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Rafferty's Return: Diaspora and Dislocation in Edna O'Brien's "Shovel Kings"

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In the middle decades of the twentieth century, a generation of young men and women were leaving Ireland on a scale not witnessed since the era of the Great Famine a century before. The primary reason for this renewed large-scale emigration was economic, as successive Irish governments largely failed to deliver on the promises of independence (Delaney 2007: 36). De Valera's vision of a nation "joyous with the sounds of industry," rather than being realised in the fields and "cosy homesteads" of Ireland, had to be found on the building sites and hospital wards of Britain (De Valera 1980: 466). From the 1930s onwards, Britain displaced the United States as the primary country of choice for Irish migrants and London, and the south-east, in particular, became their most favoured destination (Ryan 1990: 49). While the Irish could be found in a wide range of jobs, they were disproportionately clustered in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. Irish construction workers, in particular, had a highly visible presence in British towns and cities.

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This may account for the figure of the navvy being popularly associated with Irish migration to Britain, despite the fact that women outnumbered men in the statistics for most of the twentieth century (Walter 2001: 124). However, with the exception of the testimonies collected for Ultan Cowley's (2001) history of the Irish navvy in Britain, there are surprisingly few recorded first-hand accounts in existence.[1] As a consequence, the Irish navvy has left a rather threadbare legacy in the recorded history of his adopted country. As the character of P.J. declares in the novel, *I Could Read the Sky* (O'Grady and Pyke 1997: 69): "We dig the tunnels, lay the rails and build the roads and buildings. But we leave no other sign behind us. We are unknown and unrecorded."

One of the reasons why the Irish navvy endures as an icon of national strength and endeavour abroad, however, may ironically be due to such fictional representations. Popular ballads such as *McAlpine's Fusiliers* and *Building Up and Tearing England Down* have held widespread appeal for many years.[2] The characters in John B. Keane's novel *The Contractors* (1993) are, perhaps, the most representative examples of such depictions in novel form.[3] Their exploits suggest that, during the 1950s and 1960s at least, life for the London-Irish navvy was a happy and optimistic one. But such men were part of what in latter years has become known in Ireland as "the lost generation." The term came into general usage in late 2003 after the screening of a documentary on primetime Irish television about the destitute plight of elderly Irish men in Britain (Rouse 2003; see also Bronwen Walter, this volume). Some of those interviewed for the programme had spent large parts of their working lives on the building sites of Britain. But due to advanced mechanisation in the construction industry and the insecure terms of their employment in the first place, these former navvies were now living destitute lives in the very neighbourhoods they helped rebuild after the Second World War. This was a stark corrective to the notion of the Irish navvy as a national hero. So disturbing were the images and accounts of the participants that heated debates took place in the Irish parliament after the broadcast and eventually led to a review by the government of its financial support to Irish welfare agencies in Britain. In short, the programme was a salutary reminder of the potential consequences of something that had appeared in the halcyon days of the "Celtic Tiger" to no longer be a major feature of Irish society, namely, emigration.

Given its preoccupation with women's issues, Edna O'Brien's work might appear to be an improbable source for insights into the condition of the Irish navvy in post-war Britain. The Irish construction workers who appear in her early novels, such as *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964) and *Casualties of Peace* (1966), are foils for her female heroines rather than fully rounded characters in their own right. But, in her short story, *Shovel Kings* (2011), O'Brien presents us with something quite different. By tracing the life of Rafferty, a retired London-Irish navvy and his work-mates, she skilfully excavates a marginal yet finely delineated migrant milieu where unspoken social codes and practices of masculinity, imported from rural Ireland, are refigured in an urban ethnic context. In a revealing extract from her memoir *Mother Ireland* (1976: 37), there is a clue that O'Brien might eventually return to the topic of the Irish navvy in her work:

> To meet one's kinsmen is to unleash a whole sea of unexpected emotionalism. I was having a walk one afternoon in London, and passing a building site I slowed down to shield my eyes from the likelihood of grit. A young Roscommon boy asked, "Are you happy?"
> "Not very", I said.
> He beamed at hearing a fellow-countrywoman.
> "Any chance of tea at four?"
> "No chance." I said. (I had to be somewhere).
> "You won't forget us, will you?" he said.
> "I won't", I said.

Although it was published some 35 years later, *Shovel Kings* is proof that O'Brien kept to her word. The story is set in north-west London in the late 1990s. It opens with a description of Rafferty in Biddy Mulligan's pub in Kilburn. It is late afternoon on St. Patrick's Day and he is alone at the bar. The narrator informs us that, "he could have been any age, and he seemed like a man on whom a permanent frost had settled. He drank the Guinness slowly, lifting the glass with a measured gravity" (O'Brien 2011: 1). The story then moves between a number of other emblematic Irish migrant locations: the building site, Sunday mass, the sparsely furnished digs and the local Irish community centre. It also alludes to some of the enduring images of post-war navvy life, such as the hiring fair at Cricklewood Broadway and the ogre of the merciless "subbie."[4]

"The camaraderie of the trenches" is something one normally associates with the western front during the First World War. But in *Shovel Kings*, it applies to the teamwork required of navvies to dig trenches and lay pipes and cables for the city's utilities. While Cowley (2001: 197) explains how this "fraternity of the workplace" could sometimes be a constraint on individualism, it nevertheless played an important role in terms of mutual support and solidarity, especially at times of misfortune. Rafferty alludes to this in relation to a fatal accident that takes place on a building site in Hounslow. We learn about the emotional impact of the incident on him and his workmates and their collective efforts to ensure that the cost of transporting the body back to Ireland is not borne by the family. "A collection was taken in the pub to send the remains home" the narrator explains. "Lads gave what they could. A pound was a lot in those days, but several pound notes were slung into the tweed cap that had been thrown onto the counter" (O'Brien 2011: 13). Scenes like this, along with the following homage to the heroism of the Irish navvy with which *Shovel Kings* concludes, firmly situate this story in a distinct subgenre of Irish migrant literature, which I've termed the "navvy narrative" (Murray 2005):

> Under the pavements were the lines of cable that linked the lights of the great streets and the lesser streets of London, as far distant as Kent. I thought of the Shovel Kings, and their names suddenly materialized before me, as in a litany—Haulie, Murph, Moleskin Muggavin, Turnip O'Mara, Whisky Tipp, Oranmore Joe, Teaboy Teddy, Paddy Pancake, Accordion Bill, Rafferty, and countless others, gone to dust (O'Brien 2011: 36).

But *Shovel Kings* is more than simply an elegy to a "lost generation" of London Irishmen. It is also a perceptive insight into the reasons why one of them fails to realise a long-cherished dream of returning to live in Ireland. Although the publication of the story in 2011 predates *The Gathering* by two years, it constitutes an important challenge to the overly optimistic governmental discourse circulated in relation to the initiative. The concept of *The Gathering* was a by-product of the 2009 Global Irish Economic Forum, which was held to address how Ireland would overcome economic recession. It was launched by the Taoiseach in May 2012

and designed to mobilise and persuade members of the Irish diaspora to contribute to the Republic's economic recovery by returning to Ireland in 2013 for a series of government and community supported events. The following statement by the CEO of Fáilte Ireland at the launch was typical of the official rhetoric surrounding the event: "The real power of the Gathering lies in its ability to leverage the efforts of any Irish citizen, community group or indeed any diaspora member to roll up their sleeves and take an active part in mobilising behind an initiative to support our national recovery."[5] However, as Avtar Brah (1996) observes, the relationship between any nation state and its diaspora is more complicated and contested than such efforts to harness diaspora sentiment to national expedience might suggest. Brah's notion of "diaspora space" acknowledges how both those who leave and those who stay are deeply implicated in the social, political and cultural processes and effects of migration. Diaspora space is, she writes, "where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle" (1996: 208). Although Brah is primarily concerned with the experience of the migrant in the location of destination, diaspora space might equally apply to the location of departure and the community that the migrant leaves behind. Brah argues that diaspora space is a "site of immanence" where multiple subject positions are "juxtaposed" and "proclaimed or disavowed" according to historical circumstances (1996: 208). This is particularly significant in regard to *The Gathering*, when "those who left" and "those who stayed put" (to use Brah's terminology) were encouraged not only to reacquaint themselves with their personal and family histories of migration but to actively re-engage with what it means to be Irish by returning to the country (if migrants) or welcoming them home (if not). By reading Brah's notion of diaspora space in this way, each party here is a "subject-in-process" which "consciously and unconsciously replays and resignifies positions in which it is located and invested" (1996: 125). At the centre of this process is the role of narrative. Rather than simply being a vehicle for their expression, narrative, Brah suggests, is an intrinsic part of how diasporic identities are configured and re-configured over time:

> [M]ultiple journeys may configure into one journey via a *confluence of narratives* as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity that "diasporic community" is differently imagined under different historical circumstances. By this I mean that the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life (1996: 183).

In *Shovel Kings*, we have a diasporic narrative which pivots on the unsuccessful return to Ireland by its central protagonist, Rafferty. By doing so, it raises questions about the efficacy of return for migrants who have lived away from their native countries for so long. In the context of *The Gathering*, it provokes further questions about how relevant such an initiative is to the numerous elderly Irish people in Britain, like Rafferty, for whom meaningful return remains an aspiration rather than a reality. Through the character of Rafferty, we not only learn about the hardships that many of his generation of Irish migrants experienced in post-war London, but we also discover the kind of difficulties such individuals confront when they decide to return to their homeland. In particular, the story highlights the dissonance between the eager expectations and the harsh realities of repatriation. The motif of the returnee in Irish culture has long provided the prism through which both positive and negative aspects of Irish society have been refracted. At the opening of *Shovel Kings*, Rafferty is referred to as "the quiet man", in retrospect an ironic reference it seems to Sean Thornton, the idealised returnee in John Ford's (1952) famous film. Rafferty's experience, however, is more analogous to that of James Bryden, who returns to Ireland after 13 years in New York, in George Moore's short story *Homesickness* (1903). Like Bryden, Rafferty ends up torn between two senses of home, neither of which is entirely satisfactory. Through his experience of migration and return, Rafferty is confronted by questions about his sense of national identity and belonging in a more intense way than may have been the case for those individuals who never left Ireland in the first place.[6] By ultimately agreeing to tell the story of his life to the narrator of *Shovel Kings*, Rafferty begins to come to terms with such questions.

"The story of a life", Paul Ricoeur (1988: 246) wrote, "continues to be reconfigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This reconfiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told." Self-knowledge, Ricoeur contended, is derived from a combination of interpretation (which he termed "refiguration") and aspiration (which he termed "prefiguration"). This is a view supported by Paul John Eakin (1999: 100) who writes, "narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience." Self and story, he says, are, "complementary, mutually constituting aspects of a single process of identity formation" (Eakin 1992: 198). In the following passage, Peter Brooks (1984: 3) elaborates on this position:

> Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.

Identity, it would seem therefore, cannot exist outside of time and space, and narrative, as an inherently time/space mode of articulation, provides us with the means of expressing and mediating this. According to Ricoeur, fictional as well as factual ingredients and practices are crucial to understanding how personal identities are constituted. In order to illustrate this, he examined the twin components of fact and fiction through history-writing and novel-writing respectively. The manner in which facts and fictions interweave and displace each other within these narrative genres became a central focus of his enquiry. In his three-volume study entitled *Time and Narrative* (1988), Ricoeur argued that narrative and characterisation are closely related not only in literature but also in the relationship between society and the individual. Human life he states is "an activity and a passion in search of a narrative" (Ricoeur 1991b: 29), but we only reach a satisfactory understanding of our identities, he argues, courtesy of interpretive detours through what Richard Kearney terms the

"significations of history and culture, which reside outside our immediate consciousness" (Kearney 1986: 92). If the construction of a narrative identity is an amalgamation of how we see ourselves as individuals on the one hand, and as part of society on the other, then the relationship between the stories we tell about ourselves and those we hear told about others is significant. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1984: 360–61) argues, "I am part of [others' stories], as they are part of mine. The narrative of any life is part of an interlocking set of narratives."

This interlocking between an individual's life and the significant people in it is clearly apparent in *Shovel Kings*. Rafferty's narrative is presented in the series of accounts that he divulges to the narrator of the story, an unnamed Irish female migrant, who finds herself in Biddy Mulligan's prior to a consultation with her psychoanalyst. Even before Rafferty and the woman meet, we discover they have something in common. Apart from being Irish migrants in London, they both have ambivalent feelings about the St Patrick's Day celebrations which are beginning to gather pace around them. The somewhat lacklustre nature of the festivities is signalled by the sprigs of shamrock which look "a little forlorn" as they are passed around the pub (O'Brien 2011: 4). The narrator reads a newspaper report of the weather in New York and recalls how on St Patrick's Day, she had "stood among milling crowds as they cheered floats and bands, feeling curiously alone in the midst of all that celebration" (2011: 2). Rafferty, meanwhile, endures the celebrations taking place in his local pub with "a quiet sufferance" (2011: 3). St Patrick's Day is a festival that has considerable significance for the Irish diaspora, something borne out by the fact that it is celebrated on a larger scale in Irish communities outside of the country than it is in Ireland itself (Cronin and Adair 2002: xvi). This does not, however, necessarily mean that it is fully welcomed by everybody. For Rafferty and the narrator, it is something they consent to as a necessary annual recognition of their status as Irish migrants, but only reluctantly. Research into St Patrick's Day celebrations in London provides some explanation of such attitudes. Marc Scully has observed that, "St. Patrick's Day remains something of a cipher through which Irishness in Ireland and the Irishness of the diaspora are forced to engage with one another at least once a year" (Scully 2012: 120). There are clear echoes here of the aspirations disseminated in much

of the state propaganda about *The Gathering*. One wonders, therefore, if Rafferty and his newly acquired friend might not agree with the sentiments expressed by one of Scully's interviewees who complains that "the raucous kind of paddywhackery element of what passes for Irish culture in this country is not something that appeals to me" (2012: 132).[7]

Apart from their somewhat forced inclusion in this grand narrative of national identity, Rafferty and the narrator have something else in common. They both have personal stories to tell: the narrator to her analyst and Rafferty (as he gradually accedes to her befriendment over the coming months) to the narrator. We are not party to the content of the narrator's therapy sessions: it remains an unarticulated but implied confessional frame of reference within which a series of three key accounts by Rafferty are situated.[8] The first of these disclosures is about Rafferty's arrival in London in the late 1950s, his search for employment and his problematic relationship with his father. The second is about the death of his mother, how he misses her funeral due to a drinking binge and his subsequent descent into alcoholism and vagrancy. The final story is about his relationship with Grania, a young woman he falls in love with, but with whom he finds he is ultimately unable to settle down. Within each of these stories a number of other stories are embedded. In the first one, this happens in a linear fashion with a string of anecdotes about the larger-than-life individuals that Rafferty worked with on the buildings. In the second story, when Rafferty discloses his problems with drinking, we read an account by his friend Madge of a diary entry she wrote about the recent death of her husband from alcoholism, something she imparts to Rafferty, resulting in his eventual reform of his own drinking habits. Finally, in the third story we learn about how Rafferty becomes enthralled by tales told by his partner Grania and how she in turn learnt them from the old people of her village back in Ireland. At each stage of the story cycle, therefore, the embeddedness of the narratives recounted becomes increasingly apparent. In the first stage, we have a linear sequence of anecdotes, in the second, a story within a story and in the final stage stories within a story within a story.

This final stage is particularly interesting because it highlights the transmission of storytelling skills. The sequence of transmission takes place from the old people of Grania's home village to Grania herself, to

Rafferty and finally to the narrator who is responsible for the frame story we are told as readers. William Trevor (1989: ix) once wrote, "Stories of one kind or another have a way of pressing themselves into Irish conversation, both as entertainment and as a form of communication." The following quotation exemplifies how Grania's stories play this role in her relationship with Rafferty:

> He recalled standing outside her digs till one or two in the morning, hearing her soft voice as she bewitched him with stories. Listening to her was like being transported. Her father was a tailor who also had a pub and grocery, where people drank, mulled over the latest piece of gossip. She herself preferred when one of the old people, from up the country, happened to come in and tell stories of the long ago (O'Brien 2011: 28).

As Ricoeur (1991a: 131) reminds us, we "re-interpret the narrative identity that constitutes us in the light of stories handed down to us by our culture." In *Shovel Kings*, stories of various kinds help create a web of such personal associations for Rafferty. Not only are they vehicles for his liaisons with the narrator and Grania, but they also elucidate his relationship with his mother and father and his pivotal encounter with Madge. Furthermore, narrative plays a formative role in other aspects of Rafferty's life. His heroic aspirations as a young man are mediated through his love for a cowboy novel by Zane Grey (1912), which sows the seeds of his wanderlust and eventual migration. Years later, his hope of return to Ireland is ignited by hearing the Irish ballad *The Galway Shawl* played on the pub jukebox.[9]

Rafferty's return, when it does come in the late 1990s, sets the scene for an encounter between old and new Ireland. The former navvy secures a job looking after the elderly relative of a successful building contractor. Courtesy of a fellow migrant, who unlike himself had made good abroad, Rafferty is able to realise the dream of return he had always cherished. However, he discovers that he has returned to a country he no longer recognises. "Even when he went to the pub, Rafferty didn't feel at home" the narrator informs us. "It was noisy and brash, young people coming and going, no quiet corner to brood in" (O'Brien 2011: 34). Rafferty also discovers that no one is interested in his tales about his life in London. To

his dismay, he discovers that they have no purchase at a time when the historical pattern of Irish migration had seemingly ended with the birth of the Celtic Tiger. In preparation for her novel, Edna O'Brien conducted a number of interviews with elderly Irish men in community centres in Kilburn and Camden. This was a technique that Timothy O'Grady used for his novel *I Could Read the Sky,* an equally elegiac but more impressionistic account of an elderly Irish navvy in London adjusting to a sense of displacement at the end of his working life. At approximately the same time as O'Brien's novel is set, the social science researcher Gerard Leavey conducted a series of similar interviews in north London (Leavey et al. 2004). Leavey found that returning to live in Ireland was considered by most of his informants to be "an implausible hope" and for many of them, "rapidly changing values and behaviour in Ireland" contributed to their rejection of return as an option (Leavey et al. 2004: 776). They also "expressed a sense of regret tinged with resentment that they were excluded from this 'new prosperous Ireland' and poorly rewarded for the sacrifices they had made" (Leavey et al. 2004: 773). Rafferty's experience of return would appear to vindicate these views as well as the following analysis of the phenomenon by Eric Olsson and Russell King (2008: 260):

> Narratives have the power to move people back to their homeland since the "narrative of return" is both a grand narrative of most, if not quite all, diasporic communities, and an individual narrative fueled by the transformation of this return metanarrative into a personal project constructed in the heart and mind of each aspiring returnee. What results is a form of migration or spatial mobility that remains rather hard to categorize or label—not quite return migration, often not a "reintegration" of "repatriates", and not always a "resettlement" in the homeland.

Such aspirations constitute, in Ricoeur's terms, a form of prefigured narrative identity, which he insists must ultimately be reconciled to the historical realities within which all individuals are positioned. The precarious interaction that takes place in such circumstances between facts and fictions are evident in a warning that Salman Rushdie (1982: 10) expressed about an equivalent experience in the context of his own homeland:

> if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

"Irelands of the mind," to paraphrase Rushdie, find fruition in this way through the stories and anecdotes that Irish migrants trade with each other. For Rafferty, a somewhat retrospective and idealised notion of his homeland is partly what has sustained him during his many years abroad. But, closely allied to this, is a more immediate and ethnic sense of Irishness borne of his migrant experience in London.

It is clear that even before his departure for Ireland, Rafferty is already experiencing a nostalgic longing for place. But, rather than the homeland he is about to return to, he idealises a particular London building site where he worked as a navvy and describes an impromptu party that he and his workmates held at the close of a working day, recalling "a winter evening, the glow of the fire, the leaping flames of red and blue, dancing in that London wasteland, as if in some Roman amphitheatre" (O'Brien 2011: 33). The building site here is transformed in Rafferty's memory from a place of routine toil to one of celebration and spontaneity. The reference to the amphitheatre indicates how it has become an arena for a collective performance of diasporic identity, a common trope of the "navvy narrative" which is echoed in both Keane's *The Contractors* (1993: 171–8) and *I Could Read the Sky* (O'Grady and Pyke 1997: 125). Camden Town, the neighbourhood where Rafferty first arrived as a green 15-year-old, also retrospectively acquires the status of a surrogate homeland:

> I always (he said, quite shyly) missed Camden. Camden was where I first came, and though I cried my eyes out in the beginning and walked those hopeless sullen streets, it was where I had put roots down. The odd thing was that you can be attached to a place, or a person, you don't particularly like, and he put it down to mankind's addiction to habit (O'Brien 2011: 16–17).

Camden Town and Kilburn are iconic locations in the Irish migrant imaginary. But, due to socio-economic changes in London in 1980s and 1990s, the former had lost most of the vestiges of this status by the turn

of the century. Perhaps, this was why Rafferty had retreated to the latter, which even then remained a recognisably Irish neighbourhood. A similar example of his internal migrant exile is apparent en route back from a car-boot sale on the outskirts of London. He stops off with the narrator for a drink at a pub in an unfamiliar part of town. Although it is an Irish pub, it is located in a strongly multicultural area of London where they are told that the Irish are "no longer in the majority" (O'Brien 2011: 26). Both of them are initially apprehensive, but this is soon dispelled once the music starts: "Tapping one foot, Rafferty listened, listening so intently he seemed to be hearing it there and then, and also hearing it from a great distance, rousing tunes that ushered him back to the neon purlieu of the Galtymore Dance Hall in Cricklewood" (O'Brien 2011: 27). On this occasion, Cricklewood is subject to Rafferty's nostalgic longings. This is somewhat ironic given that it is only a mile up the road from Kilburn, where he had experienced a similar sense of displacement from Camden Town. Actual physical distance and geography, therefore, appear to be irrelevant to Rafferty's sense of displacement. When the barman in Biddy Mulligan's remarks that "exile is in the mind and there's no cure for that" one realises that this might be Rafferty's fate. Not only is he suspended between Ireland and England, but even within London he is torn between his attachments to different Irish neighbourhoods. One of the values of *Shovel Kings*, and stories like it, is that they invite us into the mindset of the migrant, encouraging us to empathise with their aspirations and their attendant disillusionments. Return to Ireland for Rafferty is a failure, but as a consequence he acquires a clearer understanding of himself as a migrant than he had before. He realises that his relationship with home is inextricably bound up with the fact that he has lived most of his life as a migrant in London rather than in Ireland. His sense of Irishness, therefore, is a diasporic one, but his full appreciation of this is only possible through narrative, in his case storytelling. During his aborted return to Ireland, he discovers how not at home he feels when no one there is interested in his stories of London. Conversely, when he is back in London and befriended by a fellow Irish migrant, he discovers someone who recognises the value of his stories and enables him to articulate a profound sense of displacement. Narrative, in other words, provides a cognitive conduit for Rafferty to realise an identity, albeit fractured, in the interstices between his past life and present circumstances.

Immense social, political and cultural changes took place in Ireland in the mid-1990s. Not only did it become one of the fastest growing economies in the world, but as the Peace Process gathered pace, the country began to blossom with a new-found sense of artistic and cultural confidence. Whilst all of these developments were positive and welcome, they nevertheless resulted in an inevitable and sometimes challenging reassessment of what it meant to be Irish, both at home and abroad.[10] For Rafferty's generation of Irish migrants, this was perplexing. While they were away, the country they had left in the 1950s and 1960s had been transformed. This is only fully comprehended by Rafferty when he returns to Ireland and witnesses such changes first hand. The experience is deeply disturbing and effectively ruptures his sense of belonging to his homeland. Once he is back in London, storytelling provides him with the emotional and psychological cypher he requires to overcome this. It enables him to enunciate hitherto unarticulated memories and feelings. In the course of telling the narrator the story of his life, Rafferty expresses a sense of migrant identity, even if this is not something he would necessarily have fully acknowledged as such.

Rather like migration itself, Rafferty's stories are a form of transportation, albeit a virtual one. Courtesy of his testimonies, the narrator (his listener) and we as readers travel with him across time and place. First, he takes us to London and then to Ireland of the late 1990s; then subsequently to London and Ireland of the late 1950s and 1960s. For Rafferty, such narrative journeys become the very texture of his migrant experience and identity, weaving a web of "narrative diaspora space" across two countries and across his adopted city.[11] In the process, he learns, painfully, that when a person decides to migrate, they must forego forever the luxury of a settled sense of home. This is precisely why, for migrants, stories are so important. In 1951, Theodor Adorno wrote, "For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live."[12] What is notable about *Shovel Kings* is that this applies as much to the oral tradition of storytelling as to its literary equivalent. By creating the character of Rafferty, O'Brien has illuminated an occluded narrative in the history of Irish migration. Rafferty's life may not be the success story of Dan Murray in *The Contractors*, nor is it animated by the heroic feats of physical prowess found in the navvy ballad tradition, but it is undoubtedly

more representative of the majority of Irish male migrants' experiences in London at this time than either of these. Rafferty not only has to come to terms with the changes that take place in his personal life but developments in Irish life more generally whilst he has been abroad. Through his stories, we see how (in Paul Ricoeur's terms) a personal sense of identity evolves over time in response to life events and the broader narratives generated through history and culture. Likewise, at a time when the presentation of Irishness in state-sponsored initiatives has promoted a sense of seamlessness between Ireland and its communities abroad, *Shovel Kings* reveals striking dissonances in this relationship. If Brah's notion of diaspora space reveals the tendency of metanarratives to assert overdetermined notions of the migration experience, then *Shovel Kings* likewise illustrates how, rather than being unambiguous and cohesive, migrant identities are formed within contested narratives of nation, location and return. The significance of this, in the wake of *The Gathering*, is not only evident for Rafferty and his real-life peers but also for Irish society more generally.

Notes

1. This scarcity is also the case for Irish nurses, a popular choice of occupation for Irish women in Britain at this time. See Tony Murray (2017).
2. Both of these songs were written by Dominic Behan in the early 1960s and recorded by The Dubliners in 1966 and 1983 respectively.
3. For an example of such a figure from an earlier era, see the character of Moleskin Joe in Patrick MacGill's (1914) *Children of the Dead End: The Autobiography of a Navvy*.
4. The "subbie" (i.e. subcontractor) often had a reputation for exploiting his workforce. See Cowley (2001: 194–5).
5. Press release by Fáilte Ireland, 11 May 2012, available at: http://www.failteireland.ie/Footer/Media-Centre/Taoiseach-Tanaiste-launch-The-Gathering-Ireland-20.aspx (accessed 5 January 2016).
6. For an analysis of Rafferty's sense of displacement through the work of Julia Kristeva, see Jeanette Roberts Shumaker (2014).
7. See also John Nagle (2002).

8. Another possible frame-of-reference is Holy Confession which, given his relationship with Roman Catholicism, one can assume Rafferty was probably practicing. See O'Brien (2011: 9).
9. It is possible that O'Brien may have intended to make an ironic allusion here to the great wandering Irish bard, Antoine Ó Raifteirí.
10. One of the unforeseen consequences of Ireland's economic growth was that fact that it became a nation of net immigration rather than net emigration as migrants from countries such as Poland and Nigeria radically altered the social profile of the country's cities and towns.
11. For an explanation of the concept of "narrative diaspora space," see Tony Murray (2012: 13).
12. See Adorno (1991: 51).

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