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“The Taut Elastic of Time”: Politemporalidad y el Black and Green Atlantic en *TransAtlantic* (2013) de Colum McCann

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Received: 14/03/2025. Accepted: 23/07/2025.

How to cite this article: Martín-González, Juan-José (2025). “The Taut Elastic of Time”: Polytemporality and the Black and Green Atlantic in Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* (2013).” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 46, 2025, pp. 280–304.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/6c2qt303>

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Abstract: This article analyses Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* (2013) as a polytemporal novel by focusing on the representation of the entangled histories of Irish and African American diasporas. Drawing on philosophical theories of time as well as on cultural studies on the Black and Green Atlantic as a theoretical framework, the study examines how *TransAtlantic* challenges the traditional linearity of historical narratives by presenting past historical events as dynamically connected with present and future orientations. Ultimately, this contribution suggests that *TransAtlantic* not only reimagines transatlantic relations from the point of view of the Irish and Black diasporas but also constructs a broader Pan-Atlantic memory of anticolonial resistance.

Keywords: Colum McCann; *TransAtlantic*; polytemporality; Black and Green Atlantic.

Summary: Introduction. “Overlapping Diasporas”: The Black and Green Atlantic. “The End of the Passing Past”: Polytemporal Models of Time and History. A Polytemporal Analysis of Colum McCann’s *TransAtlantic* (2013). Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza *TransAtlantic* (2013) de Colum McCann como una novela politemporal, incidiendo en la representación de las historias entrelazadas de las diásporas afroamericana e irlandesa. Usando como marco teórico diversas teorías filosóficas sobre el tiempo, así como los estudios culturales sobre el concepto de Black and Green Atlantic, el artículo analiza cómo *TransAtlantic* desafía la linealidad tradicional de las narraciones históricas para representar los eventos del pasado como dinámicamente conectados con el presente y el futuro.

En última instancia, este artículo sugiere que *TransAtlantic* no solo reimagina las relaciones transatlánticas desde la perspectiva de las diásporas irlandesa y afroamericana, sino que también construye una memoria pan-atlántica de la resistencia anticolonial.

Palabras clave: Colum McCann; *TransAtlantic*; politemporalidad; Black and Green Atlantic.

Sumario: Introducción. "Diásporas solapadas": The Black and Green Atlantic. "El fin del pasado transitorio": Modelos politemporales del tiempo y la historia. Un análisis politemporal de *TransAtlantic* de Colum McCann. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

On March 17, 2011, Barack Obama hosted a reception in the White House to celebrate St Patrick's Day, an event that was attended by Enda Kenny, newly elected Taoiseach in Ireland at the time. In the address that Obama delivered at this reception, he stressed the parallelisms between the fight for freedom of Irish people and the struggle of African Americans:

In so many ways, the Irish and their descendants have set an example for us as a people . . . It was at a Dublin rally that [Frederick] Douglass met the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell . . . Douglass drew inspiration from the Irishman's courage and intelligence, ultimately modeling his own struggle for justice on O'Connell's belief that change could be achieved peacefully through rule of law. (Obama)

The former American president was illustrating in his words the correlations between Irish and African American struggles via the personas of two high-profile historical characters: Frederick Douglass, African American abolitionist and author of one of the most famous American slave narratives, and Daniel O'Connell, Irish politician, nicknamed "the Great Liberator," and fierce campaigner for Catholic rights against British oppression in the nineteenth century.

The cultural cross-pollinations between African American and Irish cultures underscored by Barack Obama in his words are actually at the core of Colum McCann's novel *TransAtlantic*, which is the object of study in this article. The Irish writer Colum McCann gained international literary recognition with *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), a multiple-narrator novel set in 1970s New York which earned the writer the US National Book Award. McCann's interest in multiperspectivity is replayed in *TransAtlantic*, a novel that reimagines transatlantic links between Ireland and the US across the centuries by narrating the cultural attachments

between Irish and African Americans. This article aims to analyse McCann's novel as a polytemporal narration of the Black and Green Atlantic, a term that has come to designate the overlapping histories of the Black and Irish diasporas in the Atlantic context. The multiple narrative layers of the text qualify McCann's novel to be read from the viewpoint of philosophical conceptualizations of historical time.

To date, McCann's novel has been critically analysed from the viewpoint of spatial studies (Mianowski), as an example of female intergenerational narration (Mara and Mara), from the perspective of recent postcolonial takes on Irish history and culture (Armstrong; Markey) or in terms of the memory frictions between history and fiction in historical debate (Singer). These contributions do not pay enough attention to the interplay between past, present and future orientations of historical time or the refocusing towards Atlantic contexts that materialize in the novel. This article aims then to analyse *TransAtlantic* (McCann) as a polytemporal novel, identifying the uses and purposes of the interplay between the different timeframes of the narration. Taken in this light, the novel may potentially lend itself to be scrutinized in terms of the dynamic exchange between the histories of Black and Irish diasporas that have been glossed over by criticism of the novel.

To achieve these aims, this contribution firstly puts the novel into contact with maritime scholarship, providing a brief overview of the Black and Green Atlantic in recent cultural criticism. This will assist in contextualizing McCann's novel within Atlantic historiography and cultural studies and the contributions of these fields to the analysis of Black and Irish diasporas. Then, the article builds a theoretical framework based on phenomenology and philosophical theories of time more broadly, delving into different temporal approaches that have conceived historical time as plural, dynamic and multidirectional. This theoretical apparatus may lay open the intricate temporal structure of McCann's narration. Taken together, these contextual and theoretical approaches are subsequently applied to the analysis of *TransAtlantic* to shed light on the polytemporal intersections of the Black and Green Atlantic that McCann's novel pursues.

1. "OVERLAPPING DIASPORAS": THE BLACK AND GREEN ATLANTIC

The "Oceanic turn" that has characterized much of postcolonial literary criticism in the last decades (DeLoughrey 242–43) was heavily influenced by

the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy's ground-breaking work mobilised the attention from "nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches" towards "the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 15). This oceanic refocusing sought to provide a transatlantic view of Black culture, unveiling its hybrid and fractal circulation in the Atlantic waves and unearthing transatlantic slavery as an unacknowledged side of North-Atlantic modernity. Since then, David Armitage has pointed out, "Atlantic history has recently become much more multicolored" (Armitage 479). This development has served as a corrective to the dominance of the white Western perspective on the Atlantic experience.¹

Within this critical countercurrent that has sought to reclaim the voices and experiences of marginalized others in the history of the Atlantic, the Green Atlantic has emerged as an umbrella term to encapsulate the Irish experience of the Atlantic world as well as the transatlantic connections between Ireland, America and the Caribbean. However, this Atlanticist approach, grounded in principles of diaspora, circulation and movement, has only been belatedly accepted within the field of Irish studies. As O'Neill and Lloyd have keenly observed, "the notion that the Irish experience may have been defined as much by movement itself, and by processes of encounter, competition and solidarity, and the circulation of bodies and ideas, is relatively new" (O'Neill and Lloyd xvi).

The last two decades have witnessed significant contributions to these intersections between Atlantic studies and Irish historiography. The work of the Irish historian Kevin Whelan is a landmark within this line of enquiry. His essay "The Green Atlantic: Radical Reciprocities between Ireland and America in the Long Eighteenth century" (Whelan) offers a persuasive approach to the ways in which Irish people engaged in radical politics to articulate their own experience of the Enlightenment. Similarly, Whelan's more recent work "Liberty, Freedom and the Green Atlantic" provides an account of how the rhetorics of eighteenth-century discourses

¹ Together with the Black and Green Atlantic, the term Red Atlantic has also been deployed in maritime scholarship. David Armitage uses this concept in his review of Linebaugh and Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Armitage 479) arguably to denote the authors' Marxist approach to Atlantic history. On a different note, Jace Weaver uses the term in *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927* to retrieve the involvement of Native Americans in the Atlantic experience.

of freedom dovetailed with Irish republican politics in the Caribbean context. Such historiographical ventures expand the horizons of Irish studies and highlight what can be gleaned from an Atlanticist perspective.

The oceanic refocusing of Irish studies has created points of contact between Irish culture and migration and other diasporic subjects. It is from this comparative frame that the study of the intersections between the Black and Irish diasporas was engendered, a study that has come to be encapsulated in the term “the Black and Green Atlantic.” Accordingly, there exists now a growing body of critical works about the Atlantic cultural connections between African and Irish diasporic subjects, the most relevant and exhaustive of which are perhaps Peter O’Neill and David Lloyd’s edited book *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diasporas* and Kathleen M. Gough’s monograph *Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic: Haptic Allegories*.²

And yet, it remains a complex question to engage in literary-cultural comparisons between two diasporic groups whose experiences of forced diaspora and colonization differed substantially. As O’Neill and Lloyd poignantly observe:

The Irish, it has been shown, became white in the United States precisely to the extent that both slaves and free Blacks were denied full citizenship and even humanity . . . why did a people so versed in the techniques and effects of racial oppression—for there is no doubt that British colonialism understood the Irish as racially inferior . . . —not show greater solidarity with their fellow oppressed? (xvi–xvii)

It would be naive and critically partial not to acknowledge that as their historical trajectories coalesced, Irish and African Americans engaged in cooperation and collaboration as much as in fierce ethnic competition and antagonism.

Michael Malouf has expressed his concerns over the aforementioned “critical risks” in deploying the Black-Green Atlantic metaphor. Malouf wonders whether it is possible to use this “spatial-geographical metaphor” without incurring in monocultural perspectives that occlude the diversity of migratory experiences within the Atlantic as well as significant differences and divergences within both Irish and Black diasporas (Malouf

² For one of the earliest examples of scholarship on the Black and Green Atlantic, see Bornstein.

149). Black-Green Atlantic methodologies also risk engaging in inappropriate analogies between the diasporic experiences of the Irish—colonized by the British, sent into indenture during Oliver Cromwell's rule or forced into exile to escape the Irish Famine—and the capture, enslavement and brutal displacement of African people by European empires. Rather, I suggest that the Black and Green Atlantic should be approached as a site of "overlapping diasporas," to borrow from Malouf (149) again, to analyse the intersections of the Irish and African diasporas not in terms of the arguable similarity of their experiences but in the shared ways in which both groups embraced the Atlantic as a field of political change and survival.

In her take on the Black and Green Atlantic, Kathleen M. Gough analyses five "historical 'flashpoints' of contact and exchange" between Irish and Black subjects, namely: Black abolitionism and Irish anti-colonial struggle in the (mid-nineteenth century), Jim Crow laws and the "Irish Question" (late nineteenth century), the Irish and Harlem Renaissances (early twentieth century), the Civil Rights Movement in the American South and Northern Ireland (mid-twentieth century) and the Celtic Tiger and Ireland's global position (late twentieth century-early 2000s) (Gough 6–7). These historical "flashpoints," seen from a bird's eye view, enable a visualization of a genealogy of Black-Irish encounters across the last centuries. This sustained interaction validates the use of a polytemporal approach to analyse the Black and Green Atlantic, which is the focus of the next section.

2. "THE END OF THE PASSING PAST": POLYTEMPORAL MODELS OF TIME AND HISTORY

The philosophical notion that history is made up of several strands, layers or temporalities has been a staple in several critical works about historical time in the last decades. Back in 1993 Bruno Latour pointed out that "we have never moved forward or backward. We have always actively sorted out elements belonging to different times" (Latour 76). More recently, in the introduction to her volume *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, Rita Felski has claimed that "history is not one broad river, but a number of distinct and separate streams, each moving at its own pace and tempo" (3). Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty has stated that "the writing of history must always presume a plurality of times coexisting together" (Chakrabarty 109). These accounts of history as polytemporal

and multidirectional are deeply rooted in postmodern concerns about temporality, which have typically dismantled the so-called “grand narrative” of history and have put forward a model of historicity that eschews a linear and monotemporal logic and promotes plurality and a posthistorical awareness instead.

In order to outline a precise definition of the concept of polytemporality, I rely on Victoria Browne’s *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History: A Polytemporal Approach*. In this volume, Browne verbalizes feminists’ recent concerns about the popular, yet apparently questionable, hegemonic model of feminism as structured in “waves.” In Browne’s opinion, this model hinders a complete understanding of “the unfinished possibilities of feminisms from earlier times” and “perpetuates the idea that some feminisms are more “advanced” than others” (1). In order to go beyond this model of feminist history, Browne calls for a non-linear approach to feminine history grounded in the concept of “polytemporality.” Her polytemporal take on history dismisses the idea of a singular unified temporal framework to support a notion of historical time that “is ‘composite’ and internally complex . . . produced through the intersection of different temporal layers and strands that combine in distinct ways to produce particular experiences and discursive formations of historical time” (Browne 31).

Browne’s conception of polytemporality is deeply inflected by philosophical approaches to time and, specifically, phenomenology, as developed by Husserl and Heidegger in the twentieth century. Actually, in her argumentation Browne sets out from the basic phenomenological claim that historical time should be understood as a form of “lived time” (26). This notion entails that time is not a subject-independent phenomenon but rather a form of perception and a frame through which we perceive reality and articulate experience. In this sense, phenomenological approaches to historical time depart significantly from rationalist theories about the philosophy of time—mostly represented by Aristotle and Kant—that conceive time as an “*intuitive a priori* . . . meaning that the fact that time exists must be accepted *before* we can go on to make deductions about anything else whatever” (Simms 81; original emphasis).

In *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Edmund Husserl suggests that consciousness of time is circumscribed by two processes: *retention* and *protention* (Husserl 44–50). Theodore R. Schatzki puts it in the following way: “any present experience retains what

was just experienced and intends what is about to be experienced" (195). From this, it can be argued that human beings do not experience present lived time in terms of a series of discrete linear points in a chain, but rather they experience the present by recalling the past and foreseeing the future, i.e. through *retention* and *protention*. These retentional and protentional structures of temporality qualify lived time with a temporal fluidity or, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, a "within-time-ness . . . not reducible to the representation of linear time, a neutral series of abstract instants" ("Narrative Time" 173).³

The crucial idea that can be garnered from Husserl's internal time-consciousness is that lived time can be conceived as *multidirectional* rather than linear. This insight paves the way for arguing, Browne states, that "'present,' 'past,' and 'future' are not successive, isolated moments or 'parts of time,' but rather interrelated modes by which things appear as temporal" (28). Lived time and its retentional-protentional axis determine the subject's temporal experience as grounded in a dynamic interplay of past, present and future. Similarly, if we transfer the phenomenological subject-focused account of lived time to historical time more broadly, it can be argued that history itself is a narrative mediated through a complex transaction of past, present and future temporalities. In short, Dudley Andrew summarizes, "history is the double movement first of understanding . . . heritage by interrogating its traces and second of moving forward from this particular stance to a future that affects a world made up of one's contemporaries and successors" (64). In the context of Western literature, it is worth mentioning the contributions made by Modernist writers to the concept of *lived time*. Authors such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner rejected the linearity of chronological storytelling in favour of subjective and disjointed representations of time perception.

The notion of lived time also coalesces with the role of memory in time perception. Against the linear and chronological character of historical time, *memory time* is multidirectional, selective and fluid. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur has argued that "all memory is already a distortion inasmuch as it is selective. As a result, one can only counter a partial version with another equally fragile version" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 324). Adopting this notion of lived time which is markedly non-

³ For an earlier philosophical account of the interrelationship between past, present and future, see P.D. Ouspensky's notion of cyclical time in *Tertium Organum* (30).

linear paves the way for validating non-linear models of history that provide subject-focused accounts of historical time. One of such models is the one proposed by Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*, who persuasively suggests that we consider time as a spiral rather than as a line:

Let us suppose, for example, that we are going to regroup the contemporary elements along a spiral rather than a line: We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled . . . In such a framework, our actions are recognized at last as polytemporal. (75)

As can be inferred, Latour's non-linear historical model avoids conceiving human action as a uniform and irreversible succession of events. This rejection of the linearity of historical time, encapsulated in Latour's notion of the spiral and what he termed "the end of the passing past" (72), does not entail rejecting the reality of the past or the future. Instead, historical time emerges as a co-functioning system that moves neither onward nor backward, but in an eternal loop that combines and sorts out different temporalities.

A more nuanced take on the cyclical/linear dichotomy is the one put forward by Barbara Adam in *Time Watch: The Social Analysis of Time*. Adam does not abandon altogether linearity in her model of historical time. Instead, she points out that "all social processes display aspects of linearity and cyclicity . . . we recognize a cyclical structure when we focus on events that repeat themselves and unidirectional linearity when our attention is on the process of the repeating action" (Adam 38). Hence, following Adam's argumentation, linear and cyclical times are mutually co-dependent: unidirectional time is rendered cyclical through processes of ritual and repetition whereas "cyclical processes by definition involve repetition with variation, linearity and progression" (38).

Polytemporal models of time proposed by scholars such as Browne, Latour, and Adam destabilise the foundations of Enlightenment-era speculative philosophies of time and history, particularly Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, first published in 1837. Hegel's framework positions the Western state, particularly the Germanic world, as the pinnacle of historical progress, reinforcing Eurocentric narratives that present modernity as a Western phenomenon (131). As a response to Hegel's Eurocentric grand narrative of history, scholars such as Enrique

Dussel have emphatically challenged the notion that modernity was an exclusively Western phenomenon and have called to incorporate underrated cultures and civilizations as actors worthy of consideration in world history (168). Similarly, the centrality of the modern state, understood by Hegel as "the more specific object of world history in general, in which freedom attains its objectivity" (Hegel 97) has also been brought under critical scrutiny by maritime scholars such as Gilroy (Gilroy, "Route Work" 22). This questioning of the centrality of the nation-state is particularly relevant for African Americans and Irish Catholics, the two cultural groups under analysis in McCann's *TransAtlantic*, since the configuration of their respective states has been consistently marked by colonial violence, exclusion and marginalization.

3. A POLYTEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF COLUM MCCANN'S *TRANSATLANTIC*

The narration of Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* is structured in three sections. After a brief prologue set in 2012, the first volume provides a fictionalization of three historically authentic transatlantic voyages: John Alcock and Arthur Brown's first non-stop transatlantic flight from Canada to Ireland in 1919; Frederick Douglass's 1845 travel to Ireland as part of his abolitionist struggle; and American diplomat George J. Mitchell's 1998 travels to Belfast to chair the negotiations during the Northern Ireland peace process that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement. Conversely, the protagonists in the second and third volumes of the novel are entirely fictional and female. These volumes develop the saga of four generations of women whose vital trajectories intersect with the male characters in the first section: Lily, an Irish maid who meets Douglass during his Irish tour as she is about to emigrate to America to escape the Irish Famine; Emily (Lily's daughter), a Canadian journalist who witnesses Alcock and Brown's transatlantic flight; Lottie (Emily's daughter), an Irish woman who lives in Belfast during the Troubles; and Hanna (Lottie's daughter), who lost her son, Tomas, in a terrorist attack during the Troubles and who closes the novel in a sort of epilogue set in 2012 (and connected with the prologue) which ties in all narrative lines. This complex tapestry composed through multiple narrative threads, narrators and time frames provides the basis for an analysis of the novel from a polytemporal viewpoint.

The gendered symmetry of the narration, in which male historical characters and fictional female protagonists are clearly arranged in

separate sections, brings to consciousness the traditional omission of female voices in historiography as well as the uses of fiction in the writing of history more broadly. McCann himself has claimed in an interview that “we all know that women are so often excluded from the history books. As if guns and testosterone rule the world. In writing about the women, I felt like they were partly correcting a little corner of history” (McCann, “A Conversation” 310).

Nevertheless, the author’s laudable endeavour to retrieve female perspectives in the making of history turns problematic if we realise that the purpose of the fictional female narratives in the second half of the novel is apparently to lend credibility and cohesion to the “real” historical male narratives in the first half. The female narrative lines in the novel seem exemplary of what the author himself has qualified as “smaller, more anonymous moments” which constitute “the glue of history” (McCann, “A Conversation” 309). In the author’s defence, it could be argued that the male and female narratives embody two distinct forms of discourse: the dominant tales of legendary heroes depicted in the first section and the historically suppressed account of Ireland’s struggle for survival, preserved through the collective memory of four generations of women and conveyed in a traditional family saga. What can be undoubtedly attributed to the novel is that the author makes no attempt at retrieving actually historical female figures that have been traditionally omitted in the history of the Atlantic Ocean.⁴ These omissions have been the concern of Kathleen M. Gough, who has exposed the blatant exclusion of female views from the texture of Black-Green Atlantic connections and circum-Atlantic circulations in general. In Gough’s view, “female social actors . . . are like allegorical images in this historical trajectory: they become the place for meaning to occur without becoming meaningful themselves” (9). This allegorical use is analogously what characterizes the female narratives in the novel, which inescapably remain secondary to the male-centred historical frame. In a similar vein, Mara and Mara have analysed McCann’s novel as a remarkable instance of female intergenerational narration but have observed that “the fact that the very personal

⁴ To name just a few: Amelia Earhart, first female aviator to fly solo non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean; Ida B. Wells, African-American journalist and abolitionist who toured Britain in the late nineteenth century as part of her anti-lynching campaign in Post-Reconstruction America; or Mary Prince, born a slave in the Caribbean and brought across the Atlantic to London where she published what is considered the first female slave narrative published in England, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831).

redemption of Lily, Emily, Lottie, and Hannah occurs in the intertwined tales of male individual and collective redemption implies an unfinished collective redemption for these women" (Mara and Mara 23).

The three transatlantic journeys described in the first volume of the narration remain nevertheless emblematic examples of Atlantic history and the historical connections between Ireland and the US. The journeys take place in different time periods but share symbolic connection since, as Mianowski has pointed out, "all three journeys express a desire for peace: promoting emancipation in 1845, joining two worlds after World War I, and constructing the Northern Ireland Peace Process in 1998" (3). The first chapter, which introduces Alcock and Brown's 1919 flight, depicts the increasing connectivity that characterized the north-Atlantic hemisphere in the aftermath of the 1st World War: "The world was made tiny. The League of Nations was being formed in Paris. W. E. B. Du Bois convened the Pan-African Congress with delegates from fifteen countries. Jazz records could be heard in Rome" (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 12). These lines, which depict the incipient globalisation that characterized the early twentieth century, highlight the potential of the transatlantic circulation of ideas in peace-making politics and the construction of transcultural bridges. Additionally, the name of the novel, with its capitalized "A" interspersed in the middle of the title, illustrates the Atlantic Ocean as a paradigmatic locus for the in-betweenness of such circulation, the transits and routes that have been inherent to transatlantic subjectivity. This emphasis on transatlantic connections in the making of Western history underscores "the incompatibility of the Atlantic as a cultural unit with the academic logic of viewing history in nationalist terms" (Klein and Mackenthun 5).

In the study of the Atlantic interactions between Irish and African American cultures in which this novel gets involved, Frederick Douglass features as a ubiquitous figure. The well-known abolitionist and author of the acclaimed *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Douglass) has been repeatedly reclaimed in scholarship about the Black and Green Atlantic and was already acknowledged by Paul Gilroy as a "shining example" of Black Atlantic culture (*The Black Atlantic* 13). McCann's novel provides a fictionalization of Douglass's visit to Ireland, his stay at Richard D. Webb's (his Irish editor) and his ensuing anti-slavery lecture tour in that country in 1845, at the beginning of the Great Famine. The narration chronicles the political implications of Douglass's Irish stay as well as its psychological impact on him:

At the end of his second week he wrote to Anna [Douglass' wife] that he hadn't been called a *nigger* on Irish soil, not once, not yet anyway . . . There was something crystallizing inside him. He felt, for the first time ever maybe, that he could properly inhabit his skin. (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 55)

The transcendence of Douglass's visit to Ireland in 1845, which was significantly noted by himself in his autobiography (297), reveals the extent to which his stay on Irish soil allowed the ex-slave to exercise the principles of democracy and citizenship, the very principles that were denied to African Americans by the slave system. Additionally, as several scholars have pointed out (Sweeney 13; Fenton 195), his tour around the Emerald Isle was instrumental in his development as an activist and thinker, allowing him to ground his anti-slavery philosophy in a wider circum-Atlantic discourse of liberation.

The persona of Frederick Douglass also becomes the red thread by which the memory of the Black and Green Atlantic is articulated as a node of interleaving axes of oppression. The novel makes pointed note of its intersectional approach as the fictional Douglass is shocked to witness the utter misery and poverty of famine-stricken Ireland (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 44). Further on in the narration, as Douglass travels to Cork, he learns from Isabel Jennings, secretary of the Cork Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, about the negligence of British authorities in handling the Famine (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 84). Notwithstanding his strong sympathy for the plight of the Irish poor, as a slave who has endured the horrors of American slavery Douglass cannot but observe the stark differences between American slavery and the colonized Irish: "There was poverty everywhere, yes, but still he would take the poverty of a free man. No whips. No chains. No branding marks" (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 55). The narration tallies then with scholars of the Black and Green Atlantic that avoid inadequate forms of "analogical reasoning" that occur "whenever the Irish experience of famine is compared to other historical sufferings such as slavery" (Malouf 57–58).

The tensions generated around the different experiences of colonization and dispossession undergone by Irish and Africans respectively are brought to the fore in the novel when the fictional Douglass is questioned by a heckler during one of his speeches denouncing American slavery:

A shout came up from the rear of the hall. What about England? Would he not denounce England? Wasn't England the slave master anyway? Was there not wage slavery? Were there not the chains of financial oppression? Was there not an underground railroad that every Irishman would gladly board to get away from the tyranny of England? (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 64)

The paragraph quoted above, although it makes the author's advantageous contemporary viewpoint somewhat too overt, remains an interesting observation about the nature of labour, empire and freedom. In this sense, the novel's reconstruction of Irish-Black encounters brings to mind the insidious ways in which chattel slavery has shaded into other ways of oppression or forced labour and articulates the Black and Green Atlantic as a frame to understand how differently oppressed groups have been enmeshed in "a shared paradigm of exploitation" (Malouf 157).

The novel's representation of Douglass's Irish experience gathers momentum as McCann reimagines the American slave's encounter with Daniel O'Connell in 1845. Douglass's historical meeting with the "Great Liberator" has achieved a quasi-mythical status in scholarship on the Black and Green Atlantic, becoming an emblem of Irish-American connections. The novel fictionalizes the legendary instant in which O'Connell introduced Douglass as "the Black O'Connell of the United States." Although this renaming might illustrate an imposition of Western models of social struggle, it is in tune with Atlantic scholarship about Douglass that has stressed the intellectual legacy of the pro-Catholic politician on Douglass's abolitionist project (Fenton 85–89).

However, Douglass's successful stay in Ireland is underscored by an underlying poignant irony: as he was being welcomed and celebrated as an American abolitionist, one million Irish people were forced to leave Ireland and around 1.5 million died of hunger, disease and starvation between 1845 and 1852 during the Great Famine (Ó Murchadha 179–80). The plight of Irish people escaping the Famine is represented in the character of Lily, a young maid at Richard D. Webb's residence who gets emboldened by Douglass's transatlantic discourse of freedom to get on board a "coffin ship" and look for a better life in the Americas. *TransAtlantic* adds up this way to the increasing shelf of contemporary

historical fiction that narrates the Irish Famine and its historical aftereffects.⁵

The fictional Douglass becomes a witness to the devastating social effects of the Irish Famine via the character of Lily. In one of the most powerful sections of the novel, Douglass joins members of the Jennings family in a search party to look for Lily and make sure she has a safe journey to America, after the young maid unexpectedly leaves Cork, penniless and with nothing but the clothes on her back. As Lily is found starving and freezing in Cove's pier waiting for the morning boat, Douglass is moved to see Isabel Jennings giving the poor maid some food for the journey:

Douglass felt a chill. He watched as Lily moved her mouth but did not seem to say anything . . . What thoughts trembled there? What fierceness had brought her here? . . . He pulled his collar up and coughed into it. He felt his breath bounce back towards him. *Negro girl. Ran away. Goes by name Artela.* (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 97; original emphasis)

As can be seen at the end of the previous quotation, Douglass cannot help but recall stories of fugitive African American slaves as he witnesses Lily's misery and desperation to escape the famine. Hence, by intertwining the Black and Irish diasporas in terms of their shared histories of humanity and survival instinct, the novel seems to be constructing a Pan-Atlantic memory of imperialism that diverts from nationalist models of cultural history. In this construction, the Atlantic Ocean emerges as a fertile space for emancipation, movement, resistance and political struggle and this validates O'Neill and Lloyd's assertion, following Avtar Brah, that the Black and Green Atlantic can be conceived as a "diaspora space" (xix) engendered by processes of movement and circulation.

Later on in the novel, the focus shifts to Lily's story and we learn about her arrival in America, her marriage, the demise of her son in the Civil War and the birth of her daughter, Emily. Lily's story of migration and assimilation in America becomes the genesis of a long generation of women whose transatlantic saga embodies two centuries of Irish-American connections. Emily becomes a journalist who covers Brown and Alcock's flight. Further on, she embarks on a transatlantic journey with

⁵ Some relatively recent examples of Irish Famine novels include Peter Behrens's *The Law of Dreams* (2007), Mary Pat Kelly's *Galway Bay* (2009), Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2003) or Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2017).

her daughter Lottie to visit Arthur Brown in Swansea in 1929, ten years after his legendary flight. Lottie moves to Belfast, experiences first-hand the violence of the Troubles and, in her nineties, she gets to meet Senator George Mitchell in person during the 1998 negotiations. Finally, the narration closes with Hannah's 2011 narrative, framed by the debacle of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy after the 2008 economic recession. As the story progresses, the narrative structure becomes increasingly more complex and readers become gradually aware of the connections between the male historical characters and the fictional female characters, turning the novel into a polytemporal mosaic that provides thought-provoking meditations on past-present relationships.

One of such meditations is provided by George Mitchell when he is fully enmeshed in the negotiations that ended up in the Good Friday Agreement. While the American Senator is hemmed in by British and Irish authorities as well as by diplomats and observers from all over the European Union, crowds of Irish common folk congregate at the doors of the Parliament Building of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Overwhelmed by stress and tension, Mitchell looks out the window of his office and reflects upon the historical transcendence of the peace negotiations:

A sea-wind. All those ships out there. All those generations that left. Seven hundred years of history. We prefigure our futures by imagining our pasts. To go back and forth. Across the waters. The past, the present, the elusive future. A nation. Everything constantly shifted by the present. The taut elastic of time. (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 145)

Mitchell's reminiscence of those generations who crossed the Atlantic back and forth, right at the culmination of the historical accord that is going to determine Irish future, epitomizes the polytemporal conception of historical time developed above. As stated by Browne, "our various ways of living time do not conform to a straightforward past-present-future chronology...there is a dynamic interplay and interrelation between past, present and future as modes of temporal orientation" (2). Hence, the Senator's lived present time is charged with the legacy of the past as well as the political potential of the future. His temporal meditation illustrates what Ricoeur termed the "within-time-ness" of historical time ("Narrative Time" 173): living time operates on a retention-protection logic (Husserl 44–50) in which past, present and future are interrelated, mutually

dependent and “constituted through a complex blend of retention and anticipation, memory and expectation” (Browne 2).

The polytemporal character of the novel gains momentum in the last volume. In Hannah’s 2011 narrative, the story lies imbued with the historical events that intersected with the lives of her female ancestors. The complex historical-literary apparatus constructed by McCann throughout the story is congealed into a single object that has ended up in Hannah’s hands: an unopened letter written by Emily in Canada, brought by Alcock and Brown in their aircraft across the Atlantic, and addressed to “The Jennings Family, 9 Brown Street, Cork City, Ireland” (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 252). This letter stands as an element connecting different times and places and, most importantly, as a symbol of Hannah’s transatlantic matrilineality. As she observes the letter in her hands, Hannah reflects upon its spatio-temporal quality and her lineage: “The tunnels of our lives connect, coming to daylight at the oddest moments, and then plunge us into the dark again. We return to the lives of those who have gone before us, a perplexing Möbius strip until we come home, eventually to ourselves” (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 252).⁶ This reference to August Ferdinand Möbius’s mathematical device serves to illustrate the interrelation of past and present events in lived time. Taken in this light, this scientific allusion is reminiscent both of Bruno Latour’s notion of historical time as a spiral (75) and Barbara Adam’s linear/cyclical thinking (38), as mentioned above. Adopting this cyclical viewpoint about historical time “does not mean that one rejects the existence of a past or a future...it does mean [that] we abandon the linear idea of temporality” (Walters 182). In other words, it implies adopting an anti-teleological stance that explores the unfinished potential of past events to be cyclically revisited as historical time spirals into the future.

The letter also serves to contextualize another significant event in recent Irish history: the decline of the Celtic Tiger economy in the face of the great economic recession which hit world markets in the years following 2008. Hannah is facing bankruptcy and considers the letter and its potential link to Frederick Douglass as an economic possibility to avoid the eviction from her house and land. However, the text is revealed to be

⁶ A Möbius strip is a non-orientable one-sided surface that can be constructed by taking a rectangular strip and attaching both ends after giving one end a half-twist. Described by the German mathematicians August Ferdinand Möbius and Johann Benedict Listing in the nineteenth century, the most interesting property of this mathematical device is that both sides of the strip can be crossed uninterruptedly (Starostin and Van der Heijden 563).

simply a thankful letter addressed to the Jennings family and written by Emily on behalf of her mother, and proves to have no commercial value after a philatelist claims to be unaware of the mentioned name of Frederick Douglass. It is only David Manyaki, an acquaintance of Hannah, Kenyan scholar and lecturer of history in Dublin, who recognizes the transhistorical worth of the document. Still, the letter remains a powerful polytemporal symbol of the interwoven genealogical and spatiotemporal trajectories that cut across the characters' lives, bringing readers, Alfred Markey has noted, "back through a family history in which ideas and ideals played a determining role, on both sides of the Atlantic, in allowing succeeding individuals achieve growing degrees of liberty" (Markey 147–48).

As the narration draws to an end, Hanna looks back in time and muses on the transatlantic chain of events that conforms her life history. Her meditations illustrate the functioning of memory time, which moves temporally back and forth according to associations of ideas. Hannah's polytemporal recollections find resonance in her maritime surroundings—she lives in a cottage at Strangford Lough next to the Irish Sea—and her frequent drives along the eastern Irish coast:

From a distance I could hear the ship horns, boats moving through Dún Laoghaire. Everyone rushing to get somewhere. The desire for elsewhere. The same port that Frederick Douglass came through all those years ago. The water lapping around me. Travelling the widening splash . . . George Mitchell's peace. The Queen had bowed her head at the Garden of Remembrance. (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 289)

As can be inferred, McCann invests Hannah's polytemporal meditations with a phenomenological inflection in which her aquatic environment is perceived as saturated with interrelated historical events from the past and the present, illustrating the selective and fragmentary character of memory. This take on historical time based on the subject's perception and memory—which is inherent to the phenomenological basis of polytemporal thinking (Browne 26)—is further extended when Hannah provides an oceanic observation on her cottage and its surrounding lough: "The edges of the lough are never watertight, either to land or the sea. The tides flow in and out. Boats and memory, too" (McCann, *TransAtlantic* 257). The transatlantic events articulating Hannah's matrilineal lineage are narrated as metaphorically flowing into her memory just like the waves

lap onto the shore around her cottage. This figuratively illustrates an oceanic articulation of time based on repetition and circularity, evoking the principles of temporality which accrue to polytemporal models of historical time. Analogously, just like Hannah grapples with her spatio-temporal orientation by renegotiating her transatlantic legacy, the past, present and future of Ireland should necessarily be driven by incorporating the legacy of the Black and Green Atlantic into the national memory of the country.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* as a polytemporal novel, paying attention to its representation of the transatlantic diasporas of Black and Irish people. Utilising a combination of philosophical insights into historical time and maritime scholarship, the article has argued that the novel's representation of the Black and Irish diasporas constructs a polytemporal memory of the Black and Green Atlantic which encapsulates the past, present and future of these cultural groups. Even though their respective historical progressions and processes of racialization have differed significantly, as several maritime scholars have pointed out, the multiple overlapping points of contact, competition and cooperation of Black and Irish people at determinate historical fulcrum points provide a telling representation of multilinear and plural models of historical time gravitating around the notion that "individual groups have their own distinct histories, rhythms, and temporalities quite apart from traditional forms of periodization" (Felski 3).

The heated question of why the Irish became "white" in the Americas (against the process of racialization that they underwent under British colonialism) instead of demonstrating more solidarity towards their fellow African-American dispossessed remains nevertheless unaddressed in McCann's novel. Indeed, the novel focuses mostly on constructive examples of Irish-American points of exchange but shies away from approaching more unsavoury aspects of ethnic competition. As O'Neill and Lloyd have acutely warned, "affinities that appear in cultural work do not always correspond to political and social solidarity" (xix). These tensions have also been observed by Kathleen M. Gough, who has highlighted that the ubiquity of the figure of Frederick Douglass in twenty-first century critical and cultural productions in Ireland has coincided with the recrudescence of racism in the country, manifested in the 2004

Referendum that denied Irish citizenship to migrants' children born in Ireland (Gough 4). Future creative and critical work on the Black and Green Atlantic might be reoriented towards interrogating these discrepancies between the celebratory overtones of Black-Green encounters in cultural production and the lack of cooperation and solidarity in the socio-political sphere.

Despite the aforementioned ethical concerns, the historical and imagined Irish-American diachronic overlaps represented in *TransAtlantic* still suggest that the Atlantic Ocean has been a rich ground for political liberation and anticolonial struggle. McCann strives to build a polytemporal memory of the Black and Green Atlantic geared towards the delineation of a multilinear Black-Irish genealogy that keeps informing the present. Ian Baucom memorably stated in *Specters of the Atlantic* that "time does not pass, it accumulates, and as it accumulates it deposits an ever greater freight of material within the cargo holds of a present" (325). Similarly, the experiences of Blacks and Irish are both saturated with the effects of colonization, exploitation and dispossession. The histories of Irish people escaping the Famine, suffering the violence of the Troubles or navigating Ireland's unstable global position after the last breath of Celtic Tiger economy inescapably dovetail with those of African Americans fighting racism, discrimination and segregation on both sides of the Atlantic. A collective memory that is cognizant of these constructive overlaps and their impact on the present may potentially build a more equitable future for Blacks and Irish alike.

FUNDING

The research carried out for this article was funded by two research projects: "Re-orienting Assemblage Theory in Anglophone Literature and Culture" (PID2022-137881NB-I00) and "Aquatic Imaginaries: Re-charting Indoceanic and Atlantic Literary Productions" (PID2022-141118NB-I00).

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