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"You know more than you pretend": Passing, Jazz Inversion, and the Spectre of Reductive Racial Equivalence in Roddy Doyle's *Oh, Play That Thing* (2004)

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Abstract:

This essay explores how Doyle's novel utilises the jazz aesthetic to demythologise some of the most pernicious and persistent misconceptions around historical migration. Adopting a bifocal approach to Irish travel, it looks back to when the novel was published, a period characterised by sustained net in-migration to Ireland, from our current vantage point, which has witnessed the emergence of new far-right political parties in Ireland and a spike in violent anti-migrant criminality. This essay argues that Doyle's reimagining of the Jazz Age allows him to move beyond the constraints imposed by the short story format in which he initially addressed the subject of racism in contemporary Ireland, i.e. the serialised stories published in the Irish multicultural monthly newspaper, *Metro Éireann*.

Keywords: Anti-Jazz Campaign, Biofiction, Migration, New Negro Movement (Harlem Renaissance), Racism

In their recent edited volume exploring the manifold complexities around representations of race, racialisation, and racism in Irish literature and culture, Malcolm Sen and Julie McCormick Weng position Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* (1987) in a longstanding tradition of cultural appropriation, one which can be traced as far back as the problematic comparisons Douglas Hyde drew between the experiences of the colonised Irish and those of enslaved Africans in a 1906 lecture at the University of California (Sen, McCormick Weng 2024, 1). Set amid the gloomy malaise of a recession stricken 1980s Ireland, Doyle's plot revolves around the fortunes, and ultimately the misfortunes, of a Dublin-based soul band assembled by aspiring music mogul, Jimmy Rabbitte. Rather than referring to the original novel in the main body of their introduction, where the language used by Doyle's characters is decidedly more pejorative, Sen and Weng cite the following lines from Alan Parker's film adaptation of *The Commitments* (1991) to exemplify the text's questionable engagement with African American culture: "Do you not get it lads?" asks Jimmy in response to the band's bemusement at the notion that a band of white musicians from the northside of Dublin might be well placed to cover various soul classics, "[t]he Irish are the blacks of Europe. And Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland. And the Northside Dubliners are the blacks of Dublin. So say it once, say it loud. I'm black and I'm proud" (*ibidem*). In the case of Hyde's 1906 contention that "the Irish were 'not a race of nobodies or of slaves,' a 'people without a past' " (*ibidem*), Sen and Weng identify a re-enforcement of imperialist discourse, albeit in the name of Irish cultural revivalism, whereas, in the case of *The Commitments*, they detect a certain willingness to align the lived experiences of white, working-class Dubliners in the 1980s with those of the African American community (2). It is, therefore, somewhat ironic that the Dublin community where Parker filmed the scenes in and around the Rabbitte family home should find itself at the epicentre of one of Ireland's longest running and most incendiary anti-migrant demonstrations[1].

Like many of the anti-migrant protests that have sprung up around the Irish landscape since 2022, this demonstration coalesced around a disused building that was earmarked to operate as a housing site for those seeking asylum while their applications for international protection were being processed. It is difficult so say when exactly this #CoolockSaysNo protest began. However, a journalist from the national broadcaster, Barry O'Kelly of *RTÉ Investigates*, had been in the locale to film a documentary about these developments for at least four months prior to the key inflection point on 15 July 2024, which culminated in an arson attack on the building and a series of protracted skirmishes between masked "protestors" and the Garda Armed Support Unit[2]. Although this is perhaps the most volatile and extreme example of anti-migrant lawlessness, it is not an anomaly. On 8 February 2024, Deputy Paul Murphy, Teachta Dála (TD) for the Dublin South-West constituency, made the following remarks at the outset of his contribution to Leaders' Questions in Dáil Éireann:

> Yesterday, a house in Leixlip was burned down after false rumours circulated suggesting that it was going to be used for people seeking asylum. Four days ago, the old Crooksling nursing home in Brittas was burned down. On New Year's Eve, the old Shipwright Pub in Ringsend was burned down. It was due to house homeless people. We have seen 26 arson attacks in the past five years against premises rumoured to be used for asylum seekers. The pattern is very clear. A rumour starts, true or false, suggesting a property is going to be used. Far-right activists, people like Philip Dwyer, Gavin Pepper and Fergus Power, are quick to the scene. A few days later it is burned down. We should call what we are seeing what it is. We are witnessing a campaign of far-right terrorism in this State.[3]

Murphy's observations provide two important insights into matters concerning the contemporaneous development of far-right politics in Ireland. First, they foreshadow the ways in which these and other likeminded anti-migrant activists would attempt to establish a political foothold by way of the local Council and European Parliament elections held on 07 June 2024. All three of the individuals named by Murphy stood as candidates in these elections: Dwyer failed to secure a seat in both the South Dublin City Council (Tallaght Central) constituency and the Dublin constituency in the European Parliament elections; Power failed to secure a seat in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (Killiney-Shankill) constituency; only Pepper was successful in his bid to be elected Councillor for the Dublin City Council (Ballymun-Finglas) constituency. Kevin Coyle, another anti-migrant activist who played a prominent role in the #CoolockSaysNo protests, narrowly missed out on securing the final seat in the Dublin City Council (Artane-Whitehall) constituency[4]. Secondly, Murphy's observations articulate the integral function that social media performs in both the generation and proliferation of seditious mis- and disinformation, which in turn possesses the potential to make a damaging and lasting impact in the physical world.

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[1] The scenes in question were filmed in Darndale, a place located less than one kilometre away from the former Crown Paints site where these protests took place.

[2] The documentary, *RTÉ Investigates: Inside the Protests*, aired on 19 September 2024. For further details, cf. O'Kelly 2024.

[3] Cf. Murphy 2024.

This article explores how Doyle's *Oh, Play that Thing* draws on the dynamism of the jazz aesthetic to address some of the more indirect, but no less insidious, rhetoric that plagues these online platforms. Doyle's commitment to challenging the prevalence of reductive racial stereotypes can be traced back to the years immediately preceding the publication of *Oh, Play that Thing*, when he began writing serialised short stories for a monthly newspaper called *Metro Éireann*. Established shortly after the turn of the millennium by Nigerian-born journalists, Chinedu Onyejelem and Abel Ugba, this tabloid newspaper was committed to foregrounding issues affecting Ireland's immigrant population. These serialised short stories were eventually published as *The Deportees and Other Stories* (2007). In a subsequent interview with Maureen Reddy, Doyle would later reflect on the events that inspired him to pen these contributions for *Metro Éireann*: "it struck me as an opportunity […] The word 'problem' was being used about immigrants and I was upset about that. […] I suppose it's my contribution to antiracist work in Ireland" (2005, 382). Indeed, Reddy later acknowledges in this article that Doyle expressed a certain awareness of the fact that "the Irish portion of *Metro Eireann's* audience is likely 'already converted', the stories do not encourage change in that audience but instead offer reinforcement of already-established views" (384). This invites two important questions: who, then, are the unconverted? and how might they be converted? As evidenced in part by Murphy's contribution to the Leaders' Questions in Dáil Éireann, cited above, social media has provided us with countless examples of who these "unconverted" are and how they operate in the two decades that have elapsed since the publication of Doyle's interview. To attain additional evidence of this, one need only type a phrase such as "Irish slaves", for example, into the search function on X (the social media platform formerly known as Twitter). This will undoubtedly drudge up countless memes that exemplify the "Irish Slaves Myth", that is, a fictitious online narrative that contorts the reality and the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade with a view to minimising, justifying, or categorically denying the existence of racism in contemporary Ireland. As many scholars have shown, these comparisons conveniently elide important distinctions between chattel slavery and practices such as indented servitude[5]. Rather than focusing on the all-important distinctions that Hyde drew, albeit problematically, between the experiences of the colonised Irish and those of enslaved Africans in his 1906 lecture, these ill-informed reflections opt instead to propose that no such distinctions exist. Taking inspiration from the false equivalence logical fallacy, the following analysis of *Oh, Play That Thing* uses the term "reductive racial equivalence" to describe this revisionist approach to the realities of historical slavery. It further demonstrates how Doyle's reimagining of the Jazz Age in this novel allowed him to move beyond the "already converted" audience of *Metro Eireann* (cited in Reddy 2005, 384) in a bid to further challenge these all-too familiar myths and the instances of everyday racial prejudice that these myths are contrived to bolster.

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[4] For an overview of the far-right's successes and failures in both the local Council and European Parliament elections, cf. O'Keefe 2024. It should also be noted, however, that far-right and anti-migrant candidates failed to secure a single seat in the General Election held on 29 November 2024. For more on this, cf. Gallagher 2024.

[5] Cf., for example, Rodgers 2009 [2007].

1. Rhythmic Syncopation and the Emigration Tale

There is some scholarly debate concerning which criteria should be met in order for a text to warrant the classification of "jazz literature." As Sascha Feinstein explains, some critics insist that the text in question must directly allude to jazz music, or to a jazz musician; whereas others propose that a text need not directly allude to jazz music so long as it is somehow characterised by the rhythms and characteristics associated with the jazz aesthetic (1997, 2). Doyle's novel meets both elements of this criteria. Even though the novel's first chapter presents as an orthodox example of the traditional Irish emigration tale, this mode of narration becomes decidedly more playful and increasingly complex at the outset of the second chapter. Here the advertising slogans that appear on the sandwich boards carried by Henry in his new role as human billboard interpolate the chapter's first-person narration, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> ELECTRIC RAZORS –
> BOUGHT
> SOLD
> AND EXCHANGED
> GUARANTEED REPAIRS
> ON ALL MAKES
>
> I was an honest toiler, paid to carry the honest claims of small-time commerce through the streets and avenues of lower Manhattan.
>
> STAR OPTICAL CO.
> EXPERTS
> GOOD RATES
> 333 PEARL STREET
>
> And I was value for money. Women's eyes went from my eyes and, as they wondered about the rest of the handsome man inside the sandwich, they read the words and were very often sold. (2005 [2004], 9)

At first glance, this structure appears reminiscent of the "Aeolus" episode from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the thematic focus on the offices of the *Freeman's Journal* and *Evening Telegraph* makes its presence felt on a formal level[6]. In this episode, the narrative is interpolated by a series of short, capitalised headings which are designed to replicate the appearance of newspaper headings. As evidenced by the excerpt below, however, these are not entirely separate from the ongoing narrative, as is the case in Doyle's novel, but rather integral parts of the ongoing narrative that are separated only in their appearance:

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[6] For more about the relationship between form and content in the "Aeolus" episode, cf. Killeen 2005, 68-77.

> IN THE HEART OF THE HIBERNIAN METROPOLIS
>
> Before Nelson's pillar trams slowed, shunted, changed trolley, started for Blackrock, Kingstown and Dalkey, Clonskea, Rathgar and Terenure, Palmerston Park and upper Rathmines, Sandymount Green, Rathmines, Ringsend and Sandymount Tower, Harold's Cross. The hoarse Dublin United Tramway Company's timekeeper bawled them off:
>
> –Rathgar and Terenure!
> –Come on, Sandymount Green!
> Right and left parallel clanging ringing a double-decker and a singledeck moved from their railheads, swerved to the down line, glided parallel.
> –Start, Palmerstown Park!
>
> THE WEARER OF THE CROWN
>
> Under the porch of the general post office shoeblacks called and polished. Parked in North Prince's Street His Majesty's vermillion mailcars, bearing on their sides the royal initials, E. R., received loudly flung sacks of letters, postcards, lettercards, parcels, insured and paid, for local, provincial, British and overseas delivery. (1986, 96)

Where Joyce's integration of newspaper headings into the overarching narrative is designed to immerse the reader in the experience of reading a newspaper, while reading about events that take place in and around newspaper offices, Doyle's manipulation of typography is designed to engineer a syncopated, polyphonic structure that facilitates two distinct yet complementary voices. This is one of the primary hallmarks of the jazz aesthetic, both in relation to music and literature.

For Robert O'Meally, jazz is, in essence, "freedom music, the play of sounds that prizes individual assertion and group coordination, voices soloing and then (at their best) swinging back together, the one-and-many *e pluribus unum* with a laid-back beat" (1998, 117). Indeed, Alyn Shipton has traced this polyphonic component of the jazz aesthetic back to the polyrhythms played at the weekly slave dances that took place at Congo Square in New Orleans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (2001, 19)[7]. However, the purposeful manipulation of typography is also a technique that regularly features in jazz poetry. In the context of Irish literature, Michael Longley's "Elegy for Fats Waller" serves as a prime example. It is one of four poems published under the heading of "Words for Jazz Perhaps" in Longley's debut collection, *No Continuing City* (1969). Like the references to Louis Armstrong's life and work that are central to Doyle's novel, this focus on legendary jazz pianist and organist, Fats Waller, clearly meets the requisite thematic standard for Longley's poem to be classified as jazz literature. On a formal level, however, the speaker's depiction of Waller as a larger than life, "Enormous" entity, riding "on a nimble-footed camel" (1969, line 9) exemplifies what Feinstein describes as the jazz poet's propensity toward incorporating "strong visual images in an attempt to appropriate sound" (1997, 5). In fact, Longley would reveal some thirty years later that this imagery was specifically designed "to convey the weightless artistry of this hugely overweight man" (1998, 92). This sense of weightless magnification builds throughout the poems first fourteen lines and culminates in the all-caps fifteenth line that operates as a resounding conclusion: "THE SHOOK, THE SHAKE, THE SHEIKH OF ARABY" (1969, line 15). Coupled with the image of this camel-riding figure, this final sentence alludes to Waller's 1938 recording of the jazz standard, "The Sheikh of Araby". Inspired by George Melford's popular silent movie, *The Sheik* (1921), starring Rudolph Valentino and Agnes Ayres, "The Sheik of Araby" was written by Francis Wheeler, Harry B. Smyth, and Ted Snyder in 1921. However, the line that Longley borrows directly from Waller's rendition of the song, "the shook, the shake, the sheikh of Araby", is not an original lyric; it was improvised by Waller during the recording process[8]. Its inclusion in all-caps, therefore, captures the magnitude of Waller's onstage presence, and the transformative energy of jazz improvisation, in a manner that facilitates a mode of polyphonic syncopation. This is the same effect that is engineered by Doyle's studied utilisation of typography in the early chapters of *Oh, Play That Thing*.

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[7] For a detailed account of jazz music's evolution from these weekly slave dances, cf. chapter one of Gioia 2021. For a brief overview of Congo Square and its complex position in the pre-history of jazz music, cf. Fogarty 2004, 115-116.

In the latter stages of the novel, Doyle eventually makes use of capital letters to incorporate lines from jazz music exactly as Longley does in "Elegy for Fats Waller." However, this represents the culmination of a process that begins with the interpolated advertisements at the outset of the novel and gradually builds through a variety of seemingly random refrains that further underscore the musicality that inheres within the narrative structure. Indeed, these refrains also operate in ways that indicate a certain cognisance of the complex correlations between the protagonist's psychological development and the formative functions performed by the still burgeoning advertisement industry of the early twentieth century. From the moment Henry begins working as a sandwich board carrier, which coincides with his adoption of his new identity, "Henry Smart" it is evident that he sees in this new enterprise some potential for self-advancement and upward mobility: "I killed the day with words of my own", he reveals, "*There's a CAMEL just for you*. I wrote and rewrote, filed slogans for my future use, got ready for the break" (2005, 9, italics in the original). Another key component in the protagonist's character arc arrives in the guise of Fast Olaf, a bootlegger for whom Henry becomes a delivery man on his daily sandwich board rounds, and Fast Olaf's half-sister, a sometime sex worker who operates as something of a love interest for Henry in the first section of the novel. Fast Olaf works for another character who plays a significant role in the trajectory of Henry's development, "Johnny No", who is for all intents and purposes the local street boss charged with overseeing both the bootlegging and sandwich-board businesses. In addition to the italicisation of advertising slogans, as exemplified by Camel cigarette slogan cited above, there are also instances when Henry's acclimatisation to new surroundings makes its presence felt by way of italicised remarks. This is evident, for example, when the first-person mode of narration reveals that "Leon the Cob put a sack on top of the other sacks he was building into a wall at the edge of the path – the *sidewalk*" (18). This process becomes more amplified after Henry steals the sandwich boards to initiate the "break" described above. This is precipitated by Johnny No's refusal to sell to Henry the sandwich boards, prompting the following response: "[t]he answer was easy, now that I was out on the street. I'd rob the boards and lose myself. I'd stay well clear of Johnny No; there were other streets, and lots of them. At the end of business today, there'll be a new me sitting at Hettie's counter. The coming man in advertising, the new man in the new, new thing" (2019, 19). This provides both the earliest and clearest indication that Henry's advertising related entrepreneurialism is intimately entwined with the journey of self-fashioning that will largely define his experience as an Irish immigrant.

This is also true of some of the other external factors that Henry absorbs as his character develops. In fact, the correlations between the power exerted by these external factors and those exerted by the power of advertising are stated explicitly in the case of Fast Olaf's half-sister's utilisation of a process known as "autosuggestion", a psychological technique developed by

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[8] Cf. Waller Fats (1938), "The Sheikh of Araby", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YA1MBMxXCU> (05/2025).

Émile Coué at the outset of the twentieth century. In essence, this pseudoscientific mode of self-hypnosis promises individuals the power to guide their own thoughts, feelings, or behaviours through the medium of positive affirmation. This contemporaneous cultural phenomenon is somewhat humorously addressed as Fast Olaf's half-sister attempts to harness the power of autosuggestion to increase her breast size by using the following mantra: "*better and better*, *in ev-ery way*" (2005, 25, italics in the original). These phrases are also italicised, both here and elsewhere in the first section of the novel, because the reader experiences what Henry describes as "the half-sister's chant – *in ev-ery way* – again and again and again" (*ibidem,* italics in the original) from the protagonist's point of view. This journey of self-fashioning is further complicated as Henry draws on remnants from his previous life, as documented in the first novel of Doyle's trilogy, *A Star Called Henry*, as inspiration for his marketing skills:

> I knew what they were doing – *Right Now* – the men who'd come up with the slogans. *Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord*. I knew how to unsettle and soothe with words. I knew how to bully and push. *Shun all policemen and spies!* And inspire, provoke and terrify. I was still only twenty-two, but I'd been inspiring and provoking with words and more than words long before most of the New York ad men knew what they were for. (33, italics in the original)

These reflections overtly juxtapose the advertising slogans conceived by Henry, and others, with Thomas Patrick Ashe's poem, *Let me carry your cross for Ireland, Lord* and phrases that Henry himself uttered in his previous life as an Irish freedom fighter. Indeed, this is further underscored by the new alias that Henry adopts to evade the attention of Johnny No, which the protagonist formulates by changing "Smart," to "clever," to the Gaelic word for clever, "*glic*," to arrive at the alias "Henry Glick".

As the agency seized by Henry becomes increasingly more amplified in the context of his newfound role as self-employed ad man, the repetition of the phrase "*I* walked" (64) also becomes italicised, as do many of the other repetitious elements that make up Henry's daily routine, such as *Corners, streets. Sharp corners* (67). About halfway through the first of the novel's four sections, many of these italicised phrases, along with other italicised phrases that can be traced to his previous life in *A Star Called Henry*, appear on the page as a kind of jazz poem that signals a shift in the protagonist's mindset:

in ev-ery way
let me carry your cross
I don't see you again
you hearing that
so
now's the time
the soap of beautiful women
I am the man who owns
broadway
her
heels
tapped
the
time
beats
am I right
as it sweeps
for Ireland

> as it cleans
> for smokers like yourself
> am I right
> daddio. (79)

This is followed by a similar rhythmic shift that can, at times, be discerned within the structure of Henry's first-person narration. For example:

> Men everywhere.
> Fuck them.
> Waiting. Not hoboes, not lost. There for me.
> She was bringing me.
> By the hand.
> To a door.
> Another bare black door.
> I could think. I could run. Simple as that. Nothing to it.
> Where?
> I could think. (81)

This revelation simultaneously captures the psychological toll taken by Henry's life on the run, from both his former Irish comrades and street boss, Johnny No, and illustrates the linguistic patterns that signify Henry's burgeoning new identity. This glimpse into the protagonist's paranoid inner world appears while Fast Olaf's half-sister is leading Henry on something of a mystery tour; as it turns out, she is bringing Henry to meet with a pornographer with the express intention of starring with him in an adult movie. Henry's most recent past exploits do catch up with him at this juncture, when he crosses paths with Johnny No at the pornographer's studio and is held to account for his previous transgressions. Both Henry and Fast Olaf's half-sister narrowly escape, but only after the latter holds Johnny No and his henchmen at bay by way of gunpoint. Consequently, Henry is forced to go on the run again, which ultimately brings him to the heart of Jazz Age Chicago in the second of the novel's four sections. However, the chapter that brings the novel's first section to a conclusion begins with a two-word paragraph: "[w]e ran" (95), which reconfigures the paranoia inducing refrains that re-appear throughout the previous chapters as a series of "calls" to which fleeing is once again Henry's "response". This "call and response" compositional technique can be found in both traditional Irish music and jazz music. A well-known example of this in Irish traditional music is "Rattlin' Bog" which is primarily structured by two musical phrases. In this song, phrase A operates as a call to which phrase B responds. A well-known example of this in jazz music is the Glenn Miller Orchestra's "In the Mood," where phrase A, played by the woodwind section, operates as a call to which phrase B, played by the brass section, responds. In this way, the musicality that inheres in the narrative structure of the novel's first section signals the cultural transition that Henry will embark upon in the latter sections of the novel, where the familiar refrains from the novel's first section are gradually replaced by the jazz refrain that lends the novel its title, "oh, play that thing".

2. Heterotopian Speakeasies and Biofiction as Jazz Inversion

The theme of walking returns, if only in something of a preliminary role, at the outset of the novel's section section. Having started over once again, this time in Chicago, we discover that Henry has "got to know hard work again, [by handling] boxes in one of the packing houses" (129). It is during one of his many nightly walking excursions that Henry first stumbles upon the prohibition-era speakeasies and the jazz music invariably played there. He describes his first encounter as follows:

> At last. I wasn't Irish any more [*sic*]. The first time I heard it, before I was properly listening, I knew for absolute sure. It took me by the ears and spat on my forehead, baptised me. There was a whole band of men on the bandstand, and a little woman at the piano, all thumping and blowing their lives away. Two horns, a trombone, tuba, banjo, drums, filling the world with their glorious torment. There were two trumpets blowing but the spit on my forehead came from only one man's. I looked at him through the human steam – it was too hot there for sweat – and I knew it.
>
> I was a Yank.
>
> At last. (133-134)

In addition to the ritualistic rebirthing process captured by this passage's allusion to baptism, the two short sentences at the end of this passage recall the jazz poetry structure that materialises near the end of the novel's first section as Henry makes his way to the pornographer's residence. This contrasts with the two short sentences at the beginning of the passage cited above; thus, Henry's cultural transition makes its presence felt here at the level of form and content. It is at this juncture that Doyle introduces the character who, at the very least, operates as Henry's co-protagonist for much of the remainder of the novel. Indeed, as Henry explains, the character responsible for this musical baptism is none other than legendary jazz musician, Louis Armstrong:

> I learnt all his names that night. Dipper. Gate. Gatemouth. Dippermouth. Daddy. Pops. Little Louie. Laughing Louie. Louis Armstrong. The names danced among the crazy lights that jumped from the mirror ball above the dance floor. He was dancing now as he played, as if his legs were tied to the notes that jumped from the bell of his horn. His steps were crazy but he was in control. He was puppet and master, god and disciple, a one-man band in perfect step with the other players surrounding him. His lips were bleeding – I saw drops fall like notes to his patent leather shoes – but he was the happiest man on earth. (134-135)

Once again, the narrative is imbued with a sense of ceremonial otherworldliness, one which draws on both religious discourse and the ritual of blood sacrifice to capture the magnitude of Henry's admiration for both the music and its creator. Indeed, it is soon after that Henry first hears Armstrong utter the words, "oh, play that thing!" (135). Moreover, this idea that Armstrong could simultaneously perform as "puppet and master" and "god and disciple" foreshadows the form that the pair's relationship will ultimately take after Armstrong recruits Henry to play the role of bodyman/manager with a view to navigating the racial prejudices that loom large in the Chicago underworld.

Henry's entry into this underground jazz scene is, somewhat predictably, facilitated by another love interest, an African American called Ethel. As Henry puts it: "[s]he wasn't black. She wasn't white. She was new too, invented seconds before and plonked in front of me. Just for me, the new American" (134). Here Doyle appears to intentionally acknowledge, albeit through the eyes of his conveniently naïve protagonist, that women are being reductively cast to perform as plot devices in a way that evokes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writing on the roles that women are all too frequently cast to perform within the context of male homosocial exchange[9]. This knowing sense of naivety is further evident when Henry and Ethel first discuss the subject of racial segregation:

> –You Irish and you tell me you don't know the difference between black and white? You don't know

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[9] For more about the prevalence of this symbolic exchange of women in literature and culture, cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993.

> the rules? You people wrote most the goddam rules. What day we meet?
> –Monday, I said.
> –That's right, she said. –Monday. Because I wouldn't be there Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday or Sunday. And if you say, Why not, I'll tear your balls off and throw them down the street.
> –Because you're coloured, I said. […]
> –That's right, she said. –I'm coloured. No coloured let in that door any other day of the week. Monday our night. Even on State Street. Our Street. […]
> –You could pass for white, I said.
> –You know more than you pretend, she said. –I don't want to pass for white. (140)

Although this allusion to "passing" appears to fall from Henry's lips with a genuine air of organic carelessness, this is a loaded concept within the contemporaneous cultural context. As Laura Ryan points out, this term can be traced to the slavery era, when it was associated with the light-skinned slaves who forged written "passes" in order to escape, and it was a recurring trope in Harlem Renaissance literature, such as James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), and Geroge Schuyler's 1931 novel, *Black No More* (2023, 203-204). As Sinéad Moynihan explains, "to 'pass' is to appear to belong to one or more subgroups other than the one(s) to which one is normally assigned by prevailing legal, medical and/or socio-cultural discourses. To pass as white, if one is 'black,' […] is to challenge assumptions that evidence of one's race […] is always visually available by recourse to a set of physical characteristics considered immutable". In much the same way as the novel subtly acknowledges that Ethel is being used as a reductive plot device, by framing her as a "new American […], invented seconds before and plonked in front of" Henry for convenience, Ethel's insinuation that Henry knows more than he pretends gestures toward Doyle's awareness of the cultural baggage surrounding this idea of "passing" in that specific cultural context (2013, 8).

This initial exchange between Henry and Ethel also points to heterotopian function these underground speakeasies perform within the context of the novel. The concept of heterotopian space was formulated by French philosopher and cultural historian, Michel Foucault, in the 1980s. Foucault describes these spaces as follows:

> There are […], probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (1986, 24)

In *Oh, Play that Thing*, the speakeasy that provides the backdrop for Henry and Ethel's first encounter operates a space in which the unspoken rules of racial prejudice and segregation that govern communications in the everyday world can be stated explicitly in this underground reflection of everyday reality. It is interesting to note Foucault's use of the term "inverted" in this description of heterotopian space. Chordal "inversion" is a technique commonly used in jazz music. It describes the playing of a chord when the root note is located somewhere other than bass; in essence, this involves playing a familiar melody in something of an unfamiliar key. The point is not that all heterotopian spaces, whether they exist in the real world or in the fictitious world of a novel, are inherently related to the jazz aesthetic; but rather that this use of heterotopian space aligns with all the other jazz characteristics that make their presence felt throughout the novel, both formally and thematically.

The decision to include the real-life figure of Louis Armstrong as a co-protagonist draws on the genre of biofiction in a manner that provides another example of Doyle's playful inversion. As

Michael Lackey explains, biofiction differs from traditional biographical writing "because, while authors of traditional biographies seek to represent the life […] of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, biographical novelists forgo the desire to get the biographical subject's life 'right' and, rather, use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of the world" (2016, 7). The corrective "vision of the world" that Doyle appears intent on projecting by way of this novel comprises two primary components. The first relates to the early twenty-first century, and indeed the current, propensity towards conflating disparate historical realities, such as chattel slavery and indentured servitude, with a view to minimising the legacy and the realities of racial prejudice. The second relates to the common misconception that all minorities, although in this case Irish and African American individuals, experienced the same measure of ethnic prejudice in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Both of these components come sharply into focus when Armstrong explains to Henry his reasoning for refusing work at the mob-owned Black Canary club: "[s]lavery been gone sixty years, he said. […] They want me to play my cornet there [f]or the rest of my life. […] They want me for my whole entire life. Ain't doing it" (2005, 198). What is at stake here, for Armstrong, harkens back to the critical aspect of ownership that distinguishes chattel slavery from indented servitude. Indeed, this stands in stark contrast to the advertising and packing jobs that the Irish, and more importantly white, Henry has held thus far held in the novel. It is for this reason that Armstrong designs the bodyman/manager role for Henry, which he describes as follows:

> –Man once told me, before I came up from New Orleans. Man called Slipper. He say, When you get up north, Dipper, be sure and get yourself a white man that'll put his hand on your shoulder and say, This is my nigger. And then can't nobody harm ya.
> –And I'm that white man.
> –No Smoked, he said. –That not you. […]
> –Who am I then, Louis?
> –You the white man that puts his hand on that white man's shoulder and say, No man, this is *my* nigger. […]
> –You're my white man, he said.
> –And you're my black man
> –That right, Smoked, he said. –That about the size of it. But not really. Between you me, I'm nobody's black man. That seem fair to you? (212)

This is precisely the "puppet and master" and "god and disciple" role that is foreshadowed when Henry describes the jazz infused, quasi-baptism that occurs upon seeing Armstrong perform for the first time. Indeed, Doyle once again displays a certain knowingness around the complexities of racial dynamics, both in this foreshadowing and in the bodyman/manager role Armstrong describes above, because these descriptions appear to draw on Henry Louis Gates Jr's seminal study, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988).

3. Reverberations of Ireland's Anti-Jazz Campaign in the South Side of Chicago

It is the scarcity of employment experienced by the co-protagonists before Armstrong devises this role for Henry that drives the plot toward its next key developmental stage. In the process of burglarising a home located in a wealthy Chicago suburb, Henry stumbles upon his partner from the first novel in Doyle's trilogy, Miss O'Shea, and their young daughter, Saoirse. It seems that Miss O'Shea just happens to be working as a maid at the residence in question. At this juncture, it is worth recalling O'Meally's description of jazz music, specifically, that this aesthetic form “prizes individual assertion and group coordination, voices soloing and then (at their best) swinging back together” (1998, 117). In this section of the novel, the narrative moves without delineation between providing accounts of Armstrong’s development as a musical performer and Henry’s attempts to rekindle his relationship with Miss O’Shea. Here the mode of narration functions in much the same way as soloing jazz artists might play off each other within these musical arrangements. As is the case with all the other jazz techniques that Doyle has incorporated in previous sections of the novel, this is not merely included for stylistic affect. Indeed, it performs a very specific function insofar as it establishes a vehicle to allow contemporaneous Irish attitudes toward jazz music to be voiced in late-1920s Chicago. This occurs by way of Miss O’Shea’s response to Henry playing one of Armstrong’s recordings for both her and Saoirse:

> –Nigger jazz.
> I rescued the needle.
> –What?
> –That’s what that was, said Miss O’Shea. I’ve heard it.
> –Did you like it? I asked Saoirse.
> –Yes.
> –That was Louis Armstrong, I told her.
> –The man doing the funny singing?
> –That’s right. And he played the trumpet as well.
> –What was he singing about?
> –Nothing really, I said. –He sometimes does that. There aren’t real words.
> –It’s funny. (2005, 217)

While it may be tempting to dismiss Miss O’Shea’s casual racism as a convenient by-product of the influence of early twentieth century American culture, this highly pejorative phraseology was commonly used in contemporaneous Irish society, as evidenced by the local and national newspapers of the day.

In an article titled “Praise of the Foxtrot”, published in the *Kerry News* on 16 January 1925, for example, one contributor wrote: “the foxtrot is still what it was when it finally discarded the last vestige of ‘nigger’ jazz–a gay, intoxicating, magical dance, at once the simplest and most stimulating and appealing dance the world can have seen” (3). Likewise, in a piece titled “The ‘Leader,’ Referring to Mr. T. O’Donnell’s Lecture on the Cost of Government”, published in the *Southern Star* on 24 January 1925, another contributor wrote:

> We are surprised that a real nigger jazz band did not supply the music, as was the case with the Dublin Farmers Fancy Dress Ball a few years ago. […] Where are the men and women who, for one reason or another, did their best to revive Irish dancing? They, nor their dances, were not there, but Madam Rock was there–and she is the last word in Anglicisation. In the dancing world, now that we are a Saorstat, Madam Rock is queen; and Cathleen Ni Houlihan has got her walking papers. (2)

In the *Southern Star* on 7 March 1925, an article titled “Treason Bill” made the following observations:

> Many Bishops have protested against inordinate craze for amusement; and the imported dancing as it is danced in the circumstances under which it is danced come in for condemnation. The total of picture house employees, dancing hall employees, publicans and their assistants, and Government servants subtracted from the total working population of this State would tell its own emphatic tale. All night foreign dancing, with drink supplied, is evidently the newest curse of this country. Well the country did not rise to Irish-Ireland; it followed the jazz and the imported movie pictures, and it is to an extent

> going to the devil. We did out [*sic*] best against the monkey hugs, or whatever they are called, but our efforts, we admit, were not very effective. A few years ago even the Dublin Farmers Union had a fancy dress ball with a real nigger jazz band. (6)

Indeed, the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland mentioned in this article would subsequently issue a statement on 6 October 1925, which drew the following conclusions:

> It is no small commendation of Irish dances that they cannot be danced for long hours. That, however, is not their chief merit, and, while it is no part of our business to condemn any decent dance, Irish dances are not to be put out of the place, that is their due, in any educational establishment under our care. They may not be the fashion in London or Paris. They should be the fashion in Ireland. Irish dances do not make degenerates. We well know how so many of our people have of late been awaiting such a declaration as we now issue. Until otherwise arranged it is to be read at the principal Mass on the first Sunday of each Quarter of the Ecclesiastical Year. The priests will confer with responsible parishioners as regards the means by which it will be fully carried into effect. (2002, 154)

These developments would ultimately lead to the establishment of what was, in effect, a state-sponsored anti-jazz campaign, which would in turn lead to the Report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts (1880-85) and Juvenile Prostitution, also known as the Carrigan Report (1930-1931), and eventually the enactment of the Public Dance Halls Act (1935)[10].

As these broader cultural developments would suggest, these sentiments were not exclusively particular to the Munster counties in which these articles were published, nor were they necessarily confined to the Irish Free State. In an article titled "More Degrading than Murder", published in the *Belfast Newsletter* on 6 August 1927, one contributor reported on recent developments at Oxford University as follows:

> 'Nigger music comes from the devil,' said Dr. Farnell, the Rector from Exeter College, when welcoming the members of a summer school for music teachers, which opened at Oxford last night. 'Vulgar music might not be so criminal as murder, but it was far more degrading. Our civilization was threatened by our own inventions, by our dreadful noises, our horrible motor traffic, our Americanisms, and out "jazz" music.' 'Don't take your music from America or from the niggers,' he said, 'take it from God, the source of all good music'. (12)

In the *Irish Independent* on 6 August 1927, the above incident was also reported under the title, "'Jazz' attacked". Here it is reported that Sir Hugh Allen, President of the summer school, "observed that he had always been under the impression that God made the niggers. There was not enough making of music to-day; they lived in an age musical laziness" (8). It is interesting to observe that the same pejorative terms are used even by those who would reject Dr. Farnell's characterisations of jazz music and its creators. However, no attempt at such a counterpoint was made in the *Leinster Leader* on 13 August 1927, where the incident at Oxford University was reported under the heading, "Nigger Music Comes from the Devil". This is by no means an exhaustive list of such reporting from this period in Irish history. It is, rather, a small sample from a selection of newspapers that were published in and around the three-year period in which *Oh, Play That Thing* is based.

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[10] For an overview of the Carrigan Report's findings and the subsequent enactment of the Public Dance Halls Act (1935), cf. Smyth 1993.

4. Passing and the Spectre of Reductive Racial Equivalence

The third of the novel's four parts sees Henry return to New York in his relatively new role as bodyman/manager for Armstrong. Upon his return, however, Henry finds himself based exclusively in the predominantly African American neighbourhood of Harlem. At the outset of this section, Henry observes: "Harlem was America; it was new every morning. I liked it there. I loved it" (Doyle 2005, 235). In the series of events that immediately follow, the novel provides something of an inversion of the racial "passing" theme explored in Henry's previous exchange with Ethel, insofar as this section documents Henry's experiences as he grows more and more comfortable embracing cultural codes, such as language and fashion, that are more "African American" than "American" in form. However, this is once again a knowing playfulness on Doyle's part because this process is designed to bring Henry, and by extension the reader, to a crucial realization with respect to racial discrimination. Indeed, to underscore this growing understanding, the passage in which he reaches this epiphany of sorts begins with Henry repeating the description of Harlem that his marginally more naïve self expresses at the outset of this section of the novel:

> Harlem was America; it was new every morning. I liked it there. I loved it. But I had to keep forgetting that I was the white man, strolling with the black man; stopping to talk with other black men, entering the barber shop with the black man, bringing my white man's hair in with me.
>
> –See more temple than I used to see, O'Pops, said Louis. […]
>
> We were sitting side by side.
>
> –Fuck off, Louis. […]
>
> I was tolerated, because I was with the black man. […] He stood back and let me pull open the doors, but it didn't work in reverse. I didn't need Louis beside me to do it; it was just a fucking door. No one was going to step in my way. (251)

In this critical moment of cultural self-awareness, Henry offers a finely distilled and telling image of the disparate stakes at play for him, as a white outsider, while navigating one of the archetypal examples of a male, African American communal space: the barber shop. Moreover, this realisation offers a stark contrast to the unwritten societal conventions that were foregrounded, indeed, spelled out for Henry, during his first experience of Chicago's heterotopian speakeasies.

After the conclusion of Doyle's novel, the reader will find a two-page section titled "[t]o the authors of the following books, thank you" (375-376). There are over one hundred books listed here, ranging from autobiographies of Louis Armstrong to cultural histories of both New York and Chicago, and from books written about the New Negro Movement to novels written by some of the most central figures in the Harlem Renaissance. The list, and indeed the novel itself, indicates a learned understanding of the role both jazz music and the Harlem Renaissance played in establishing a space where African Americans might begin to reconcile what W. E. B. Du Bois defined as "double consciousness". Du Bois coined this term in the early twentieth century to describe the sense of psychological duality experienced by African Americans who were simultaneously aware of their own sense of self and of how they were negatively characterised in white American culture: "[o]ne ever feels his two-ness", he writes, "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (1903, 3). Early-twentieth century Harlem played a pivotal role in fostering a space for new modes of Black aesthetic and cultural practices, which in turn saw the emergence of a hybrid "African American" identity. In addition to the manner in which Henry's barber-shop inspired epiphany exposes the historical realities of racial prejudice that are, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, obfuscated by the spectre of reductive racial equivalence, the trajectory of Henry’s narrative arc in the second of the three novels that comprise in Doyle’s *Last Roundup* trilogy further highlights the disparity that defies any false equivocation between the African American and the Irish American identity. What Henry, and by extension the reader, learns by way of his experiences in *Oh, Play that Thing* is that the latter identity is a compound term that amalgamates two national identities, Irish and American; whereas the former is a compound that amalgamates one continent and one country, Africa and American, in a way that speaks to the brutal cultural dislocation initiated by the transatlantic slave trade over hundreds of years. As Kristina Deffenbacher rightly points out, Doyle’s *Last Roundup* trilogy “demonstrates how nationalist iconography such as Ireland-as-woman, popular songs such as those made famous by John McCormack, and iconic films such as John Ford’s *The Quiet Man* function as medial frameworks of remembering that produce and reinforce the dominant, nationalist narrative of Irish history and identity” (2014, 149). In the case of its second instalment, however, Doyle’s widening of the lens around this spectre of reductive racial equivalence is designed to highlight and to counteract the ways in which these dominant nationalist narratives are being co-opted by far-right politicians and anti-migrant activists to minimise, justify, or categorically deny the existence of racism in contemporary Ireland.

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