



Irish and African American CINEMA

Identifying Others and Performing Identities, 1980–2000



Maria Pramaggiore

**IRISH AND
AFRICAN AMERICAN
CINEMA**

T H E **S U N Y** S E R I E S

CULTURAL STUDIES IN CINEMA/VIDEO

WHEELER WINSTON DIXON | EDITOR

IRISH AND
AFRICAN AMERICAN
CINEMA



*Identifying Others
and Performing Identities,
1980–2000*

MARIA PRAMAGGIORE

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INTRODUCTION



The danger is in the neatness of identifications.

—Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta*

Taking its cue from Samuel Beckett, this book examines the disorderly identifications of screen characters in twenty-five Irish and African American films made between 1980 and 2000. In these films, character identification functions as a politically charged act that ruptures the boundary between self and other. These moments when characters suspend themselves and explore what it means to be an other are linked to experiences of social disenfranchisement and psychological self-estrangement.

As screen characters explore otherness, they explicitly question paradigms of identity founded upon exclusion and hierarchy. In contemporary African American and Irish films, these paradigms are associated with colonialist and racist power dynamics that are based on essentialist notions of identity. Yet the same essentialist frameworks are shown to underlie anti-colonial nationalisms that can mirror the colonizer-native binary and merely reverse its terms. Thus, in these films, acts of identification reflect a profound skepticism toward monolithic identities and emphasize the diversity that disrupts national, racial, and gender identities. They also reveal an interest in exploring Irishness and blackness as performances rather than ontological imperatives.

The porous sense of self that these films depict is a cinematic counterpart to W. E. B. DuBois's potent concept of double consciousness, an epistemological standpoint from which the self is perceived as subject and

object that is derived from experiences of racialization and internal colonization. Irish and African American histories and experiences of colonization differ in critically important ways. To study these two contemporary film cultures alongside one another is neither to compare nor to equate those histories. Instead, I consider these emerging cinemas of the 1980s and 1990s in terms of their common metaphor for addressing the dilemma of postmodern but not-yet-postcolonial identities. What this book proposes is that, during the 1980s and 1990s, a common interest in rejecting lingering colonial stereotypes, and the rigid racial, gender, and national identities that inform them, was expressed in Irish and African American cinemas through an emphasis on character identification. The films posit that acts of identification offer a means of moving beyond the terminology of *self* and *other* to explore the constructed, relational, and performative aspects of identity.

The films I examine are not radical countercinema manifestos but conventional narrative films addressed to general audiences. In fact, many of them are Irish and African American “themed” films that represent the mainstreaming of indigenous Irish and black independent film traditions. In terms of their production histories and their textual address, the films embody contradictory desires to create distinctive Irish and African American visual cultures, to counter lingering colonialist stereotypes, and to stage an encounter between essentialist and postmodern concepts of identity. Those desires are expressed through characters who identify with others across boundaries of race, gender, class, and nation and discover new ways of defining self, other, and self as other.

The popular yet political character of these films reflects the material circumstances of filmmaking outside Hollywood in the late twentieth century. Government subsidies, the Eurimages Fund, television and cable networks, and private investors funded low-budget African American and Irish films such as *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash 1990) and *The Disappearance of Finbar* (Clayton 1996). Others, such as *In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan 1993) and *He Got Game* (Lee 1998), were co-financed and distributed by major studios: the former was a collaboration between Sheridan’s Hell’s Kitchen Films and Universal, and the latter was a joint project of Lee’s production company, 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks, and Touchstone pictures, a division of Disney. Despite their somewhat marginal status within an industry increasingly dominated by Hollywood conglomerates, these cinemas garnered international recognition during

the 1980s and 1990s. This attention was partly the result of the prominence of several directors, including Neil Jordan, Spike Lee, Jim Sheridan, and John Singleton.¹

The emergence of these quasi-national cinemas might seem paradoxical, given the period in question: two decades during which the stability of national designations and the fixity of racial identities were increasingly called into question. During the 1980s and 1990s, a number of events and trends seemed to confirm the nation-state's demise as an economic, cultural, and political entity. Those events included the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the movement toward freer trade, and the increasing importance of international capital flows. Ethnic nationalism as a model of political organization was discredited, not only amidst the "ethnic cleansing" of the Balkan wars and genocide in Africa, but also as a result of the growing recognition of the implications of migrant, refugee, and diaspora cultures. In critical discourses, Benedict Anderson's influential notion of the "imagined community" defined the nation as a powerful yet fictional construct.² Within film studies, research on national cinemas shifted from the analysis of film industries to the textual representation of nationality. In fact, several recent studies have defined national cinemas in terms of their engagement with the concept of national identity.³

The historical emergence of Irish and African American cinemas at a time when events and critical discourses alike forced a reconsideration of totalizing national narratives partly explains the films' focus on deconstructing identity. A desire to address dominant misrepresentations of internal others—that is, the project of cultural decolonization—explains the intense focus on the dynamics of identification in these films.

Between 1980 and 2000, Irish and African American films embedded postmodern debates about identity within popular narrative cinema by focusing on modes of identification: acts through which characters temporarily relinquish the notion of a permanent, coherent self. These gestures reveal both a desire to move beyond the understanding of identity as a fixed essence *and* the difficulty of renouncing traditional, ontological notions of national, gender, and racial identity. Focusing on character identification speaks to the way identities are constructed through acts of exclusion and may be deconstructed through equally unsettling practices of appropriation, incorporation, and mimicry.

NONESSENTIALIST IDENTIFICATION: TWO EXAMPLES

Two examples help to illuminate my argument that identification expresses the tension between traditional and postmodern concepts of identity in recent Irish and African American films. In Alan Parker's *The Commitments* (1991), based on the exuberant novel by Roddy Doyle, Jimmy Rabbitte, a James Brown devotee and working-class hero, manages a band of disenfranchised Dubliners.⁴ He convinces the band, called The Commitments, that the time is ripe for music that expresses "sex an' politics . . . [r]eal sex" (12). Adhering to the adage that one should write about what one knows, Jimmy tells the lads to look to their working-class background as a source of their own culturally distinctive sound:

—Your music should be abou' where you're from an' the sort o' people yeh come from—Say it once, say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud.

They looked at him.

—James Brown. Did yis know—never mind. He sang tha'.—An' he made a fuckin' bomb.

They were stunned by what came next.

—The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads.

They nearly gasped: it was so true.

—An' Dubliners are the niggers of Ireland. The culchies have fuckin' everythin'. An' the northside Dubliners are the niggers o' Dublin.—Say it loud, I'm Black an' I'm proud. (13)

Jimmy expresses his working class culture—an identity he distinguishes from the culchies, the middle class city-dwellers who migrated to Dublin from the countryside—by identifying with African American music. This crosscultural identification astonishes the band members, yet rings "so true." Jimmy's vernacular reflects the author's interest in the oral and poetic capacities of language; this emphasis on oral performativity reappears in the form of numerous musical performances in the film.⁵

Jimmy's cohorts express their social alienation by performing music. They appropriate, but also translate, African American soul music, an emotionally expressive art form associated with resistance to racism.⁶ They attempt to make the music their own by citing the linguistic effects of

English colonialism in Ireland and, specifically, the loss of the native tongue and the renaming of Irish cities and towns. During the band's first gig, singer Deco reroutes the "Night Train" by substituting stops on the Dublin DART train's northern line for U.S. cities, reclaiming Irish place-names while at the same time de-territorializing urban spaces.

The band's appropriation of soul music reveals a complicated, even paradoxical, view of race. Emphasizing the liberating effects of performing soul music, band philosopher Joey the Lips claims, "soul has no skin color" (44). Yet, in Joey's mind, other forms of music do. Charlie Parker "had no right to his Black skin," according to Joey, because he played jazz, an overly intellectual and individualistic form (108). Joey refers to his bandmates as "Brother" and "Sister," telling them: "Soul isn't words . . . Soul is feeling. Soul is getting out of yourself" (53). In his desire to get out of himself, Joey essentializes soul music as authentically black, despite his statement that it has no skin color. Joey might well be accused of being an agent of love and theft, the formula Eric Lott uses to characterize the racial dynamics of minstrelsy.⁷

The film's unconventional narrative structure underscores Joey's desire for transcendence through performance. The emotional intensity of the episodic musical performances subverts the narrative's forward movement. The emphasis on musical spectacle draws attention to precisely those moments when characters get outside themselves. Through soul music, members of The Commitments express the way their class position undermines their sense of national belonging yet also connects them with "the people" everywhere. The band advertises itself to a global audience, with a strong emphasis on its working-class appeal: "The Hardest Working Band in the World . . . Bringing the People's Music to the People" (73).

The hardworking members of the Commitments are actually out-of-work Irish youth who, like the poet Seamus Heaney's "Tollund Man," are "lost, unhappy and at home."⁸ In Ireland, they go virtually unrecognized except in terms of stereotypes. Jimmy is approached by a local record producer, whose record label is called Eejit, a kitschy bastardization of the Irish pronunciation of "idiot." The producer is happy to learn that band members are on the dole because his company is subsidized by the Department of Labor, which approves of him signing the unemployed band members. The members of the Commitments attempt to both articulate and transcend their dire local situation by becoming a global band of "Celtic soul brothers."⁹

After the band breaks up, Jimmy encourages several former members to form a country-punk band. He plays them the music of The Byrds, once again encouraging the band to think of musical performance as a locus of cultural self-definition:

—Joey said when he left tha' he didn't think soul was righ' for Ireland. This stuff is though. You've got to remember tha' half the country is fuckin' farmers. This is the type of stuff they all listen to. (139)

Jimmy's admonitions reinforce the idea that their music must somehow bear a specifically Irish resonance: it must combine the foreign and the familiar, in the terminology of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. Once again, the musicians move outside themselves in order to re-situate themselves at home. In the shift from urban soul to country rock, the rejuvenated band acknowledges the internal diversity of the Irish nation by considering the rural dimensions of Irish experience.¹⁰ They continue to use music and performances to complicate what they understand to be an all-too-simplistic notion of national identity.

Jimmy and Joey use the disembodied potential of music to recast the meaning of Irishness. They do so in response to contemporary social and economic dislocations that challenge their traditional notions of working-class Irishness. In the period under discussion, such disruptions include the erosion of the Catholic Church's cultural power; the continuing pattern of emigration for jobs abroad; the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger 1990s; the increasing rate of internal migration to Dublin; widening income disparities; and the numerous repercussions of Ireland's membership in the European Union. As part of an international renegotiation of Irish identities—of which the ubiquitous Irish pub and *Riverdance: The Show* are obvious examples—films like *The Commitments* explore Irishness through characters who identify with and perform otherness.

The central question of this book is to what extent, and in what ways, characters like Jimmy and Joey identify with others, get out of themselves, and, in so doing, explore the constructed nature of all identities. An example from recent African American cinema illustrates the way acts of character identification self-consciously acknowledge the way African American identities, like the Irish identities of the *Commitments*, are mediated through popular culture.

In Albert and Allen Hughes' *Menace II Society* (1993), practices of identification establish the young African American protagonist as a quin-

tesessential American antihero. In *Menace*, several characters look to, identify with, and emulate Hollywood figures. In doing so, they reveal the way popular culture representations help to construct African American identities, with important political implications.

The film's protagonist is Kaydee "Caine" Lawson (Tyron Turner), whose nickname suggests his fractured identity. The name resonates with the biblical fratricide Cain, the white patriarch of American cinema, Charles Foster Kane, and Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer's *Cane*.¹¹ Caine's story is familiar, particularly when read within the context of the "New Black City" film.¹² The South Central Los Angeles setting and first-person narration connect the film to both the "new ghetto aesthetic" and to classic gangster films of the 1930s.¹³ Caine grows up in South Central, becomes involved in gang violence and crime, and becomes a successful cocaine dealer (yet another "caine"). Ultimately, Caine fulfills the "live by the sword/die by the sword" worldview the ghetto cycle inherits from its gangster film ancestors. He dies in a drive-by shooting instigated by a young man who seeks revenge.

At a critical turning point early in the film, Caine engages in an identification that crystallizes his persona as a gangster. Waiting in a hospital room after he has been treated for a gunshot wound, Caine watches *He Walked by Night* (Alfred Werker 1948). This act of televisual recognition reinforces the notion that Caine acquires his identity from film and television. Caine is fascinated by the white ethnic gangster made appealing by an earlier generation of Hollywood cinema. In the gangster films of the 1930s and their *film noir* descendents in the 1940s, the gangster is a social outcast who is nevertheless as quintessentially American as Horatio Alger.¹⁴ The white gangster's ascent fulfills the American Dream and endorses the melting pot metaphor: he sheds his ethnicity in the process of rising to the top of the underworld.

Caine's identification with this figure, in contrast to his father Tat's (Samuel Jackson) association with another screen image—the renegade drug dealer Youngblood Priest (Ron O'Neal) of *Superfly* (Gordon Parks Jr. 1972)—suggests the son's desire for assimilation. Thus, these conflicting iconographies of masculinity reveal important historical contrasts. Their juxtaposition pits the Black action hero of the 1970s against the white-ethnic gangster. Tat's persona represents the culmination of decades of group protest and individual action aimed at dismantling the system whereas Caine's nostalgia for an earlier era privileges the gangster's ability to manipulate the system for his individual benefit rather than his interest in destroying it.

Caine's identification is set in relief by a subsequent scene in which character identifications reflect upon African American cultural identities. When Caine and his homey O-Dog (Larenz Tate) are forced to watch *It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra 1946) on television with Caine's grandparents (Arnold Johnson and Marilyn Coleman), Caine's discomfort, boredom, and disbelief are made palpable through repeated close-ups. He cannot relate to the Capra film, whose pessimistic postwar vision of American capitalism is redeemed by melodramatic sentiment, and whose obsessive repetition at national holidays has reified its claims to exemplary Americanness.

Caine, Tat, and Grandpapa all identify with screen performances of American masculinity. Grandpapa admires Capra's hero George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart), a man whose arguable triumph is achieved when he recognizes his stake in the American dream of small-town family values.¹⁵ In contrast to his grandfather, Caine prefers to emulate the classical gangster.¹⁶ The gangster's antisocial violence reconciles his desire for capitalist-defined markers of success with his exclusion from legitimate means of achieving them. Thus he differs greatly from Capra's lily-white, suicidal George Bailey. Both are self-destructive figures, but the gangster takes aim at the society around him, not himself. Bailey's saga is reformist, targeting corrupt individuals, whereas Caine's gangster can be unintentionally revolutionary: he sheds light on the endemic problems of capitalism, exposing its ruthless underbelly.

Menace explores generational disparities through the three men's affinities for specific iconographies of celluloid masculinity. Whereas Caine identifies with the urban ethnic (but white) outlaw, Tat Lawson adopts the good badman persona of African American folktales and Blaxploitation fame, while Grandpapa admires the sentimental Capra hero. The screen identifications of Caine, his father, and his grandfather suggest that black masculinity is a historically variable construction, continually renegotiated through identification and performance.

In keeping with this emphasis on cinematic identification as a source of identity, the film makes explicit use of screen images to depict history. The film opens with simulated documentary footage of the Watts riots of 1965. Caine's voice-over situates those events as a historical parallel and backstory; his own story takes place several decades later, amidst urban deindustrialization, the dismantling of social support programs, challenges to affirmative action, police corruption, and the rise of movement conservatism during the Reagan administration and the first Bush administration.

Although they are located within very specific urban geographies (northside Dublin; South Central, Los Angeles), characters in these two films re-envision their local situation through music and film culture. Character identifications in *The Commitments* and *Menace* thus tap into a newly global context for performing identities. One way to conceptualize the spatial imperatives of these films—that is, their expression of local concerns in terms of global popular culture—is through Stuart Hall’s familiar analysis of the nation-state’s disintegration. Hall writes, “[W]hen the nation-state begins to weaken [. . .] the response seems to go in two ways simultaneously. It goes above the nation-state, and it goes below it. It goes global and local in the same moment” (1997a 178). These two films make explicit the role that popular culture identifications play in this doubled response, as gestures that reach above and below the nation as a paradigm for community and that also seek to move beyond an ontology of identity.

NONESSENTIALIST IDENTIFICATION

I characterize acts of character identification in recent Irish and African American cinema as nonessentialist identification because they express a character’s desire to suspend the self and to explore otherness. A number of scholars have discussed the way postmodern culture has reconfigured identities. Richard Kearney employs the term “postnationalism” to characterize the inclusive political and aesthetic sensibilities of contemporary Ireland (1997). Although Kearney’s term captures the sense of urgency with which the nation-state has been called into question, its suggestion of having moved beyond nationalism altogether seems premature. The events of the post-September 11 era seem to confirm the persistence of the nation as a military construct, to say the least.

Film scholar Mark Reid has described recent African American film and popular culture as exhibiting a “PostNegritude” aesthetic, which “creates, reveals, and exposes the nonessential nature of socially constructed ideas about race, gender, class, and nation” (1997 18). For Reid, PostNegritude involves “a creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions” (1997 113). Expanding upon Reid’s idea, I employ the term nonessentialist identification because the aesthetic Reid describes is evident in both African American and Irish filmmaking of the 1980s and 1990s. In Irish and African American films, character identification forms the locus of “creative dialogue” and plays a crucial role in the deconstruction of identity.

Most film scholarship on identification, including recent work on postcolonial identification, focuses on spectatorship. Postcolonial film theorists have studied the Eurocentrism of visual media, analyzed filmmaking practices that challenge and resist that regime, and elaborated instances in which colonial and ethnographic gazes construct primitive others.¹⁷ These studies, like much of film theory, stress the psychosexual character of spectator identification and the viewer's mobility with respect to gender, race, class, and even species when introjecting on-screen figures. In *Threshold of the Visible World*, Kaja Silverman discusses a mode of spectator identification that relies upon both unconscious processes and secondary self-examination to foster a sense of estrangement from the self.¹⁸

Like Silverman, I am interested in pursuing the link between identification and self-estrangement, but from a different vantage point. I emphasize the social, political, and aesthetic dimensions of identification between and among characters, addressing the way character identification exhibits not only a potential for estrangement from the self, but also from dichotomous concepts of identity. Drawing upon Silverman's useful observations that identification always involves the body, I organize my analysis according to several key modes of embodiment (and disembodiment) that catalyze and enable character identification. I examine music and performance (chapter 2); pregnancy and maternity (chapter 3); violence (chapter 4); and genre (chapter 5), concluding with a discussion of contemporary Westerns that revisit the familiar American genre in order to challenge the racist underpinnings of traditional notions of the national body.

One paradox of cultural production in an era of globalization and standardization is that there are expanded opportunities for representing the complexity of identities and crosscultural affinities. Stuart Hall has written that marginality has never been such a productive space as it is now. Irish and African American films of the 1980s and 1990s exploit this moment and its opportunities for productive marginality. These films present identification as an aesthetic and political gesture that has the potential to redefine identity as an inclusive and ongoing process rather than a state of being.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In chapter 1, "Identifying Others," I review the recent history of Irish and African American cinema in the context of a longstanding connec-

tion between Irish and African American cultures. I consider Kaja Silverman's account of heteropathic identification and its dependence upon the body, extending her assertions to the analysis of character, rather than spectator, identification.

In chapter 2, "Sampling Blackness: Music and Identification in the Films of Neil Jordan and Spike Lee," I examine jazz and performance in Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982) and *The Miracle* (1991), and in Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Crooklyn* (1994), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *He Got Game* (1998). Jazz music offers Jordan and Lee's protagonists a way to get out of themselves, to identify with others, and to participate in a community of jazz musicians, past and present. More than merely embellishing the narrative with jazz music, both of these filmmakers convert jazz form into film style, replacing narrative continuity with circularity, riffing, and improvisation. Their cinematic adaptation of the jazz aesthetic reinforces the notion that identity, like music, is a process rather than a product.

Chapter 3, "It's a Wise Child that Knows His Own Father': Pregnant Performances and Maternal Mythologies," explores films that foreground the improperly pregnant body as a process rather than a state of being. Although these films emerged amidst a heightened rhetoric surrounding teen pregnancy in Ireland and the United States, they also speak to longstanding colonialist representations of subaltern women's sexuality as well as the prescriptive patriarchal family values of Irish and black nationalisms. Within this framework, I discuss *The Color Purple* (Spielberg 1985), *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (Margo Harkin 1989), *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash 1991), *The Playboys* (Gillies MacKinnon 1992), *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (Leslie Harris 1992), *The Snapper* (Stephen Frears 1993), *December Bride* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan 1990), *A Man of No Importance* (Suri Krishnamma 1994), *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme 1998), and *Blessed Fruit* (Orla Walsh 1999).

Chapter 4, "Culturing Violence: Masculine Identification in Irish and African American Gangster Films," considers recent revisions of the gangster genre. Contemporary versions of the gangster film situate their narratives within the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and urban gangs in the United States. They also make clear the importance of masculine identification to the gang community. The chapter includes readings of *Cal* (Pat O'Connor 1984), *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton 1991), *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan 1993), *Menace II Society* (Albert and Allan Hughes 1993), and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan 1992).

Chapter 5, “‘Both Side of the Epic’: Identification and the Nonessentialist Western,” discusses the importance of identification within contemporary films that reference and revise the Western, and includes discussions of *Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod 1986), *Into the West* (Mike Newell 1992), *Posse* (Mario Van Peebles 1993), and *The Disappearance of Finbar* (Sue Clayton 1996). In these films, characters wrestle with the Western genre’s radical individualism and colonialist ideology, seeking to undermine the stark contrast between colonizers and colonized. Pat Dowell describes the Western as “*the* cultural production that continuously refurbished a national foundation myth of agrarian equality” (6). Characters in these films confront and reconsider the basis for national foundation myths by relocating the frontier and/or by populating its hostile landscape with a cast of different others, including African Americans and Irish travelers. In so doing, they call into question the Western’s, and the West’s, colonialist paradigm of difference.

In these analyses, I am less interested in condemning or celebrating characters’ identifications with powerful and/or disenfranchised others and more interested in analyzing the way identifications become a shorthand that signifies a desire for a changing politics and poetics of identity. I share the belief, voiced by Luke Gibbons, that “cultural representations do not simply come after the event, ‘reflecting’ experience or embellishing it with aesthetic form, but significantly alter and shape the ways we make sense of our lives” (1996a 8). These cultural representations reflect and have shaped contemporary thought, making contributions to our shifting understanding of self and other, and of our real and imagined communities.

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.)