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INTRODUCTION

This article briefly examines the representation of the Other in Frank McCourt's book, *Angela's Ashes: a Memoir of a Childhood*, Flamingo, 1997.

Extrapolating from this book, it is clear that McCourt constructs a wide variety of categories of people—English, Protestants, Jehovah Witnesses, Muslims, Jews, Americans, Africans, Indians, the Irish upper classes—as Other. However, my interest of this article is rather more limited. It is restricted to those who would, broadly, be termed "non-Europeans and/or of non-European origin" in McCourt's novelised memoir of his childhood to young adulthood.

A rigorous critique of a book like McCourt's is necessitated by its power within modern literary discourse. The book was—and has remained—among the top best sellers, at least in the English speaking world. It has been given almost mythical importance by equating the author with Charles Dickens. The book, however is steeped in racist discourse that has so far gone uncontested. As an autobiography, the author has been afforded a ready camouflage that disguises the work as a harmless narrative of an oppressed child. Nothing is further from the "truth" when it comes to the oppression of the Other in the very same work. This article rejects the assumption that McCourt was simply and innocently retrieving experience that was trapped within what Foucault called the "discursive formation" of the time. Instead, one should view McCourt's work as a contemporary one and an important element in our day-to-day Eurocentric discourse about the Other. While much of McCourt's Limerick is no more, the portrait of the Other that he details can still be detected today in the Irish media, and, indeed, in that of most other European countries. Others are depicted as dependent, dirty, hungry, sickly and untrustworthy. It is precisely these images that are contested in this article.

Distant Places and the Other

Reflecting about the English officers, McCourt and the Limerick librarian agreed that these officers "are glad to be in Ireland after all they put up with India and Africa and other desperate places" (p.329). A glimpse of these desperate places is given in different parts of the book. The

unsuitability of these places for human (*read European or white*) habitation is unveiled in the story of the representatives of the St. Vincent De Paul society who pay an assessment visit to McCourt's home. Appalled by the unhygienic state of the house and its upper floor-renamed Italy,

They're careful the way they step into the lake in the kitchen and ...they tell one another. Isn't this a disgrace?.. They keep shaking their heads and saying, God Almighty and Mother of God, this is desperate. That's not Italy they have upstairs, that's Calcutta. [Mccourt 1997:113-114].

The unfortunate family had to endure another unfit environment which resembles the houses of the Other, having,

....backyard, a garden with tall grass and weeds, an old bicycle that must have belonged to a giant, tin cans galore, old papers and magazines rotting into the earth, a rusted sewing machines, a dead cat with rope around his neck that somebody must have thrown over the fence.

Michael gets a notion in his head that this is Africa and keeps asking, Where's Tarzan? [Mccourt 1997:325]

No wonder, these places are sources of fatal diseases as Patricia Madigan was trying to come to grips with her own ailment:

They don't know. They think I have a disease from foreign parts because my father used to be in Africa. I nearly died. [Mccourt 1997:219]

The wildness of the place is made worse by its animals, insects and heat too. Frank was perhaps poorly advised to even contemplate joining the White Fathers Mission to the bedouins. He was too innocent to know that his bad eyes could easily rot and fall off his head in Africa. His doctor was vulgarly honest but straight to the point:

Do you know the preferred form of transportation in the Sahara desert? ... a camel... It bites your shoulder and, rips it right off. Leaves you standing there tilted in the Sahara. How would you like that, eh? And what class of a spectacle you'd be strolling down the street, lopsided in Limerick. What girl

in her right mind will look at an ex-White Father with one miserable scrawny shoulder? And look at your eyes. They are bad enough here in Limerick. In the Sahara they'll fester and rot and fall out of your head. [McCourt 1997:338-339]

Given the inherent ugliness of the country of the Other, it is no surprise that nearly any hint of it evokes unpleasant feelings. Thus, Frank and his brother discover a long hunt for lumps of coal in the streets of Limerick on a Christmas day:

... Malachy is turning black from picking up lumps [of coal], and pushing them into the bag and wiping the rain from his face with his wet black hands. I tell him he is black, he tells me I am black, and a woman in a shop tells us get away from that door, 'tis Christmas Day and she doesn't want to be looking at Africa. [McCourt 1997:109]

Nineteenth-century association of the Other with dirt and hence the slogan of whitening the white man's burden through hygiene is still thriving in the Limerick of the 1930s. Children of Limerick, then, can be forgiven for getting it mixed up.

At one house they push up the window and the children point and laugh and call us, look at the Zulus. Where are your spears? [McCourt 1997:109]

Innocent as may be, the children of Limerick may have formed their ground for being apprehensive. Reflecting on the Others who are lacking in manners, if not in "culture", a Limerick librarian narrates,

At least the people here [Ireland/Limerick] are polite. We're known for that, the politeness, not running around throwing spears at people. [McCourt 1997:329]

These Others notably look peculiar; they are also renowned for their unwarranted aggression against strangers:

Dad tells us story out of his head. All we have to do is say a name, Mr. MacAdorey or Mr. Leibowitz down the hall, and Dad will have the two of them rowing up a river in Brazil

chased by Indians with green noses and puce shoulders.
[McCourt 1997:16]

The hostility of the Other, however, indicative of their uncivil nature, is routinely bolstered in Limerick's cinema, lauded by the city's lower classes as their own protest against authority.

...Lower classes who fill the tuppenny seats in the gods at the Lyric Cinema and are never done shouting at the screen, the kind of people if you don't mind who are liable to cheer on the Africans when they throw spears at Tarzan or the Indians when they're scalping the United States Cavalry.
[McCourt 1997:246-247,367]

These same people, however, appear on the civil side of the divide after Confirmation.

Priests and masters tell us Confirmation means you're a true soldier of the Church and that entitles you to die and be a martyr in case we're invaded by Protestants or Mohammedans or any other class of heathens. [McCourt 1997:211]

Martyrdom is a reward open for Frank but not the Other. The latter can only perish in defending his/her land or religion.

The Other's lack of civility is also contagious. The Mohammedans, for example, seem to have bestowed their ugly characters even onto their dogs.

That ... Man-eatin' bitch ... is a right Hindu, so she is and that's where I found her mother wandering around Banglore. If ever you're getting a dog, Francis [Frank], make sure it's a Buddhist. Good natured dogs, the Buddhists. Never, never get a Mohammedan. They'll eat you sleeping.
[McCourt 1997:197-198]

Even use of the term "Mohammedan" is semantically informative. At its connotative level, it reduces Islam to no more than a human invention borne out of Mohammed's successful social gamble. The binary opposite of that is obvious but crucial to the representation of the Other. It is Christianity or rather Catholicism whose origin is in God.

The Mohammedans may rejoice in their trustworthiness in one sphere however. Quoting his humorous uncle Pa, Frank narrates,

... we all have arses that have to be wiped and no man escapes that. ... Hitler, Roosevelt and Churchill all wipe their arses. De Valera, too. He says the only people you can trust in that department are the Mohammedans for they eat with one hand and wipe with the other. [McCourt 1997:283]

Never mind that the Mohammedans are distinguished from the Western world by nothing but the way they wipe their arses, a quality that can hardly be a source of pride. The Mohammedans however appear to be the deviants as they fail to share even what unifies such (seemingly?) diverse people like Hitler, Roosevelt, Churchill and De Valera. Perhaps one should stress what unites those men rather than what sets them apart. Various options are open to our imagination here: They are Christians, White, Western, Civilised?, and never forget, and none of them are terribly scrupulous as to which hand they use to ...

Among the Others, the Buddhists, can celebrate at least one friend in Limerick. This is Mr. Timoney who was once in India and was married to an Indian women. He now has designs on his house-keeper.

... he tried to turn her into a Buddhist, which he said he was himself and the Irish would be much better off in general if they sat under a tree and watched the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins float down the Shannon and far out to sea. [McCourt 1997:198-199]

Flattering as it may seem for the Buddhists, however, this is hardly a cause for celebration. Mr Timoney's kind words are no great praise as he is "off in the head" anyway, after years of fighting with the British army in India. Indeed, does not one have to be "off in the head" to praise Buddhism at the expense of the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins in this setting?

India is not only a favourite place for serving with the English army, it is also, for McCourt, an arena for appropriating women with red dots on their foreheads. The invasion of India and the appropriation of women run through the text as legitimate pursuits within the order of things, a way to escape the crushing poverty to be found at the mouth of the Shannon. Frank was told about this strategy by Paddy, whose uncle Peter

was in India in the English army and they have a photo of him standing with a group of soldiers with their helmets and guns and bandoliers around their chests and there are dark men in uniform who are Indians and loyal to the King. [McCourt 1997:181]

Thanks to the English army, Paddy, too, will soon be able to partake in the delight of that country.

... he can't wait to grow up and be fourteen so that he can run away and pass for seventeen and join the English army and go to India where it's nice and warm and he'll live in a tent with a dark girl with the red dot on her forehead. [McCourt 1997:132]

Paddy's plans are revisited by Frank later the text.

Paddy goes on again about running away and winding up in India in a silken tent with the girl with the red dot and the curry and the figs and he's making me hungry even if I am stuffed with apples and milk. [McCourt 1997:P181]

A salient image of India is that it is a country whose dark people are lacking in national sentiment and common direction. Hence, the attraction of cheerfully serving the English Crown. Most of all, however, India is a place of chaos, where "runaways" from the bottom of the metropolitan class hierarchy can work and partake of its spoils. At this point in the text, this wish will soon be within reach of Frank: he is thirteen, but he can pass for seventeen.

Frank's dream will be realised when, one day,

He [Paddy] says he'll write me a letter and when he's over there and I can come to India and have my own girl with a red dot. [McCourt 1997:183]

Tellingly, Frank is confident that his lower class origin will not hamper his intended exploits in India. After all, it is India, not England he is going to.

What's the red dot for, Paddy?
It shows they're high class, the quality.

But, Paddy, would the quality in India talk to you if they knew you were from the Lane in Limerick and had no shoes? Course they would, but the English quality wouldn't. The English quality wouldn't give you the steam of their piss. [McCourt 1997:182]

In addition to its women, who are ready for appropriation by the westerners, India as a place of Other has other attractions.

There are birds honking over our heads. Paddy says they're ducks or geese or something on their way to Africa where it's nice and warm. The birds have more sense than the Irish. They come to the Shannon for their holidays and then they go back to the warm places, maybe even India. [McCourt 1997:182]

The warmth of the place of the Other however may disguise some undesirable elements awaiting the Limerick young men. Nonetheless, the dream continues,

... he'll live in a tent with a dark girl with the red dot on her forehead and he'll be lying there eating figs, that's what they eat in India, figs, and she'll cook the curry day and night and plonk on a ukelele. [McCourt 1997:133]

Monotony is far from being the only ugly attribute of the unpalatable food of the Other, however. The futility of figs and plonk is obvious, but that of curry is much worse. It is verified by the stink of the lavatory buckets of curry eaters in the Lane in Limerick:

In warm weather we run to close the door all day because we know which families have the worst buckets. There are families whose fathers have jobs and if they get into the habit of cooking with curry we know their buckets will stink to the heavens and make us sick. Now with the war on and men sending money from England more and more families are cooking with curry and our house is filled with the stink day and night. We know the families with the curry, we know the ones with the cabbage. [McCourt 1997:241]

Still, the Other may share some elemental denominators with the people of Limerick. This potential connection is reflected in Frank's examination of his brother's blood in front of a dead dog, but it is a weak one.

Malachy has dog blood and the dog has Malachy blood. I pull Mr. MacAdorey's hand. I tell Malachy has blood like the dog.

Oh, he does, indeed Francis. Cats have it too. And Eskimos. All the same blood. [McCourt 1997:12]

Instead of such connections, the physical ineptitude of the Other, that distinguishes the Other from what he knows is stressed again and again. It is the idleness, laziness and imprudence of the Other that make "India and Africa and other desperate places" (McCourt 1997:329) a perfect exile for indolent young boys. Thus, upon their poor performance at school, Frank and his class were threatened with banishment by a teacher because they,

are a disgrace to Ireland and her long sad history, that we'd be better off in Africa praying to a Bush or tree. He tells us we're hopeless, the worst class he ever had for First Communion... but he'll beat the idler out of us and the Sanctifying Grace into us. [McCourt 1997:130]

The place of the Other, surely, levies less demands than the Limerick schools. Lacking coherence and populated with underachievers, it is a fit home for the failures of metropolitan society.

A glimpse of that illogical world is portrayed in one of the bedtime stories told to Frank.

Everyone in the story is a different colour and everything is upside down and backward.... Sharks sit in trees and giant salmon sport with kangaroos on the moon. Polar bears wrestle with elephants in Australia and penguins teach Zulus how to play bagpipes. [McCourt 1997:239]

This physical and conceptual ineptitude in turn inspires a particular sort of Irish benevolence. Frank might "not know his arse from his elbow" (p.129) but he is certainly sure that if "[you are] not a Catholic then [you are] doomed and so [you] can do anything [you] bloody like" (p.129). This is the fate of "millions of Chinese and other heathens [who will be]

winding up in hell with Protestants" (p.163). Thus, Others are objects of pity even for the pitiable. The image of the "black baby" as the doomed Other most worthy of being saved nicely epitomises this sensibility in the Irish imagination. The Irish God dictates unmercifully that unbaptized babies are condemned to remain in Limbo, which is "dark, forever and no hope of escape even on the Judgement Day" (p.205). The First Communion is a good occasion for collecting money for these otherwise doomed innocents. Frank is caught in between, as his teachers in the school in Limerick think that he and his fellow pupils have other priorities.

They'll go from house to house in their little suits like beggars for The Collection. And will they take any of that money and send it to the little black babies in Africa? Will they think of these little pagans doomed forever for lack of baptism..? Limbo is packed with little black babies flying around and crying for their mothers because they'll never be admitted to the ineffable presence of Our Lord. [McCourt 1997:131]

The spiritual deficiency of the Other, however, is secondary to the theme of the moral ineptitude of Others to which McCourt repeatedly refers in the text. Black babies grow up into treacherous, ungrateful natives and outright cannibals. In case, he is in doubt, Frank has the opportunity to learn directly about the relationships between the charitable giver and the mean receiver.

She (teacher) waddles to the a table and brings back the head of a black boy with kinky hair, big eyes, huge lips and an open mouth. She tell me put the sixpence in the mouth and take my hands before the black boy bites me.. I drop in the sixpence and pull my hand back before the mouth snaps shut..

I don't want to stay in this place where Mrs O'Connor can't take the sixpence herself instead of letting me nearly lose my hand in the black boy's mouth. [McCourt 1997:157-158]

Such distorted, even grotesque, physical qualities are the *sin qua non* of Otherhood. Thus, the Africans come with "kinky hair, huge red lips and open mouths" (p.157) and the Indians of Brazil with "green noses and puce shoulders" (p.16). The soulless Chinese have their peculiar physical

imperfections too, as a logical consequence of their moral decrepitude. Commenting on one piece of their "morally corrupting" literature in Limerick's public library, Frank was sternly informed,

This is disgraceful. Filth. No wonder the Chinese are the way they are. but what could you expect of slanty eyes and yellow skin and you, now that I look at you, have a bit of the slanty eye yourself. [McCourt 1997:355]

Not surprisingly, those who are mistaken for foreigners in Limerick are avoided, even by members of their own family.

Uncle Tom has his wife, Jane, with him. She is from Galway and people say she has the look of a Spaniard and that's why no one in the family talks to her. [McCourt 1997:93]

This supposed physical imperfection of the Other taps into the long-standing binary opposition of nature/culture. This imperfection is bound to be enduring and beyond redemption and recovery.

Frequency and Classification of Representation

In the next section, I will present a Table of reference to the Other. Entries are then classified into Positive, Negative and Neutral (reference to weather excluded).

Table 1: Reference to the Other

Entries	Positive	Negative	Neutral
India/Indians	2	12	3
Hindu/ Buddhism	2	0	0
Africa/ Africans	0	11	0
Black baby	0	6	2
Black	0	3	0
Brazil	0	1	0
Chinese	0	4	0
Jews	0	1	2
Mohammedans	0	2	1
Eskimos	0	0	1
Total	4	40	9

Clearly, the Other is predominantly associated with negative attributes. The text systematically evokes images connected to unprovoked hostility, aggression, subordination, inferiority, dirtiness, ill health, poverty, starvation, ugliness, and moral and spiritual damnation, to name but a few.

Conclusion

This article examines how the Other features in *Angela's Ashes*. I have confined my discussion to Others commonly associated with the countries of the south. As the article shows, the Other is represented in a very negative way. Surprisingly, many of the images of the Other in McCourt's book are still widely prevalent within the present Irish Media and literary work. Half a century seems to have changed little.

Apologists might contemplate a scenario in which the fight against unfair representation takes two stages. Firstly, the problem has to be exposed and this is what McCourt's book is partially about. Secondly, the problem must be unpacked and challenged and, perhaps, this is the duty which McCourt leaves to the scholars. Such a scholarly challenge is necessary because the racist discourse in McCourt's book still too often passes uncontested. *Angela's Ashes* is littered with the depiction of the

Others as dirty, aggressive, hungry, uncivil, ugly, untrustworthy, and morally inept, artistically rendered as authentic dialogue. Such representations are meant to evoke hostile feelings—fear, anxiety, threat, disgust and hatred. Indeed, the partial identification with darker Others, and the insistence on their own superiority with respect to such Others, is a main index of both the oppression of the Lane People in 1930s Limerick and their collusion with a colonial/imperialist hierarchization of the world that is still with us. At this level, then, McCourt cannot pretend that he was simply and honestly reproducing old narratives. This is what I described as a futile tendency to use the discursive formation of his early childhood as an alibi. If representation denotes/connotes the active creation of meanings, then it can only be so at the time of the discourse exists rather than the era in which the incident or history was made. The current “Refugee Crisis” highlights that the racist discourse that McCourt's book faithfully records and renders into Art, far from being a relic of the thirties, is still with us today.

There is no doubt that McCourt's book successfully exposes the extreme oppression which he and others endured in Limerick. For that, McCourt deserves our praise. Nonetheless, in so doing, he employed the same oppressive discourse vis-a-vis the Other. Consequently, the book becomes an active voice in the reproduction of the same discourse which the author is trying to contest.