

Zélie Asava

# THE BLACK IRISH ONSCREEN

REPRESENTING BLACK AND MIXED-RACE  
IDENTITIES ON IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION



This book examines the position of black and mixed-race characters in Irish film culture. By exploring key film and television productions from the 1990s to the present day, the author uncovers and interrogates concepts of Irish identity, history and nation.

In 2009, Ireland had the highest birth rate in Europe, with almost 24 per cent of births attributed to the 'new Irish'. By 2013, 17 per cent of the nation was foreign-born. Ireland has always been a culturally diverse space and has produced a series of high-profile mixed-race stars, including Phil Lynott, Ruth Negga and Simon Zebo, among others. Through an analysis of screen visualizations of the black Irish, this study uncovers forgotten histories, challenges the perceived homogeneity of the nation, evaluates integration, and considers the future of the new Ireland. It makes a creative and significant theoretical contribution to scholarly work on the relationship between representation and identity in Irish cinema.

This book was the winner of the 2011 Peter Lang Young Scholars Competition in Irish Studies.

Zélie Asava is Programme Director of Video and Film at Dundalk Institute of Technology, where she teaches courses on film and media theory and national cinemas. She has published journal articles and essays on questions of race, gender and representation in Irish, French, American and African cinema.



## The Black Irish Onscreen

# Reimagining Ireland

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*For my pioneering parents Christopher and Pamela – Khutsisanga Imberi!*

*For Eugene*





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— ZÉLIE ASAVA  
Dublin, June 2013

## INTRODUCTION

### Positioning the Black Irish: Theoretical, Historical and Visual Contexts

In 1976 Radharc produced *The Black Irish* for RTE, a factual programme on mixed-race Irish-Caribbeans, exploring their history and daily lives in Kinsale, Montserrat. Known as the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean, the space is Irish in its traditions, names, accents and people, and apart from Ireland, Montserrat is the only country where St Patrick's Day is a national holiday.<sup>1</sup> The show declared that given their intimate links 'perhaps the white Irish of Ireland and America today have something to learn from the black Irish of Montserrat'. Yet, while the diaspora has become very important to Irish culture since then, particularly in 2013, the year of The Gathering, the existence of the black Irish in Ireland or in the diaspora has only become a major issue in recent years. Since Radharc's documentary, mixed-race/black actors have featured in many Irish fiction films (particularly since the influx of migrants in the 1990s), including: *Pigs* (Black, 1984), *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1992), *Mona Lisa* (Jordan, 1986), *The Nephew* (Brady, 1998), *When Brendan Met Trudy* (Walsh, 2000), *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan, 2005), *Isolation* (O'Brien, 2005), *Boy Eats Girl* (Bradley, 2005), *Irish Jam* (Eyres, 2006), *The Front Line* (Gleeson, 2006), *New Boy* (Green, 2007), *The Blaxorcist* (King, 2007), *Cactus* (Molatore, 2007), *Kisses* (Daly, 2008), *Trafficked* (O'Connor, 2010) and *The Guard* (McDonagh, 2011). This book takes a close look at work from the 1990s to the present day, analysing these intercultural figures and questioning the idea of Irishness as a static

1 The show was followed three years later by a documentary on a white diasporic group; *The Forgotten Irish* took a similar look at the people of Newfoundland.

A more detailed analysis of the complexities of *The Black Irish* follows later in the chapter.

category which defines the 'other' but is not subject to definition. It asks, how is the relationship between the white and black Irish expressed in Irish visual culture? Further, how is Irish identity defined, and how can we consider the black Irish as participants in Irish society, and as part of the Irish diaspora? The research presented here examines the history of black and mixed-race people in Ireland and from Ireland, and explores their representation onscreen. A Critical Race/Ethnicity Studies approach is used to consider how screen images correspond with real life histories and how this affects concepts of Irish identity, history and nation.

In 2009, figures showed Ireland as having the highest birth rate in Europe with almost 24 per cent of births attributed to the 'new Irish'.<sup>2</sup> According to the Immigrant Council of Ireland, foreign-born residents made up 17 per cent of the Irish nation in 2013. Researching mixed-race and black figures is important, not only to the study of 'new identities' in Ireland, i.e. the 'new Irish' of the last decade, but also to the history of migrants in Ireland, and, as the term suggests, the conceptual whiteness of Irishness itself. This topical project is a critical exploration of political representations of gender and race, and the links between visual culture and social reality. It acknowledges the history of the term 'black Irish' and repurposes it as a label for those who are both Afro-Caribbean and Irish. In examining how these figures are represented, the book also interrogates the relationship between the visibly different and recognizably Irish (and the various other ethnic communities in Ireland). This study thus seeks to uncover forgotten histories, challenge the perceived homogeneity of the nation, evaluate integration, and consider the future of the new Ireland, through an analysis of Irish screen visualizations of the black Irish.

In 2007 Rotimi Adebare, who had arrived from Nigeria as an asylum seeker, was elected as mayor of Portlaoise. The story of the first black Irish mayor made news around the world. The response in Ireland was divided;

- 2 Statistics from The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) show that of the non-Irish mothers, 10 per cent were from Accession states, including Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, 4 per cent were from Asia, and 3.4 per cent were from Africa. In 2005 the 'new Irish' birth rate was just 17 per cent.

Adebari was hailed as a poster boy for integration, and yet many questioned his right to residency, claiming that he had lied about his reasons for entering the country (after his asylum application was rejected, he was given residency on the basis of his child's birth in the country). In his election speech he said:

History is being made today... The United States has only just elected its second black governor, in Massachusetts, and that's after 300 years. We here can be a model for all around Europe and the world. I am honoured to accept this position in a town and a country that has shown it looks beyond the colour and creed of all its people. This is not just a country of a thousand welcomes, but a country of a thousand equal opportunities.

Adebari's success (a two-term mayor and councillor) seemed to hail a new Ireland, yet in 2004 a referendum on the issue of amending the 2001 Citizenship Act (which granted citizenship to any child born on the island of Ireland) produced a change in the law and the integrated, multicultural future of Ireland came under question.<sup>3</sup> By 2011, in a post-recession climate, Adebari's run in the general election gained only 0.85 per cent of the vote and his campaign was dogged by rumours about his past, leading to a concerted push for his deportation. As Steve Garner observes, the change in the Citizenship Act 'meant that the possibility of Ireland becoming more multicultural through further settlement by people from outside the EU, most of whom are not White Europeans, was greatly reduced' (2007: 134). Thus the 'new Ireland' discourse seemed perhaps to be a fantasy. Nevertheless there have been many developments since then which evidence a cultural shift, as many have adapted to a new understanding of what it means to be Irish; a definition tied less to history and linked more to contribution. In October 2010, an African film festival began in Carlow. There are now annual Japanese, Indian, and various other ethnic

3 The 2004 referendum was held on 11 June. A 62 per cent turnout produced an 80 per cent yes vote. The new dispensation became law on 1 January 2005 and states that non-Irish-heritage children born in Ireland attain a three year residence qualification before being allowed to apply for citizenship (this does not include those born to asylum seekers or students).

minority film festivals in Dublin and around the country. In 2010, Irish mixed-race people were all over Irish screens: Clare Kambamettu (part of the Irish diaspora and a returning emigrant) won the Rose of Tralee (a beauty/talent competition for women with Irish heritage, the winner becomes a cultural ambassador for Ireland in her year-long reign);<sup>4</sup> Ruth Negga's film debut *Capital Letters* (O'Connor, 2004) was re-released as *Trafficked*, and she starred in *Love/Hate* (RTE); a Phil Lynott exhibition opened at the RDS Music Show, and a new compilation of his music was released;<sup>5</sup> RTE produced *Paul McGrath: My Life and Football*, a documentary on the international footballer.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, Filipino-Irish-Australian Tara Talbot won the Rose of Tralee for Queensland. Mixed-race television presenters Liz Bonnin, Baz Ashmawy and Sean Musanje, and sportsmen such as Stephen Reid, Clinton Morrison, the O hAilpin brothers and Simon Zebo are now household names. Television sports documentaries have begun to explore Ireland's interculturalism. *Saviours* (Nolan and Whitaker, 2007) depicted the achievements of three Irish boxers including the late mixed-race boxer Darren Sutherland. *Man on a*

- 4 There have been few mixed-race Roses to date. Luzveminda O'Sullivan was the 1998 Rose of Tralee (her name is mysteriously misspelt or replaced by another on many websites listing the history of the Roses). Though O'Sullivan hails from Mayo she was the Philippines Rose, reflecting her Irish-Filipino identity. 2004's Philadelphia Rose, Sinead De Roiste, was the first Irish-African American contestant in the history of the Rose of Tralee. Belinda Brown was the 2008 mixed-race London Rose. White supremacist groups started an online hate campaign against her two months prior to the final competition, and UK police became involved. Refusing to be intimidated, Brown said at the time: 'I have a mixed heritage and am equally proud of both parts of it'.
- 5 *Yellow Pearl: A Collection*, the title of which reflects his 'yellow', i.e. mixed-race status. Phil Lynott was the lead singer and bass player of Dublin rock band Thin Lizzy before becoming a solo artist.
- 6 Based on McGrath's 2006 autobiography *Back from the Brink*. Although always prefaced in the Irish media as (like Lynott) a victim of addiction (due to his difficult working-class/racial background – abandoned by his Irish mother due to the shame of illegitimate miscegenation, he was born in secret in England and then raised in foster homes and orphanages) – McGrath was a pioneer. Ireland now has a growing number of mixed-race sportsmen and athletes.



*Mission* (RTE, 2012) followed Bro. Colm O'Connell in Kenya, examining his training techniques and their impact on world champion runner David Rudisha. *We Got Game* (Setanta, 2013) documented the history of African-Americans in Irish basketball (who were head-hunted by Irish teams in the 1980s heyday of the sport), detailing their experiences to date (many married locals and still live in the country).

The films I have chosen to analyse in this study have been selected according to a number of criteria: a centralization of racial issues; a raced protagonist; an innovative approach to racial representations which challenges dominant Western cinematic tropes. Irish films are defined here as films which are made by an Irish/Irish-based director, co/produced by an Irish company, featuring a predominately Irish cast, and set in Ireland. Some exceptions have been made to allow for comparative analysis (*The Commitments* was directed by an English filmmaker; *Milo* was directed by Dutch brothers; *Queen* was an American production, set in America, with an American cast; *Irish Jam* is a British-American co-production).

## Cultural Shifts: Interrogating the Other

Contemporary Irish cinema has established a series of common threads. Given the excesses of capitalism which led to the label Celtic Tiger Ireland,<sup>7</sup> there is a new focus on the individual and their relationship to society.<sup>8</sup>

7 This economic boom, which led to great changes in Ireland between 1997 and 2007, produced Ireland's first experience of immigrants outnumbering emigrants, though many of the 'immigrants' until 2001 were actually returning Irish who had been living abroad.

8 These films, while often centred on loss, tend to refuse to attribute blame to any one figure/institution, and to reflect Ireland's new secularism, as Martin McLoone notes: 'The[se] films seem to suggest that Catholic, Nationalist Ireland is now merely a faded memory passed down to Ireland's young population from their grandparents (or, ironically gleamed from those Irish films that seem to be obsessed by this dead past)' (2008: 46).

In these films, the personal is political and a European aesthetic is often privileged over the Americanized style of cinema popularized by Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan. Due to the cultural shifts accompanying the rise and fall of Ireland's economy in the early part of the twenty-first century, shifting from a land of emigrants to immigrants and back again, there is a duplicitous tone to the status of characters in these films. They are both outsider and insider, native and foreigner, open to the freedom of the Irish landscape and the potential that holds, and yet isolated and excluded from the land masses to either side – Europe and America. There is a sense of Ireland being in-between identities in these films, as the protagonist searches for purpose and a new sense of selfhood, away from the (often traumatic) fixed strictures of the past and in line with a new, more fluid personal/national identity. This personalized form of filmmaking has been heralded by filmmaker Mark O'Connor as part of a new wave, or *Tonn Nua* in Irish film. His manifesto for Irish cinema, read aloud at the Galway Film Fleadh and then published in *Film Ireland* in 2012 promotes a form of *Fís* (vision) filmmaking, inspired by the nouvelle-vague concept of the *camera-stylo* (the camera as pen and the film as essay), which can form part of counter-cultural political movements. While limited in scope, O'Connor's manifesto names several directors key to developing an indigenous aesthetic and emphasizes the importance of using (experimental) art to challenge socio-economic and cultural norms. It is notable that of recent films, many, including *Milo* (Boorsma and Boorsma, 2012), *Byzantium* (Jordan, 2012) and *What Richard Did* (Abrahamson, 2012), explore inter-ethnic families and most (e.g. *King of the Travellers* (O'Connor, 2013), *The Other Side of Sleep* (Daly, 2011) and *Jump* (Walsh, 2012)), explore hybridity and question absolutes of national and personal identity more generally. Fintan O'Toole observes that the migrant had a doubling effect on boom-time Ireland, as a signifier of the old and the new, the foreigner within:

They were... the most visible sign – and through the multiple languages, sound – of radical globalisation. They literally embodied a major break with the past. Yet... they were also... us – twenty years, or fifty years, or 150 years before. Their presence created overlapping realities... what the Irish were experiencing as new – rapid urbanization, multiculturalism, the need to make one's way in a polyglot and physically unfamiliar society – was a recapitulation of their own ancestors. (2009: xiv)

The black Irish raise the double reality of Ireland as a nation demanding rights for undocumented workers in America and the 'forgotten Irish' in England (the male construction workers who emigrated in the 1950s and 1960s and became isolated in the UK), while also attempting to be a first world competitor and affirm its white capital, where as O'Toole notes the words 'economic migrant' have become a term of abuse. The roots of this duplicity can be traced back to Ireland's relationship with empire and whiteness, most evident with regard to slavery and Ireland's relationship to African-America; locals largely supported O'Connell's abolitionist stance and Irish emigrants in America largely rejected it. It must be understood that historically, in order to gain political whiteness<sup>9</sup> (i.e. access to public power) in slavery-era America, there was a need to remove oneself from blackness, whether by fighting for slavery or engaging in blackface minstrelsy.<sup>10</sup> Dominique Quessada's (2007) term *Esclavemaitre* is useful in describing this doubling, as Michael Cronin notes:

a slave who is at the same time a master while remaining a slave, a figure in whom the distinctions of master and slave become literally indistinguishable, without the two states ever really being confused with each other... this collapse of categories... this seemingly contradictory, hybrid figure... is deeply revealing of a profound uncertainty about Ireland... in the twenty-first century. (2009: 20)

- 9 Distinction is made here between skin colour and imperial power. While predominately white in terms of appearance, the Irish were often denied access to political whiteness and regarded as non-white due to their position under British rule. According to the racial binary, only nations with global power were considered politically white. See Garner, 2007, Ignatiev, 1995. See also American dramas about working-class Catholic Irish-Americans: *Black Irish* (Gann, 2007); TV series *The Black Donnellys* (NBC, 2007–present); Stephan Talty's novel *Black Irish* (2013).
- 10 As in *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland and Hollingshead, USA, 1927), where a male entertainer sheds his Jewish immigrant background and assimilates into an American identity through blackface minstrelsy. It was the first commercially successful sound film, and became a classic musical. See M. Rogin (1992), 'Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer finds his voice', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (3).

John Brannigan (2009) notes that Irish involvement with Africa could be read as an attempt to distance the nation from this 'collapse of categories' by becoming benevolent masters as missionaries, charitable benefactors, sponsors and educators.

While a cynical reading,<sup>11</sup> it is clear that the national charity focus in the 1950s and 1960s on giving 'a penny for the black babies'<sup>12</sup> each week, instilled an understanding that while African nations were dependent and underdeveloped, Ireland, as a donator of peoples and finances, was independent and developed, i.e. first world and politically white.<sup>13</sup> Rather than O'Connell's vision of universal humanity, modern Ireland was thus established paradoxically as based in nationalist ideals of equality, and yet also as superior to Africa and thus equal with Europe, according to the racial binary.

The black Irish open up a space beyond binaries for what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) calls a 'Third Space' in which the in-between becomes acceptable in its own right. Lisa Nakamura's (2008) theory of 'third identities' and

11 Brannigan does acknowledge the heroic work done by Irish missionaries in providing medical and educational facilities for oppressed peoples. But, he notes that this practice was semiotically used to feed into nationalist mythology regarding Ireland's national identity as rooted in Christian, non-materialistic altruism, reaffirming its position as the land of saints and scholars (thus fostering a separate identity from England). Joseph McGlade (1967) observes that Irish missionary work was directly connected with British colonial administration and critiques their slowness to develop native clergy, which he finds based in colonial racism and self-serving practices.

12 Evon Brennan and others have written about how this phrase was used as a racist slur against black and mixed-race people growing up in the 1950s and 1960s in Ireland (see Brennan's article 'I was Raised by Nuns', *The Guardian*, 17 February 2007). See also Clare Boylan's *Black Baby*.

13 And while Africa now has more Christians than Europe, it is and was portrayed as a non-Christian, i.e. primitive space.

Christian programming has been central to Ireland's visual history. When RTE began in 1960, Archbishop McQuaid sent two priests to New York – Fr Des Forrester and Fr Joe Dunn – to learn about television so that they could advise the new broadcasters. They formed Radharc, the first independent production company to produce documentaries for RTE. Radharc was run and broadcast by Catholic priests who made over 400 documentaries in seventy-five countries between 1962 and 1966 on a range of social, political and religious issues.

Josephine Lee's (2003) theory of 'third types' follow on from this concept and provide a useful framework for considering interstitial figures. The links between Africa and Ireland have inspired a series of postcolonial writings in Ireland, as well as those challenging the idea that Ireland's complex history can be paralleled with those of colonial nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia. The black Irish visualize Ireland's cultural ghosts by visibly living on the borderlands of identity and questioning established concepts, both in terms of the parameters of their representation, and those of other Irish characters. They embody a physical and critical de-homogenizing of the nation, thus Julia Kristeva's writings on the concept of the stranger will be drawn on to explore the position of the outsider in Irish cinema.

## Theoretical Contexts

This book explores manifestations of Irishness which challenge the concept of Irish identity as a stable, white, homogenous ethnicity. Recent studies by Gerardine Meaney (2010), John Brannigan (2009), Gavan Titley (2011), Bryan Fanning (2009), Maria Pramaggiore (2007), Steve Garner (2007) and Kathleen Vejvoda (2007), and films by Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien (e.g. 2010's *Promise and Unrest*, looking at a Filippino-Irish family), provide an important context for this project. These works have established the diversity of Irish culture and signalled the vast range of material not yet investigated in relation to how these so-called 'new Irish' agents are represented. This book advances their work through a detailed and rigorous investigation of how black and mixed-race Irish identity is positioned in Irish film and television imaging, thus encouraging an open debate on how we think about nation, identity and belonging.

Studies by Herman Gray (2004), Bambi Haggins (2009), Mary Beltrán (2008) and Camilla Fojas (2008) have revolutionized ways of thinking about mixed and black representation onscreen. Theories and methodologies on race and film to date, including work by Susan Courtney (2005),

Mia Mask (2004) and Jane Gaines (2001), will here be applied to Irish film and television, in order to explore the idea of the mixed/black figure and the racially mixed society as tools against racism. While my work is informed by the first major exploration of miscegenation in American visual culture, *Mixed-Race Hollywood* (2008), this project will, following on from Jayne Ifekwunigwe (2004) and Lola Young's (1996) work on mixed-race figures in Britain, as well as Elizabeth Ezra (2000) and Carrie Tarr's (2005) work on black and mixed figures in French cinema, deconstruct the perceived positionality of these figures as participants in Irish society, migration, and screen culture. Due to the cinematic focus of my study (Irish television has far fewer multiracial characters), the figures I consider will be mostly African or Anglo/Celt-African/American, and mostly heterosexual (following dominant representations).<sup>14</sup> My focus is on those who are visibly mixed-race, as this is the most overrepresented group in terms of minority exposure in Irish cinematic/televisual culture.

My work follows on from Diane Negra's edited collection *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture* (2006), in its consideration of Irish identity as a changing construction. Following Negra, the idea of Irishness as an 'enriched whiteness' underpins this study of how black and mixed-race people are positioned in terms of Irish citizenship, and how they are represented on the Irish screen as black, mixed-race, 'off-white' (to use Negra's (2001) term) and Irish/Other. Drawing on Ezra Shohat and Robert Stam's (1994) reading of 'cultural bilingualism', I examine the positionality of the black Irish, a group who fall between cultures and identities, both geographically and sociologically. Whether mixed-race or black, of Irish or migrant heritage, the black Irish are interstitial characters, therefore this study will draw on ideas of a third identity, beyond the binaries of black and white, national and foreigner, in the critical essays of *Mixed Race Hollywood* (edited by Mary Beltràn and Camilla Fojas,

14 Fintan Walsh expands on the 'excluded space and place of queerness in Irish film and culture' in his chapter: 'Mourning Sex: The Aesthetics of Queer Relationality in Contemporary Film'. In: Claire Bracken and Emma Radley, eds (2013), *Viewpoints: Theoretical Perspectives on Irish Visual Texts*. Cork: University of Cork Press, pp. 215–228.

2008), and *'Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader* (edited by Jayne Ifekwunigwe, 2004) which seek to reposition the in-between as central to the study of film and representation.

As Suki Ali (2003) and Jill Louie (2002) note, the mixed-race discourse is framed to suggest that the problem lies within the group; that this pathology is intrinsic to the group rather than based in ineffective social processes and the effects of institutional racism. Louie, like Naomi Zack (1993), evidences the fact that it is the institutions – the medical, scientific and political in particular – which have created these ideas, and constructed a perverse concept of fixedness as inherently problematic. Following on from these scholars as well as Judith Butler, Donald Bogle, Susan Courtney, Jane Gaines et al, my work is focused on the binary framework of black/white mixing and centred on adults, as these are the most widely represented groups on screen (and notions of blackness are particularly significant to a nation that was historically denied access to 'whiteness' and its socio-economic privileges).<sup>15</sup> It is unfortunate that this remains an overrepresented focus in literary and visual culture, yet it is the mixed-race form that dominates onscreen as a signifier of fixedness (and multiculturalism, especially in Ireland, hence the repeated use of Ruth Negga in films with no other visibly differenced characters). The black/white group is statistically the largest mixed grouping in the UK according to statistics. As there is no mixed category on the Irish census there are no figures for this populous in Ireland. It is interesting however that on the 2006 census, 16, 131 listed their nationality as 'Other' and 45, 597 did not give a nationality.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps some of these people are what might be termed black Irish, and indeed perhaps many are mixed-race.

My decision to focus on black/white heterosexual mixed-race is not based in a desire to replicate the black/white binary or the hegemony of

15 See Carol Coulter's (1990) pamphlet *Ireland: Between the First and Third Worlds*, Caitriona Ruane's (1992) report *Is Ireland a Third World Country?*, and CL. Innes' (1990) comparative analysis of African and Irish literatures, *The Devil's Own Mirror*. See also E.B. Cullingford, 2001; B. Quinn, 2005; B. Cunliffe and J.T. Koch, 2010.

16 See <<http://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/population/populationclassifiedbyreligionandnationality2006>>.