies. Drawing on the work of Peter D. McDonald, the essay makes a case for listening carefully to the idiosyncrasies of a “tangled archive” of South African-Irish relations in order to shed light on what postcolonial comparison might look like in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS:

Solidarity, Affinity, Archive, Entanglement, Complicity,

Perhaps the entire complex history of South African-Irish political and cultural entanglements can be seen in the story of a moving monument—very moving, really, since it disappeared for a time. It is a story told in this special issue by Johannesburg-based photographer Christo Doherty. The monument commemorates the volunteers who fought in the Irish Transvaal Brigade on the side of the Boers in the South African War, and it was installed in 1975 at the foot of the Brixton television tower in Johannesburg. Among its champions was Hendrik Verwoerd, the so-called architect of apartheid and Prime Minister, who contributed to the cost of the monument out of his own pocket. Forming a small part of a cultural strategy of the *Broederbond*, a secret society dedicated to advancing Afrikaner influence in South African society during apartheid, the monument to the Irish Brigade was erected some seventy years after the end of the South African War, with a clear mandate to establish the genealogy of the present, lending to the apartheid regime some kind of historical imprimatur. It helped that this imprimatur came with traces of international cooperation and solidarity; just as boycotts and sanctions against South Africa were ramping up in the 1970s, a monument such as this established the internationalist credentials of a republic that was fast losing support around the world.¹

The monument fell into some disrepair over the next couple of decades, a sign that there was no special reason to keep the memory of Irish support for the Boers alive in South Africa, especially after the end of apartheid. But the formerly unloved monument found a new home in the 2000s. From near oblivion in Johannesburg, it was moved to Orania (an Afrikaner-only town on the border of the Northern Cape and the Free State) cleaned up, and installed on a new monument hill there—both a living museum of monuments to white South Africans and a mausoleum of anachronistic memorials. What are we to make of this transposition of the Irish

Transvaal Brigade monument? Is it some kind of twisted, distorted final chapter of the story of the Irish engagement in and inspiration of anti-colonial action around the world? Or is it rather a testament to a strain of white supremacy that has always been present but occluded in the Irish struggle for self-determination? Perhaps those who moved the monument to its new location in Orania were not wrong to think that this monument to struggle against the British Empire was little more than a sublimated celebration of racial violence. If the history of South Africa in the twentieth century is one long racial struggle, the Irish began the century on the wrong side of that struggle, fighting alongside a people who opposed an empire but not the empire's racial logic.

Or maybe the entanglements and complicities between Ireland and South Africa are most clearly articulated in that ultimate chronicle of the agonistics of decolonization, Ulysses, which is replete with references to the South African War, set as it is just two years and a few days after the war had ended.² The novel actively grapples with the legacies of the war rather than simply, as Elleke Boehmer suggests, “allow[ing] the main characters’ awareness of the Boer War to percolate gradually into their lives, or lightly to touch its margins” (2012 251). Though Ulysses appears to presage a century of complicities between Ireland and South Africa, it is not a case of Joyce knowing it all in advance, as some Joyceans are wont to claim, though it is true that “coming events cast their shadow before” (U 8.525).³ The coming event that Joyce might have had the most difficulty foreseeing is the publication of South African writer Zoë Wicomb’s novel David’s Story, in which the ghostwriter makes a sudden and quite unmotivated allusion to Ulysses. David is describing a Youth Day celebration and the ghostwriter jumps in: “Youth Day—Soweto Day, the sixteenth of June—that’s also Joyce’s Bloomsday, I gabble excitedly, Day of the Revolution of the Word. Imagine, black children revolting against Afrikaans, the language of oppressors, on the very anniversary of the day that Leopold Bloom started with a

hearty breakfast, eating with relish the inner organs of—” (35). The ghostwriter is mercifully interrupted, having mistaken calendrical coincidence for causality. But that is not her only mistake. The day might begin with Bloom eating kidneys, but the novel does not—it begins with that arch critic of language, Stephen Dedalus, the character whose soul in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, “frets in the shadow” (2007 166) of the English dean’s language, and who stages his own revolution of the word. Stephen offers perhaps the only trenchant critique of the South African War in Ulysses, drawing a direct line from the bloody imagination of Hamlet to Rudyard Kipling’s “Absent-Minded Beggar,” and on to Algernon Charles Swinburne’s full-throated defense of the British. English literature, Stephen implies, is complicit in the slaughter of imperial wars. If there is some kind of line, then, from Ulysses to the anti-racist politics of the 1976 Soweto Uprising it is to be traced via Stephen, not Bloom. The ghostwriter’s error, as Stephen might say, is a portal of discovery (U 9.230), exposing ambivalent Irish attitudes to politics in South Africa.⁴

If we make Bloom rather than Stephen the link to the politics of dissent in South Africa, Ulysses’s connection to the Soweto uprising looks a lot less flattering. Bloom has little patience for the pro-Boer protests he remembers having walked into and turned quickly away from. When confronted by British soldiers in Nighttown Bloom claims, “I’m as staunch a Britisher as you are, sir. I fought with the colours for king and country in the absentminded war under general Gough in the park and was disabled at Spion Kop and Bloemfontein, was mentioned in dispatches. I did all a white man could” (U 15.797-800). Of course Bloom claims to have fought at Bloemfontein, enjoying the rhyming echo of his name, and of course he identifies the wrong General Gough, being a stickler for details even if they are not always correct—the Anglo-Irish army general memorialized in Dublin’s Phoenix Park was Hugh Gough, who fought in India (but

also briefly at the Cape), not Hubert Gough, another Anglo-Irishman who fought in the South African War. Here and elsewhere, Bloom (as Molly does in the “Penelope” episode) disappoints the critic seeking to reclaim Ulysses for a revolutionary politics.⁵ In the end, Ulysses is a novel that knows the messiness of decolonization, the desires and limits of solidarity, and the everyday realities of the accommodations that most people make with empire and power. It is this, the instability of anticolonial politics and the asymmetries of solidarity, that Wicomb’s brief nod to Ulysses brings to the surface. As an intertextual interruption in Wicomb’s novel, it recalibrates too-easily assumed solidarities and recasts the place of Joyce’s novel as a cautionary tale. In an article in this issue Eric Lewis performs his own recasting, asking what we might learn about consumerism and identity formation by reading Wicomb’s work back into Ulysses, arguing that a very particular contemporary South African social formation can radically alter the meaning of Joyce’s century-old novel. It is not a case, for Lewis, of Wicomb “writing back” to Joyce, but of her novel displacing Ulysses, revealing a new reading of Joyce’s novel forged in the conditions of the Global South.

David’s ghostwriter’s breezy assumption of a shared history and an assumed solidarity between South Africa and Ireland is not entirely without analogues in the world of politics. A major international travelling exhibition marking the one hundredth anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s birth arrived in Dublin in the summer of 2018.⁶ The exhibition was hosted in Kilmainham Gaol, a space uniquely suited to pay homage to a man whose iconic status rests in large part on his 27-year incarceration. Kilmainham Gaol is also an appropriate venue to mark the relations between two countries in which the history of incarceration is so central to their national imaginings, as Fiona McCann shows in her contribution to this special issue. Kilmainham Gaol played host in its time to many political prisoners who fought the might of the

British empire. Among them are Robert Emmet, leader of a doomed 1803 uprising, and profound influence on the political philosophy of Thabo Mbeki (Gevisser, 2007 152). There too were incarcerated (and in some cases executed) the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, including John MacBride, who was also one of the leaders of the Irish Transvaal Brigade. With less of a global presence in the iconography of resistance and freedom than Robben Island does, the prison museum at Kilmainham nonetheless stands in the national imaginary as a symbol of both colonial oppression and anti-colonial activism. Before being allowed to see the 2018 Mandela exhibition, visitors were led around the prison cells where the 1916 leaders were housed, and tour guides explicitly reminded the visitors of the anti-colonial affinities between Ireland and South Africa. The name of Kader Asmal, leader of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM) and later first Minister for Water in the new South Africa, was invoked, alongside MacBride and many others. Guides also called attention to the workers of the Irish grocery chain Dunnes Stores (discussed in this issue by Kylie Thomas), who refused in the 1980s to handle South African goods, and catapulted apartheid to the top of the Irish news cycle for years afterwards. This everyday resistance of the Dunnes Stores workers is still regularly alluded to on tours of Robben Island, enhancing the impression of a call and echo between carceral spaces in South Africa and Ireland.

The exhibition experience was touted by its curators at Kilmainham Gaol as a celebration of the deep ties of affection and political action between South Africa and Ireland that arose over the course of long struggle against colonial rule, and yet the content of the exhibition itself made little of these ties. The story being told was a detailed hagiography of Nelson Mandela, whose historical and political and geographical locations had little in common with and were largely unaffected by Ireland. A panel on Mandela's three visits to Ireland attempted to stitch these two

locations together with fine sentiments from Mandela and Mary Robinson, while one on the IAAM was more robust, recognizing the importance of that movement in both Ireland and South Africa, and celebrating the fact that the first draft of the South African Bill of Rights was “completed on the kitchen table of the home of Kader and Louise Asmal” in Dublin. There are, of course, all kinds of reasons why there was a mismatch between the claims of the curators and content of the exhibition—principally, the fact that the exhibition was designed by the Apartheid Museum for a generic international audience—but it was hard not to be left with the impression that long-heralded affinities between South Africa and Ireland that engender frequent comparisons and expressions of solidarity have been all too frequently more a matter of acknowledgement than engagement.

* * *

Haunting these three opening vignettes is the specter of solidarity that has dominated South African/Irish relations since the turn of the last century, and that continues to leave traces in the work of any critic thinking across and between postcolonial cultures. Solidarity is a protean force, however, its meaning and impact constantly under contestation and negotiation. As Rajini Srikanth writes about South African solidarity with Palestine, Palestine’s current “South Africa moment” is high on symbolism but low on particulars. The benefits to Palestinians of this solidarity are not clear, but what it offers to South Africans is “a moment...to be restored to the robustness of their prior activism, and to burnish the luster of their stated ideals of a multiracial democracy” (4-5). Srikanth’s recognition of the opportunistic use of solidarity—at least social if not political—for national self-imagining may help us to think through Irish-South African solidarities, or even comparisons. What South Africa has long offered to the Irish imaginary is the chance to be restored to a “prior activism,” whether that be the activism of the

now over-commemorated revolutionary period, or of the civil rights movement and IRA struggle of the 1970s and 1980s in Northern Ireland. Indeed, Northern Ireland at this very moment is in dire need of a reminder of its own place as a beacon of peacemaking in the 1990s, just as South Africa may be. Transnational solidarity, then, can be the result of a displaced desire to revive revolutionary activism from a place where that seems no longer possible, or feasible, or just too inconvenient. This is not to diminish the felt experience of solidarity, but to historicize and contextualize it, recognizing the complex impulses that accompany the feeling.

Kader Asmal, in a 1971 report on the IAAM that he authored for the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, identified what he called the “instinctive solidarity” of the Irish people with the freedom struggle in South Africa. He attributed this to the fact that “the Irish people have themselves undergone the experience of imperial rule and in this century have had recourse to force to free their land and themselves from foreign domination” (1). Historical experience of colonization, we are led to believe, results in an “instinctive” abhorrence of injustice. In 1971, with the Irish revolution still within living memory, that argument might have held sway. Indeed, when the Irish government formally declared its opposition to apartheid at the United Nations in 1966, the Minister for External Affairs, Frank Aiken (himself a veteran of Ireland’s fight for independence), recalled his personal memories of the South African War. The assumption that a shared history of colonization will engender solidarity will be repeated many years later in a slightly different form by the influential postcolonial critic Luke Gibbons when he writes that “Ireland is a First World country, but with a Third World memory” (3). On this assumption—that despite its current geopolitical and economic condition, Ireland retains an identity as part of the Global South—a generation of Irish postcolonial scholarship was built.

But the critic must be wary of any appeal to instinctiveness. A coded warning against this kind of unexamined thinking appears in a brief moment in Elleke Boehmer's novel Bloodlines, in which a bombing at a Natal beachfront supermarket at Easter becomes an occasion for discovery of and reflection over the tendrils of the South African War and its Irish connections that trail into the present. Early in the novel, a freelancer for the Irish Independent newspaper makes a mistaken assumption about the bombing, reaching for a compelling and sensational coincidence, yet failing to grasp the details. The journalist is comfortable in his or her assurance of an instinctive comprehension of the "Easter sacrifice" of the bombers, claiming with ease echoes of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, and dissolving complex differences into a historical sameness (2000, 13). In Kylie Thomas' essay in this special issue on the strange formations of solidarity in and around the IAAM, she reminds us of Mohamed Shabangu's warning that solidarity "only becomes possible through a willingness to recognize the conditions that separate us as much as those that connect us," yet this kind of awareness tends to be observed primarily in the breach.

Speaking in Dublin in 1960, Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah paid tribute to "those Irish leaders of the last century who realised that the struggle of Ireland for independence was not the struggle of one country alone, but part of a world movement for freedom" (Qtd. in O'Sullivan 1). The sentiment, as Kevin O'Sullivan writes, played well in Dublin, but its seamless conflation of Irish and African freedom struggles glosses over the most intractable of differences: colonial racial formations, and the racist inheritances that have governed relations between Africa and Europe. The histories of Irish and African independence struggles and postcolonial nationhood diverge on the question of race, as Ireland's entry into the club of

developed European nations after World War II was eased by the absence of imagined racial and ethnic divisions—Irish people were figured as white.

There is a danger in this citational practice, in which postcolonial struggles become rhetorically though not necessarily historically linked. I borrow the term and the idea from Antoinette Burton's reading of African-Indian relations in the late twentieth century, in which the "politics of postcolonial citation" sees a vertical, hierarchical relation of power and identity between differentiated postcolonial sites being occluded behind an overt post-Bandung claim for horizontal, non-hierarchical relations (2012, 2016). Postcolonial and Global South affinities, Burton's work suggests, are fraught with hidden asymmetries.⁷ If Burton's story of "brown over black," as her book was titled in its Indian edition (2012), complicates our desires for South-South or postcolony-postcolony solidarity, it also affirms the enduring power of such sentiments even in the face of their patent falsity. But solidarity, Burton shows, doesn't always need a level playing field—it can function rhetorically in the absence of any actually existing or even desired equality, erasing historical specificity and structural differences in the name of ill-defined fellow feeling.

* * *

Yet the language of solidarity and affinity continues to pattern South African-Irish comparisons, concealing the reality that the imagined distance between between these two sites is under constant negotiation, one moving closer to the other according to and in response to certain crises and opportunities, the observation of which affords us a useful vantage point from which to understand the purchase of memories of colonialism and conceptions of postcoloniality in both Ireland and South Africa. To adapt a phrase from Walter Benjamin, speaking of Ireland and South Africa together, recognizing their affinities, shared histories, solidarities,

imaginings, is not to speak of things as they really were—it is “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”, or at least of crisis (255). Why, we might ask, do these comparisons tend to reach peaks at moments of political instability? Placing South Africa and Ireland side by side also has obvious payoffs, not least of which is highlighting instabilities and challenges shared across postcolonies. Not that this cannot be said of any geographical or political entity, but the loose use of the term “South Africa” is itself a form of provocation, a recognition of a uniquely and acutely unstable relationship between nation, state, people, culture, and language. The phrase at once means something recognizable and calls to mind divisions and contestations. It only swims into view if we squint, as Derek Attridge and David Attwell acknowledge when they write in their overview of the field in The Cambridge History of South African Literature that “South Africans generally understand what they disagree about” (2015 5). “South African literature” is even harder to discern, not least because of its linguistic diversity. Even Leon de Kock’s alternative and ecumenical formulation, “Literature in South Africa,” offers only a weak solution, as he himself recognizes.⁸ Like “South Africa,” “Ireland” may make some affective sense, may even describe some kind of shared cultural vision, but it is hardly a stable signifier—politically divided, and now under threat of being physically divided again in the aftermath of Brexit, the island of Ireland can only be described as being a site of perpetual contestation, internally and externally.

These deep divisions in Ireland can be seen in sharp focus in the way that different communities on either side of the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland have engaged with and deployed solidarities with South Africa in the course of the 1980s and 1990s. There was, for many, a special connection between Northern Ireland and South Africa, as the Catholic/Nationalist community saw their plight mirroring that of the Coloured and African

communities. In the 1990s there was a robust exchange of visitors and ideas between the ANC and the IRA, and ANC figures like Cyril Ramaphosa and Mac Maharaj helped to consolidate and underwrite the Peace Process (Guelke 2000).⁹ At the same time, a significant element of Northern Irish society has sought and still seeks a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Ireland, a question with implications for cultural production in Northern Ireland, as Connal Parr discusses in his essay in this issue that looks at how the theatre becomes a sight in which the attenuated politics of reconciliation is debated and critiqued. Less well remembered than these moments of anticolonial solidarity is the South African ruling National Party's support for loyalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. This can be seen most revealingly in the fact that Armscor (the South African arms procurement agency) routed guns and ammunition to loyalist paramilitaries (Guelke 143-144), who helped the apartheid state in its self-definition as a guarantor of hegemonic power and a friend to the United Kingdom. In this sense, we could say that the idea of "South Africa" has been especially potent in the formation of present-day Northern Ireland, even more so than the Republic. Indeed, we could say that a certain element of the politics of present-day Northern Ireland and South Africa have been formed in the crucible of the prison, a shared site of cultural production under duress that Fiona McCann investigates in this issue.

South Africa and Ireland are contingent historical formations that act upon each other when placed into conversation, and both significantly exceed the physical borders that they also define, taking part in a transnational economy of ideas, texts, and forms. But while we might agree that these two locations can be and have been mutually constitutive, from the South African War to the Northern Irish peace process, it is also the case that there is an asymmetry of interest across both sites. These two often quite isolated sites of real or imagined exceptionalism

have different engagements with and investments in a comparison that increasingly takes the cast of North/South. In putting this issue together, and in convening a seminar on Africa and Ireland at the American Comparative Literature Association meeting in Utrecht in 2017, Agata Szczeszak-Brewer and I encountered a certain amount of difficulty in attracting responses from the African continent. Despite multiple calls for papers and dozens of individual appeals to those who identify primarily as South Africanists, and to scholars in South Africa, we had very little uptake. There are some clear structural reasons for this, especially related to the location, timing, and cost of the ACLA conference, but there are also some challenging disciplinary, historical, and political reasons why a call for papers studying cultural production in Ireland and South Africa is more legible to scholars of Irish than of South African literature.

While some Irish scholars may be keen to give in to Gibbons's (at the time deeply generative) arguments about Ireland's "Third-World memory" even in the face of economic success, the claim does not necessarily translate across fields, and a too-easily claimed subalternity on the part of Irish postcolonial academics can easily be read as unearned. At the same time South African literary studies has also seen a slow and uneven uptake of transnational and comparative studies, and is still grappling with its uneasy relationship with the rest of the African continent. Indeed, the academic study of literature in South Africa is still traveling what has proved to be a difficult road in opening itself up to those who have been traditionally overlooked and purposefully disenfranchised, to the extent that a gaze inward and not outward, at the diversity of South African voices, will likely continue to be the most important institutional and intellectual shift in the South African academy. Yet political and critical attention in South Africa has recently (and belatedly) focused on the country's South/South political, economic, and cultural ties, as a turn against a long-held interests by South African academics in the Anglo-

American world as the site of engagement and prestige. With Ireland's continuing charge (after a hiccup during the Great Recession) towards being a fully paid-up member of the liberal democratic global order, and a media and political landscape that waves its jubilant flag in support of that order, it is all too easy for leaders in Irish political, economic, and cultural life to project outwards to the world an image of Ireland as a long-established member of the Anglo-American sphere of influence. In this light, a call to re-think a comparison of Ireland and South Africa might be read as insensitive to the current intellectual and political climate in South Africa, and a nostalgia for a "prior activism."

The most glaring grounds on which Irish and South African cultural production imperfectly align are not just those of race but of language. This special issue is focused on the English language, which is moderately limiting in the Irish context, but profoundly so in the South African. While A.W. Oliphant registers the inescapable "multilingual fact" of South Africa (Qtd. in Attridge and Attwell 9), it is not surprising that the shared language of Ireland and South African culture is largely English, though figures like Karel Schoeman, the Afrikaans writer who lived in Ireland for some time, complicate that landscape. So too, as Matthew Eatough argues in this issue, does the case of the Sestigers movement of Afrikaans modernists. There is a significant risk in concentrating on English, given its status as just one of eleven official languages in South Africa, and its historical and current associations with cultural hegemony and with a privileged sphere of the field of publishing. To take English-language cultural production as standing in for South Africa is to significantly flatten a contested written, oral, and performative field, and to deny the critical importance of African-language cultural workers in particular. In that sense, while comparison across two geographical sites can yield new questions and new answers, we must also be aware of significant blind spots. An Irish and

South African comparison could potentially reinforce a particular global and Anglophone version of South African culture that is readily available and accessible to the Global North.

All these potential blocks to meaningful comparisons of South Africa and Ireland appear to point in just one direction—they warn us against making comparisons between these two complex and highly contested postcolonies, as if to say (after E.M. Forster) “not yet,” and also to mean “not ever.” But to shy away from comparison is to refuse the grounds of analysis and to reinforce the corrosive discourse of exceptionalism that is the enabling fiction of nationalism. If solidarity and affinity are no longer the lines along which we can imagine South Africa and Ireland together, then we must try to construct comparative studies that take into account asymmetries of interests, brought about by asymmetrical histories that have led to divergent presents. In short, a comparison of incompatible cultural fields that nonetheless move along similar trajectories and offer to each other revealing reflections.

* * *

The essays that follow in this collection do not conjure their comparison out of thin air—they engage with and critique an active field of comparative practice especially in popular culture and in the academic disciplines of history and politics. It is easy to remember the heady days of the Dunnes Stores strike, the boycott of South African sports, and even the Irish support for the Boers, but the shared colonial history of Ireland and South Africa make transnational connections and comparisons almost inevitable, and the presence of the Irish in the Cape Colony makes for a long and frequently ignoble story. The work of Donal McCracken in particular has served to excavate an enduring history of the Irish in South Africa.¹⁰ A shared imperial history, however, is no longer either a sufficient or an ethical basis on which to build a comparison—the practices of distinction that creates archives (and that also create canons, as Matthew Eatough

shows in the pages of this issue) are deeply problematic, reflecting and solidifying relationships of uneven power. The archive on which these comparisons are built must be placed into question, if not into crisis. Any postcolonial comparison that relies on the archives of an empire faces, inevitably, a crisis of empiricism, as evidence about “the way it really was” (Benjamin 255) consistently fails to offer anything but the most jaundiced of views. If empiricism is in question, the value of the imaginative arts should become more clearly visible, given their capacity (not always realized) to circumvent the dead hand of imperial history and create new archives.¹¹

The three vignettes that open this essay offer us a shadowy roadmap for how to undertake the work of rethinking connections and comparisons between Ireland and South Africa in ways that trouble the centrality of empire. Each in their own way tells us that the history of South African / Irish relations runs less straight than the story of colonial connections. And in each there is a sense of a complex cultural history that has yet to be told, and that relies on emerging but as yet unarticulated routes of connection and comparison. That sense is what animates all of the articles in this special issue. What ties the three opening scenes together is the way that these historical stories emerge into our present moment—the way that, in Ireland and in South Africa, yoking these two terms together makes and assumes meanings that tell us about how we use and abuse stories of anti-imperial solidarities for new ends. Now, after the heady days of decolonization and a (tentative) end to political violence in South Africa and Northern Ireland in the 1990s, and in light of the current reappraisals of the effectiveness of those movements, it is time to revisit the architecture on which Irish/South African comparison is built, and to seek both new methods and new archives. The newly invigorated discourse of decolonization in South

Africa and the call to a new politics of engagement from the Global South demand that we rethink assumed histories of postcoloniality within and beyond the borders of nations.

As a guiding principle for undertaking an asymmetrical comparison of these two anomalous sites, we could think of Leon de Kock's metaphor, not entirely satisfying but useful to work with, of the seam and suture—a joining together of incommensurables that retains always the traces or scars of having been sundered—a contingent and yet necessary relationship of contiguity and difference (2001 276). The challenge for any comparative work is to retain a sense of the singularity of the artefact, recognizing its difference “as an end in itself” (Jackson 5), while also paying attention to its capacity to be mirrored, echoed, and refracted elsewhere. Yet both South African and Irish literary fields have assumed a certain exceptionalism, marked by what Jeanne-Marie Jackson calls South Africa's “culturally marginalized but politically prominent place in the world” (15) and by Ireland's anomalous position as both western European and colonized. This exceptionalism has tended to dull any impulses towards comparative analysis of a systematic kind in the field of literary criticism.¹² Though it may be true that, as Robert Young writes, Ireland was England's “first and always exceptional colony” (16), this does not mean that Ireland is unavailable for comparison—Young's own analysis offers a roadmap for thinking of exceptionalism and exemplarity at once. On the whole, though, both South Africa and Ireland have been positioned as “politically prominent,” their transformations over the course of the twentieth century inviting extensive study and comparison, and yet “culturally marginalized,” or at least construed as both celebrated and incomparable.

The study of Irish literature remains largely focused on the relationship with the neighboring island, though postcolonial scholars have since the early 1990s resisted this singular

focus and sought wider fields of comparison. Irish literary interconnections with India are more firmly established, thanks to a range of work in the early 2000s that kicked off this fruitful comparison (Foley and O'Connor, 2006). The same cannot be said for Irish/African literary relations, though there are some notable exceptions. Recent work by Nathan Suhr-Sytsma has established not only the co-emergence of Northern Irish and Nigerian poetry in the 1960s, but the centrality of an Irish/African network of poets, publishers, and editors to the emergence of the field of Commonwealth Studies, one of the forebears of postcolonial studies. And the resistance to comparison lies not only on the Irish side. South African literature has long been thought of as forming something of a case study in literary isolation, cut off not only from its European and American roots, but even more so from the literature of its African neighbors. The insistence on isolation has faltered in recent years with some outstanding studies of the transnational contexts of South African literature, but shades of isolationism still remain. Work by scholars such as Stéphane Robolin, Tsitsi Jaji, Stefan Helgesson, and others has traced the exchange of personnel, texts, and ideas across the African world to prove the resilient transnationalism of South African writers even at the height of apartheid isolationism.

Specific South African-Irish comparisons are more rare, but Laura Winkiel, in a recent essay on the modernist novel in the world system, takes the approach of trying to define South African and Irish exceptionalism through a reading of Ulysses and Sol Plaatje's novel Mhudi (Winkiel 2015). The result is a compelling explication of South Africa and Ireland's semi-peripheral status that fastens modernist experimentation in the novel form to particular forms of semi-peripherality.¹³ While this application of a systematic reading of South Africa and Ireland produces a complex account of the relationship of, say, the novel form to economic structures, it remains in many ways indebted to externally imposed systems of description and analysis that

have a tendency to reinforce sameness across times and spaces—identifying South Africa and Ireland’s places (even if both anomalous) in the world system results in the loss of a rich archive of differences, and identifies and classifies both according a systemic understanding of a singular modernity that brings us back to questions of archives on which comparison is based. Winkiel’s reading is fresh and robust, but shades of Elleke Boehmer’s criticism of the inflexibility of world-systems theory (Boehmer 2012a) haunt the project, reminding us of the legacy of world-making that lies beneath this approach to thinking about the place of two anomalous colonies with complex and flourishing cultural spheres. If this present special issue is to accomplish its aim of identifying emerging strains of a new comparison across postcolonial sites, coming out from the shadow of a longer archive of colonial comparison, the systematizing of world systems theory may carry too much of the baggage of a diffusionist model of modernity to allow that new archive to be fully grasped. What we need is a ragged, disjointed sense of South African-Ireland comparisons that reaches towards the counter-intuitive and the singular.

Peter McDonald offers a more circuitous, serendipitous mode of inviting texts and their writers to come together loosely, and in a contingent fashion. In Artefacts of Writing McDonald searches out what he calls “a tangled archive of repeatedly sifted, recycled, and adapted inheritances” (2017 30). His wide-ranging primary materials, barely held together, evoke echoes and resonances that alternately flourish and wither. For McDonald the work of comparison and connection across far-flung sites is something of a detective game of identifying thin and thinning threads of meaning that reach across vast distances. What holds Artefacts of Writing together is Finnegans Wake, the archetypally encyclopedic text that looks askance at its own pretensions to world-making completion—a book that is a “disintegrative and disincorporative artefact of writing” (2017 117). The Wake, both Irish and very much not, creates, generates, and

invites meanings across time and space, capacious not for what it already contains but for what invites in, for what it makes room for in the world.

This may be the unspoken model of comparison that lies behind all of the essays in this special issue, which seek new visions of the “tangled archive” not only of South Africa-Ireland comparisons and connections, but of the place of South Africa and Ireland as paradoxical exemplary exceptions in the postcolonial world. In fact, what our contributors offer is a range of optics and methods for bringing together two disparate parts of the empire, which neither choose nor privilege one systematic approach, but seek to model a myriad of ways of reading transnationally, translocally, comparatively, and differentially. That is not to say that this is a model of “weak theory” about postcolonial comparisons, since there is indeed one over-riding concern that links all of our essays—a concern to both reinterrogate and decenter the colonial archive as primary or even sufficient site from which to begin the comparative journey.¹⁴

While McDonald’s work here and elsewhere relies on “questions of circulation, translation, writing systems, book history, and literary geography” (2019 13) to construe a wide field of comparison, we could think also of a long-tested tool of literary analysis: hermeneutics. Jeanne-Marie Jackson, in her recent book on Russian-South African correspondences writes that, while “scholars of world literature employ overridingly print-cultural and historical methodologies,” “it is well worth reflecting on how a hermeneutic vocabulary might enrich our understanding of literature’s globalization (or lack thereof)” (197-198). The appeal is, at base to the value of the comparative over the transnational, which has become the new ruling deity in many quarters, and to the comparison of stubborn singularities, artefacts that do not easily yield to comparison. This form of comparison of “incommensurable” terms is at the root of Natalie Melas’s work on postcolonial comparisons in which there is a “ground for comparison” but no

clear “basis of equivalence.” This attention to incommensurability, Melas writes, “opens up the possibility of an intelligible relation at the limits of comparison” (31). For Melas the recognition of incommensurability guards against a too easily assumed equivalence, protecting the asymmetries of the terms of comparison. I don’t in any way want to dismiss transnational or world-systems approaches here, but to suggest that the complexity of the fields of South African and Irish literatures, and the asymmetrical connections between them, demands a fluid and multivocal set of tools to set up and interrogate the necessity of postcolonial comparison.

The contributors to this special issue come together to ask how we might now be in a position to reimagine in more engaged and complicated ways the old routes of filiation on which we have often relied. The authors bring to the fore new geographies of identification and disidentification, or sympathy and division. Ireland and South Africa and the distance between them shift and vanish, as impossible to fix as the memorial that Christo Doherty chases down. The contributors do not seek to reset the way we think about comparisons between South Africa and Ireland as much as to dissolve what has seemed set, to find a new fluidity enabled by the various reading strategies on display in the pages that follow. The essays form a case study in postcolonial comparison, and their work together offers what we could call, after Said, a body of “secular criticism” (1983 1-30), not indebted to any mythical or transcendental formulations of either national identities or transnational solidarities, but relentlessly searching for a way to create new formations through comparison. Borrowing from a leading voice in another emergent field of comparative literary practice, Indian Ocean studies, we might say that each of the contributors aspires to “think beyond the tired pieties of older ideologies that have lost much of their purchase while also capturing new cultural forms as they are taking shape in a rapidly changing world order” (Hofmeyr 2012 590).

The essays that follow probe and extend the limits of North / South or postcolony / postcolony comparison, and challenge scholars of Irish and South African literature and culture to hear the questions that can emerge through comparative study. We envisage this special issue as a first step in a wider and deeper engagement between Irish and African literature more generally, one that will generate new archives and new questions to challenge imperial bases of comparison. As an indication of what we might learn from resituating the geography of South African and Irish literature, Agata Szczeszak-Brewer's astute re-casting of the tired discussion of the stage Irishman in Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm unearths an American genealogy, through Ralph Waldo Emerson, for Schreiner's racial politics. Szczeszak-Brewer exposes the transatlantic formation of Irishness and Africanness in the crucible of the Cape Colony. The work does not in any way deny the historical fact of South African and Irish colonization, but uncovers a new way of understanding this history through an expanded geography. Similarly, Eatough's contribution examines how South African and Irish literatures are incorporated and sanitized as modernist in the American academy and publishing industry, which validates apolitical difficulty in the 1950s and 1960. In widening the geography of South African-Irish comparisons to include the US these two essays are not turning to the Global North for answers, but recognizing the circuitous and occluded routes by which meaning is made in postcolonies, and offering methodological models for re-examining the geographies of postcolonial comparison.

* * *

I want to end this introduction as I began it, with two brief stories that illustrate contemporary approaches to the purpose of postcolonial comparison now. The first can be found in a recent issue of the Johannesburg Review of Books, in which Niq Mhlongo writes of a

pilgrimage he made to James Joyce's grave in Zürich. Mhlongo, excited to meet his literary hero, pays homage to him by sitting by his graveside and reading an unpublished story about a visit to a grave in Soweto, "Avalon," to Joyce. "After this," writes Mhlongo, "I feel satisfied that I've met James Joyce's spirit. He is my first audience for this story, and although I was only talking to his grave and statue I know he listened and enjoyed it" (2017). Joyce's bones, deterritorialized in the Swiss soil, provide a warrant for Mhlongo, who feels bold enough to read at them and to take their stony silence as approval—a contemporary South African writer communing with a long-dead Irish author who speaks to him across decades but cannot listen to him. There is a crisis of communication here, in one sense, given that Mhlongo speaks and Joyce does not hear or reply, but Joyce has written his reply in advance, reaching out to the present in a way that is fittingly incomplete and faltering, and Mhlongo replies to him not by mimicking his writing but by confidently asserting a new writing that does not exist in Joyce's shadow. The communication is, as in so many cases in this collection, partial and short-circuited, but not therefore a failure in any sense. It is also rooted in a complex relationship of equality across continents and centuries, celebrating a long relationship of closeness and distance that cannot be reduced to a simple formula, but also cannot be dismissed out of hand.

A second story about fresh comparative impulses comes to us by way of the South African asylum seeker in Ireland, Bulelani Mfaco, who has become a powerful spokesperson for a disenfranchised and incarcerated community of asylum seekers, primarily African, in Ireland. In 2019 he attacked a plan to solve Ireland's affordable housing crisis by introducing a system called "co-living," comparing the proposed high-density, single-room-occupancy housing units to apartheid-era hostels for workers. In doing so, Mfaco skirts around older stories of connections and circulations; he builds a comparison as provocation that makes no mention of

shared histories and deep sympathies. Instead, Mfaco imagines a regime of the management of lower-income workers across the world today inspired by the lessons of apartheid. Mfaco has himself been detained in grim asylum-seeker accommodations in Dublin (known by the statist euphemism of “direct provision”) that could easily be drawn straight from the pages of J.M. Coetzee’s The Childhood of Jesus or the work camp in The Life and Times of Michael K, only in the Irish detention centers the inmates have been expressly forbidden to work—a supposedly humanitarian inversion of the work camp. In Mfaco’s tactic a reviled South African institution emerges into the Irish public sphere and perfectly captures the unspoken and largely unseen brutality of our present moment. While we may think of the so-called “migrant crisis” in Europe as signaling a new shift in patterns of human settlement, and played out between North Africa and Southern Europe, Mfaco’s intervention reminds us that both Ireland and South Africa form part of a system of policing, transporting, devaluing, and exploiting the bodies of others of which apartheid was only the most visible recent example.

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¹ A white supremacist desire to commemorate a supposedly heroic war two generations earlier is not unique to the *Broederbond*—the Ku Klux Klan was instrumental in the rapid appearance in the 1920s and 1930s of memorials to the Confederates in the US Civil War.

² By using the terms "entanglements and complicities" I am invoking the work of Mark Sanders (2002) and Sarah Nuttall (2009), who have written about the witting and unwitting intertwinings that have marked apartheid and post-apartheid South African culture and politics respectively. Nuttall's opening description of entanglement is the most illuminating: "Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited" (1).

³ References to Ulysses follow the convention of identifying episode and line number in the Gabler edition.

⁴ Though Fiona McCann claims that the answer to David's subsequent question—"what's that got to do with your Mr. Blooms?"—is "nothing," (McCann 222), Wicomb knows better. The passage begins with the ghostwriter recalling an earlier amanuensis, Samuel Beckett, making his own error while translating Joyce's spoken words to writing, and plays on the inescapable (but often indecipherable) significance of errors (Wicomb 35).

⁵ I include myself in this, as I think back on an overly optimistic article I published a few years ago on Ulysses and South Africa (Parsons 2017). For other approaches to thinking about Ulysses and South Africa see Booker, 85-103; Brown; Reizbaum; Temple-Thurston; Toker; and Voss.

⁶ A virtual version of the exhibition can be found at <https://www.apartheidmuseum.org/other-exhibitions>.

⁷ In a sign of the potency of Burton's argument, and the feelings involved when assumed solidarities are called into question, the book was the subject of a heated exchange, some of which can be seen in Menon (2014).

⁸ See de Kock 2005, and also de Kock 2001, where the same questions arise in a slightly different frame, and are answered by way of the useful metaphor of the "seam."

⁹ On post-conflict connections between South Africa and Northern Ireland see also Hamber (2009).

¹⁰ For an overview of this work see McCracken (2003), but also the suite of historical essays collected in the short-lived (1991-1996) Journal of Southern African-Irish Studies, co-edited by McCracken.

¹¹ In thinking about empire and archives in this work I am always guided by the work of the Archive and Public Culture research group at the University of Cape Town, under the direction of Carolyn Hamilton, and by the work gathered in volumes such as Hamilton et al. (2002) and elsewhere.

¹² A curious example of this tendency can be seen in the way that Ireland figures as both exemplary and exceptional in Pascale Casanova's world literary system. For a cogent critique of Casanova's Ireland see Malouf (2013).

¹³ One of the earliest of studies of this kind, Semicolonial Joyce, though not indebted to world-systems theory, laid the groundwork for a generation of readings of Joyce's anomalous position, including the one that opened this paper (Attridge and Howes 2001).

¹⁴ A discussion of the possibilities and pitfalls of a "weak" theoretical approach in literary studies can be found in Saint-Amour (2018).