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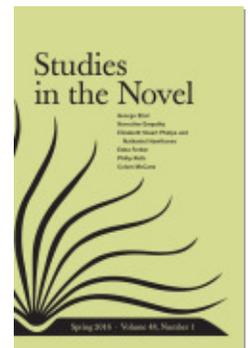
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## **Towards a “Narratology of Otherness”: Colum McCann, Ireland, and a New Transcultural Approach**

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## TOWARDS A “NARRATOLOGY OF OTHERNESS”: COLUM McCANN, IRELAND, AND A NEW TRANSCULTURAL APPROACH

RUTH GILLIGAN

In his 2002 Yale University lecture “Step Across This Line,” novelist Salman Rushdie discussed the recent dissolution of borders around the globe, concluding that “this new, permeable post-frontier is the distinguishing feature of our times” (425). In this new “post-frontier” age that Rushdie described, information, goods, money, and media endlessly traverse national boundaries, while migratory forces and cheap travel mean that humans also step across their lines, millions now residing in a land they did not previously call their own. As part of this loosening of global borders, literary texts are similarly enjoying mass circulation. The Amazon marketplace alone currently lists 32.8 million titles available for sale and international shipment. Meanwhile, particularly in the UK and US markets, the rising popularity of the “world literature” genre reflects readers’ desire to purchase works by overseas writers (even as critics such as Emily Apter warn against the genre’s tendency towards the commodification or branding of difference [2]).

However, while British, American, and European readers are avidly consuming works by writers from Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and other Anglophone contexts, another dissolution of frontiers has occurred in writing coming from authors *within* Anglo-American and European literary traditions. Increasingly, many of these authors appear more inclined (or, indeed, more equipped) to step beyond their traditional frame of reference—to dismiss the age-old adage to “write what you know” and instead to inhabit, through their fiction, subject positions that are not in fact their own. Rushdie himself asserts that “the crossing of borders, of language, geography, and culture” has become central to his writing project (434), while elsewhere, Irish-American novelist Colum McCann talks of “ridding [himself] from the work”: “I think that’s what one has to do. Don’t write about what you know, but towards what you want to

know. There's a great freedom in the fictional experience" ("Write What You Want To Know").

Yet, despite this supposed freedom, critics are very quick to point out the ethical complications inherent in producing such fiction, such as the potential for discursive domination of "other" subjects by white and/or Western writers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, examinations of the work of these writers have been almost entirely devoted to assessing the political implications thereof, whereas formal examinations of the texts remain considerably less prevalent and, in most cases, underdeveloped. As such, in order to expand the parameters of existing critical dialogues, this essay will argue that by devising and applying a narratological lens to contemporary transcultural fiction the focus may be shifted away from the field's preoccupation with ideological questions.<sup>2</sup> This is not to disavow the importance of such questions; rather, it is to illuminate the formal ingenuities enacted by certain transcultural writers, the majority of which have been heretofore overlooked. Taking Ireland as my case study (a decision for which I will provide apt justification), I will devise this proposed narratological lens—as I term it, this "Narratology of Otherness"—by examining the work of Colum McCann. This will at once shed new light on the formal nuances of McCann's fiction, whilst also revealing the implications such a narratological lens may have for both Irish and transcultural literary debates moving forward.

Existing interrogations of transcultural writing inevitably invoke the important work of Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha. Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) posits that the "other" traditionally cannot be given a voice in fiction—particularly since such a voice could only ever exist via the dominant discourse against which they are trying to speak out in the first place—while Bhabha warns that any possibility of speech would necessarily be "unrepresentable in itself" (37). These groundbreaking theories once served as necessary challenges to the prevailing representational hegemony of the time; however, contemporary critics such as Shameem Black now bemoan that they have become "so widespread as to constitute a new set of critical givens" (3). Furthermore, considering the "unrepresentability" of Bhabha's utopian space, and the lack of alternative Spivak offers to the "epistemic violence" supposedly inherent in all transcultural writing, Black worries that authors may in fact "question the possibility and value of imaginative border crossing" altogether (23).

By paying closer attention to form, however, Black identifies where certain authors have indeed attempted to make this possibility a reality. To this end, she begins by foregrounding the collaborative or "crowded" nature of contemporary selfhood, before pointing to the corresponding evolution of a "crowded style," that is, a narrative approach which encompasses many identities and points of view simultaneously, thus mirroring the absence, in today's global age, of "conceptual divides between the selves and styles

considered one's own and the selves and styles considered another's" (38). Reading such stylistic multiplicity in the fiction of J. M. Coetzee, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Amitav Ghosh, Black certainly gestures towards a more aesthetic approach to the analysis of transcultural texts. However, her work still remains broadly in the philosophical or theoretical realm—concerned, as she puts it, with the “underlying principles of identity and imaginative projection” (14)—whereas the narrative minutiae of these texts remain largely overlooked. Accordingly, I would now like to turn to the field of narratology, where textual minutiae are precisely the focus, and where developments are currently afoot to begin to connect same with wider literary conversations.

With an emphasis on features such as modes of discourse, points of view, framing devices, and footnotes, narratologists have long been devoted to the scrutiny of texts' structural DNA. However, rather than just examining these traits in isolation, in recent years there has been a postclassical turn towards contextualizing such narratological findings. As Marion Gymnich writes: “The proponents of various ‘new narratologies’ emphasize that narratology should take into consideration how the text relates to the extratextual world” (62). Gymnich cites “Feminist Narratology” as the most successful example of this, with “Postcolonial Narratology”—a field similarly concerned with formal manifestations of identity, power, and control—still in its nascent stages.

Since Gymnich's claims, however, Gerald Prince's essay “On a Postcolonial Narratology” (2008) has further interrogated the field's potential, while Monika Fludernik's “Identity/Alterity” (2007) emphasizes that although issues of “otherness” are fundamental to *all* narrative, “for thematic and ideological reasons—they seem to be more prominently addressed in postcolonial texts” (260). Taking Hari Kunzru as her case study, Fludernik calls attention to narratological features such as paratextual formats, framing techniques, and loaded usages of standard and non-standard English, in each case unpacking how such devices can serve as textual embodiments of a postcolonial novel's ideological concerns.

This kind of approach has now been embraced by other postclassical narratologists such as Ansgar Nünning, Hanne Birk, and Birgit Neumann. More broadly, Sharae Deckard has also foregrounded the rising prevalence of “close textual analysis in investigating the precise literary ways in which peripheral aesthetics through their generic formal innovations self-consciously encode and engender critique” (93). However, by consistently situating such analyses within a postcolonial context, it remains the case that the authors in question tend to be members of the “peripheral” groups themselves—that is, they *share* their characters' cultural background—whereas this essay is interested in the kinds of issues that arise when authors attempt to write about characters whose subject position and cultural background they *do not* share. For despite Spivak's, Bhabha's, and Said's insistences that issues of power, identity, and control are

likewise at stake in the writing of transcultural fiction, the only successful example to date of unpacking the structural implications thereof is Charlotte Szilagyi's as-yet unpublished PhD thesis "Framed! Encountering Otherness in Frame Narratives" (2010). Here, rather than focusing on postcolonial fiction, Szilagyi instead opts for "other" fiction, more broadly conceived—both that written *by* traditionally "othered" groups, but also *about* another "othered" group—for example, German literary fiction about 1930s colonized Africans; Jewish-American literary depictions of 1950s blacks; or African-American literary representations of mid-nineteenth-century Jews and Germans.

Szilagyi begins by addressing Spivak's and Said's insinuations that the act of "othering" is an unavoidable facet of any narrative process, and suggests instead a means by which such domination can in fact be avoided—that is, through structure and form. For, by foregrounding the framing techniques within their works, Szilagyi shows how certain transcultural writers succeed in rendering the "other" a narratively-charged rather than politically-charged category:

[T]he structural properties of frame narrative accommodate—and ensure—the mechanism for the framer to silence—but also, as my central argument holds, paradoxically offer the very mechanism through which the literarily represented Other...can speak—in other words, it can claim Selfhood by using its own idiosyncratic discourse—in a way that turns the tables on the framer. (8)

Szilagyi cites narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, particularly her theories on embedded narratives, that is, the "story-like constructs contained in the private worlds of characters," which include their dreams, fictions, beliefs, desires, or any other "unactualized possibilities" (Ryan 156). Alongside this, Szilagyi also cites Fludernik's work on embedded narratives, which unpacks the ways in which characters may become narrators in their own right (*An Introduction* 29). So Szilagyi argues that free indirect discourse, quotation marks, and translations all function as alternative frames, the spaces within them thus serving as sites where the subaltern can in fact be heard. In this way, Szilagyi asserts, "literature becomes an arena where unsolved political debates play out, and where literature's resolution becomes a political gesture" (49).

Szilagyi's laudable excavation paves the way for precisely the kind of structural scrutiny of transcultural fiction with which this essay is concerned. That said, it does remain decidedly rooted in twentieth-century literature, with almost no reference to contemporary texts. Furthermore, despite her pertinent choice of complex sites of "otherness," Szilagyi never mentions Ireland, a country with a particularly charged relationship with regard to issues of postcolonialism, diaspora, and inter-cultural tensions, and the country which will form the basis for the rest of this essay. Of course, this is not the first time the Irish context has been singled out as a paradigm for such an exploration.

For, even despite the Franco-centric nature of her work *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), Pascale Casanova likewise argues for Ireland as a unique case study for the kind of analysis she is promoting, given the country's dramatic shifts in circumstance over a concentrated period of time, as well as its need to "create" a literary tradition upon its relatively-recent independence (304).

So now, upon unpacking Ireland's unique (and uniquely-loaded) position, as well as the kinds of conversations which currently surround transcultural literature emerging therefrom, I will adopt a narratological lens to analyze the work of Colum McCann, revealing aspects of same which have been previously overlooked.

Historically, Ireland is a nation of emigrants. And although the last twenty years saw an unprecedented influx of immigration owing to the country's rapid economic boost, or "Celtic Tiger," the 2008 financial crisis triggered yet another resurgence of departures, the Irish now more engaged than ever with their diaspora across the world. Critics such as David Lloyd, however, actually deem the notion of an Irish diaspora as incorrect, given the Irish are ethnically the same as the majority of countries to which they relocate, and "fully integrated" therein (102). Meanwhile, for others, the idea of an Irish diaspora is inappropriate on the basis of its inference of analogy, given "diaspora" was originally a term specific to the Jewish people—a people with whom the Irish have often tried to draw problematic parallels: "There is an Irish nation," politician Brian Lenihan recently stated. "But it is a diaspora. We are like the Jews. Ireland is a home base—like Israel, the promised land" (Corcoran 6). Such parallels mirror the long-standing (and oft-contested) assertion that Ireland is in fact a "postcolonial" country, as Lloyd and countless others believe that her experience under British rule corresponded with that of other colonies. For many, then, the Irish are a minority group who share much in common with other traditionally "othered" groups. As such, writing about any alternative community from an Irish standpoint could in fact serve as a means of positing a likeness or analogy between the two, just as Lenihan has demonstrated above.

However, critics such as Elizabeth Cullingford are swift to contend this dangerous process of analogy, given it can prove both ethically problematic and, in many cases, simply factually incorrect: "Analogies, then, are slippery things: one man's sympathetic identification is another woman's 'cannibalistic' appropriation, and the construction of aesthetic parallels that elide historical differences or asymmetries of power may appear racist or falsely totalizing" (133). Cullingford cites examples of such analogies occurring across Irish culture, from *Riverdance* to the fiction of Roddy Doyle, revealing (and criticizing) the widespread adoption of such an approach. Thus she succeeds in identifying a further ethical pitfall available to Irish authors who attempt to write transcultural fiction.

Since Cullingford, however, relatively little has been written on the cultural manifestation of Ireland's engagement—problematic or otherwise—with its minority communities, thus rendering Pilar Villar-Argáiz's recent volume *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland* (2014) a welcome addition to the field. And yet, while the critics featured therein identify a number of exciting transcultural developments currently afoot in the Irish poetry and drama scenes, they seem less able to offer a comparable range of interesting representations of ethnic "others" in contemporary Irish fiction, particularly in the novel form. Furthermore, the few analyses of such representations that *do* feature in Argáiz's volume yet again focus purely on the thematic or theoretical aspects of such texts.

So I turn now to the work of McCann, an Irish-born writer who has certainly embraced the possibility of transcultural fiction, even despite the numerous complications inherent in his own subject position. And while thematic readings of McCann's work abound, this essay shall instead adopt a narratological lens, finally gesturing towards the formulation of a "Narratology of Otherness" that will serve to fill the current void in contemporary transcultural conversations—first within an Irish context, and then, hopefully, across the globe.

The work of dual Irish-American citizen Colum McCann has always endeavored to engage with "other" communities, his unique utopian vision inspiring what critic Eoin Flannery has termed an "Aesthetics of Redemption" (2011). Throughout his six novels and two shorter collections, McCann uses the democracy of storytelling to create a shared world that is both local and international, resisting any final moral consensus but rather wrangling therewith. What sets McCann apart from other contemporary writers, though, is that this wrangling is as much structural as it is thematic. Certainly Flannery goes some way to addressing this, noting how McCann's work "aggregates form and content in its representation of historically peripheral populations and individuals" and that he thus "recovers and redeems in furnishing utopian narrative spaces and forms in which these people can articulate their own stories" (5). However, while Flannery does identify the different forms to which he is referring—Irish oral traditions; Romani storytelling; ballet theory; jazz cadences—he does little to unpack the intricacies thereof, and the manner in which they are employed, all of which proves exemplary material for my proposed "Narratology of Otherness." Furthermore, while McCann's National Book Award-winning novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) has garnered the greatest critical attention thus far, this essay focuses on his previous offering *Zoli* (2006), since it is in this text that the most interesting range of narrative techniques occur.

*Zoli* tells the story of an orphaned Romani poet born in 1930s Czechoslovakia whose grandfather controversially teaches her to read and write. After the Second World War, Zoli is discovered by leftist academic Martin Stransky who strives to publish her songs and to "liberate" her people from the

oppression they have endured under a murderous capitalist regime. Assisted by Stephen Swann, the half-Irish, half-Slovakian printer and translator with whom Zoli enjoys a brief affair, Zoli's songs are recorded, transcribed, edited, and published as she becomes, quite literally, a poster child for a new inclusive post-war era. However, soon the political climate hardens, and the government introduces new laws that demand settlement, ultimately prohibiting travel altogether. Deeming Zoli responsible for their static fate, as well as for the exposure of their intimate culture, the Roma sentence her to "Pollution for Life in the Category of Infamy" (147), thus banishing her from the only world she has ever known.

Excommunicated by a group already so marginalized from society, Zoli represents the most extreme version of "otherness" McCann has ever attempted. Indeed, anthropologist Isabel Fonseca categorizes the Roma as the "quintessential outsiders of the European imagination" (273). And yet, despite—or precisely because of—this elusive nature, stereotypes surrounding the Roma have always proliferated, a fetishization reminiscent of the kind of Orientalist myth-making Said and others have identified with regard to Western colonialism. Furthermore, examining the history of travelling peoples within an Irish context reveals yet another layer of complication. For while the Irish likewise once fetishized and idealized these wandering groups, anthropologists such as Mícheál Ó hAodha and Ian Hancock reveal how, in the wake of the country's independence, it seemed Ireland required a definitive "other" against which to articulate its newfound selfhood. As such, the settled populations transferred onto the travelling communities the stereotypes to which they had historically been subjected in British imperialist discourse. As Ó hAodha explains: "This image, a frequent mirror-type of the colonial 'stage Irishman,' has included that of the happy-go-lucky vagrant, the criminal, the drunk, the storyteller, the fighter and the outcast" (44). Ó hAodha traces this image through the work of writers ranging from W. B. Yeats to Jennifer Johnston to J. M. Synge, the latter of whom also forms the basis of Mary Burke's 2007 survey of portrayals of the "Tinker" in Irish culture.

As such, it can be seen how, when choosing to write about this group—particularly from an Irish standpoint—McCann found himself confronted with an unavoidable ethical minefield. And yet, what is interesting is that, in a number of subsequent interviews, he has made statements that precisely recall the kinds of ethical complications mentioned earlier, drawing connections between the Irish and the Roma, as well as between the Jewish community: "I imagine that the Jewish people—of all the people in the world—can examine and understand the Roma story. That suffering. That longing. I think Irish people can relate too" ("*Zoli* Interview"). Not only are the dangers inherent in such analogies manifold (as has been unpacked by Cullingford), but history often disproves them entirely (as critics such as Ó hAodha and Burke reveal). Indeed, José Lanters concludes her 2008 article on *Zoli* by foregrounding the

novel's contemporary context—the heavily-publicized treatment of a Romanian Gypsy halting site on the Dublin M50 roundabout (42)—a hostile reality that puts paid to any simplistic sense of empathy that might exist between the Irish and the Roma. Furthermore, it is worth noting that McCann's preferred notion of "empathy" is not without its own colonizing import. For as Kimberly Chabot Davis points out, alongside compassion and sympathy, empathy can in fact be used as an imperialist tool that affirms rather than erodes hierarchies of race and class (399).

So McCann's overriding democratic project, together with his utopian aspirations, may sometimes verge on the ethically problematic. However, the works themselves remain far more self-conscious and self-reflexive, upending and undermining assumptions throughout. As such, by applying a narratological lens to *Zoli* it may be illuminated how, through immense methodological effort, McCann succeeds in managing, if not transcending, the ideological dilemma at hand.

*Zoli's* formal innovation can be seen from the very outset. The novel is divided into seven different sections, each distinguished by its respective location and period. For example, the fourth section is entitled "Czechoslovakia – Hungary – Austria, 1959-1960" (143), the dashes between the locations symbolic of the borders *Zoli* traverses, while the section itself is split into three subsections, one for each country. These parcelled-off, individually-framed narratives also vary in voice and point of view, including *Zoli's* first-person retrospective narrative addressed to her daughter, which thus proffers both a contemporary *Zoli* (the teller) and a *Zoli* from the past (the character in the telling), further multiplying the layers of subject and object. This telling is then interrupted by another point of view, as McCann uses the narrative to enact the very process by which *Zoli's* voice was usurped.

Reading this interruption—this mirroring of form and content—Anne Fogarty claims that *Zoli's* personal tale is symbolically "overwritten by a more objectifying historical voice" (109). However, it is in fact Swann's voice that comes next—another first person account with its own, far-from-objective agenda clearly on display. Furthermore, after this "overwriting" *Zoli's* voice does not remain silenced; rather it returns later, only this time as she is writing her story down, finally transcribing her own words rather than lamenting as others do so instead. Then in the novel's final, omnisciently-narrated scene, her voice almost appears again, as she stands up to sing for the first time in years—an impromptu performance to a group of strangers in her daughter's living room:

The tall musician strikes a high chord and nods at *Zoli*—she smiles, lifts her head, and begins.

She begins. (353)

This promise of a song, though, is denied—there is nothing after these lines but blankness, as the novel, tellingly, ends in silence. Fogarty notes the significance of this conclusion, deeming it an “incomplete action” which “sums up the complex stance of this eco-cosmopolitan heroine who refuses to settle but is yet entirely at home in the world” (119). However, this extraction is not only over-simplified but incorrect, particularly in deeming the action “incomplete,” erroneously assuming that just because the reader does not get to hear the song it does not occur. Rather, employing a more narratological terminology, I would like to suggest that the action has in fact been deliberately designated outside the reader’s frame of reference—it takes place, but the reader is not privy to it—the novel’s ending thus chiming with Szilagyi’s explication of narratives of potentiality—narratives “marked concurrently by [their] absence and presence” (99).

Indeed, throughout *Zoli* there are countless alluded-to stories and reported anecdotes that the reader overhears but which are never fully elaborated upon. The final performance is the climactic instance of this, but even at the beginning when Zoli composes her first ever song (notably, just after the Roma are forced to bury their musical instruments) the reader is told: “I put together a song in my mind, about down in the ground where the strings vibrate. I can still to this day recall every word, the harps listening to the grass growing above them, and the grass listening back to the sounds two metres below” (47). The gist of the song is given, a paraphrasing of the lyrics, but no more. This is at once loaded with denial, an assertion of what can and cannot be heard and therefore known, whilst also alluding to the later distinction between Zoli’s oral and written songs, designating this to the former category and thus for private not public consumption.

However, despite this profusion of embedded narratives, it is worth noting that although Szilagyi cites Fludernik’s and Ryan’s arguments for such narratives as moments of hope for the “other”—brief glimpses of their narrative coming through from beneath the frame (or indeed, precisely *because of* the frame), thus providing a means of self-identification—in *Zoli* they serve almost an opposite role, that is, to keep Zoli’s narrative at bay (Szilagyi 99). They offer a window through which the reader *could* see, but then close it up just as quickly again—a politicized gesture on McCann’s part for, given the betrayal which forms the novel’s crux, he is constantly wary of reenacting same. Instead, he strives to teach the reader to remain content with these glimpses, to respect the privacy of this people, as Fonseca puts it, “living as best they can, outside history,” and not strive to fix their wandering selves (5). So rather than liberating these “others” by providing a platform of revelation, as Szilagyi suggests, McCann instead affords them the utmost dignity through his refusal to do just that.

Looking beyond these layers of narration and point of view, another feature to consider—and one to which the aforementioned postcolonial narratologists

pay great attention—is the use of non-standard English in the text. Traditionally, the italicization thereof serves as an act of “othering” since it draws attention to such words as alien from the dominant discourse. However, in *Zoli*, as with many of the techniques, this works both ways. For, apart from the instances of italicized Romani words in Swann’s section (sometimes even accompanied by elucidating but ultimately distancing translations), Zoli herself also refers to non-Roma folk as *gadzikano* and *gadze* (20, 22), italicizing her own native tongue specifically for the terms that refer to those whom *they* view as “other.”

By employing these italics, multiple sections, and typographical borders, McCann ensures that framing devices are conspicuous on every page. Furthermore, within the text he also includes a number of conspicuously-loaded statements, such as: “Zoli pauses on the threshold, framed between light and shadow” (145). In this way, then, McCann exemplifies exactly what Szilagyi suggests—that is, he renders these borders a textual rather an *a priori* designation, and therefore the “other” a narratively rather than politically charged category. However, it is also worth noting that elsewhere Swann is likewise shown “leaning against the wall, framed by two cheap prints” (344), just as he has been sectioned off into his own narrative space, which is later “overwritten” by Zoli herself. Thus McCann subjects him to precisely the same structural traps as his “other” protagonist. This means that any subsequent narrative subjugation of Zoli becomes entirely relative, if not absent, given its commonality across the novel as a whole.

The above analysis reveals how McCann continuously upends traditional structural devices in ways that speak directly to the novel’s content, devices which a “Narratology of Otherness” should endeavor to unpack. However, shifting the narratological lens slightly now, it is worth exploring how such devices are also employed self-reflexively, often to the point of meta-textuality. For, just as Szilagyi persuasively argues that the presence of conspicuous framing tropes renders “otherness” a narrative as much as a political designation, so she more widely concludes (with specific reference to Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Der Schuss im Park*) that such architecture can in fact draw attention to the very act of its construction: “[I]t becomes clear that this narrative is not so much a story about the woman’s identity, as it is about how to tell a story, about how and what the text comes to mean. This is no longer *a* text about *her* text, but *her* text about how *a* text signifies—or, in Benjamin’s view, how it comes to perpetuate itself” (102). Echoing this are José Lanters’s compelling remarks on McCann’s process, wherein Lanters argues that “as a novel, *Zoli* is as much about the impossibility of authenticity in representation and the hubris of an author who attempts such representation as it is about the character and her story” (34). However, Lanters never really elaborates on the narrative means by which this is achieved, an elaboration that should be central to any proposed “Narratology of Otherness.”

Again, very early in the novel, McCann's use of self-reflexive techniques is clear. The opening pages chart an anonymous "Slovakian journalist, forty-four years old, comfortably fat" (5) as he drives towards the "shitscape" (3) of a "grey Gypsy settlement" (4). His every observation of the camp is conveyed to the reader, his voyeur status implied even by the cigarettes he offers "like peeping toms" (8). Alongside these detailed descriptions there is also the free indirect discourse of the journalist's thoughts, particularly his surprise upon entering the camp's interiors where there is no sign of the live music he had been expecting, only the drone of TV (6), and where the children have "immaculate" teeth (4). The notion of expectations and the flouting thereof then tends towards stereotype, as he believes: "[T]he same girl seems to appear from all angles" (5). And yet, such generic distinctions work both ways, as he considers: "He is, he thinks, every idiot who has ever walked this way" (5), McCann as ever turning and returning the critical gaze.

Later, upon revisiting this scene, the layers of looking and stereotyping become even more extreme: "They'd played him like a harp" the journalist remarks (221), turning to lazy similes, and then "he even felt for a while that he had a bit of the Gypsy in himself, that he'd been inducted into their ways, a character in one of their elaborate anecdotes" (221). This claim is hugely problematic, and foregrounds the danger of any empathetical and analogical leaps McCann's works might otherwise seem to propose. However, the idea of the journalist being inducted into the Roma culture via anecdote is less preposterous; rather it shows how he recognizes the fundamental role storytelling plays in the group's identity. Furthermore, just as this man has come to the camp to find out about Zoli, so too did McCann, during his own research, spend time on a Roma settlement. Accordingly, these sections are in fact *precisely* "elaborate anecdotes" derived from real experience, the journalist's emotions directly inspired by those McCann felt upon undertaking his own trip. So, through the creation of this doppelganger, McCann anticipates potential ethical issues, directly pointing up the flawed procedure of a curious outsider coming in. In this way, he also subjects himself to the same kind of framing process to which he subjects his fictional characters, thus further de-problematizing such processes, since the "other" is no longer the only figure subjected to such scrutiny.

Book-ending the novel is another, even more obvious meta-textual framing device, this time in the form of the academic conference "From Wheel to Parliament: Romani Memory and Imagination" (321). Here international scholars and artists assemble to discuss Zoli's people—to engage in debates about the sorts of topics I have thus far been exploring and with which McCann himself is so clearly concerned. The conference's timetable, the list of academics attending, are all outlined, as is the TV advertisement in which the boyfriend of Zoli's daughter, Francesca, is framed on the screen, informing the world of the forthcoming event (330). Elsewhere, Francesca explains the difficulty of even

booking a venue to host the conference, noting that she was ultimately forced to lose the word “Romani” from the title and change it instead to “European memory and imagination” to gain the hotel’s cooperation (332). This play on naming, framing, and outsider scrutiny eventually leads to the event itself, where birdsong is pumped out on a loudspeaker across the foyer—a false recording of the most natural of sounds, played for listeners’ enjoyment (333). Yet again, then, McCann points up the problematic probing into this “other” group, no matter how intellectual or well-meaning it may be; a point which is all-the-more pertinent given Irish/Roma scholars such as Thomas Acton and Ian Hancock have long bemoaned the number of conferences and publications that exist *about* the Roma community, but to which no actual Roma contribute (Acton 4; Hancock 19).

Indeed, Zoli herself refuses to speak at the conference, wary of reenacting her previous mistake, yet it is the scene directly after in which she stands up to perform, and the novel ends. Only it isn’t quite over—one single turn of the page and suddenly there is McCann’s own voice, outside the novel’s frame yet still close by, expressing his acknowledgements with typically-loaded phrases: “We get our voices from the voices of others” (355). The term “other,” together with the emphasis on “voice,” again proves that his words are not far from what the reader has just heard (or not heard, as the case may be). That said, McCann is keen to highlight his own personal remove from the novel’s material, explicitly disavowing any Romani familial link. Next he says he has “scavenged” his information, before poetically affirming: “Our stories are created from a multiplicity of witness” (355).

All these claims echo what I have thus far been exploring—the self-reflexive import of the novel through its layers of voice and witness—but also how the novelist places himself within the frame at large, straddling narrative boundaries and creating an added meta-textual layer. Accordingly, any “Narratology of Otherness” should seek to examine the use of self-reflexive and meta-textual narrative techniques, given their particular potential within a work of transcultural fiction.

One final aspect of McCann’s formal play that needs to be unpacked is not one that has been mentioned elsewhere—indeed, even Szilagyi, during her excellent transcultural analysis, makes no allusion thereto. However, although this essay has identified the structural innovations at work in *Zoli*, as well as the author’s attempt to directly encapsulate his exploration of Romani identity on a structural level, McCann takes this even further by actually encompassing Romani structural techniques in the process of doing so.

The incorporation of “native” forms into the English canon has certainly received attention within a postcolonial context. Critics have long examined minority writers’ struggle to fuse Western structures with their own indigenous modes, from the Caribbean inflections of Sam Selvon’s realist narrators, to

Chinua Achebe's and Salman Rushdie's respective incorporation of ancient folktales when "writing back" against the dominant discourse.<sup>3</sup> However, when analyzing McCann's technical ingenuity, it becomes apparent that something similar is in fact afoot—a transcultural version of this formal hybridity—thus pointing to yet another trait that a "Narratology of Otherness" may serve to reveal. For, where Cullingford previously outlined metaphor and analogy as processes in which the properties of two separate groups are "fused rather than juxtaposed" (99), here the fusion becomes narratological, the "other's" cultural forms now embedded into the novel's overall architecture.

McCann's invocation of Romani cultural strategies is most explicit in his use of orality. Indeed, Zoli's first account is framed as an oral address full of hesitations and verbal ticks to which we are invited to listen: "You can hear all this and more" (51). Elsewhere, certain phrases recur like a chorus or a refrain, enhancing the sense of the prose actually being an oral performance ("staring out at the roads going backwards"; "My days were spent still staring backwards" [15, 22]). However, rather than simply being an oral address to the reader, this performance is in fact framed as a direct address to Zoli's daughter, a frame which is all the more pertinent given a fundamental aspect of Romani oral tradition is that stories and songs are always passed down from one generation to the next. Indeed, the first thing the reader hears Zoli sing is an old song of her mother's (24), while the women on the camp tell her she looks like her too (33). Immediately after this, then, Zoli says: "It is strange now to talk of such things, but these are the moments I remember, chonorroeja," invoking her own daughter once more, thus marking the generational layers through which the legacy of stories and songs is being handed down, even as the novel unfolds.

Rena M. Cotten's article "Gypsy Folktales" outlines four types of oral stories that exist in Gypsy traditions. The first is the "Paramica," or fairytale, which begins by placing the action at a great distance spatially and temporally, and which strives to link all disparate or separate episodes together (261). McCann certainly succeeds in distancing the action via his use of geographical and temporal markers at the start of each chapter, while the innumerable echoes that resonate through each section serve to link the disparate episodes together. Cotten also explains how the teller of the "Paramica" is required "to tell it as it is; the way it must be; the way the story goes; compactly," a dictum which Zoli herself quotes almost exactly when she states: "I tell you this directly, there is no other way to say it" (15), and then later repeats: "I try to tell it to you as I saw it then, as I felt it" (33).

As well as the "Paramica," Cotten cites the "Hira" or tale about a known, living or remembered person (which McCann's novel as a whole certainly is), and the "Kris" or Gypsy court-trial story (which features later in the novel when Zoli is put on trial and sentenced to her fate) (264, 265). The fourth type of Gypsy folktale Cotten lists is the "Svata"—the saying or educational

folk truth—of which the Roma are particularly fond, and which shift and evolve over time and circumstance (262). So throughout *Zoli* we encounter countless examples of both established and newly-formed sayings, such as the grandfather's beloved phrase “[g]o ahead, horse, and shit” (19). We also watch as this truism evolves: “He looked up and said an old thing, but in a weary new way: Well I guess the horses didn't shit, too bad” (54), McCann ensuring these words adapt to events and circumstances over the course of the text, precisely as the culture demands.

This evolution of individual phrases features elsewhere in Romani oral culture given the organic modification of song lyrics over time, another process explicitly foregrounded by McCann. For, less than ten pages into her first chapter, *Zoli* sings an old song of her mother's, in a rare instance of quoted lyrics:

*Don't break bread with the baker; he has a dark oven, it opens wide, it opens wide.* There were times I would sing it for Grandfather while he sat on the low steps and listened...and then one day he stopped me cold and asked, What did you say, Zoli? I stepped back. What did you say, child? I sang it again: *Don't break bread with the Hlinka, he has a dark oven, it opens wide, it opens wide.* You changed the song, he said. I stood there, trembling. Go ahead, sing it again, you'll see. I sang it over and he clapped his hands together, then rolled the word *Hlinka* around in his mouth. He repeated the song and then he said: Do the same with the butcher, precious heart. So I did the same with the butcher. *Don't chop meat with the Hlinka, he has a sharp knife, it slices deep, it slices deep...* I was too young to know what I had done, but a few years later, when we found out what the Hlinkas and Nazis had done with ovens and nails and knives, the song changed for me yet again. (24-25)

I quote this at length owing to the huge import it holds for everything that follows. For not only is the reader called to observe the way songs organically unfurl from one generation to the next, but also how historical circumstances can imbue them with extra layers of meaning. As a result, the reader more explicitly recognizes when this exact process takes place *within* the novel's structure. For throughout *Zoli* historical echoes abound; wars end and recommence; fresh sets of tanks roll in; concentration camps become displaced persons camps and countless aspects of pre-Second World War history are mirrored directly by those before, during, and after the collapse of Communism. In one such instance, *Zoli* remarks under the threat of a shower at a displaced persons camp: “There is nothing so terrible that they will not try to repeat it. I shouted in Romani that they would not take me to their showers, no, I would not let them take me!” (243), haunted by the echoes of previous atrocities. So McCann infuses the structure of his work with precisely the kind of evolutionary cycle found in Romani songs and stories.

Furthermore, this evolutionary cycle also feeds into McCann's use of symbols. Jan Vansina, who writes extensively on oral traditions, emphasizes

that such tales are always “built around a single core image or set of images” (43), so the same motifs appear again and again throughout *Zoli*. However, these also shift over time and acquire new meanings, as Vansina elsewhere elaborates: “In tales the artistry consists of working with a single core image throughout by repeating it in identical or variable settings as the action develops and transforms its meaning, so as to lead the listener to plumb the depth of meaning held in the image” (77). McCann adopts this approach in his recurring use of the lake, in turn the site of Zoli’s family’s murder, the place where she bathes after her grandfather’s death, and the border she wades across. Then again later, when face to face with Swann for the first time in years, “[h]er breath sounds to her like someone drowning” (340), the simile far more effective given all the import the symbol has acquired over the novel’s course. It is also by the lake that Zoli utters the phrase “[g]o ahead, horse, and shit” for the last time for years, before she puts her “fingers to the ground and [leaves her] thumbprints there” (62).

These prints serve as another recurring and revising image, for when first being documented by the state at age seven, Zoli gives her fingerprints and remarks: “I liked the little patterns my fingers made, like bootprints down by a river” (27). This rare use of a simile to describe the very defining feature of her individuality is most telling, while soon after, she depicts Eliska’s hair as being “black as thumbprints” (31), the subject and object of the simile now shifted. Furthermore, just as Zoli is appropriated by the people around her, so too are her symbols. For in Swann’s account he tells us how his father used to leave his thumbprint in the bread to remind his son and wife of the hard work that had put it there (71), while Stransky’s shoes are later stained with ink from the posters of Zoli’s face as he leaves footprints up the stairs of his house (123).

What makes this imagistic treasure trail all the more pertinent is the fact that not only is it indicative of a distinctly oral, Romani technique, but it also reflexes upon itself as it goes, the inky tracks at once the subject as well as the process thereof. Furthermore, it foregrounds the role of writing, thus pointing outwards yet again to McCann’s own novelistic predicament. This in turn recalls Walter Benjamin’s famous discussion of the storyteller leaving his unique mark on the story he tells “the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (92). So not only does Zoli leave her thumbprints, quite literally, all over this book, but also on a more structural level through the use of a core set of symbols that recur and develop throughout, a technique closely linked to her own people’s oral traditions.

One final aspect of Romani narration to be considered is the actual genesis of the songs and stories proper. According to Cotten, the most crucial aspect of Romani lyrics is that their source and circumstances of formation always be attributed: “the narrator is required to present documentation of the authenticity of the story” (262). So throughout *Zoli* the reader watches as events occur and then are turned into songs, a unique insight into how such pieces first come into

being (and indeed, proof of their authenticity). For example, when there are rumblings in the camp about young Zoli attending school, Barleyknife “made up her very own song about a black girl who goes to a green schoolhouse and then becomes white, but finally on the road home she turns black again” (41). Later, Zoli is not the subject but actually the enactor of this allegorical assimilation, making up “a song about a wandering Englishman waiting for a train whistle” (97), turning Swann into a piece of art for the Roma’s enjoyment. However, the greatest example comes at the end of Zoli’s second section when she writes out a song entitled “*Since by the Bones They Broke We Can Tell New Weather: What We Saw Under the Hlinkas in the Years ’42 and ’43*” (301). In this beautifully-crafted piece the reader finds countless images and events that were witnessed earlier in the novel:

*They drove our wagons onto the ice  
And ringed the white lake with fires,  
So when the cold began to crack  
The cheers went up from the Hlinkas* (302)

The reader hears of the snow, streams, forests, and the eating of icicles—all features from the earlier portrait of Zoli’s youth. The poem also ends with a final plea to a generic “Old Romani mother” not to hide herself away and to be proud of identity (305), a plea which is particularly pertinent given Zoli arrives in the next chapter in the form of her older, maternal self. Zoli signs her full name at the end of the poem, alongside the date and location of its composition: “Bratislava, September 1957” (306), foregrounding always the source of the work. Thus I conclude that the poem is a direct product of her own autobiography, framed by her geographical and temporal location just like the novel’s sections, circling back in time to tell that portion of her life again in a new, newly-crafted way.

However, where the poem does deviate from the life the reader has been following is in its description of the hordes of Roma who were taken off on trains to “*Auschwitz, Majdanek, Theresienstadt, Łódź*” where “[w]e were taken in through their gates / They let us up through their chimneys” (304). Focusing on those who endured a worse fate than her, Zoli thus renders the poem more of a general history than a first person account. Indeed, Fonseca’s description of Romani poetry remarks that “through hundreds of refinements and retellings, they are mostly faceless, highly stylized distillations of collective experience,” rarely focusing on a single voice (5). Furthermore, it is crucial to mention that this poem is also a version of one written by the inspiration for Zoli’s character, Papusza: “*Bloody Tears: What We Went Through Under the Germans in Volhynia in the Years ’43 and ’44.*” Obviously Zoli’s poem borrows directly from the title, though the time period it selects is a year earlier than Papusza’s, McCann conspicuously reworking the order of descendency. And yet, Fonseca

also cites Papsza's tendency to supplant the collective experience with her "own singular voice," deeming this approach as what set her poetry apart, "a style for the most part...still unheard of in Gypsy culture" (5). Thus the form *as well as* the content of Zoli's poem directly corresponds with its biographical source, yet again displaying how every Romani song is a reworking of an old one, as Zoli fuses her own life with her people's, as well as with her ancestor's outside of the novel's frame.

McCann has eschewed the common claim that he is "one of the first Irish writers to sort of write internationally" ("The First Man" 151). However, what he *has* affirmed is his "intention to try to stretch the parameters, or borders, of the Irish novel." So now, by examining these parameters or borders quite literally, new aspects of his writing have been unpacked, aspects which have remained largely overlooked. What's more, this examination reveals how contemporary transcultural authors are in fact devising new structural strategies by which to negotiate their complex subject matter. Moreover, these strategies are far more technically-specific than Black's "crowded style."

As well as identifying these strategies, however, this essay is as much about the *method* of identification itself—a method that, as it has been gestured towards here, involves the application of a "Narratology of Otherness." This narratological lens focuses on textual features such as framing devices, italicization, and embedded narratives, as well as on the more self-reflexive usages thereof, particularly through the inclusion of stereotype and meta-textual allusions. Furthermore, this approach also promotes the analysis of any formal devices that may belong distinctly to the particular "other" group in question, scrutinizing how and why the author has decided to incorporate same. As such, this narratology builds on, but necessarily moves away from, the emerging work being conducted in the field of "Postcolonial Narratology." For, as shown in the case of Ireland, a country which inhabits a particularly loaded position with regard to issues of "otherness," transcultural architectures need not be restricted to authors or texts strictly defined as "postcolonial."

So while certain critics will continue to draw on Spivak and Said to debate the ethical complications inherent in any imaginative treatment of alternative communities, this "Narratology of Otherness" shifts the emphasis away from what can often be dead-end ethical claims about Western and/or white writers ventriloquizing non-white and/or subjugated subjects. This shift can now be taken up by future scholars, applying and adapting the "Narratology of Otherness" as they see fit, so as to reveal the rich and elaborate ways in which contemporary writers continue to transcend their borders—or, in Rushdie's terms, to step across their lines.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term “other” here refers simply to any alternative or minority group in a given national or cultural context. That said, for the duration of this essay I will maintain quotation marks around the label so as to foreground its problematic status, given its potential implication of a dangerous binary between an established “us” and an inferior “them.”

<sup>2</sup> By “transcultural” fiction, I simply mean any fiction in which a writer inhabits a subject position which s/he does not him/herself occupy. Though this term is not unproblematic, its OED definition as “transcending the limitations or crossing the boundaries of cultures” bears closest resemblance to the border-traversing journeys upon which my chosen writers are attempting to embark.

<sup>3</sup> For an examination of these, see for example Nick Bentley (2003) or Ferial Ghazoul (2013).

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