

REPRESENTING THE OVERDETERMINATION OF BLACKNESS IN RODDY DOYLE'S GUESS WHO'S COMING FOR THE DINNER

Victor Augusto da Cruz Pacheco¹

¹Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brasil

Abstract

With the increase in migration to the Republic of Ireland during the period of economic prosperity known as the Celtic Tiger (1990-2008), Irish writers began to represent the lives of African and Asian immigrants. Given the need for a critical analysis of racial representation and blackness, this article aims to analyze the construction of the character Ben in the short story "Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner" (2007) by Irish writer Roddy Doyle. The story follows the racial anxiety experienced by Larry, a white Irishman, who welcomes Ben for dinner. In addition to Frantz Fanon's (2008) concepts of overdetermination of blackness and Negrophobia, I analyze the short story considering the notion of hospitality discussed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2000) and internationalist Ida Danewid (2017), reflections on empathy by historian Saidiya Hartman (1997), as well as issues of gender and sexuality based on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) and Keguro Macharia (2019). I argue that the short story reinforces racial tropes, contributing to anti-black solidarity. The irrationality of racial anxiety remains unchallenged by humor because the short story does not evolve from the irrationality, reaffirming Ireland's self-image as a country that is cordial and receptive to immigrants.

Keywords: Irish Literature; Blackness; Black Characters; Roddy Doyle; Short Story.

^{*} Ph.D. candidate at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Victor's research centres on blackness in contemporary Irish fiction and is financed by the São Paulo Research Foundation (Grant Number 2020/03891-7). He holds an MA (Capes scholarship) and bachelor's degree in Portuguese and Spanish from the University of São Paulo. He was a visiting PhD student at the University of Limerick, Ireland, in 2022 and studied at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2016. He is an editorial assistant of the *ABEL Journal - The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies* and directs the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Sub-Committee of the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures (IASIL). E-mail: victor.augusto.pacheco@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4785-5394>.



Having Irish popular culture as his main topic, dialoguing directly with the working class, and using a humorous tone, Roddy Doyle is a prolific and well-established writer. For Irish literary critics, such as Liam Harte and Eve Patten, he inaugurated contemporary Irish fiction with his novels. For Patten, the author 'reinvented the modern Irish novel as an authentic, popular medium which registers the experiences of everyday Irish life' (n/p). As Doyle engages with social issues in Ireland, immigration captured his attention, especially the initiative of the Nigerian journalists Abel Ugba and Chinedu Onyejelem, founders of the multicultural newspaper *Metro Eireann*. After a meeting with Ugba and Onyejelem, Doyle decided to contribute to the newspaper by sending brief narratives later collected in the book *The Deportees*, published in 2006. Consisting of eight short stories, each divided into sections of 800 words, *The Deportees* represents the interactions between Irish people, mostly from Dublin, and immigrants from different nationalities. Black characters appear in half of the stories: while "The Deportees" is a continuation of his 1987 novel *The Commitments*, with Jimmy Rabbitte forming a band composed of immigrants, and in "Home to Harlem" a black Irish student decides to research the influences of the Harlem Renaissance in Irish literature, "Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner" and "New Boy" focus on episodes of everyday racism in Ireland. In this sense, the narratives reflect Irish society, aiming to criticize and change Irish people's attitudes towards immigrants.

The refined irony and self-consciousness of whiteness as a structure of power do not dismantle the racist/anti-black structure that the short story seems to ridicule. In Doyle's case, humor¹ plays a great part in his narrative style, and in "Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner", the narrative I will analyze in the following pages, humor and irony are used as a form of criticism of the internalized prejudices within Irish people concerning black people, in specific, and immigrants, in general. I am not ignoring that humor and irony are a potent form of social criticism and can be used for social change. The point, however, is that the short story reinforces racial tropes, contributing to anti-black solidarity. The irrationality of racial anxiety remains unchallenged by humor because the short story does not evolve from the irrationality of negrophobia.

"Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner" accompanies the anxiety of Larry Linnane when he discovers that one of his four daughters knows a Nigerian, a refugee man. Up to that point, Larry considered himself a "modern, successful, Irish" father, proud of having all kinds of conversations with his daughters, especially about sex: "a da listening to his daughters talking about their plumbing ... and their sex lives, confidently, frankly and, yeah, filthily... Nothing his daughters said or did ever, ever shocked him" (3). However, that changes when, during a family conversation, Larry overhears Stephanie mentioning Ben's situation in Ireland. As he was not paying complete attention to it, Larry takes part in the conversation and discovers that Ben is not allowed to work because he is a refugee from Nigeria. The idea of a black man, or "the black fella", terrifies Larry who makes a scene and gives the impression that he opposes Ben because

he is black. That was not the first time Larry would meet a black man, as his wife Mona reminds him, Phil Lynott, the singer playing during their first kiss, was black, but for Larry “Phill Lynott was Irish! ... He was from Crumlin. He was fuckin’ civilized!” (6). His reaction is imbued by affects, going from anger to shame, Larry does not confront the idea of internalized racism, and his self-image of a modern Irish man contradicts his reaction against Ben. For Larry’s despair, his overreaction encourages the family to invite Ben to dinner.

As the short story suggests, the source of Larry’s anxiety is caused by, on the one hand, the idea and the existence of a black man dating his daughter and, on the other, his previous knowledge of Africa: “There was AIDS ... thousands and thousands of people, flies in their faces”, civil wars, criminality, religious fanaticism (9). When the day of the dinner arrives, Larry’s anxiety reaches a point where he cannot even decide what to wear. Expecting that “the young fella would probably be in a tracksuit”, Larry decides to dress “himself a bit up from that, enough to impose his authority—the older man, the citizen, the firm but fair father” (10). What Larry does not expect is that Ben is wearing a suit: “The best, most elegant suit Larry had ever been close to. A small lad – very, very black – and completely at home in the suit” (11). The contrast between Larry’s expectations and assumptions about blackness and black people with the physical materiality of Ben disarms Larry who successfully breaks the ice by greeting Ben with “Great weather, wha”. It must remind you of home’ (11). The first impression Ben gives Larry erases his anxiety about AIDS and religious fanaticism until Larry notices that Ben is wearing perfume: “A man with smell was hiding something. That was what Larry believed” (12). The previous anxiety gives way to paranoia, and in Larry’s imagination, Ben is seducing not only one of his daughters but all the women in his family.

Up to this point, the dinner goes smoothly until Larry asks what kind of food people in Nigeria eat. Surprising the whole family, Laurence, Larry’s son, answers the questions with “Anything they can get” (13). The answer causes verbal and physical reproach from all of the members of the family. Apologies were exchanged between Laurence and Ben, but the climate of the dinner had changed. Used to everyday racism in Ireland, Ben feels more outraged by the way Larry and Stephanie treat each other: “—Stephanie, your lack of respect for your father shocks me ... —And your language, said Ben, and he looked from Stephanie to Larry. —I will not listen to this profanity. I find it most offensive” (16) which makes Larry ask Ben to leave. Mona intervenes and brings a dessert, and they have a moment where Ben shares his life story: with one brother recently released from jail, three sisters, one of whom disappeared because of her teaching and political inclinations, and a deceased mother; Ben decided to go to Ireland after trying to live in Germany. Even with the everyday racism in Ireland, Ben wants “to live here ... For now. I want my children ... to live as children do here. I want them to take comfort for granted. I want money in my pocket” (23-24). Ben’s life story impels empathy and changes Larry’s view on the future relationship between his daughter and Ben. When Larry externalizes his blessings

to the relationship, he discovers that his daughter and Ben are just friends. Larry feels happy because “He wasn’t a racist. There was a black man sitting across from him, and he wanted to be his father-in-law” (25). The short story ends with Larry accompanying Ben to the door and asking where he could find the perfume Ben is wearing, suggesting a possible sociability between the two characters.

It is worth noting that the short story’s title references the 1967 film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, directed by Stanley Kramer. The difference is that in Kramer’s film, the plot consists of a racial antagonism caused by the announcement of the engagement of John Prentice, a renowned black doctor who will work at the World Health Organization, and Joey Drayton, a 23-year-old white woman raised by wealthy liberal parents. The fathers of both families oppose the marriage not only because of its interraciality but also because of the racialized social configuration of that time. In Doyle’s narrative, the virtuality of the daughter having any type of relationship with a black man is the central aspect that generates the plot as a reflection of Larry’s anxiety. In this sense, the narrative cannot be separated from the affective dimensions of racial anxiety motivated by blackness. The continuous phobogenic aspect of blackness provides intertextuality even if the film and the short story were produced in different historical backgrounds. On one hand, Kramer’s *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* was produced and released during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and in part of U.S. states, interracial marriage was not allowed. On the other, Doyle’s short story represents the immigration change that occurred during the prosperous moment of the Celtic Tiger. It could be argued that what is at work here is the notion of imported racism because of the influence of racial categories and classifications used in the United States, reflecting the intertextuality of the short story. However, I will not consider racism as the center of the intertextuality between the two works because Doyle’s character spends most of the narrative trying to convince himself and the reader that he is not racist. This reading would privilege a binary perspective in which the conclusion would be the absolution of Larry’s racism or a confirmation of his racist position throughout the plot. Maureen T. Reddy (2007), in a chapter on race in Roddy Doyle’s short stories, already argued that “racism equates with prejudice and is entirely personal, not systemic or social, not intimately intertwined with all the basic conditions of daily life,” representing “racism in a fantastical and oversimplified way” (19). Thus I will focus my attention on how Doyle frames the representation of Ben through an overdetermination of blackness, i.e. a co-constitutive relationship between whiteness and blackness which predetermines the existence of blackness, and how his text does not contribute to a critical representation of black characters but rather is more concerned with preserving the self-image of Irish whiteness.

Before I delve into the analysis of the short story, it is worth considering Roddy Doyle’s foreword to *The Deportees* in which the author explains the social climate possible for the stories. As the Celtic Tiger has resulted in a significant transformation of Irish social reality, Doyle relies on the idea that he “went to bed in one country and woke up in a different one” (xi). Although the sentence points

to a celebratory perspective on the arrival of new inhabitants, I find it interesting that his perspective and the foreword have a double movement because, at the same time, it tries to represent immigration as a positive aspect of Irish society, it does so by using tropes that reaffirm the stereotypical perspective on immigration. There is a “sneaky” message behind the sentence that can be directly linked to the representation of the immigrant as illegal in the country. Thus the metonymic chain “blackness, immigration, illegality” is not disturbed even by a work of fiction that wants to change the readers’ perspective on immigrants in Ireland.

The celebratory aspect of Doyle’s foreword is mostly suggested by the creative atmosphere of the new configuration of Irish society, where the autonomous creative writer finds a source for new narratives. About the stories in *The Deportees*, Doyle explains:

Someone born in Ireland meets someone who has come to live here. The love, and the horror; excitement, and exploitation; friendship, and misunderstanding. The plots and possibilities are, almost literally, endless. Today, one in every ten people living in Ireland wasn’t born here. The story – someone new meets someone old – has become an unavoidable one. Hop on a Dublin bus, determined to sit beside someone who was born and bred in Dublin, and you’ll probably be standing all the way. (xiii)

The endless possibilities of plots are encountered in everyday life, and immigrants are the fertile ground for creativity. In this excerpt, Doyle gives a general account of his narratives, showing that most of the stories will focus on the Irish experience with the immigrants. The double movement appears again and, this time, Doyle uses a xenophobic trope to confirm the endless possibilities for creative writing. Doyle conjoins the visual aspect of racial and cultural differences by denying the existence of people born and bred in Dublin beyond the category of Irish whiteness. In this regard, the racial charge of this passage reaffirms the anxiety and paranoia that motivates the *jus sanguinis* category from the 2004 Irish Citizenship. I would further add that Doyle’s remarks instantiate a politics of recognition through a visual practice, almost as a membership value, that excludes any other person who does not attend the category of Irish as white.

The other part of Doyle’s foreword that deserves attention is when he mentions his 1986 novel *The Commitments*:

In that book, the main character, a young man called Jimmy Rabbitte, delivers a line that became quite famous: —The Irish are the niggers of Europe. Twenty years on, there are thousands of Africans living in Ireland and, if I was writing that book today, I wouldn’t use that line. It wouldn’t actually occur to me, because Ireland has become one of the wealthiest countries in Europe and the line would make no sense. (xii)

I wish I did not have to mention the (in)famous line by Jimmy Rabbitte in *The Commitments*, who also appears in the second short story that gives the title of the collection. In the analysis of *The Commitments*, Liam Harte gives an overview

of the criticism of the line² and calls attention to the political subtext of Doyle's ironic comparison (35). I reserve my comments to notice how at ease Doyle is to use the n-word repeatedly, and this time with no quotation references, suggesting a complete dissolution of the borders between author and character. As Doyle notes, the line became quite famous, and it is often overused when discussing the process of racialization of the Irish throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1980s, the analogy refers mainly to the financial destitution lived by the Irish working class. The apologetical (but is he really apologizing for that line?) tone of the passage is suspended by Doyle's assertion that, during the Celtic Tiger, it would be impossible to use the same line not only because of the presence of African people in the country but because of the economic success of Irish society. In this sense, Doyle displaces and reaffirms the process of racialization and poverty into black bodies not as an ironic comment but as a given. I would also suggest that Doyle would not use the same line because Ireland cannot use the same displacement since there is a considerable population of black people.

I am interested in the foreword because the tropes used by Doyle suggest a deeper level of Ireland's racialized structure that also involves the figure of allies in the anti-racism struggle. White allyship still suggests a dynamic of power, and, if we consider that the foreword opens a possibility of reading the narratives of *The Deportees*, the ironic and humorous tone of the short stories cease to be a productive criticism of the Irish society and instead is an integral part of antiblack solidarity having everyday racism as its consequence. The racial anxiety represented in "Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner" is an intrinsic part of the foreword since the representation of the illogical and irrational process of anxiety cannot be overcome by logical and rational arguments. The irrationality of the phobic process narrated in "Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner" is described by Frantz Fanon in his *magnum opus Black Skin, White Masks* (2008).

Specifically in the chapters "The Fact of Blackness" and "The Negro and Psychopathology", Fanon investigates the overdetermination of blackness which produces what he calls Negrophobia, the phobic process of white people against black people related to the irrationality of an overdetermined object, and the mere knowledge of its existence triggers the process of phobia:

So, it wasn't that Stephanie actually brought home the black fella. It was the idea of him, the fact of his existence out there somewhere, the fact that she'd met him and danced with him and God-knows-what-else with him. But, if it had been an actual black man that she'd plonked on the table in front of Larry, he couldn't have been more surprised, and angry, and hurt, and confused. (Doyle 5)

I will not resist the temptation to read the short story through Fanon, even knowing the risks of a psychologization of the character. On a certain level, the analysis will prove Fanon's psychological theory. The passage strangely resembles Fanon's explanation of the phobic process: "For the object, naturally, need not be there, it is enough that somewhere it *exist[s]*: It is a possibility" (Fanon 120,

emphasis on original). Ben is not present at that moment quoted in the excerpt, but only the idea of his existence as a black man provokes an affective reaction. Larry imagined that Ben and his daughter met, danced, and probably had sex, because “in relation to Negro, everything takes place on the genital level” (121). Larry’s unconscious links black men to sexual prowess that threatens whiteness and, more specifically, white women. It is not about a consensual relationship between two adults but the possibility of sexual aggression. As Keguro Macharia demonstrates, “Because the black man is figured as rape ..., any sexual violence toward any man is figured as violence from the black man” (104). It is worth mentioning that the “man” in “any sexual violence toward any man” designates the metonymic process that characterizes man as white and human. Larry’s affective/phobic reaction is understood through the virtualization of the threat that might occur to his daughter, but that would be an act of violence directed at him.

The compulsory heterosexuality of the narrative, and Fanon’s work, is at the core of the phobic process. It is worth noting, however, that in *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon mentions homosexuality by arguing that “...the Negrophobic woman is in fact nothing but a putative sexual partner — just as the Negrophobic man is a repressed homosexual” (121), displacing homosexuality as a sexual practice observed in Europe. Macharia argues that the repressed homosexual panic described by Fanon relates to “the panic over something being transmitted through proximity to blackness, the panic over losing some element of whiteness,” and “on the level of the imaginary, they view black men as sexual partners and, more particularly, as sexual aggressors” (108-109). Following Macharia, I will not adopt the perspective of closeted homosexuality to analyze Larry’s anxiety because it would impoverish the reading.

In addition, the short story reflects on the question of hospitality by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2000). Drawing on the ethical and legal conceptions proposed by Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, and Pierre Klossowski’s novel, Derrida pays attention to the conditions of hospitality as a human and universal right reserved for all those who are considered strangers or foreigners defined, as Derrida makes clear, “as nonautochthonous, non-indigenous ... he who is born elsewhere” (14), by considering the issues of cosmopolitanism in the European context. According to the philosopher, there is a self-contradictory element, or an aporia, in the concept of hospitality, since it brings with it its opposite term, hostility. The definition of who is worthy of being treated with hospitality or hostility is part of a lexicon that considers the reception of the stranger within the household and the family, highlighting the privileged place of the host or patron of hospitality. The lexicon and semantic meaning of domesticity reveal and demarcate issues related to gender, extending as a metonymic process to designate the territorial surroundings that comprise the nation. Therefore, the right to hospitality becomes a question of governance and citizenship. Following Derrida, Larry represents the typical Irish *pater familias*, the patron of hospitality, maintaining the structural position of the nuclear family and heteronormativity. Combining Fanon’s and Derrida’s considerations, Doyle’s narrative places Larry’s

family as a metonymy of Ireland. In this sense, Ben is in an asymmetrical position in relation to Larry, if he occupies any position, as well as being a phobogenic object. For Derrida, hospitality "... is also an intentional experience which proceeds beyond knowledge toward the other as absolute stranger, as unknown, where I know that I know nothing of him" (8). Such openness to the unknown will not be possible in racial terms, considering the overdetermination of blackness in Fanonian terms, since blackness is a way of knowing the other even though we have not known him yet.

Another possibility of reading is the concept of homosociality proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in which the representation of a triangular relationship revolves around strengthening the social bonding between two men, maintaining the structure of power on a patriarchal level. In the short story, the triangular relationship between Larry, Ben, and Stephanie erases Stephanie from the general economy, and Larry, in a phobic position, is the one who suffers the consequences of Ben's sexual violence. This would be a compelling proposition, but in Sedgwick's theory blackness is not considered³ because men stand for the bourgeois white man of the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth-century English literature. The relations analyzed by Sedgwick require a symmetrical relationship between the two male characters, but that does not happen in the short story once Ben's blackness is a defective of the human, he is a being not-quite-as-human. Ben is in an asymmetrical position to Larry if he occupies a position besides being a phobogenic object. My focus here is then to comprehend how Larry's phobic process and the narrative in general only make sense through a heterosexual paradigm.

Larry stands for the typical Irish *pater familias*, holding the structural position of the nuclear family and heteronormativity. If we agree with Fanon that the family reproduces the nation, consequently Doyle's narrative places Larry's family as a metonymic to Ireland. In this sense, and leaving behind for a moment the connotation of blackness as a sexual threat, the arrival of a black person in the family will disturb the racial hegemony of whiteness in Ireland. The alliance to heteronormativity also reproduces black subjects as straight and inserts them into the parameters of heterosexuality as an inscription to narrative intelligibility and prescription for citizenship:

—But, said Larry. —D'you mind me asking? If your brother's grand about it. If he's happy to stay there. And he's going to study his doctoring, or whatever—
Ben finished the question for him.
—Why do I not go back?
—D'you see what I mean? said Larry.
—I want to live here, said Ben. —For now. I want my children—
Larry looked at Stephanie. But there was no blush there, no hidden eyes.
—to live as children do here. I want them to take comfort for granted. I want money in my pocket. Is that wrong, do you think?
—No, said Larry. —Good luck to you. (26)

Even after Ben has narrated a traumatic experience in his country of origin, Larry insists on knowing why Ben wants to live in Ireland. In this passage, Larry's protective position moves from protecting his daughter to protecting his country from blackness. As Macharia points out, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is deeply rooted in desire as expressed in the question "what does the black man want?" (Fanon 1), a desire that "engages embodiment, sex, and sexuality" (Macharia 130). In the passage, Ben establishes common ground with Larry by pointing out that he wants to provide for his future family. The empathic connection between the two characters is only possible through heterosexuality, but also because it means that Ben would take care of Stephanie similarly Larry takes care of his family. It is worth noting that this symbolic view of *pater familias* is deeply rooted in the neoliberal perspective of the Celtic Tiger: Ben will provide for his future family by consuming goods. It is interesting to remark that Larry changes his perspective about Ben because he is wearing a suit: "The best, most elegant suit Larry had ever been close to. A small lad – very, very black – and completely at home in the suit. The wall looked filthy behind him" (11). I cannot read this passage as a positive remark after analyzing Doyle's foreword and noting that he uses anti-immigration tropes. The juxtaposition between the filthy wall of an Irish home and the description of Ben's suit suggests that the short story is using another typical racist trope about immigrants that they have a better life than the "born and bred" Irish people. Access to good products should be destined only for white Irish people and immigrants should continue to be in a state of complete destitution. The unexpected turn of Larry's presumption is both the ironic dimension of the plot where Larry confronts his expectations of a different "fact of blackness", and the paradox of representation of blackness in which the suit places Ben in a different perspective.

The consumerism aspect of the Celtic Tiger will return at the end of the short story:

—That stuff you have on you, said Larry.
 —Yes? said Ben.
 —The scent, said Larry. —The perfume; whatever the fuck. What's it called?
 —Towering Ebony, said Ben.
 —Grand. Thanks. Eh—
 Larry looked over his shoulder again, and back at Ben.
 —Where would I get a bottle? he said.
 —There are several shops on Parnell Street.
 —Of course, yeah. That sells all the African stuff. Would I be welcome in one of them places?
 —Yes, of course.
 —Grand, said Larry. —Well. Seeyeh so, Ben. It was nice meeting you.
 —Yes, said Ben. —That name was Towering—
 —I remember, said Larry.
 They smiled at each other. (25-26)

As Maureen T. Reddy (2008, 19) points out, the ending suggests that Larry wants to assimilate Ben's culture through consumerism by asking where he can find the perfume Ben is wearing. The perfume's name, "Towering Ebony," references the blackness of the ebony wood, while towering, as *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* shows, means "impressively high or great; reaching a high point of intensity; going beyond proper bounds" (n/p). Thus the perfume's name is both a connotation of the prowess of the male sexual organ and the black community under construction in the physical space of the white Irish society, "going beyond proper bounds." The sexual undertone suggests that Larry's interest in the perfume is a way of joining, confirming, and even improving his masculinity. In this sense, the stereotyping of the black body through sexuality is commodified, indicating an intricate relationship between the fetishism over the body and the fetishism of the commodity. In some parts of *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon asks "In what way, taken as an absolute, does a black son-in-law differ from a white son-in-law?" And he proposes "Why not, for instance, conclude that the father revolts because in his opinion the Negro will introduce his daughter into a sexual universe for which the father does not have the key, the weapons, or the attributes?" (127). The neoliberal process of transforming identity into a commodity means that Larry can buy the key, weapons, and attributes to be part of the sexual universe blackness provides. The reciprocal smile at the end may also point out the shared secret between both characters, besides the celebrated racial conviviality and cordiality in Ireland.

Up to this point, I have demonstrated that the short story follows Fanon's perspective of reducing the black body to sexuality. I will argue that besides having sexuality as an overdetermination aspect of blackness, the narrative uses effective strategies to turn Ben into an intelligible character. As Fanon suggests, the sexual overdetermination of blackness is predominantly, but it is not the only one to fix the black subject:

Well, there was AIDS for a start. Africa was riddled with it. And then there was – it wasn't the poverty, exactly – it was the hugeness of it, the Live Aid pictures, the thousands and thousands of people, the flies on their faces, the dead kids. Heartbreaking, but – what sort of a society was that? What sort of people came out of a place like that? And all the civil wars – machetes and machine-guns, and burning car tyres draped around people's necks, the savagery. Fair enough, the man was an accountant but that was the place he came from. And why had he left – what was wrong with Nigeria? He could be a criminal, like Al Pacino being thrown out of Cuba in *Scarface*. He could be one of those religious fanatics, or married already, two or three times for all they knew. And they'd never know – it was too far away. It was too different; that was it. Too unknowable, and too frightening for his daughter. (Doyle 9)

Narrative intelligibility follows (1) an imperialist notion of Africa as an inhospitable place; (2) blackness as a characteristic restricted to Africa, excluding any possibility of black diaspora and black identities in Europe; (3) Ireland as a

place of a historical overcoming of the colonial past; (4) racism as an individual phenomenon; and (5) gender and sexual normativity (heteronormativity). These characteristics cover Doyle's narrative, and the passage highlights the overdetermination of what Africa and African peoples are as part of symbolic attachments. As Achille Mbembe puts it, "Africa is held incomprehensible, pathological, and abnormal. War is seen as all-pervasive. The continent, a great, soft, fantastic body, is seen as powerless, engaged in rampant self-destruction" (8). Larry lists all his knowledge on Africa confirming his anxiety about having a black person in his house, and he fears his daughter who will be raptured. Considering that Larry's home is a metonym for Ireland, Ben's presence indicates a rupture of the normality of the country, bringing with him the degeneracy of Africa, and disturbing the lineage of Irish whiteness in case Ben and Stephanie have children. The idea of Ben also suggests a form of contagion through presence: "there was AIDS for a start." It does not occur to Larry that AIDS is a sexually transmitted infection thus he would need to have sex with Ben to get infected. Ben's presence is a sign of the possibility of contagion that does not require any (sexual) contact. Larry's unreason will not be confronted by reason since his own perceptions do not work through reason because his beliefs are rooted: "how could he do it if he wasn't certain, in his heart of hearts, that they were his real objections?" (9)

I am not discarding the fact that the ironic and humorous tone of the text could rely specifically on how Larry's view is contradicted throughout his experience with Ben. The narrative uses overdetermination to point out the absurd of racist reasoning and how it is deeply rooted in sexual anxieties. The attempt to criticize Irish social/racial configuration, however, is undermined by the affective aspect of the text:

—I have three sisters. Two.
Ben looked very young now; he looked down at the table.
—Three, he said. —I have three sisters.
—What happened? said Mona.
Ben said nothing at first. Stephanie shrugged slightly; she didn't know what was happening.
—My sister, said Ben —My sister. Disappeared.
Suddenly, Larry felt very cold.
...
—It happened, said Ben, —it happened after I left Nigeria.
He stopped.
They waited.
—I left soon after my brother was arrested. (19)

In the first pages of *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman asks "does the pain of the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection?" She concludes that "At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator" (3-4). I am interested in the precariousness of empathy because I contend that the narration of traumatic experiences, and the affects it generates, is not an opportunity for self-reflection but an elementary form of overdetermination in Fanonian terms. It is only when Ben tells them

that her sister disappeared and his brother was arrested that Larry changes his perspective on Ben and fully accepts him. But it is interesting to note that this affective turn confirms Larry's view on Africa. I am not arguing that there is no violence in Africa, violence that is a direct legacy of colonialism, my point is that the narrative needs this specific overdetermination to raise empathy and make the character intelligible. In the narratives of the Celtic Tiger, colonialism needs to be erased to separate the Irish experience from the new immigrants, aligning Ireland with European modernity. The short story ignores colonialism because the colonial past does not combine with the modernity (through economy) of Ireland, suggesting a historical link between Larry and Ben, denying, to a certain extent, Larry's self-representation as man/human. I would also suggest that the economic development of the Celtic Tiger is a form, or a confirmation, of the racialization of the Irish through whiteness within a Western paradigm.

I insist on wondering why the narrative needs the moment seen in the previous passage for Ben to be accepted. This is a moment where the irony ceases, the atmosphere changes, and a serious tone is adopted because it aims to produce affect. Recurring to Hartman, Ben's story has an empathic function in the plot, directed to the reader. The affective dimension confirms the aspect of overdetermination that places Ben as a being no-quite-as-human. Ben only becomes or resembles something as, human through trauma. Following Ida Danewid's argument, "this focus on bodies in pain not only decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the ongoing tragedy, but also contributes to the construction of a particular cultural narrative – of European goodness, humanity, and antiracism" (1681). Thus, the moment in the passage does not represent Ben's humanness but confirms Larry's goodness, humanity, and antiracism.

Recurring to Danewid's essay "White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the Erasure of History" (2017), the humanist principle of hospitality staged in the short story reproduces "an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and turns questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality" (1675). Larry's position as "the older man, the citizen, the firm but fair father" (10) entitles him with a vested amiability: "The first black hand Larry had ever shaken. He felt sophisticated – not a bother on him – shaking a black hand. Not even looking at it" (11). As the narrative figures as a misunderstanding on Larry's part and Ben will not stay in the family as son-in-law nor will he be the father of Larry's grandchildren, the temporal and ritualistic characteristic of a dinner suggests a practice of hospitality in which the guest needs to leave. Following Derrida, this enacts the difference between the hospitality of invitation and hospitality of visit: "In visitation, there is no door. Anyone can come at any time and can come in without needing a key for the door. There are no customs checks with a visitation. But there are customs and police checks with an invitation" (14). Returning to the metonymic process of Larry's family representing the Irish nation and society, the temporal mark involved in hospitality, welcoming someone for a set period, raises the question:

What happens when the guest stays longer than desired? In this sense, the tension in the narrative reflects discussions about migratory rights. On the one hand, asylum seekers and immigrants are sources of negative affects, threatening the security and homogeneity of the nation; on the other, their bodies are needed not only for labour in a globalized market but also as necessary recipients of symbolic displacement. As Carby observes, “The new nation displaces its past racialization and colonial history onto black bodies that act as icons, floating, global signifiers of blackness which appear to have no limiting national belonging but are rather disparate multinational images” (329). Here it is necessary to highlight that hospitality can also be applied to the preface discussed in the previous pages. The reception of foreigners (black, immigrant) requires the authorization of the host, Roddy Doyle, who welcomes and represents them within Irish literature. It is not uncommon for Doyle’s accolades to appear in new publications, either praising new authors or authors who represent immigrants. This position makes it impossible to research immigration and blackness without mentioning or using Doyle’s production.

I am also interested in how overdetermination is a double edge in the narrative. Traumatic experiences linked to nationality not only confirm overdetermination but also overdetermine how characters can be represented. The immigration process during the Celtic Tiger created a vocabulary (re) presented in fiction. There is no possibility of representing blackness and black subjects besides the always-already scripted vocabulary of vulnerability and trauma.⁴ In the first pages of *Gender Trouble*, Butler problematizes the relationship between representation and politics. Considering Michel Foucault’s notion of the juridical subject, the author argues that juridical systems of power “produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent” (4). That is, the representational realm is not itself the representation of something previously established as a subject, but it is what shapes the subject in the first place. Along the same lines, Gayatri Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* discusses the difference, in German, between *vertreten*, ‘represent’ in a political sense, and *darstellen*, “re-present” as in art and philosophy. According to Spivak, both terms are united in the current conception of the representation of the subaltern subject because, during the act of representation, which infers a dialogical process of speaking and listening, the subaltern subject is always represented by a hegemonic language and perspective. These theoretical proposals on “representation” make me question how to analyse a literary representation that focuses on the subaltern or minority subject. In this sense, the narratives of (black) immigration are restricted to traumatic experiences thus moving to another country is not a choice but an imperative of living denied to black subjects. When Ben affirms that he wants his “children to live as children do here. I want them to take comfort for granted. I want money in my pocket” (23-24) his desire is only validated because he had traumatic experiences. The lack of agency for migration denies the status of an autonomous subject to black people since the law (and fiction) does not accept them beyond the terms of subjection to violence.

The overdetermined possibilities of blackness circumscribe Ben's existence. The interaction between the experience imposed on the black subject in society and the modes of representation in fiction prevents the character from being anything other than a phobogenic object, a not-quite-as-human being. In this article, I have demonstrated that "Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner" challenges neither common sense nor legal narratives on immigration and blackness. The irony of the text ridicules Larry's anxiety but does not deconstruct his perspective on blackness because the narrative seems to reaffirm the self-image of Ireland as a cordial and receptive country through European modernity aligned with whiteness. I am unconvinced that the use of racist tropes is productive to represent black characters not because I am denying the existence of racism as an issue in Irish society but because it focuses on the experience of whiteness and reproduces blackness through a vocabulary of suffering in need of a white subject to grant "empathy, generosity, and hospitality". If humor and irony are not useful as an anti-racist tool, what modes of narrative could be capable of representing black subjectivities?

Acknowledgments

This study was financed, in part, by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brazil. Process Number 2020/03891-7. I would like to thank Professors Laura P. Z. Izarra and Tina O'Toole for their comments.

Notes

1. Don L. F. Nilsen claims that there is an exceptional relationship between Irish short stories and oral storytelling tradition with Irish wit and humor: "... Irish short stories bear striking resemblances to Irish jokes. The story in Irish literature have the same narrative structure as the stories that are told and retold in pubs [as a form] to develop into close social groups" (1, 6). In this regard, humor and wit are already a device for social commentary and criticism. In her book *Reading Roddy Doyle, Caramine White* argues that "Doyle is able to use humor and comedy in a way that does not dissolve his characters' lives into farce but rather makes their situations endurable without rendering absurd any part of the complex opinion on which seriousness rests ... he uses both humor and the comic form to direct our responses to his work. Obviously, Doyle's novels are funny. His characters possess the enviable quality of being able to find the humor in anything, even situations in which the average person would weep" (2020 18, 20). I will not follow the specificities of Irish humor in this analysis neither in Doyle's style.
2. I quote: "Luke Gibbons, for example, claims that 'the legitimacy of the claim that the Irish are 'the niggers of Europe', and so on, only makes sense by reconnecting with a colonial legacy in which Ireland was indeed a Third World at the back door of Europe.' Michael Cronin is also sympathetic to this reading, though he insists that Jimmy's homily needs 'to be set in the context of a rights discourse that can and did travel from Alabama to Antrim' in the 1960s. For Elizabeth Cullingford, however, the Irish/black analogy is historically misleading because it overlooks 'the dismal history of Irish-American hostility to African-Americans,' which complicates in turn any notion of 'the Catholics as the white Negroes of Northern Ireland.'" (Harte 34-35)

3. Sedgwick briefly discusses race when analyzing a passage of rape in the novel *Gone with the Wind* and its adaptation into film. She accurately points out that “Black sexuality ‘means’ here only as a grammatical transformation of a sentence whose true implicit subject and object are white” (10) in the sense that the violence perpetrated by white men to black women and black men to white women is structurally different. But the overall economy of homosocial bonding remains unchanged because her analysis does not cover a relation between a white man and a black man.
4. According to the Citizen Information website, there are two main statuses for granting international protection: asylum seeker and refugee. The website describes asylum seeker as “a person who has left their country and is seeking protection in another country. Asylum seekers are also called international protection applicants.” Refugee, in turn, means a person who “has a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group; is outside of their own country and cannot or will not return there because of the well-founded fear of persecution; cannot be protected in their own country.” The International Protection Office may grant permission to remain in Ireland based on the applicant’s “connection to Ireland, humanitarian considerations, and character and conduct in Ireland and abroad”. (https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/moving_country/asylum_seekers_and_refugees/the_asylum_process_in_ireland/refugees_asylum_seekers_introduction.html)

References

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.
- Colebrook, Claire. *Irony*. Routledge, 2004.
- Danewid, Ida. “White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History” in, *Third World Quarterly*, 2017 vol. 38, no. 7, 1674–1689 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1331123>
- Derrida, Jacques. “Hospitalidade”. In: *Angelaki – Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 5 n. 3, 2000, pp. 3-18 DOI: 10.1080/09697250020034706
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. Pluto Press, 2008.
- Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. Directed by Stanley Kramer. Columbia Pictures, 1967.
- Harte, Liam. *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987–2007*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Macharia, Keguro. “Frantz Fanon’s Homosexual Territories”, in *Frottage. Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora*. New York University Press, 2019, epub, pp. 103-186.
- Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001.
- Nilsen, Don L. F. *Humor in Irish Literature. A Reference Guide*. Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Patten, Eve. “Critical Perspective”. In: *Roddy Doyle*. Available at: <<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/roddy-doyle>>. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.
- Reddy, Maureen T. “Reading and Writing Race in Ireland: Roddy Doyle and Metro Eireann”, in *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*, edited by Wanda Balzano,

Anne Mulhall and Moynagh Sullivan Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp.15-25.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Columbia University Press, 1985.

Spivak, Gayatri. *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris. Columbia University Press, 2010.

“Towering”. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/towering>>. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024.

White, Caramine. “Introduction” in *Reading Roddy Doyle*. Syracuse University Press, 2001, pp. 1-24.

Submission date: 09/04/2024

Acceptance date: 25/10/2024