

CHAPTER ONE



Identifying Others

The central argument of this book is that recent Irish and African American films depict character identification as a process that violates the boundary between subject and object. Through acts of identification, characters inhabit and perform otherness. They circumvent essentialist models of identity that pit self against other, and us against them.

Irish and African American films of the 1980s and 1990s connect these processes of identification not only to the historical and interpersonal dynamics of colonialism but also to contemporary discourses about nation, race, and gender. In the period under consideration, critical discourses about Irish and African American identities, long shaped by practices and ideologies of race, colonialism, and nationalism, were confronted by and indeed helped to generate countervailing ideas and practices that forcefully asserted the constructedness of all identities.¹

During the 1980s, models of national identity rooted in race and ethnicity were increasingly recognized as problematic and potentially ineffective. In the Republic of Ireland, according to Brian Graham, civic nationalism began to eclipse ethnic nationalism. Cultural geographer James Anderson argues that the Belfast/Good Friday Accords (1998), which address longstanding disputes over the status of the British province of Northern Ireland vis à vis the independent Republic of Ireland, reflect a belief that solutions to this entrenched conflict “require new policies and mobilization around non-national identities and issues” (216).

Discourses addressing African American and African Diaspora identities also shifted their focus in this period. Mark Reid distinguishes earlier black nationalist and Pan-Africanist movements from more recent postNegritude concepts and practices. PostNegritude cultural production encompasses analyses of class, gender, and sexual orientation as well as race; this aesthetic refuses to suppress the “polyvalence of diverse subjectivities” (Reid 1997 112–16).

The dilemma of how to negotiate the deconstructive effects of postmodernity and globalism found vibrant expression in Irish and African American film cultures, which depict the promises of anti-essentialism and the difficulties of relinquishing flawed (yet familiar) models of identity. These films address mass audiences, giving image and voice to widespread concerns about the perceived breakdown of ethnic, racial, and national identities. Through an emphasis on character identification, they interrogate the meaning and stability of Irish and African American identities.

Two films that I examine at length in chapter 5 use character identification to reconsider fixed and binary paradigms of identity in the context of the Western genre. In Mike Newell’s *Into the West* (1992), a contemporary fable of marvelous realism, two Irish traveler boys adopt the personas of their favorite cowboy outlaws, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.² Although Butch and Sundance appeared on screen in 1969, long before the boys were born, Ossie (Ciarán Fitzgerald) and Tito Reilly (Rúaidhrí Conroy) are familiar with their exploits because of the ubiquity of the television set and the omnipresence of U.S. popular culture. They rent American Westerns on video and watch *Butch Cassidy* on their neighbors’ television, literally becoming Butch’s “Hole in the Wall gang,” as they peer through the dilapidated wall into the neighboring apartment. And when the boys flee Dublin on horseback, headed for the West of Ireland, they envision themselves galloping into the Wild American West.

But Ossie needs his older brother’s help in focusing his identificatory energies. Unsure of his entitlement to Western icons, he asks Tito, “[A]re we travelers Indians?” Although Tito replies that they are cowboys, the boys indiscriminately take on the attributes of both cowboys and Indians during their escape adventure, whooping it up around their campfire and warming tinned beans for dinner. The brothers enact “both sides of the epic,” in the words of John Ford, the American film director who is consistently associated with both the Western genre and with Ireland (Peary 72).

In their polymorphous identifications, Ossie and Tito challenge several ideas related to national identities, and they expose the roots of those identities in concepts of racial difference. First, they debunk the notion that the differences between cowboys and Indians are so obvious that one instinctively would know the proper group with which to identify. Second, they deny any automatic identification with the victors of the cowboy-Indian conflict. Third, they force a reconsideration of the idea that Native Americans and travelers are “vanishing races” whose tales of cultural dispossession must be relegated to the space and time of the past. This point is reinforced by the temporal incongruity of the time travel film they watch as they hide out in a movie theater: *Back to the Future III* (Zemeckis 1990). Ossie and Tito are twentieth-century travelers, and, as such, they find it difficult to reconcile their existence with the notion of Indians (or travelers) as a vanquished and vanished people. Because Ossie and Tito fail to distinguish cowboy and Indian in their practices of identification, they call into question the narrative of conquest that constructs natives as savage others and subsequently uses that designation as a pretext to remove them from the landscape.

A 1993 Western challenges that system of difference as well. In Mario Van Peebles’s *Posse* (1993), veteran actor Woody Strode narrates a tale that self-consciously situates African Americans within the plot conventions and visual iconography of the Western. Like Ossie and Tito, Strode’s storyteller claims allegiance to both the cowboy ethos and to Indian culture. So does the legendary figure of Jesse Lee (Mario Van Peebles), whose diverse outlaw gang and black Indian mentor, Papa Joe (Melvin Van Peebles), support the film’s project of recasting the colonial contest as a dispute over capital that is expressed through racial hatred.

Lee’s gang grows out of a segregated military unit serving in the Spanish-American War that flees Cuba for the western frontier. Moving north and west, retracing the steps of African Americans who served in the Civil War then ventured west to become the Buffalo Soldiers who fought the Indian Wars, Lee’s racially diverse posse heads for Freemansville, a town founded by Lee’s father King David.³ On the way to Freemansville, the posse’s experiences catalog the deadly ambiguities of a national identity founded upon racial essentialism: African Americans fight on behalf of the United States in the Civil War, the Spanish-American war, and the Indian wars, yet face extinction “at home” by a Klan-like organization that terrorizes the frontier town. (The plot reiterates a number of elements contained in an earlier African American Western, *Buck and the Preacher* [Sidney Poitier 1972], a point I return to in chapter 5.)



FIGURE 1.1. Jesse Lee's multicultural posse in Mario Van Peebles's *Posse*. Courtesy of Photofest.

Rather than investing Western icons with Manichean attributes, with hero or victim status, *Posse* and *Into the West* indict capitalist individualism as the source of violence, exploitation, and community destabilization. In *Into the West*, corrupt Dublin police officers confiscate Ossie and Tito's horse—symbolically named *Tir na N'og* after the Celtic land of eternal youth—and sell the animal to a wealthy rural businessman. The new owner renames the animal “National Security,” a telling moniker that displaces Irish mythology and replaces it with the economic, political, and strategic concerns of contemporary Celtic Tiger Ireland. “National” security—whether the term designates economic or strategic well-being—clearly accrues to the private coffers of businessmen.

In *Posse*, greed undermines community solidarity when a prominent citizen of Freemansville colludes with white racists. Carver (Blair Underwood) buys cheap land vacated by Freemansville residents who have been intimidated by the racist gang. Carver is a key player in the white gang's scheme to profit from the sale of land to the railroad. Through characters like Carver and the exploitive businessman, *Posse* and *Into the West* link capitalism's winner-take-all ethos to agencies or symbols of the nation-state, including the police force, the military, and the railroad.

The films' protagonists are distinguished from these unsavory characters by their identifications with multiple others and by their ability to imagine and act upon diverse, inclusive notions of self and community. In their multiple affinities, Ossie, Tito, and Jessie Lee's posse locate themselves outside the system of difference defined by the merger of American imperialism, free market capitalism, and Hollywood representation: they reject the oppositional logic of cowboy *or* Indian, black *or* white, victim *or* victor. These films do not simply reiterate familiar Western conventions but, instead, engage in a Bakhtinian “double voicing” as they adapt an older genre to new contexts.⁴ By calling attention to characters' multiple identifications, these films question the dichotomous rhetoric of racial and national identities and they hint at the troubling implications of any political practice based on essentialism.



The discussion that follows lays the historical and theoretical groundwork for my contention that African American and Irish films of the 1980s and 1990s emphasize acts of identification and, in so doing, stage the conflict between essentialist notions of identity and the postmodern model of

identity as performance. The next section examines the Afro-Celt connection, a political and aesthetic affinity between Irish and African American cultures that offers one historical context for examining these film cultures in tandem. The Harlem Renaissance and Irish Literary Revival of the early twentieth century were associated with modern nationalist movements. By contrast, the Irish and African American film “renaissances” that began in the 1980s articulate the challenges that fluid postmodern identities pose to black and Irish nationalisms. The final section of the chapter draws upon contemporary film theory to ground my analysis of character identification in these films.

First, a note on methodology. Setting Irish and African American film cultures side by side may seem to some readers to be misguided, or even irresponsible. Colonial settlement, forced evictions, land confiscation, transport, and enslavement have disrupted and defined Irish culture and diverse African cultures differently through centuries of modern history. Although they are diasporic cultures, the Irish Diaspora is primarily the result of emigration rather than a global dispersal emanating from the triangular trade in commodified bodies that produced the African Diaspora. In addition, the experience of racialization has differed greatly, particularly in the context of the United States, where Irish immigrants ultimately acquired whiteness, crossing a color line that African Americans could not. Finally, the Irish Free State (1922), which later became the Irish Republic (1949), is a formal state institution that represents the culmination of centuries of struggle among diverse Irish nationalists against British colonial rule. Of course, the geographical and symbolic borders of the Irish nation remain contested, not only because of the partition of Northern Ireland but also because a narrow vision of a traditional rural Irish Catholic culture dominated representations of Irishness within and outside of Ireland for much of the twentieth century.

The history of black nationalism reveals a wide variety of approaches to the national question in both symbolic and material terms. Many black nationalist leaders have looked to the continent of Africa as a source of national identity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Paul Cuffee, Martin Delany, and Henry Turner sought to establish a black nation state by repatriation to Africa or relocation to Central America or Canada because they doubted that African American self-determination was possible in the United States. Opposition to such schemes—particularly among abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and

Albion Tourgee—held that African Americans were appropriately considered “natives” of the United States (McCartney 19).

Three areas of divergence emerged in twentieth-century black nationalist movements, from the Pan-African Congress associated with W. E. B. DuBois to Marcus Garvey’s African nationalism in the 1920s to the black nationalisms of the 1960s and 1970s. Philosophical and tactical disputes have involved, first, whether a separate nation is a prerequisite for African American self-determination; second, what is the proper geographical site or locus for a black nation; and third, whether a movement for black liberation ought to encompass U.S. racism, an interracial class analysis, and/or a global vantage point that expresses the reality of the African Diaspora as a “non-state nation” (Johnson 1998).

I acknowledge that profound differences in the historical experiences and the concepts of national identity have informed Irish and African American cultures. I nevertheless would make the case that reading Irish and African American film cultures in relation to one another helps to illuminate certain historical and representational questions that reading them as instances of a singular national or cultural tradition cannot. Certainly, I run the risk of perceptions that I am endorsing a notion of postcoloniality as “a universal constant,” and reinforcing a metropolitan focus on culture as a “free floating ambience” (Radhakrishnan 1996, 155–57).

Yet I am struck by the way these two cinemas elaborate the process of identifying with others as a mode of self-recognition and redefinition that may produce personal transformation and political change. These films focus on the dynamics of diaspora in an era in which Irish-ness and black-ness were increasingly seen as flexible rather than fixed identities. On the one hand, these ethnonational identities have often seemed to signify entrenched and dichotomous categories of white-ness and black-ness; on the other hand, during the period under discussion, Irish and African American identities became readily procurable through commodities, including music and fashion, which promoted what might be called identity tourism. I would argue that the breakthrough moment for these film traditions occurred during this period not only because of a confluence of resources and talent, but also because these cinemas address contemporary conflicts over essentialism, authenticity, realness, commodification, appropriation, and the preservation of traditional cultures.

To examine these film cultures singly would fail to address the larger cinematic and social implications of practices of identification. Those implications extend to the way global popular culture creates the

illusion of a public sphere, organized by communities of consumption, and, thus, reinforces the notion that identification is an efficacious political strategy. I address these issues throughout the book and return to them in the conclusion.

The outpouring of Irish and African American films after 1980 resonates with two earlier moments in history when Irish and black nationalist movements inspired, and were energized by, cultural production. Those moments were the Irish Literary Revival and the Harlem Renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century, and the civil rights protest era of the 1950s and 1960s. One major difference between these two earlier periods and the film boom after 1980 is that the emergence of these cinema cultures was not accompanied by revolutionary protest movements. One important question to consider, therefore, is the relationship between popular cinema and notions of the political: do these films endorse the idea that acts of identification stand in for (or are in themselves) acts of political solidarity? Do popular culture identifications, which may exploit the desire to consume images of otherness without any political investment or responsibility, become the preferred method for navigating the economic and political shifts of global capitalism?

Another important methodological issue raised by these film cultures concerns the concept of national cinema. To consider what it means to de-essentialize identity, it becomes necessary to break with certain traditions, such as a strict obeisance to the national cinema model. I depart from that tradition, which would consider Irish cinema in relation to British and European national cinemas and African American cinema in the context of U.S. cinema, because that framework circumscribes these cinema cultures within national borders. These films deconstruct that paradigm in both their production strategies and narrative concerns.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue for the importance of “[speak-
ing] of cultural/racial groups in relation, without ever suggesting their
positionings are identical” (6). To speak these two film cultures in relation
suggests that common, *not* identical, concerns permeate their contempo-
rary expressions. Those concerns involve the desire to destabilize essen-
tialist race, national, and gender identities and the often unexpected dif-
ficulties that process entails.

The proliferation of Irish and African American film production since 1980 bears examination in both historical and theoretical context. Although Shohat and Stam are interested in “dominant Europe’s histori-
cally oppressive relation to its internal and external ‘others’” (3), they refer

to Ireland only to mention Jonathan Swift's satire. They discuss African American film only in the context of Hollywood images. I would argue that there is a critical need for a thorough account of the emergence of quasi-national film cultures that circumvent national and commercial cinema models.

Despite these limitations, Shohat and Stam's work provides important theoretical ballast to this study. Their injunction against recreating binary structures establishes a point of reference for the way this book pairs these two cinemas without pursuing equalization:

Rather than recreating neat binarisms (Black/White, Native American/White) that ironically recenter Whiteness, while the "rest" who fit only awkwardly into such neat categories stand by as mere spectators, we try to address overlapping multiplicities of identity and affiliation. (6)

This book examines character identification in Irish and African American films because, I argue, it is through that device that African American and Irish filmmakers express their ideas about the "overlapping multiplicities of identity and affiliation" that undermine essentialist notions of identity.

AFRO-CELT CONNECTIONS: RACE AND NATION

A number of historical issues inform the dynamics of otherness and common gestures of identification that appear in the films under consideration. The interest in social and psychological alienation that pervades contemporary Irish and African American films derives from historical experiences of colonization, enslavement, and displacement.⁵ Political historian Brian Dooley notes that slavery "was the defining historical experience for Black Americans, but it also played a fundamental part in the development of early Ireland" (7).

England's colonization of Ireland and Europe's colonization of Africa rested upon and crystallized the notion of racial difference and produced surprisingly similar renditions of natives as savages, "missing links," and human chimpanzees.⁶ A particularly visual thrust dominates colonialist reportage, conveyed in letters, journals, engravings, paintings, and travel literature. By the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers employed numerous descriptions of Africans

as ape-like and “introduced a commonplace of early travel literature into a ‘scientific’ context” (Gilman 176).

Jan Pieterse, among others, has speculated that colonial relations between England and Ireland “pioneered and prefigured” the power relations between European colonizers and their non-European territories (32). Michael Hechter argues that racism “came to full flower” in the British Isles as a system of differentiation of Anglo-Saxons and Celts (xvii). L. Perry Curtis demonstrates that Victorian-era political cartoons published in Britain’s *Punch* magazine frequently visualized the Irish Celt in the primitive, simian mode used to depict Africans. In 1862, *Punch* suggested the Irish were the “missing link” between apes and Africans, a status previously attributed to the “Hottentot” (Khoi-Khoi) by Bory St. Vincent.⁷ British Ethnologist John Beddoe’s “Index of Nigrescence” grouped people who lived on the West Coast of Ireland and all Africans in the “Black” category.⁸ Victorian novelist Charles Kingsley famously wrote to his wife about the “white chimpanzees” he saw in visits to Ireland.⁹

Racial classification, a system for differentiating groups of people in ontological terms, underpins the idea of nationality through these oppositions of civilized/savage, colonizer/native, and insider/outsider. According to Pieterse:

These comparisons, in England between Irish people and Africans, and in the United States between the Irish and Blacks, were made under the heading of race, but this only serves as a reminder that, until fairly recently, the terms ‘race’ and ‘nation’ (or ‘people’) were synonymous. (214–15)

Liam O’Dowd has argued that the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalisms obscures the ethnic basis, and bias, of civic nationalism itself and “fails to register the process of ethnic domination and hierarchization central to constructing nation states” (177). Thus, even civic nationalism distinguishes citizens from foreigners and establishes categories of internal otherness based upon ethnic and racial identities.

Countermovements may challenge those hierarchies but adopt the same basic logic. Irish Catholics’ demands for full citizenship in Northern Ireland, and African Americans’ struggles for civil rights may reject racist hierarchies, but might not necessarily reject ethnic essentialism. Ethnic essentialism—“a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (Fuss

xii–xii)—may be politically efficacious but may also simply reverse the terms of colonialist and nationalist hierarchies, leaving assumptions about the static character of identity and a binary construction of “us versus them” intact.

To counter racial hierarchies, and the economic oppression and social exclusion they foment, black and Irish nationalist movements have not only adopted similar strategies of ethnic nationalism but have also forged a historical affinity that George Bornstein has dubbed the Afro-Celt connection.¹⁰ This connection dates back to the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement in the United States and the Catholic emancipation movement in Ireland.¹¹

The “Great Liberator,” Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847) fueled his movement for Catholic emancipation with oratorical attacks on slavery. In speeches delivered in Ireland and the United States, he frequently compared the plight of Irish Catholic peasants to that of African American slaves. O’Connell’s rhetoric and civil disobedience campaigns resonated among American abolitionists intent upon liberating enslaved African Americans. Whereas O’Connell’s program inspired American abolitionists, many in Ireland were moved by Frederick Douglass’s experiences (Dooley 10). Douglass (1818–1895) traveled to Ireland in the early famine years of 1845–1846, appearing at meetings of the Repeal Association (which promoted the repeal of the 1800 Act of Union with Britain) and the Belfast Anti-Slavery Society.¹² After being presented with a Bible by the Belfast society, Douglass stated “whenever I feel myself to be a stranger, I will remember I have a home in Belfast” (10) and thanked his audience for its interest in “the cause of the wronged and oppressed slaves in America” (10). English and Irish friends raised money that Douglass used to purchase his freedom and to buy a printing press upon which he published the *North Star*, an abolitionist paper.

Connections between Irish and African American political leaders persisted well into the twentieth century. In the early part of the century, notions of a complete secession from dominant culture gained popular appeal among African Americans. Marcus Garvey, who agitated for the creation of an independent black state in Africa, and Eamon de Valera, an Irish Republican leader during Ireland’s war for Independence (and later the President of the Republic), shared visions of and strategies for independence. U.S. military intelligence linked Garvey and the Irish-American Friends of Irish Freedom. In 1921, when Garvey was elected provisional president of an African empire at the Universal Negro

Improvement Association (UNIA) conference, he publicly recognized de Valera as the president of the newly formed Irish Free State at a time when Britain and the United States had not officially done so.¹³

Within the United States, however, relations between Irish immigrants and African Americans generally departed from this relationship of mutuality among political leaders. Labor historians such as Theodore Allen, David Roediger, and Noel Ignatiev have documented tensions between African American and Irish laborers in U.S. cities in the North, which, at the turn of the century, witnessed the conjunction of post-famine migrations from Ireland and the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South. Noel Ignatiev emphasizes that experiences of racialization for the Irish and for African Americans were in many ways similar, but he points out that Irish immigrants, who were initially disenfranchised socially and economically on the basis of a non-white racial designation, “earned” whiteness by constructing themselves in opposition to African Americans, with whom they competed for jobs. Thus, despite the rhetoric of solidarity emanating from some political leaders, in the competitive economic circumstances of the labor market, and in a society circumscribed by the color line, potential affinities gave way to hostilities.

In the cultural arena, Irish and African American artists and activists at the turn of the last century sought to reclaim and valorize what had been designated “primitive” within colonialist representations. In many instances, literary production was marshaled in the service of political efforts to authenticate and validate racial otherness, whether Celtic or African. In late nineteenth-century Ireland, Irish nationalism underwrote the aesthetic rebirth of the Literary Revival. In the United States, the Harlem Renaissance coincided with and fueled political organizing and protest associated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), including protests of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* in 1914–1915, the Chicago race riots of 1919, and the development of Garvey’s UNIA, which reflected the heightened political consciousness of many African Americans during and after World War I.

Mid-century civil rights movements brought the common struggles of African Americans and Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland into the public eye. Brian Dooley, among others, makes a convincing case that the nonviolent tactics and rhetoric of the black Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s inspired the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement

of the 1960s. These nonviolent protest movements sought to eliminate discrimination in education, voting, housing, and employment and to affirm the citizenship rights and humanity of African Americans and Irish Catholics.¹⁴ Dooley writes that crosscultural influences between African Americans and Irish Catholics have largely been “underplayed” in historical accounts of the civil rights movements (3). Examples include the link between women’s organizing in Birmingham, Alabama, which provided an impetus to widespread activism. The model of the Women’s Political Council (which began in Birmingham in 1946) was repeated in Dunganon, Northern Ireland, where women formed the Homeless Citizens League in 1963.

Afro-Celt affinities have persisted in political organizing and in popular culture. During the 1970s, imprisoned IRA members’ favored reading materials were books on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A decade later, Irish rock band U2’s songs “Pride (In the Name of Love)” (1984) and “Angel of Harlem” (1988) paid tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Billie Holiday, respectively. Black activist and intellectual Angela Davis, whom Irish activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey visited in prison in 1969, spoke out in 1997 on behalf of Devlin McAliskey’s daughter’s release from a London prison.

Literary scholars have documented the Afro-Celt connection in twentieth-century poetry and prose. Tim McLoughlin has explicated the connections between Irish and Zimbabwean settler fiction, whereas Joshua Esty has established the importance of the satirical scatology of Jonathan Swift, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett to the post-independence novels of Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah and their aesthetic of “excremental postcolonialism” (25). Laura Severin has argued that the work of late twentieth-century Scottish women poets such as Liz Lochhead, Valerie Gillies, Jackie Kay, and Carol Ann Duffy reflects the influence of the African American musical tradition, and, particularly, its critique of essentialist and masculinist notions of identity.

The dialogue between Irish and African American cultures was evident in 1990s popular culture in works such *Riverdance, the Show* (1994), where an encounter between Irish immigrants and African American tap dancers on the docks of New York culminates in a duel of footwork. The dancers mock one another’s peculiarities of style and training, drawing attention to the contrast between the rigid and unmoving arms of the Irish and the loose limbs of the African American dancers, yet also challenging one another to deliver virtuoso performances. In the film *The*

Nephew (Eugene Brady 1998), a young African American man visits Ireland to meet the family of his dead Irish mother. The fifth installment of the Leprechaun horror franchise, entitled *Leprechaun V: In the Hood* (Rob Spera 2000), stages an encounter between an evil Leprechaun and hip-hop culture. Irish director Jim Sheridan's autobiographical film *In America* (2002) depicts an Irish immigrant family that develops a bond with a Nigerian artist in New York; his *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2005) is the story of an African American drug dealer who wants to become a rap artist (the lead role is played by rapper 50 Cent). The music of the Afro Celts, the band that scored Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002) and Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), combines *uilleann* pipes and talking drums.

These popular culture collisions and collusions reconsider the supposed incommensurability of Irishness—a cultural identity that often morphs into an emblem of white-ness itself—and black-ness. In an essay on the representation of Irishness as innocence in American culture after September 11, Diana Negra discusses a comic scene in *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (McG 2003) that juxtaposes Irish-ness and black-ness. Bernie Mac, using a fake driver's license that bears the name Paddy O'Malley, defends his identity as “Black Irish”: the people who invented the McRib and Lucky Charms. Negra is correct in stating that the scene implies the “omnifarious nature of Irishness” (2004 54). Yet the joke also turns on two additional assumptions: that Irish-ness is as white as it gets and that black-ness is impervious to nationality or ethnicity. The unlikely combination of seemingly polar opposites underwrites the humor of Bernie Mac's attempts to “dilute” his black-ness with a presumed white Irish-ness.

Ranging from the profound to the prosaic, these moments of cultural juxtaposition represent attempts to breach the divide between white-ness and black-ness. Clearly, all identities are being renegotiated under the auspices of global capitalism and its commodification and branding of cultural identities as lifestyles. Ironically, it is often through projects aimed at cultural reclamation, such as *Riverdance* or *Stomp*, that Irish-ness and black-ness have been transformed into living brands to which anyone can gain access by patronizing the local Irish pub or busting the latest moves of a hip-hop star.

Whereas Irish and black cultural nationalist movements of the early twentieth century shared key features, as Tracy Mishkin's *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances* argues, and the civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s renewed this connection, as Brian Dooley suggests, this book describes a

third conjunction of cultures based on the creative response to a disintegration of national constructs. Mishkin argues that a major focus of the Irish and Harlem renaissances was an attempt to “mitigate the effects of what Paolo Freire calls ‘cultural invasion’ by investing their languages and/or dialects with dignity” (47) and to create “positive depictions in the arts” (87). The importance of folk culture and dialect is apparent in works by Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Yeats, John Millington Synge, and James Joyce, though not all of these artists saw their work as supporting a nationalist cause.

Early twentieth-century renaissances were concerned with the discovery and preservation of “authentic” Irish and black folk cultures. By contrast, late twentieth-century Irish and African American films stage an encounter between essentialist authenticity and the unfixing of identities. In the films under consideration, defying colonialist stereotypes by reclaiming and celebrating an authentic national identity gives way to expressions of hybridity and disarticulations of self.

WHY NOW? AFRICAN AMERICAN AND IRISH FILM

It’s appropriate to ask why Irish and African American cinemas emerged as popular forms during the late 1980s, after almost a century of filmmaking. Economic factors as well as popular tastes explain this turning point. The timing of these film renaissances coincided not only with the rise of several individual directors, including Neil Jordan, Jim Sheridan, Spike Lee, and John Singleton but also with the development of audiences with a heightened interest in diverse representations of otherness. Against the backdrop of blockbuster franchises such as *Alien*, *Terminator*, *Rambo*, and *Die Hard*, low-budget independent films became profitable vehicles, and studios eagerly pursued profit-making opportunities in the wake of the success of films such as *sex, lies, and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh 1989), *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee 1993), *Boyz N the Hood*, and *The Crying Game*.

Historically, two concerns have dominated Irish and African American filmmaking: a desire to resist dominant cinema’s misrepresentations, and an interest in the development of a commercial industry to benefit, and employ, Irish and African American people. The prominence of both cultural and economic issues suggests that these cinemas might be best considered within the national cinema paradigm.

Certain historical aspects of Irish and African American film validate that perspective. An editorial published in *The Irish Times* as early as 1922 suggested that Irish cinema might develop along the lines of the “native dramatic movement,” a cultural enterprise that contributed directly to the Irish nationalist movement (qtd. in Slide 22). The Republic of Ireland’s attempts to develop a commercial film culture highlight the problems inherent in creating a cinema to function as both a mode of cultural expression and an economic growth industry.

Indigenous Irish cinema has been encouraged and hampered by the Irish Republic’s adoption of a national cinema model and its emphasis on cinema as a commercial enterprise. The government-subsidized Ardmore Studios (established in 1958), the Irish Film Finance Corporation (IFFC), and the Irish Film Board have primarily served established directors from outside Ireland rather than supporting indigenous filmmaking. Brian McIlroy reports that most of the fifty-six films made between 1958 and 1976 at Ardmore were produced and directed by foreigners (20). Since the early 1980s, the Irish Film Board has provided funds to Irish filmmakers, but, as Terry Byrne writes, “it is still necessary for an Irish director to find a measure of success in the foreign market before being regarded as a good risk for funding by the home government” (191). In other words, international success is the most important criterion for national government support.

The fact that so many Irish films are cofinanced and coproduced within the European Union complicates the notion that Irish Cinema functions as a national cinema. Producing Irish films remains dependent upon externally acquired finance. Films such as *The Disappearance of Finbar* (discussed in chapter 5) and *December Bride* (chapter 3) were financed by consortia that included Irish, British, and Danish sources. So, to define a film as an Irish film in terms of production or narrative content becomes inordinately complex. In fact, some scholars emphasize the potential for formerly marginal filmmaking traditions to unsettle the nation-based model of the European art cinema. John Caughie has argued that ‘other’ Europeans (including the Scots and Irish, emergent states of Eastern Europe, and immigrants from former colonies), not American cinematic neocolonialism, pose the greatest threat to the notion of a European identity.¹⁵

African American filmmaking also has embodied the concerns commonly associated with a national cinema, including the desire to define an African American culture and worldview and to sustain a viable industry

that trains and employs African Americans. From the earliest years of black American filmmaking, segregation and discrimination ensured that African American cinema would develop outside the Hollywood industry. In the 1920s, Oscar Michaux's *Within Our Gates* (1919) responded to D. W. Griffith's Klan epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), while Noble and George Johnson founded the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, whose goal was to depict "the negro as he is in his every day life" (Cripps 1993 50).

K. Maurice Jones has compiled a list that offers evidence of changes that occurred within African American film around 1980 (Jones 136). Jones writes that twenty-five major films were made by African American directors in the fifty-five years between 1925 and 1980, whereas thirty-eight were made in the fifteen years between 1980 and 1995. The discrepancy indicates the persistence of the black independent film tradition and points to its explosion after 1980, more than a decade after Hollywood began to deal with race through the social problem films of the 1960s.

Black American cinema's link to domestic protest politics became apparent during the 1970s Blaxploitation cycle in films by Ossie Davis (*Cotton Comes to Harlem* 1970), Melvin van Peebles (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* 1971), and by white directors like Larry Cohen (*Black Caesar* 1975). These wildly popular films express a politicized violence practiced by outlaw heroes. Politically incendiary and commercially successful, their formula was taken up and repeated by the industry. It's no coincidence that contemporary black films such as *Posse* and *Menace II Society* hearken back to those vivid and provocative representations that brought African American antiheroes the screen.

However, as Clyde Taylor points out, African American films produced after 1980 must be situated within a different political climate: one that witnessed a "backlash against black empowerment" (187). The ability to forward black nationalist claims was compromised, partly, Adolph Reed contends, because the electoral politics that replaced movement politics was not based on racial exclusivity.

Because black power activism's sole category was race, radicals were generally unprepared to respond when the new, mainstream, black political elite gained momentum in the late 1960s . . . (204)

The idea that racial identity defined a political identity was called into question, and this factor contributed to the development of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition in the 1980s.

African American popular culture also began to challenge the idea of an immutable, authentic black identity as well. Tricia Rose describes hip-hop culture, perhaps the most important black aesthetic expression to emerge in recent years, as the mesh of “Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American musical, oral, visual, and dance forms” and situates its development in the environment of post-industrial urban America (23). The broad and inclusive vision of films like *Daughters of the Dust*, *Posse*, and the equal opportunity comedy *Undercover Brother* (Malcolm Lee and Gregory Dark 2002) emphasize the importance of reclaiming African American histories while also looking at the complexity and constructedness of racial designations in both historical and contemporary terms.

Although they carry the vestiges of the traditional national cinema paradigm, I would argue that Irish and African American cinemas are best discussed in light of views forwarded by Robert Burgoyne and Susan Hayward that link the concept of a national cinema to the interrogation of national identity. Burgoyne defines Hollywood as a national cinema because it “unambiguously articulates an imaginary field in which the figures of national identification are deployed and projected” (6). In other words, Hollywood activates cinema’s powerful capacity for promoting identification in the service of nationalist ideology.

Hayward argues that the national cinema model is a problematic framework because the fiction of the nation no longer holds. One important reason to reconsider the concept of national cinema, she argues, is that the “internal” diversity of nations has come to be increasingly recognized. Citing radical changes instigated by the social movements of the 1960s, Hayward argues that recent popular culture texts “undermine the strict borders that nationalisms police” (95). As a result, “identity co-existing with difference(s) has become a reality—the very thing that nationalisms seek to deny” (95).

In their emphasis on character identification, recent Irish and African American films deconstruct those borders that nationalisms police. They address the “internal” diversity of both individuals and national formations, making reference to the perpetual dislocations of colonialism and racism. They speak to the affinities among people within the “third space” of Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial diasporas and the traveling cultures theorized by James Clifford who experience “intercultural positionality” (Gilroy 1993 6). In recent Irish and African American films, intercultural positions are explored through acts of character identification enabled by a model of identity as performance.

IDENTITY AS PERFORMANCE

Recent Irish and African American films re-evaluate race, gender, and nation in light of the fluid notions of self that emerged during the last two decades. That debate has been carried out in critical theory and cultural studies as well as in visual culture. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the gender system is not merely a social construct to be obeyed but a series of repeated gestures or performances that can be both enacted and resisted. Richard Dyer's work on whiteness, as well as that of Diane Negra and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, reveals the way that ethnicities are performed and reproduced through films texts, star personas, and promotional materials.

The idea that identities are performances challenges notions of individual and cultural authenticity that defined an earlier era. Irish cultural critic Fintan O'Toole sees the now-canonized literature of the Irish Literary Revival as permeated by a defensive posture that fostered a "counter-myth of national purity" and produced the "true Irish Gaelic peasant." (1997 28). He further argues that the Irish often make strategic choices around their ambiguous racial identity—"black or white or anything in between" (1997 25)—through playful identifications with Indians and African Americans. Richard Kearney suggests that these multiple identifications are "far more inclusive than the ethnic nation-state in that [they embrace] the exiled along with the indigenous [. . .] not only different Irish peoples but [. . .] different racial confections as well" (1988 5).

In a critique that resonates with that of O'Toole, Phillip Brian Harper considers appeals to black authenticity problematic. Harper sees unavoidable contradictions in African American investments in African identities:

However much U.S. blacks might want to underscore our identification with "Africa" (a concept whose highly problematic character I leave almost entirely aside in this analysis), it seems likely that the widespread adoption of *African American* bespeaks much more loudly our peculiarly—and *narrowly*—"American" disposition. (73)

Harper goes on to question the masculinist character of black authenticity and the "conformist demands the concept implies"(ix). Manthia Diawara also offers a vigorous critique of the way Africa becomes conflated with authenticity. Diawara disparages contemporary Afrocentrism

as “Afro-kitsch,” an “imitation of the discourse of liberation” that fixes the meaning of blackness rather than deploying blackness as performance (1999 181). Diawara calls for a “modernist meta-discourse” that would

[focus] on such zones of ambivalence as identity formation, sexual politics [. . .] and attempt to prevent [blackness] from falling into the same essentialist trap as whiteness. (1999 181)

Contemporary Irish and African American cinemas focus precisely on Diawara’s zones of ambivalence. They do so, I would argue, as a reflection of the postmodern belief in both the possibility and desirability of subjects divesting themselves of limiting identity positions. In getting out of themselves, in revealing their multiple identifications, characters attempt to resist the limitations of identity politics. Their successes and failures, in psychological and political terms, mark the possibilities and limitations of the paradigm of identity as performance.

THE THEATER OF POPULAR DESIRES

It is a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.

—Stuart Hall, “*What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?*”

[Irish culture] is demolishing the colonial opposition of Self and Other and re-inventing the ideal of the Self as Other . . . the foreign native, the white black, the civilized barbarian. It is enjoying the benefits of a long history of being on the borders of two worlds and turning its dread status of being neither one thing nor the other into the playful pleasures of being both and neither.

—Fintan O’Toole, “Going Native”

Stuart Hall and Fintan O’Toole view acts of identification as gestures of playful transcendence and of deadly seriousness. But are they also political? Diana Fuss claims that the very notion of identification has a specific,

colonial history. Freud's psychoanalytic concept of identification was developed "within the larger cultural context of colonial expansion and imperial crisis" (1999 295). Moreover, she argues, Frantz Fanon's founding premise is that politics are embedded within psychic structures. "What Fanon gives us, in the end," she concludes, "is a politics that does not oppose the psychical, but fundamentally presupposes it" (1999 322). Thus, the idea that one can transgress the boundaries of individuation, to inhabit, occupy, empathize with, perform, or introject another carries with it the traces of the colonialist imagination.

Performance theorist Elin Diamond also views identification as political, arguing, "because it bridges the psychic and the social, identification has political effects" (391). Diamond goes on to claim, "the wholeness and consistency of identity, is transgressed by every act of identification" (396). If, as Fuss and Diamond argue, political circumstances shape and are shaped by identification practices, then transgressing the boundaries of the self is not necessarily liberatory. To analyze the political character of identification, Diamond's acts of destabilization and transgression must be situated historically.¹⁶

One way to historicize spectator identification would be to document actual audience practices. Recent cultural studies work that challenges psychoanalytic concepts of identification examines the ways that spectators insert or project themselves into films, or resist such temptations. Stuart Hall's taxonomy of official, negotiated, and oppositional reading strategies and the work of Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, and Jacqueline Bobo all highlight the ability of spectators to engage with and disengage from characters and texts.¹⁷ This body of work debunks the notion—deriving from the Frankfurt School and film apparatus theory—of mass culture as a purveyor of false consciousness and film identification as evidence of the medium's internal colonization of the spectator.

Another way to historicize processes of identification is to analyze the way they function within film texts. In this method, identification, as part of the film's story and discourse, becomes one aspect of the "cultural gaze." Kaja Silverman defines the cultural gaze as "the cultural constructedness of the images through which the subject assumes a visual identity" (19). In their explicit focus on character identification, recent Irish and African American films suggest that one important aspect of the contemporary cultural gaze is the belief in one's ability to relinquish the self and perform other identities. They also emphasize the way image consumption assists in the self-conscious practice of donning and doffing identities.

In exploring identification, many film theorists focus on the relationship between the spectator and the camera, which Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz termed *primary identification*. Apparatus theories divorce spectators from the complications of narrative and character, however, in their emphasis on the viewer's identification with the camera and their neglect of *secondary identification* (between viewer and character) and, especially, *tertiary identification* (among characters on screen). I would argue that tertiary identification—the relationships expressed between and among on-screen characters—represents an important site for examining notions of postmodern subjectivity. Characters' acts of identification reflect contemporary beliefs about the politics and poetics of identity.

Unlike psychoanalytic critics such as Metz and Silverman, I do not focus on the the spectator's unconscious as the privileged site for acts of identification.¹⁸ Instead, I examine narrative structures as well as visual and aural strategies that enable the expression of character intersubjectivity. Certainly, films with an emphasis on character identification may affect spectators at the unconscious level. It's also likely that the point-of-view structures that convey character identification draw upon the spectator's primary and secondary identification with the camera and characters. But my interest lies in the textual representation of characters who get outside themselves in order to engage with others and with otherness, and the implications of those acts. Do characters who apprehend their own experience through/as others become politically empowered and/or psychically entangled by their identifications?

Silverman insists that cinema's "identificatory lure [. . .] represents the potential vehicle for a spectator self-estrangement" (65), which may lead to a process of self-redefinition. Identification forces the viewer into a previously unimaginable subject position, which Silverman terms "heteropathic identification." Such identification

is the privileged mechanism whereby the spectator can be not only integrated into a new social collectivity, but also induced to occupy a subject-position which is antithetical to his or her psychic formation (i.e., to his or her self). (91)

Heteropathic identification has the potential to counter essentialism by recognizing the possibility of occupying different subject positions. In my focus on character identification, I displace the locus of this transaction

from the psyche of the spectator to the screen. Rather than focusing on the spectator's unconscious processes, I suggest the way characters identify within the context of the narrative might present to audiences on a conscious level the idea that such heteropathic identifications are desirable, valuable, or, perhaps, unavoidable.

Despite my focus on character identification, I find Kaja Silverman's argument that the body plays a central role in maintaining a culture's existing categories of identity compelling (92). She repeatedly emphasizes the relation between the body and identification, variously referred to as "alter[ing] the terms of bodily reference"(89); a "deliteralization of the spectator's body" (89); "the cinema's propensity for carrying away the spectator" (89); and "spectatorial abduction" (89). I use these ideas to explore acts of character identification.

In the chapters that follow, I analyze the way that Irish and African American films alter certain terms of bodily reference as their characters suspend themselves, identify with others, and perform other identities. Chapter 2 examines the way jazz and other musical performances enable heteropathic identification in the films of Neil Jordan and Spike Lee, two prominent *auteurs* of Irish and African American cinema. Chapter 3 focuses on the fascination with the pregnant female body in numerous Irish and African American "women's films." These films foreground pregnancy not only to critique gender essentialism but also to expose its connections to racial and national identity. Chapter 4 addresses the role that masculine identification plays in the reproduction of violence in contemporary Irish and African American gangster films. Chapter 5 considers the way contemporary Irish and African American films revise archetypes of individual and national identities produced by the quintessential colonialist narrative: the Western.

Character identification in these films is not necessarily politically progressive, enabling acts of solidarity or intervention, nor is it consistently regressive, prompting withdrawal from politics or the embrace of traditional structures of identity.¹⁹ Nor are acts of identification free of eroticizing, appropriating, and fetishizing others and otherness. These films enact the pleasures and confusions associated with the fading efficacy of old paradigms for individual and communal identities and the dearth of new models of affinity.