

Identity, Self-Loathing and the Neocolonial Condition in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*

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Patrick McCabe's novel is set in a small Irish town at the beginning of the 1960s, a turbulent time in the world at large (as references to the Cuban Missile Crisis and potential nuclear war underscore) and more specifically in neocolonial Ireland.¹ The departure of the colonizer leads to a state of indeterminacy that is dictated by two conflicting impulses: to embrace the tenuous promise of prosperity left in the wake of the colonizer, or to "imagine" a unified past and reclaim a necessarily idealized "identity."²

The struggles of Francie Brady in *The Butcher Boy* invoke both neocolonial Ireland's anguished residual relationship with the colonizer and its search for nationhood. Francie's ambivalent relationship with the community, his search for identity, his lack of a sense of history combined with an idealization of the past, his fascination with the life led by the Nugents as adopters and representatives of dominant culture values, and finally his own self-loathing all mirror the country's neocolonial condition. McCabe's novel, in effect, attempts to stretch neocolonial discourse to its limits, calling into question both notions of nationhood and cultural hybridity.

The Butcher Boy contains a number of examples that highlight the lasting effects of colonization responsible for Ireland's neocolonial status. Francie's crisis of identity reflects this unbalanced state as does the communal status of several characters who attempt to impose on him their limited notions of identity. The residual effects of colonialism are manifested on a number of different levels throughout the town; not the least of those is the hierarchical positioning adopted by various characters in the novel. But an examination of Francie's troubled psyche is McCabe's principal means of painting a bleak portrait of neo-

colonial Irish life. As Gerry Smyth notes, "The various factors attending colonialism and decolonisation—the constant questioning of one's identity, the context of violence, the common acceptance of social, political and cultural inequality—constitute a threat to the psychological stability of colonised subjects" (48–49). The reader is constantly reassessing Francie Brady's psychological (in)stability and is never quite sure to what extent Francie's perceptions are delusions or are incisive commentary on the narrow community in which he lives. That ambiguity allows Francie to embody the Other for the community; he becomes that by which they define themselves.

Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, Francie finds himself in an uncertain environment, dictated largely by the presence of an uncertain authority. Other similarities between Francie's transformation (into Francie Pig) and Gregor's metamorphosis are readily apparent. The different identities Francie adopts throughout the novel are merely quixotic defenses against having his identity determined.³ Eric Santner notes that Gregor's transformation is a response to external, as well as internal stimuli. Much the same could be said of Francie, whose violent outburst "can be approached as a symptom whose fascinating presence serves as a displaced condensation of larger and more diffuse disturbances within the social field marked out by the text" (Santner 195).⁴ The community's inability to provide Francie with any kind of stable environment demonstrates the extent to which uncertainty runs rampant within it. The dysfunctionality of the Brady family also serves to underline the sickness of the community at large. The lack of stability or authority in this "microcommunity" highlights the indeterminacy that is its main characteristic. Ironically, Francie achieves some form of stability when Mrs. Nugent foists an identity on him. Despite its negative frame, Francie, like Gregor Samsa, comes to accept and adopt his alternate identity.

Growing up with a suicidal mother and an alcoholic father, Francie is left to fend for himself. Rather than their taking care of him, Francie becomes his parents' caregiver. Within a set of family dynamics he barely understands, Francie strives to maintain the semblance of a normal household in a home inhabited by two grossly dysfunctional parents.⁵ Francie's parents are overwhelmed, unable to decipher the circumstances that led to their present situation. For example, early in the novel, after his mother beats him for stealing Philip Nugent's comics, she pathetically turns to him for solace:

She said there was nobody in the world meant more to her than me. Then she put her arms around me and said it was her nerves it was them was to blame for everything. It wasn't always like this for your father and me she said. Then she looked into my eyes and said: Francie—you would never let me down would you? (4–5)

These expectations are likely to lead to failure, and the entire community is partially responsible. But a sense of denial permeates the town, as each member, in neocolonial fashion, refuses to own any agency. His father even blames Francie

when his mother eventually commits suicide. When the community shirks responsibility for Francie's progressively sociopathic behavior, it mirrors this externalization of blame.

From the start, the stability of Francie's relationship with the community is tenuous. His strongest emotional link to the community, other than his parents, is his friendship with Joe Purcell. Initially, Joe is Francie's accomplice in "the wars with Nugent" (3); but by the end of the novel, he has completely disassociated himself from Francie's actions, denying any connection whatsoever. Joe struggles in vain to curtail his friend's extreme deeds, and his progressive alienation from Francie suggestively parallels the response of a large portion of the population that cannot condone the violent solution proposed by various fringe groups in Irish society. His allegiance finally wears thin, especially as he is provided with options never offered to Francie. But Joe's growth throughout the novel also illuminates Francie's arrested development; he matures in a way that Francie cannot. The community welcomes Joe with open arms, as revealed in the friendship that develops between him and Philip Nugent and between the Nugents and the Purcells. The Purcells' social position, although only marginally higher than the Bradys', guarantees that Joe will benefit from the community's attention in ways that Francie will not. By the end of the novel, Joe is enrolled in a private school, "another house of a hundred windows," (97) while Francie remains on the outside peering in.

Each member of the community endeavors to emerge from the colonialist shadow, at whatever cost. Having been subjugated for so long, they, in turn, subjugate whomever they can to relieve or compensate for their own feelings of inferiority. Even the summary contact Francie has with the everyday life of the town through Mrs. Connolly and her two cronies reflects this fact. Outside of his world, Francie makes a pretense of following the community's rules; his dialogue is a virtual parody of the meaningless chatter that makes up the better part of everyday life.⁶ The humor of Francie's banter with these women reveals his fiction-making abilities, or at least his ability to mimic the superficiality and falseness of the world in which he lives:

The women were standing over by the cornflakes saying things have got very dear. Its very hard to manage now oh it is indeed do you know how much I paid for Peter's shoes above in the shop. When they seen me coming they all stopped talking. One of them moved back and bumped against the display case. There you are ladies I said and they all went right back on their heels at the same time. What's this? I says, the woman with three heads? When I said that they weren't so bad. Flick—back come the smiles. Ah Francie, they said, there you are. Here I am I said. They leaned right over to me and in a soft top secret voice said how's your mother Francie? Oh I says she's flying she's above the garage and it won't be long now before she's home. (14–15)

Francie tests the women because all too clearly he sees their hypocrisy. Their chatter may appear benign, but the determination with which they prop up life on

the surface, never really tackling or addressing anything, can only contribute to Francie's progressive alienation. They may ask about his mother, but they show no real concern for her well-being and are only interested in the answer as a source of gossip. Their attitude prevents Francie from expressing any truth about his familial situation; understandably he refuses to give them any satisfaction in that regard. As the novel progresses, the women, led by Mrs. Connolly, become merely another example of the ways in which the community shirks or abandons its responsibilities.⁷ The shadow of colonialism looms over this scene. Despite their feigned attempts at caring, the women are really interested in maintaining whatever hierarchical standing the existence of the Bradys allows them to preserve.

The negligent superficiality of the three women may be harmful, but it does not compare with the violent psychological damage inflicted on Francie by J. Leddy, abattoir owner, with whom Francie eventually seeks employment. Leddy, another outsider in the community, preys on Francie. By oppressing Francie, Leddy removes himself from the bottom rung of the communal ladder. Wishing to exert his authority, he threatens to shoot a small piglet in front of Francie's eyes. The words Francie imagines should echo in the reader's mind: "Now he says take a good look at him. He was as pink as a baby's bottom and he said to me with his big eyes: I'm not a big pig yet I don't understand anything. Please—will you not let any harm come to me?" When Leddy kills the piglet, Francie is again assailed by guilt: "[A]nd what does he do only stick [the bolt gun] into the baby pig's head and bid-dunk!, right into his skull goes the bolt and such a squeal. Then down on the concrete plop and not a squeak out of him all you could see was him saying you said you'd mind me and you didn't" (131).

The reader, along with Francie, probably recalls the promise he made to his mother before her suicide. When Francie picks up a piglet of his own and repeats Leddy's gesture (despite the anguish he clearly experiences), the shock the reader feels carries with it a foreboding that more violence is to follow. This scene comes on the heels of one in which Francie, beaten and threatened by Mrs. Nugent's brother and a friend, responds by repeatedly smashing the friend's head with a stone. The scene in the abattoir, where Francie has supposedly found respectable employment but where he is most brutally treated serves as foreshadowing for the novel's most brutal moment—the murder of Mrs. Nugent.

The scene highlights once more Francie's powerlessness to effect any meaningful change and the absence of an authority figure in whom he can place his trust. The violent nature of Francie's actions escalates in response to the accumulation of violence he himself suffers—physically but also, more significantly, psychologically. His frustration and despair (most pathetically communicated in the loss of Joe's friendship) can find recourse only in destruction. Each defiant act simply leads to another encounter with a potentially oppressive institution that fails him in its own particular way. Whether by a pedophilic priest, the bumbling police, or an uncaring town, Francie is permitted, time and again, to slip through the cracks.

Through his interaction with Mrs. Nugent, Francie expresses most fully his frustration with the community. She comes to embody all of the harm that has been done to his family. Ironically, his anger arises in part from a recognition that what Mrs. Nugent speaks is not entirely false:

She said she knew the kind of us long before she went to England and she might have known not to let her son anywhere near the likes of me what else would you expect from a house where the father's never in, lying about in pubs from morning to night, he's no better than a pig. You needn't think we don't know what goes on in this house oh we know all right! Small wonder the boy is the way he is what chance has he got running about the town at all hours and the clothes hanging off him it doesn't take money to dress a child God love him it's not his fault but if he's seen near our Philip again there'll be trouble. There'll be trouble now mark my words.

After that ma took my part and the last thing I heard was Nugent going down the lane and calling back *Pigs—sure the whole town knows that!* (4)

This scene, the first confrontation between Mrs. Nugent and the Bradys reveals several significant facts: the Nugents' high social standing in the community, Mrs. Nugent's disgust with the Bradys, and, paradoxically, her insight into the life that Francie is living. She is sure to bring attention to her stay in England, distancing herself from "the kind of us," and establishing her superior position within the community from which to judge the Bradys. This attribution of the word "pigs" is to mark Francie for the rest of his life. That Mrs. Nugent takes it upon herself to speak for the community makes her an obvious target for Francie's anger and frustration.

Because this action comes so early in the novel, Mrs. Nugent's motivation for such hostility may not be immediately apparent to the reader. What is it about the Bradys, or indeed about herself, that causes her to lash out at them with such vitriol? In *Tropics of Discourse*, Hayden White makes the following observation:

In times of sociocultural stress, when the need for positive self-definition asserts itself but no compelling criterion of self-identification appears, it is always possible to say something like: "I may not know the precise content of my own felt humanity, but I am most certainly not like that," and simply point to something in the landscape that is manifestly different from oneself. This might be called the technique of ostensive self-definition by negation, and it is certainly much more generally practiced in cultural polemic than any other form of definition, except perhaps *a priori* stipulations. It appears as a kind of reflex action in conflicts between nations, classes, and political parties. (151-52)

Because precisely the same kind of distinction was constructed between colonizer and colonized, it is not surprising to see the bourgeoisie adopt it to establish their own superior standing. In a seemingly homogenous society such as Ireland, it is important to find someone who represents what one is not. In a statement particularly relevant to McCabe's novel, White later adds: "It is a tech-

nique that is especially useful for groups whose dissatisfactions are easier to recognize than their programs are to justify, as when the disaffected elements in our own society use the term pig to signal a specific attitude with respect to the symbols of conventional authority. If we do not know what we think 'civilization' is, we can always find an example of what it is not" (152). Although applying the attribution of "pig" to a different context, White's understanding of the process directly illuminates the technique used in *The Butcher Boy* by the community and Mrs. Nugent in particular.⁸ Her attack on the Bradys is meant to accentuate the distance between her family and theirs and to denote the all-important difference that distinguishes them. One might wonder, however, whether the community's eventual "forgiving" of Francie's actions signals some recognition that it shares some of his characteristics, that it is, in fact, closer to him than to Mrs. Nugent. It cannot condemn him outright, despite the brutality of his crime and his complete lack of remorse because to do so would be to condemn themselves, not only for what they have in common with Francie, but also for their lack of compassion for, or even interest in, Francie's plight prior to the murder of Mrs. Nugent.

Paradoxically, Mrs. Nugent comes closest to perceiving the desperate circumstances in which Francie is being raised. She is one of the few who speaks out on the topic. Where she falls short is in not recognizing her communal role in redressing the situation, in not recognizing that she can improve Francie's life, as she did later with Joe Purcell. Without question, stepping in when such circumstances arise is the community's responsibility. Moynihan criticizes the novel for sentimentalizing Francie and for letting him get away with too much. It would be more realistic, he concludes, if Mrs. Nugent were to stand up and put Francie in his place (29). That kind of action, however, would demand constructive engagement on Mrs. Nugent's part. She prefers to let the various institutions take the responsibility and simply remove the problem from sight. Perhaps unconsciously, Mrs. Nugent realizes that she cannot help the Bradys too much, for to do so would eliminate the Other by which she defines herself, a self dependent on an established, and dubious, superiority. Bhabha suggests that the stereotype is "a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive" (70). In other words, Mrs. Nugent, by exhibiting her desire to impose a stereotype on the Other (Francie), reveals her own anxiety about the instability of her (dominant) position. The distinction must exist for Mrs. Nugent's constructed identity to exist.

The Nugents represent an economic upsurge and a change in class structure in Ireland at that time.⁹ Francie's mother remarks that Mrs. Nugent has changed since the Nugents returned from their stay in London. We are never told the reason for their return, but the Nugents clearly feel they now belong to the upper crust of this community, a position beyond their status in England. The Bradys become an all-too-easy target for Mrs. Nugent who needs a contrast to validate her position in the community. The Nugents are not English but are Irish striving to be English, and becoming more imperial than the colonizer.¹⁰ A sense of infe-

riority, fostered by years of living in the shadow of the colonizer, needs to be constantly assuaged by the subjugation of another. For the community, that Other is the Bradys, who must be ostracized for the new conception of the community to be established; their presence simply serves to recall an Irishness that the new Ireland would rather not acknowledge. If Francie's parents are Irish stereotypes (the drunken father, the long-suffering mother) it is because they embody truths about the community that it must face, rather than live above, as the Nugents strive to do.

The nouveau middle-class lacks a sense of community; they merely wish to live comfortably, content with the minimal improvements that come their way. The existence of a stratum of people below them empowers them, allows them to feel that their lives are progressing. In this regard, Bhabha poses a significant question pertaining to the reconstruction of the neocolonial nation: "How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?" (2). Bhabha points to the inherent need for hierarchy that seems to exist within any community. It is not uncommon for the neocolonial state to construct that hierarchy on residual connections with the colonizer. Edward Said offers another explanation. He suggests that the colonizer's role of dominance is merely picked up by the bourgeoisie who have fostered a relationship with the colonizer. Nationalism as such is nothing more than a reaplication of the oppression applied by the colonizer in a different guise:

Yet for all its success in ridding many countries and territories of colonial overlords, nationalism has remained, in my opinion, a deeply problematic ideological, as well as sociopolitical enterprise. At some stage in the antire-sistance phase of nationalism there is a sort of dependence between the two sides of the contest, since after all many of the nationalist struggles were led by bourgeoisies that were partly formed and to some degree produced by the colonial power. [. . .] These bourgeoisies in effect have often replaced the colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative force; instead of liberation after decolonisation one simply gets the old colonial structures replicated in new national terms. (Said 74)

In fact, the colonizer is often responsible for establishing these long-lasting connections. It is not uncommon for economic ties to persist long after the colonizer has left, and it is subsequently understood that it is the colonizer, and not the neocolonial community, that will wield the economic power.

The Nugents' economic status and dominant position within the community reflect their apparent maintenance of strong links with the colonial power. Such wholehearted adoption of the colonizer's values, however, can only lead to a loss of "national" identity. Such a void, in McCabe's novel, is filled by the presence of subalterns in the form of Francie and his family. The legitimization of the

Nugents' authority arises from their stay in London, but they must return to Ireland in order to impose their hierarchical superiority on the community. In the same vein, the community also foists respect and adulation on Uncle Alo, who ostensibly works in London with "ten men under him." This adulation of both the Nugents and Uncle Alo indicates the extent to which the community has not managed to extract itself from under the colonizer's ideological shadow. In a community obsessed with its sense of inferiority, the slightest contact with the world of the colonizer (real or imagined) immediately invests that person with a value unattainable by the others. This can be interpreted as a kind of hybridity, but it seems evident that the Irish component is subservient to the English. The value system used to gauge the worth of an individual is entirely based on a structure imposed by the colonizer.

One consequence of this hybridity is that the colonized continue to perceive themselves as "secondary citizens" in contrast to the colonizer who, after all, brought civilization to this barbaric and uncultured land (or so the colonialist narrative goes). Such an inferiority complex is not easily shaken. There is no sense of the possibility of upward mobility within the community; such prestige can only be derived by realigning oneself with the colonizing power. Francie himself reflects this belief when he describes his own reaction to Uncle Alo:

I still couldn't stop looking at him, the gold tiepin and his polished nails, the English voice. Nugent's was only half-English. The more you thought it the harder it was to believe that Nugent had anything worth talking about. (28-29)

At times, Francie cannot hide the envy he feels for what the Nugents have, and Uncle Alo gives him a momentary upper hand, but an upper hand entirely defined through a connection with the colonizer rather than through any Irish attribute. This may partially explain Francie's father's need to crush Alo's illusion, though he clearly also wishes to bring Alo down to his own level. The neocolonial community exhibits an inability to fully imagine an identity existing beyond the perimeters of that domination. At a largely conscious level there is the continued attempt to establish a "national" character, but the community also lashes out at things that cannot really be expressed, and these remain primarily unconscious. Because it can identify no definite object as the source of frustration, it determines targets arbitrarily. And therefore any victory is transitory, as was Mr. Brady's diminishment of Alo. That the events in *The Butcher Boy* finally lead to brutal violence is not surprising, although the source of the violence may surprise.

Appropriately, the novel contains little history, indigenous or colonial, and references to an Irish past or events outside of Francie's narrative are understandably scant. Francie does not recognize the statue of Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, and his admission of ignorance is a telling one: "I didn't know anything about him except he was something to do with the English and all that" (40).¹¹ The ambiguity of the statement implies an ignorance of the dynamics of the cultural and historical contexts in which he lives. And the gardener at the reform

school who speaks of his involvement with Michael Collins is clearly lying, as Francie knows: "He licked his lips and little infantrymen ran from one eye to the other" (99). This idealized version of history is even contradicted by an old farmer near the end of the novel who, Francie notes, "was all talk about Michael Collins too except that he said he was the worst bastard ever was put on this earth because he sold out the country" (189). The only other historical reference is to a fountain in the town that honored Queen Victoria but, as Francie points out, she never came (110). The unreliability of the past is made clear, though Francie cannot apply this to his own personal narrative. McCabe's message appears to be that searching for a past has no point because it has already been constructed by the colonizer and thus has no real bearing on the formulation of one's (national) identity. This lack of historical awareness in a community whose past so firmly dictates its existence raises a number of questions. How does obliviousness to history affect an individual's or nation's sense of the present and its place in it? The lessons of the colonizer—the "education" and subjugation of the colonized—are ingrained in the life of the community. Thus, in contrast to the Bradys, the Nugents may feel secure, but that feeling is the result of a blind acceptance of a life largely dictated by the colonizer.

In a novel filled with ineffectual rebellion and acquiescence, Francie's response strikes an individualistic chord. Like the "Irishness" constructed by the colonizer, Francie's "piggishness" has been imposed on him by Mrs. Nugent. Lacking the necessary tools to fight back, Francie's only recourse is to adopt the identity and make it his own refuge. As his options diminish, he returns repeatedly to Mrs. Nugent's definition as a means of establishing his identity. But it is important for Mrs. Nugent that he do so. With the special zeal of the colonized, she has taken over the role of the colonizer who "attempt[s] to convince the colonized themselves of their irremovable deficiencies and the consequent naturalness and permanence of their subordination" (Cairns 178). David Lloyd echoes this idea when he speaks of the "implicit violence of identity formation, not so much in the sense that identity seems to provoke and legitimate a sectarian antagonism towards the different, as in the far more fundamental sense in which the formation of identity requires the negation of other possible forms of existing" (4). The community needs the Bradys to help them define themselves. By labeling the Bradys as pigs, Mrs. Nugent can discount their existence; their poverty and anguish are not the community's problem because their subhumanity is the source of the difficulties. As the community "evolves," lower forms of life must necessarily be excluded from the process. This exclusion results most perniciously through a control of narratives—the dominant culture tells the tales that must be told and retold, to the detriment of any other.

Thus, Francie Brady adopts or internalizes the dominant culture's hatred. As one critic notes: "Mrs. Nugent's words take Francie's life over until the pig and the butcher become one" (Baker). Mrs. Nugent's labeling of the Bradys as "pigs" is the trauma that unleashes Francie's self-loathing. He totally adopts the catego-

rization. He will be made into the antithesis of everything the Nugents represent for the community. Because Francie cannot define an identity of his own and has no past on which to construct it, he must assimilate Mrs. Nugent's attributions—but only to the degree that they are no longer hers but his own. This, of course, is twisted logic: Francie is not a pig nor a butcher, but in some ways he becomes both. Bhabha notes the propensity of the colonial to adopt a dual role, wishing to maintain his original identity while appropriating that of the oppressor: “The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s avenging anger” (44). The danger, of course, lies in the schizophrenic state that can arise from not actually inhabiting either space. This explains and illuminates Francie’s conflicted desires and actions. Indeed, we might stipulate that he can never be one or another and that his actions express that recognition. When he returns from Dublin to discover that his mother has committed suicide, his feelings of self-loathing and remorse are overwhelming: “As long as I walked the streets under them stars there’d be only one thing anyone could say about me and that was: I hope he’s proud of himself now, the pig after what he did on his poor mother” (47). Francie’s self-loathing reaches such a pitch that he condemns himself without the community’s direct involvement. This state of self-hatred is accompanied by guilt—for not keeping his promise to his mother, but mostly for wanting nothing more than to become just like the Nugents. Philip Nugent leads the life that he can only dream of and never possess. Joe’s infiltration into the Nugent’s circle, therefore, represents the supreme betrayal. Francie becomes the outsider who can only peer through the windows at a world that will never let him in. This transformation occurs, however, through an imposition of guilt and abjection. Francie constantly struggles with a sense of failure as well as the perpetual abuse he suffers at the hands of his family and the community. Failure and guilt are combined in the abattoir scene when he both identifies with and kills the piglet. From that point on, he is both victim and aggressor.

As noted, part of the neocolonial dilemma emerges in the inferiority the colonized feels in respect to the colonizer long after the latter has departed. Francie’s desire to be like the Nugents is not unlike the paradoxical relationship between colonizer and colonized. Although the colonized desperately wish to rid themselves of the colonizer, they unconsciously yearn for all that the colonizer has and is. When he breaks into the Nugents’ home, Francie imagines that he has been invited, admires the cleanliness and order of the home, and finally daydreams that he is Philip and, thus, that Mrs. Nugent is his mother. As he vandalizes the home and defecates on their carpet, he experiences conflicting visions. In the first, he is in command, telling Mrs. Nugent and Philip to act like pigs in his Pig School. In the second, he involuntarily imagines Mrs. Nugent symbolically offering her breast and smothering him with it:

Then I heard Philip Nugent’s voice. But it was different now, all soft and calm. He said: You know what he’s doing here don’t you mother? He wants

to be one of us. He wants his name to be Francis Nugent. That's what he's wanted all along! We know that—don't we mother?

Mrs. Nugent was standing over me. Yes, Philip, she said. I know that. I've known it for a long time.

Then she slowly unbuttoned her blouse and took out her breast.

Then she said: This is for you Francis.

She put her hand behind my head and firmly pressed my face forward. Philip was still at the bottom of the bed smiling. I cried out: Ma! It's not true. Mrs. Nugent shook her head and said: I'm sorry Francis its too late for all that now. You should have thought of that when you made up your mind to come and live with us! (64)

The degradation Francie imagines he is inflicting upon his victims is in fact directed toward himself. His daydream reveals his secret desires and the guilt he feels for having them. This fantasy recurs when he is on Father Sullivan's knee in the reform school. He then imagines Mrs. Nugent speaking to his now-dead mother: "Do you know what he did? He asked me to be his mother. He said he'd give anything not to be a pig. That's what he did on you Mrs Brady. That's why he came to our house. Her breast was choking me again, lukewarm in my throat" (97). The irrational guilt Francie feels for his mother's death revisits him continually as no one in the community attempts to console or understand him. Again, the burden of responsibility placed on this mere child brings disastrous consequences.

The relationship that the community has with the Bradys, and with Francie in particular, illuminates the transitional world of the aftermath of colonization. As Smyth points out, the community is in some ways responsible for Francie and what Francie becomes:

Such a community, so at odds with the official pastoral ideology of modern Ireland, finds the hero it deserves in Francie Brady, for as well as being the agent of evil and resentful revenge, Francie is also a scapegoat for this community, the empty, innocent vessel into which all its repressions and vices are poured. (82)

Such a conclusion endows the community with more agency than it actually possesses, but it emphasizes the responsibility the community shirks in its own quest for an identity. Francie's limited perspective finally causes him to turn on Mrs. Nugent as the focus of the community's disdain for his family. At times it appears as though he simply puts words in her mouth:

She leaned over and said something to Philip. I knew what she was saying but I don't think she knew I knew. She crinkled up her nose and said in a dead whisper: *Just stands there on the landing and lets the father do what he likes to her. You'd never do the like of that would you Philip? You'd always stand by me wouldn't you?* (11)

Obviously these are Francie's words, not Mrs. Nugent's, because they are a play on his own mother's words to him. The lines reflect Francie's own fears, limi-

tations, and irrational guilt projected into the mouth of Mrs. Nugent. Later, he believes he hears her say, "Of course you know what she was doing with the fuse wire don't you Philip?" (11). In his heart, Francie knows that his mother was contemplating suicide when he surprised her standing on the kitchen table with the fuse wire in her hand. He cannot bring himself to admit it, however, and it is easier to pretend that this was revealed to him in Mrs. Nugent's bitter whispers. These may not be Mrs. Nugent's words, but Francie is insightful enough to know that these are the mutterings of the community. He simply finds a voice for them.¹²

Part of Francie's problem, not unlike Ireland's, is that the presence of the dominant culture, or its converts such as the Nugents, causes him to focus on external factors rather than internal ones that may have produced his condition. What Francie yearns for, in fact, is a return to a time before the arrival of the Nugents. This nostalgia for a past before everything went wrong correlates with Ireland's striving to recover a precolonial identity. Nationalist movements are often founded on the evocation of a past where issues of identity were unsullied by the colonizer's stamp. Francie demonstrates a similar desire in his displays of sentimentality, whether in his relationship with Joe, his love for his mother, or his attachment to the idea of the idyllic honeymoon his parents ostensibly spent in Bundoran. His obsessive nostalgia can never be gratified and his idyllic belief finally crumbles when the manager of the hotel recalls how shabbily Francie's mother was treated by her husband. Francie pesters the woman with questions until she cannot prevent herself from blurting out the truth: "What can I tell you about a man who behaved the way he did in front of his wife. No better than a pig, the way he disgraced himself here. Any man who'd insult a priest the way he did. God help the poor woman, she mustn't have seen him sober a day in their whole honeymoon!" (193-94). He is thus the victim of another narrative constructed by his father. This realization should, of course, remove the blame from the Nugents because things were apparently bad before they arrived. Francie, however, is incapable or unwilling to make such a concession. Part of the paradox or irony of the neocolonial condition is that although one is now free to express fully one's identity, that sense of identity has been so inextricably tied to the colonial past that one can never be sure of ever achieving pure self-expression. The manager of the hotel should have disabused Francie of notions of an idyllic past, but what occurs instead is a corroboration of Mrs. Nugent's earlier labeling of the Bradys. In his confused and deeply disturbed state, Francie sees that he must eradicate the one obstacle that has constantly stood in the way of his happiness.

The murder of Mrs. Nugent emerges as the inevitable conclusion to this futile search for identity. Francie cannot shake her label; therefore, he must destroy the source of this identity. His act of violence is characteristically Irish if we see violence as the only recourse remaining in a struggle against the dominant culture. Francie's response may appear to feed into a particular Irish stereotype, an unthinking violence that is endemic to Irish society. But David Lloyd argues that

those who critique the violent nature of Irish society have missed the point: "Official history cannot address the possibility that both the persistence and the forms of violence in Irish history constitute not simply barbarous aberrations but a continuing contestation of a colonial civil society's modes of domination and representation" (128). In a similar fashion, Francie rebels not only against the adopted dominant position of Mrs. Nugent but also her representation of his family. Francie's action, as dramatic as it is, must not be perceived as anomalous, or as a momentary rupture in the otherwise harmonious fabric of the community. It is commensurate with, or representative of, a diffuse violence, or aggression, that takes various forms throughout the novel, most of which is directed at Francie himself.

The shocking depiction of the crime is intentional; McCabe wishes us to feel the depths of Francie's alienation and frustration. The brutality of Francie's crime is not mindless violence; there is a logic to it. Both the manner in which he kills Mrs. Nugent (like the piglets in the abattoir) and the scrawling of the word PIGS in her blood on their walls are a refutation of the identity the community has tried to impose on him. He is recovering the narrative in the only manner left to him. He is not the Other; he is the part of themselves that they are unwilling to acknowledge.¹³

The argument that McCabe's novel in some ways empathizes with Francie's plight ignores a fundamental fact reiterated throughout the novel: the principal reason the community does not truly punish Francie (even at the end of the novel) is that to do so would be to recognize him as part of the community. Doctor Roche may inquire and be suspicious but he does nothing. Father Bubble will simply dismiss Francie from the reform school rather than acknowledge what Francie's presence has uncovered about the pedophilic priest, Father Sullivan. Finally, even Mrs. Nugent's murder is presented by the lawyer as motivated by robbery. The truth cannot be revealed, for to do so would be to admit that Francie is not the Other, but a product of their world, or even an extreme manifestation of their own frustrations.¹⁴

In *The Butcher Boy*, McCabe does not present the archetypal confessional tale. Although we spend all our time in Francie's head, we never sense guilt, contrition or, in fact, change. He remains innately secure in who he has become. Considering where Francie is and what he has done, we might expect to read his narrative as a public confession or self-justification. Neither is the case, however. Francie makes no plea for forgiveness nor suggests any change in character or personality; in short, he never reveals any self-awareness. The absence of overtly political or historical commentary in the novel may reflect the degree to which such things have entered the national psyche and no longer need to be explicitly stated.¹⁵ That absence realistically, and rigorously, continues to embody Francie's limited world view.

Through the experience of Francie Brady, Patrick McCabe would have one reconsider postcolonial discourse and its emphatic pursuit of something called national identity.¹⁶ A rereading of the discourses established by the colonizer as well as the counter-discourses that have been created is the next logical step.

McCabe's novel seems to imply that avoiding the fate of both Francie Brady and the community in which he lives can only come through such a revisionary gesture.

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NOTES

1. Much debate has surrounded the question of Ireland's "postcolonial" status. Many critics argue that Ireland's complicity in her own colonization as well as the marked differences in the imposition of colonization (in contrast to Third World countries) eliminate her from consideration. Others maintain that Ireland is still "colonial" and hardly "postcolonial," primarily because of the ongoing situation in the North. Luke Gibbons suggests that the prefix post is misleading because it implies "historical closure" when in fact "it is precisely the absence of a sense of an ending which has characterized the national narratives of Irish history" (179). Ian Crump has shown that Ireland can indeed be considered as a "postcolonial" nation, but I prefer the term "neocolonial" as proposed by Ella Shohat. She points to the inadequacy of the term "postcolonial" for describing present-day situations: "The term 'post-colonial' carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past, undermining colonialism's economic, political, and cultural deformative-traces in the present. The 'post-colonial' inadvertently glosses over the fact that global hegemony, even in the post-cold war era, persists in forms other than overt colonial rule. As a signifier of a new historical epoch, the term 'post-colonial,' when compared with neo-colonialism, comes equipped with little evocation of contemporary power relations" (326). And it is these very "power relations" that are the subject of McCabe's novel.

2. "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 6).

3. Throughout the novel, Francie continually searches for identity. Pig is not the only label he adopts. He takes on various identities that reveal his inability to fit in, or accept life as it is: Algernon Carruthers, The Boy Who Could Walk Forever, Francie Brady—The Fugitive, and Adam Eterno.

4. Such a view is also put forth by Tom Herron who argues that in "McCabe's cataclysmic endings [. . .] a latent psychotic contagion is finally exposed in all its grotesqueness" (169).

5. Brown (35–36) interprets the ambivalent relationship between the protagonist and his parents as commonplace in Irish literature and metaphorically representative of the protagonist's relationship with Ireland.

6. For McCabe's thoughts on playing with language and everyday speech, see FitzSimon 186.

7. When, later in the novel, Mrs. Connolly volunteers to clean up the house after the discovery of Mr. Brady's death, the reader senses it is simply to gather more material for her neighborhood reportage.

8. For a detailed and illuminating examination of McCabe's use of pig imagery, and the stereotype's connections to colonial and neocolonial history, see Potts 85–91. "By associating Francie Brady, and indeed the whole Brady family, with pigs, McCabe alludes to the long English tradition of drawing a distinction between England and Ireland in the form of John Bull and Paddy the Pig" (87).

9. Smyth sees the Nugents as representative of a certain class: "As a well-off, middle-class family with experience of the wider world, less than pleased with the rural idiocy to which they have returned, the Nugents anticipate the new Ireland which economic and ideological change was beginning to make possible" (83).

10. In a pamphlet written for Field Day, Seamus Deane notes that the binary of Civilians and Barbarians has so long existed between the English and Irish that it has become a means of defining one's identity. The only way for the Irish to become civilized, using this paradigm, was to renounce their Irishness: "To become free and prosperous the Irish were evidently going to have to become English" (5). Such a feat is impossible, as Deane well knows, but the Nugents do their best to accomplish it.

11. Brown, for example, notes that "there is only enough overtly political comment in *The Butch-*

er Boy to underscore its overall absence from the novel" (41). Later he observes that "if Francie's understanding of Daniel O'Connell's role in Irish history is imperfect, he at least understands that imperialist aggressors are to be repelled, that he has a duty to his family and his nation, and this duty is specifically a duty owed the mother" (41-42).

12. At one point in the novel Joe tells Francie that "He didn't care what his ma or da said about me or my da or the Terrace but if I did things like that it would all be ruined" (53).

13. In this vein, Bhabha notes, "the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification—that is, to be for an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness" (45).

14. Lloyd points out that "Formations which resist incorporation within the state are not simply residues of pre-colonial cultures to be celebrated by nativists, but strictly speaking the 'unrepresentable' of the state" (9).

15. Discussing his own childhood, McCabe in an interview notes that "I think you would be aware, even growing up, that you come from a brutalised culture, to some extent [...] there's no question that there was a deep hurt at all levels of society, certainly in the small town that I lived in. I mean, it wasn't overt but you were always conscious of it" (FitzSimon 180-81).

16. Smyth attempts to situate McCabe's novel among contemporary Irish works and suggests that its discourse is a far more apocalyptic one: "If *The Journey Home* [Dermot Bolger] and *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* [Roddy Doyle] were part of the process whereby a young highly educated, post-nationalist community began to interrogate the discourses which had structured modern Ireland, as well as their own lives, McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* is the text wherein those discourses are most fully and most wickedly indicted" (81).

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