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Traumatic Childhood Memories and the Adult Political Visions of

Sinéad O’Connor, Bono, and Phil Lynott

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Sinéad O’Connor, Paul “Bono” Hewson of U2, and the late Phil Lynott of Thin Lizzy are three of Ireland’s most famous rock musicians, but that is not all that these celebrated singer-songwriters have in common. Memories of traumatic events and/or circumstances from their formative years in Dublin greatly influenced the political visions of all three artists in later life, as expressed through their lyrics and live performances. In O’Connor’s songs protesting the handling of abuse cases by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and England’s ill treatment of the peoples it has colonised,¹ she has repeatedly returned to the image of the abused or endangered child – a reflection of what she has called the “torture” suffered at the hands of her mother in childhood (qtd in Loughrey). Likewise, the effect of the May 1974 Dublin bombings perpetrated by loyalist paramilitaries on Bono and his best friend’s brother, Andy Rowen, inspired several important U2 songs. Examples include tracks addressing Northern Irish violence, the reconciling of Catholic and Protestant Irishness (which – obviously – also relates to Bono’s half-Catholic, half-Protestant background) and heroin abuse in 1980s Dublin. Finally, while Phil Lynott’s music was not used for political activism in the way – or to the degree – that O’Connor’s and U2’s has been, there is one highly significant political

¹ I am following O’Connor in focusing on England, as opposed to the UK or Britain more generally.

agenda in his work. His experiences of racial prejudice during his Dublin childhood led him to repeatedly (if sometimes subtly) assert the validity and power of a black Irish identity.

Sinéad O'Connor

Sinéad O'Connor has stated that during her formative years in Glenageary, Co. Dublin, her mother Marie was physically and sexually abusive. O'Connor has asserted that her mother “ran a torture chamber” that “she was a person who took delight in hurting you” (qtd in Loughrey). O'Connor’s parents separated when she was nine years old, but she and two siblings were left in the charge of their mother – and, after that, the abuse only got worse. At 13, she went to live with her father and his new partner, but she could not settle, due to the trauma she had experienced at the hands of her mother. O'Connor began “acting out”, skipping school and shoplifting, and this led to her being placed for 18 months in a Magdalene asylum run by the Sisters of Charity when she was 15. While she flourished artistically there, she also experienced the severe discipline and “punishments” that were common in such Catholic-run institutions (Frawley “Last”). This undoubtedly contributed to her fraught relationship with the Roman Catholic Church in later years. She briefly attended a Quaker secondary school in Waterford, before dropping out to pursue her musical ambitions in Dublin. During her teenage years, she came on In Tua Nua’s 1985 hit single “Take My Hand” (which she co-wrote), and live performances with a band she co-founded, Ton Ton Macoute, brought her to national attention. She subsequently went solo, landed a record deal with Ensign Records, and moved to London. The music she would make over subsequent decades (during which she was based first in England and later back in Dublin) would frequently return to the subject of the abuse suffered during her childhood. Her remarkable ability to lyrically and musically evoke the terror experienced at the hands of her mother has been confirmed by her brother, the bestselling novelist Joseph O'Connor, who has claimed

that he finds it difficult to listen to his sister's music because it reminds him too much of their painful formative years (Bannon).² It should be stressed, however, that Sinéad O'Connor has repeatedly returned to images of abused or endangered children in her lyrics and live performances not simply with an eye towards exorcising her own personal demons but also as part of her attempts to make strident political statements related to Ireland and – on occasion – the wider world.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is her appearance on the late-night US sketch show *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, on 3 October 1992. This performance turned into a powerful protest highlighting abuse perpetrated by the Roman Catholic clergy over decades in Ireland, as well as the Church's failure to protect children in its care and in abusive family homes. As someone raised in a home where her mother was not stopped from abusing her by the clergy or her Catholic neighbours and as someone later placed in a Catholic reformatory tied to a Magdalene Laundry,³ this was a subject close to O'Connor's heart.

On the show, O'Connor stood before a tall metal stand topped with ecclesiastical candles and draped in a green, yellow, and red Rastafarian scarf, and performed an *a capella* version of Bob Marley's "War" – the original lyrics of which are based on a speech that Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I made before the United Nations General Assembly in 1963, in which he strongly condemned racism. In O'Connor's *SNL* version, she subtly altered the lyrics of the later verses to make clear that she was condemning "child abuse" committed by an unnamed "regime". She sang:

² The O'Connor children have suggested that the trauma was worsened by the fact that their mother died in a car crash in 1985 (i.e., when Sinéad was 19), which meant that they never got "closure" in their relationships with her.

³ A study carried out by Ireland's Health Service Executive (HSE) in 2012 discovered that the Dublin reformatory where O'Connor was sent – the An Grianán Training Centre – and the adjoining High Park Magdalene Laundry were "one and the same thing" (Ó Fátharta). Despite this, inmates of An Grianán were initially excluded from the government's Magdalene redress scheme; they were eventually included after public protest.

Until the ignoble and unhappy regime
Which holds all of us through
Child abuse, yeah, child abuse, yeah,
Sub-human bondage
Has been toppled, utterly destroyed
Everywhere is war
War in the east, war in the west,
War up north, war down south
There's war and the rumours of war
Until that day, there is no continent which will know peace.

O'Connor then shout/sang "Children! Children!" and then simply shouted "Fight!", before she resumed singing the lines "we find it [fighting] necessary" and "we know we will win / we have confidence in the victory of good over evil". Just before reaching the word "evil", she held up a photo of Pope John Paul II; after finishing the line, she tore the photo into pieces and implored the audience to "Fight the real enemy!"

During the mid-to-late-1980s, various (if sporadic) books and articles drew attention to the physical and sexual abuse of children perpetrated by priests, nuns, and Christian Brothers within Ireland's Catholic Church during the twentieth century.⁴ Those familiar with these investigative reports, personal testimonies, and semi-fictionalised accounts would have had greater context for O'Connor's protest. They would also have recognised that she was strongly suggesting that, given the number of clerical personnel involved in the scandals, the

⁴ Important examples include the books *Nothing to Say* (1983) by Gerard Mannix Flynn, *Children of the Poor Clares* (1985) by Mavis Arnold and Heather Laskey, and *The God Squad* by Paddy Doyle (1988).

church hierarchy (all the way up to the Vatican) would had to have known about the widespread abuse and – by covering it up – implicitly condoned it. As it happened, many simply assumed that the 25-year-old woman making this protest was indiscriminately criticising the Catholic Church and was tactically using “shock value” to generate publicity. In the weeks following her *SNL* performance, O’Connor was condemned by figures as disparate as Madonna (qtd in Brozan) and Joe Pesci (who said that he would have given her “such a smack” if it had been his show). She was even booed by the attendees of a Bob Dylan tribute concert at Madison Square Garden two weeks after her *SNL* appearance. When O’Connor came on stage to sing Dylan’s “I Believe in You” and was met with deafening jeers, she twice signalled to the keyboardist to stop playing the Dylan song and then angrily launched into her version of “War”, aggressively pointing her finger during the lines about “child abuse” to emphasise the meaning of her original protest. This gesture was lost on many of the people in attendance (a significant number of whom booed her again after the song was over) – which is ironic given that they were supposedly fans of one of history’s most famous “protest singers”.

Posterity has, of course, been kind to O’Connor with regards to her *SNL* appearance. Even though NBC makes sure that reruns of that *SNL* episode show the dress rehearsal version of O’Connor’s performance (in which she holds up and does not rip a picture of a Balkan refugee child), many commentators have indicated that they now understand and appreciate O’Connor’s protest – an understanding undoubtedly influenced by the breaking of similar clerical abuse scandals across the world (see, for example, Agresta; Trecka; Petrusich). Within an Irish context, belated appreciation for O’Connor’s *SNL* protest is evident from graffiti on a wall in Dublin’s Temple Bar: on the side of a building in Aston Place, the Dublin street-art collective The Icon Factory have painted a portrait of a young,

hooded O'Connor accompanied by the words, "Sinead you were right all along, we were wrong. So sorry".

O'Connor's controversial performance of "War" on American television is not the only example of her using the image of an abused or endangered child to comment on politics. As Emilie Pine has noted, in the song "Famine",⁵ from 1994's *Universal Mother* album,

O'Connor's lyrics project Ireland itself as an abused child, suffering a potato famine worsened by the ruling colonial power of Britain. O'Connor connects this historical suffering with modern Ireland, "the highest statistics of child abuse in the EEC," unemployment, and drug use. O'Connor's song thus links colonialism, natural and national catastrophe, and child abuse together under the suffering of the Irish "race" through history. (168)

"Famine" is not the only example of O'Connor using the image of an abused or endangered child to comment on England's ill treatment of the Irish and, indeed, other peoples it has colonised. One clear example is O'Connor's self-penned 1997 track "This IS a Rebel Song". The song's title is an allusion to a famous statement made by Bono on U2's 1983 live album *Under a Blood Red Sky*; just before a performance of the pacifist anthem "Sunday Bloody Sunday", he tells the audience, "This song is not a rebel song; this song is 'Sunday Bloody Sunday'". While O'Connor's song may bill itself as a rebel song, it is not a strident one. The ballad echoes many works from Irish literature and discourse (from seventeenth-century *aisling* poems to Yeats and Gregory's 1902 play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* to the last paragraph of Declan Kiberd's 1995 seminal study *Inventing Ireland*) in that it depicts

⁵ In the track listing and the lyrics, the word "famine" is in inverted commas, because O'Connor controversially insists that "there was no 'famine' ... Irish people were only allowed to eat potatoes / All of the other food / Meat fish vegetables / Was shipped out of the country under armed guard / To England while the Irish people starved".

Ireland as a woman. While this is certainly problematic from a feminist point of view (especially since O'Connor – like so many before her – depicts England as a male lover and Ireland as his relatively submissive female partner), O'Connor's invoking of this trope is interesting in that she, as Ireland, truly "embodies" the country by alluding to pregnancy in her first-person lyrics. In the song's opening lines, she sings, "I love you my hard Englishman / Your rage is like a fist in my womb". During the course of the song, the relationship between England and Ireland is not depicted as a happy marriage, as in past Irish Unionist works, or as a rape, as in fiery Irish Nationalist rhetoric; instead, England and Ireland are shown as relatively intimate, but it is suggested that their relationship is badly compromised by the fact that England is a violent, cold abuser. This is evident not just from the previously cited opening line, but also from the song's main refrain: "How come you've never said you love me / In all the time you've known me? / How come you never say you're sorry / and I do?"

Critique of English colonialism and its treatment of people from the colonies who subsequently moved to England is the subject of two other O'Connor songs. In "Empire" (a 1997 track co-written and performed with Bomb the Bass and writer/dub artist Benjamin Zephaniah), O'Connor and Zephaniah compare someone they know – a "vampire" that "feed[s] on the life of a pure heart" – to "England". They make links to injustices perpetrated by the British legal system, to the "fall" of England's "empire", and (implicitly) to its vampiric exploitation of "good" and "pure heart[ed]" immigrants from the former colonies and their descendants. While a case could be made that these innocent, exploited souls are (at least in some cases) children, O'Connor's self-penned 1990 track "Black Boys on Mopeds" places the image of the endangered child front and centre in her critique of England's treatment of immigrants from former colonies and their descendants. O'Connor sings that she is returning to Ireland in order to protect her young son from learning too soon about

“grieving”. This move has been inspired by the shooting of Afro-Caribbean minors by English police officers – and, as in her *SNL* performance, she traces the responsibility for these killings up to those in higher positions of authority. The song begins:

Margaret Thatcher on TV

Shocked by the deaths that took place in Beijing

It seems strange that she should be offended

The same orders are given by her.

Of course, this verse brings to mind not just Tiananmen Square and black victims of police brutality in England but also all of the harsh ways in which Thatcher’s government had treated people chaffing under British rule across the world, including Nationalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland. That said, O’Connor is keen to emphasise that she and other immigrants did not initially come to England with wholly negative views of what was once the “mother country”; instead, they felt a degree of attraction to England that has only been soured by personally witnessing English racism in the former imperial centre itself. Such disillusionment is captured in the song’s chorus:

England’s not the mythical land of Madame George⁶ and roses

It’s the home of police who kill black boys on mopeds

And I love my boy and that’s why I’m leaving

I don’t want him to be aware that there’s

⁶ The reference to “Madame George” is presumably an allusion to the classic track of that name by Northern Irish singer-songwriter Van Morrison. Because Morrison recorded his early work with Them in London and alluded to London locations in several early songs, O’Connor seems to have assumed that “Madame George” was one of his “London” songs. However, it was written in Morrison’s native Belfast (and the lyric refers to “Dublin”, “Sandy Row” and “Cyprus Avenue”), and the 1967 and 1968 studio versions of the song were both recorded in New York City.

Any such thing as grieving.

O'Connor is simultaneously protecting her young Irish son and expressing disgust for the harassment and slaughtering of Afro-Caribbean youths by English police forces. There is additional sympathy expressed for endangered children in the song's second verse:

Young mother down at Smithfield

Five a.m., looking for food for her kids

In her arms she holds three cold babies

And the first word that they learned was "Please ...".

While we never learn if these children are from a BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) background, the privation that they are suffering adds to O'Connor's growing disillusionment with England. And, with all of the children invoked throughout the song's lyrics, "Black Boys on Mopeds" is clearly another example of O'Connor, as a survivor of child abuse, drawing on her own trauma to strengthen a political protest.

O'Connor once stated that "child abuse" is the "cause" of "all problems in the world"; she pointed to the fact that so many perpetrators of evil, including Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein, were abused children (qtd in Guccione Jr.). Such a view clearly derives from memories of her own childhood trauma, in which she suffered extreme abuse at the hands of her mother and felt "panic and terror and agony" in the Magdalene asylum she was sent to as a teenager (qtd in Lambert). O'Connor has been very open about the negative impact that this abuse has continued to have on her mental health in adulthood, and – knowing how much she has had to overcome – it makes it all the more admirable that she has turned the extreme pain associated with her past into stunningly powerful political protests.

She was an early voice raised against clerical abuse within the Catholic Church – and, as she protested, she always made clear that she still believed key Catholic tenets and was

speaking out as someone who still hoped the Church would reform (Mackey). That long attempt at engaging with the Church has presumably ended with her recent decision to convert to Islam and change her name to Shuhada Sadaqat,⁷ but her protests have undoubtedly inspired many other Catholics (in Ireland and beyond) to call for reform in the Church. Likewise, her bravery in speaking out when few in Ireland were willing to do so certainly made it easier for others to draw attention to clerical abuse. After all, several groundbreaking documentaries related to the abuse perpetrated by members of the Irish Catholic clergy both inside and outside Church-run institutions appeared regularly in the years following O'Connor's *SNL* protest (and, it must be acknowledged, Patricia Burke Brogan's landmark Magdalene Laundry-related play, *Eclipsed*, and Pat McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* – both from 1992). These documentaries include *Washing Away the Stain* (BBC, 1993), *Dear Daughter* (RTÉ, 1996), *Sex in A Cold Climate* (Channel 4, 1998) and *States of Fear* (RTÉ, 1999).

As we have seen, O'Connor has drawn on memories of childhood trauma to comment on England's poor treatment not just of Irish people but also others from its former colonies. And she made these protests at a time when the Troubles (1968–1998) in Northern Ireland and historical revisionism made Irish commentators (understandably) reluctant to make statements that seemed too “Republican”. While one might not agree completely with O'Connor's perspectives on Anglo-Irish relations (or, in the case of her personifying Ireland as a woman, her methods), the power of her political statements regarding England's tangled history with its colonies – including Ireland – cannot be denied.

⁷ She still performs under the name Sinéad O'Connor. It should also be noted that in 2017, prior to her conversion to Islam, she briefly changed her name to Magda Davitt to be (in her words) “free of parental curses” (qtd in Loughrey).

Paul “Bono” Hewson

As a teenager, U2’s Paul “Bono” Hewson had to take two buses to get to and from his non-denominational secondary school, Mount Temple Comprehensive in the well-to-do Dublin suburb of Clontarf. In the mornings, the first bus would take him into the city centre from his own lower middle-class/working-class area: the (at the time) slightly downmarket part of middle-class Glasnevin that borders on the thoroughly working-class neighbourhoods of Ballymun and Finglas. The second bus would then bring him out to Clontarf. On his way back home in the late afternoons, Bono would often spend some time in town before getting the second bus home to Glasnevin. His most frequent hangout spots near where the bus dropped him off in town included two record shops: Golden Discs in Marlborough Street and Dolphin Discs in Talbot Street. On 17 May 1974, there was a bus strike in Dublin, so Bono had to cycle the six kilometres to Mount Temple that day. As it happens, this meant that he avoided getting caught up in the deadliest attack of the Troubles. Between 5:28 and 6:58 that evening, loyalist paramilitaries detonated four car bombs in the Dublin city centre and Monaghan town, resulting in the deaths of 33 people and a full-term unborn child as well as injuries to nearly 300 other people. The second of the co-ordinated bombs went off at 5:30pm in Talbot Street, which is the exact time Bono would ordinarily have been in or between Golden Discs in Marlborough Street (“just around the corner from where the bombs exploded” (Bono, qtd in Boyd) and Dolphin Discs in Talbot Street itself.

This near-miss proved traumatic for Bono for a variety of reasons. Most notably, Andy Rowen, the 11-year-old brother of Bono’s best friend since childhood – the artist Derek “Guggi” Rowen – personally witnessed the first of the bombings (in Dublin’s Parnell Street). Andy was helping his father to deliver goods to shops; when the bomb went off, his father locked him into his delivery van. Andy banged on the door to get out and eventually escaped the van. When he went to look for his father, who “was nobly trying to help people”, he

immediately saw several dead and horribly mutilated bodies (Fanning n. pag.). As Steve Stockman – a Presbyterian minister from Belfast and a friend of Rowen – has explained, “In those few moments ... Andy’s life was psychologically torn apart ... There was no post trauma counselling in 1974 and eventually Andy filled the pain with drugs” (Stockman n. pag.).

Bono would witness Andy’s struggle with heroin abuse in the years to come, and this would make him keenly aware of the heroin epidemic affecting Dublin’s youth during the late 1970s and 1980s. He would write songs specifically inspired by Andy’s struggle with addiction for the classic U2 albums *The Unforgettable Fire* (1984) and *The Joshua Tree* (1987); these songs include “Bad”, “Wire”, and “Running to Standstill” (which references the seven tower blocks which were built and which stood in Ballymun during Bono and Andy’s childhood in nearby Cedarwood Road, Glasnevin). In contrast with Bono, the Irish government did not formally recognise heroin abuse as “the most pressing of the country’s drug problems” until 1996 (Cullen 8). Bono’s songs about heroin addiction not only drew attention to this severe epidemic; they also highlighted its main cause – the hopelessness felt by many young people in Dublin at the time. This hopelessness was exacerbated by high unemployment, an issue which U2 also drew attention to through their involvement in the Self Aid benefit concert (held in Dublin’s Croke Park in 1985).

Bono would later write a song focused primarily on Andy’s experiences during the bombing and the psychological price he paid for witnessing it: “Raised by Wolves” from U2’s *Songs of Innocence* album (2014). In the song, Bono takes on Andy’s point of view and sings about witnessing the carnage, which he cannot forget (indeed, the lyrics suggest that he can still remember the registration number of the blue Ford Escort which was used as a weapon – “1385-WZ” – and that it is only when Andy opens his eyes that the gruesome

images “disappear”).⁸ However, the chorus (“I don’t believe any more”) and key lines in the verses (“a red sea covers the ground”, “[A] boy sees his father / Crushed under the weight / Of a cross in a passion / Where the passion is hate”, and “the worst things in the world are justified by belief”) draw our attention to why the bombing was even more disturbing for Andy than it might otherwise have been – and why it had such a lasting impact on Bono, even though he avoided getting caught up in the carnage himself. Andy and Bono were both raised Protestant, and it was generally understood that the bombers who carried out the atrocity were Protestants from a Loyalist paramilitary organisation. (The UVF eventually claimed responsibility for the bombings in 1993.) In the liner notes to the *Songs of Innocence* album, Bono describes the Rowen family as an “old testament tribe”. As Stockman has pointed out (“Andy Rowen’s Story”), this is because of the family’s size (“10 children meant that like the tribes there were 12 in the house”) but also because of “their deep faith” (which resulted in much “Bible smashing”, as Bono puts it in another *Songs of Innocence* track touching on the Rowen family, “Cedarwood Road”).

It is little wonder that Andy, as depicted in “Raised by Wolves”, had trouble “believing” in the wake of the bombing. Besides witnessing such a disturbing example of the world’s cruelty, the atrocity had been carried out by people who considered themselves “Bible Christians” (supposedly his own people). These aspects of the bombing would also not have been lost on Bono, the son of a Catholic father and a Protestant mother, who was raised in the (Protestant) Church of Ireland. Many in the Republic were happy to ignore the Troubles in Northern Ireland while they raged between the late 1960s and the late 1990s; there is arguably no clearer sign of this than the fact that the Barron Inquiry into the Dublin-Monaghan Bombings concluded that the Republic’s Fine Gael/Labour government “showed

⁸ Bono has stated that Andy Rowen told him that he still has “a piece of the car that tried to kill [us]. I’ve taken it with me everywhere” (Fanning n. pag.).

little interest in the bombings” when they occurred and did little to assist the investigations into them (Houses of the Oireachtas 275–276). By contrast, Bono has stood out as someone from “down south” who simply could not look away from the conflict. This is perfectly understandable when one considers that his harsh introduction to the Troubles was the co-ordinated set of bombings that devastated his best friend’s brother and that likely would have killed or injured him on any other ordinary Friday afternoon in school time.⁹ What’s more, the Troubles were the sectarian (Catholic versus Protestant) tensions in his own background writ large. *Irish Times* journalist Kevin Courtney (“Bono’s Dublin”) has mocked Bono for suggesting that there were “sectarian” tensions in the Dublin of his youth. However, Bono’s childhood friends and key experiences early in his career have confirmed that this was indeed the case. Not only did Bono and his Protestant classmates and friends experience a degree of sectarian bullying,¹⁰ a number of early U2 gigs were broken up by a gang of skinheads calling themselves The Black Catholics. The gang’s members were offended by the fact that three members of U2 were raised Protestant – Bono, David “The Edge” Evans, and Adam Clayton¹¹ – and that all four members were (at the time) part of a Pentecostal/Charismatic fellowship, the Shalom community.

The sectarian component of the Troubles and the lasting resonance of the 1974 bombing (which affected Bono’s ongoing reality through Andy Rowen’s enduring struggles) meant that during the 1980s and 1990s, he repeatedly addressed Northern Ireland in his lyrics and his on-stage speeches. In 1983, the band released the aforementioned classic track “Sunday Bloody Sunday”, calling for an end to sectarian violence in the North. It sought to link the Bloody Sundays in 1920 (when the British Army opened fire on a crowd of Gaelic

⁹ Bono makes a direct connection between the 1974 bombings and his interest in the Troubles in his interview with Fanning.

¹⁰ It should be noted that when a childhood friend of Bono and the Rowens – the singer-songwriter Gavin Friday (né Fionan Hanvey) – first moved to the Cedarwood Road area, he was slagged by them for being a Catholic.

¹¹ “The Edge” was born in Essex to Welsh Protestant parents and raised in Dublin from the age of one; Adam Clayton was born in Oxfordshire to English Protestant parents and raised in Dublin from the age of five.

Football supporters in Croke Park in retaliation for assassinations carried out by the IRA) and in 1972 (when a British paratrooper regiment opened fire on a peaceful but proscribed civil rights march in Derry) to Christianity's Easter Sunday. Bono was suggesting that it is nonsensical for Catholics and Protestants on the island of Ireland to shed each other's blood when they share a common belief in Jesus's (bloody) atoning sacrifice.¹²

An op-ed in *The Belfast Telegraph* from 2014 is worth quoting at length here, since it succinctly details Bono's continued engagement with Northern Ireland in the decades following the release of "Sunday Bloody Sunday":

The IRA earned Bono's venomous wrath after they killed 11 people in the Poppy Day bombing in Enniskillen [in 1987]. U2 were performing in Denver, Colorado later that same day and during "Sunday Bloody Sunday", Bono condemned the atrocity, shouting "f*** the revolution" in a speech in the middle of the song. He also denounced armchair Republicans among Irish Americans and said most people in Ireland didn't support the IRA.

Bono [...] backed his words with actions when U2 played a gig for a specially invited audience of young voters at the Waterfront Hall on the eve of the referendum on the Good Friday agreement in May 1998.

It was only a matter of months of course before the [Real IRA's] Omagh bomb killed 29 people and ... Bono later wrote a song called "Peace on Earth" which featured the names of some of the Omagh victims including that of Ann McCombe whose husband Stanley said he was honoured that

¹² There is a flaw in this parallel, of course: Jesus actually shed his blood on Good Friday, not Easter Sunday. Bono as much as admitted the flawed nature of the lyrics when he stated that "it was a song whose eloquence lay in its harmonic power rather than its verbal strength" (qtd in U2 with Neil McCormick 135).

she'd been mentioned and added that millions of people around the world would understand the message. ("Bono Has Never Been One-Sided")

There is one additional song that deserves a mention in this context: "Tomorrow" from U2's *October* album (1981). Bono has said that, when he initially wrote the song, he thought it was about the Troubles (hence, the decision by the band to have Vinnie Kilduff add uilleann pipes to the track). When Bono wrote and sang the following lyrics, he thought he was speaking about a paramilitary killing or abduction:

Somebody's outside

Somebody's knocking at the door

There's a black car parked

At the side of the road

Don't go to the door.

He says it was only later that he realised he was describing the day of his mother's funeral, which came less than four months after the May 1974 bombing. (In September of that year, his mother, Iris, suffered a cerebral aneurysm at her own father's funeral and died four days later.) Eventually, Bono saw that the refrain of "Tomorrow" – "Won't you come back tomorrow?" – was not the words of a Northern Irish family speaking to a deceased or "disappeared" relation but Bono himself crying out to his lost/absent mother.¹³

It is perhaps not surprising that Bono subconsciously conflated the Troubles with the death of his mother, especially since he endured three events in quick succession that taught him about mortality: a Troubles-related bombing in which he might have died plus the deaths of two (Protestant) members of his family, his mother and maternal grandfather.

¹³ For information on Bono's realisation that "Tomorrow" was about his mother and not the Troubles, see Stokes (30).

Of course, Bono is unique among the three figures examined in this chapter in that the traumatic memories being discussed relate to something that he did not experience at first hand.¹⁴ However, this does not mean that he was not traumatised by it or that he did not have “memories” of it: as Alison Landsberg has argued, it is possible for people to have what she calls “prosthetic memories”. These are memories which are “neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerge at the interface of individual and collective experience” (*Prosthetic Memory* 19). As Landsberg suggests, people with “prosthetic memories” have “privately felt” feelings regarding significant “public” events (*Prosthetic Memory* 19).

Bono’s traumatic “prosthetic memories” of the 1974 Dublin bombings – and their effects on Andy Rowen and himself – inspired him to write and perform several politically engaged songs. Specifically, the sectarian agenda of the bombers stirred his interest in Northern Irish politics, fuelling his desire (strengthened by his own “mixed” background) to see the Troubles end and Protestant and Catholic Irishness reconciled. (As he sings in “Sunday Bloody Sunday”, “tonight we can be as one” – cold comfort to narrow-gauge Ulster Unionists who regard themselves as British and not Irish, but certainly a message of hope in the dark times of the Troubles.) Bono also drew on Andy’s personal struggles in the wake of the Parnell Street blast to highlight the sufferings of young Dubliners battling heroin addiction – a battle, I am pleased to report, that Andy Rowen ultimately won.¹⁵

Phil Lynott

¹⁴ One could, of course, also write about Bono’s traumatic memories related very specifically to the death of his mother. These memories not only inform “Tomorrow” but also the U2 tracks “Lemon” (1993) (which was initially inspired by seeing old footage of his mother wearing yellow), “Mofo” (1997), and “Iris” (2014).

¹⁵ Bono notes that Andy is still dealing with the aftermath of that addiction – e.g., he has hepatitis C – but that he is a “remarkable” and “very poetic” man who has “survived” (Fanning n. pag.).

Philp Parris Lynott was born in West Bromwich, England, in 1949 to a white mother from Ireland (Philomena Lynott) and a black father from Guyana (Cecil Parris), but – from the age of seven – he was raised by his maternal grandparents in the Dublin working-class neighbourhood of Crumlin. (Philomena Lynott, who greatly regretted that she could not support her son on her own, remained in England to work; however, she and Philip visited each other regularly in Dublin and Manchester throughout the rest of his formative years.) According to Peter Eustace, who was the live sound engineer for Thin Lizzy throughout their career and a Dublin housemate of Phil Lynott’s before he found fame, the dark-skinned Lynott was “very aware of his own uniqueness” in the Ireland of the 1950s and 1960s, because he “was never allowed to forget” that he was “literally a black Irish bastard” (Putterford 45). During Lynott’s early Dublin school days, he was called racist “names” by the students, including “Blackie”, “Baluba”, and “Sambo”, and, upon Philomena’s return trips to Crumlin, she even had to “challenge ... his *teachers* for calling him racist names” (Putterford 16; Thomson 22; Coyne). What’s more, “for years” “many local people” in Crumlin “assumed” that Lynott was “adopted” (Putterford 15). Thin Lizzy drummer Brian Downey (and Lynott’s childhood classmate) has also said that the Christian Brothers who ran their school in Crumlin gave Lynott the task of “collecting what was called the ‘Black Baby Money’, for the missionaries in Africa. So every day he’d come around with this collection box, with pictures of black babies on the side ... this went on for years” (Putterford 22–23).

This constant signalling (and stigmatising) of Lynott’s race was difficult, but Eustace says that Phil felt that one racist incident from his youth was significantly more traumatic than any other:

A friend who he was very close to said to him one day, “Jesus Phil, you’re not bad for a black fella after all.” That freaked him out and completely undermined him. After that Phil thought, “Well, I suppose I really am different

if even one of my best friends can make a comment like that.” (Putterford 45–46)

Lynott was luckier than other black and mixed-race people in the Ireland at the time, in that he was a supremely talented singer-songwriter and extremely charismatic. And it was Phil’s brilliant stage presence, songwriting skills, and ever-improving bass playing that helped his band Thin Lizzy – originally comprised of Lynott, Downey, and Belfast guitarist Eric Bell – to land a major record deal with Decca Records in 1970.¹⁶ Over the next 13 years, the band (whose line-up would regularly change, with the exception of the ever-present Lynott and Downey)¹⁷ would produce all-time classic albums such as *Jailbreak* (1976) and *Live and Dangerous* (1978) and international hits like “Whiskey in the Jar” (1972), “The Boys Are Back in Town” (1976) and “Dancing in the Moonlight” (1977). Lynott would also record two solo albums, the latter of which features the much-loved single “Old Town” (1982).

In Lynott’s work with Thin Lizzy and as a solo artist, he (in the words of RTÉ presenter John Kelly) “projected an image of both a tough guy and a soft old romantic” (Kelly). Kelly has added that “much of Thin Lizzy’s appeal was that they really did seem like a gang”, and Boomtown Rats frontman Bob Geldof once referred to the group as “the intelligent lad’s band” (Kelly; Geldof, qtd in Heffernan and Stokes). Because Lynott’s music was – as these quotes suggest – often playfully macho, as well as amatory and “feel-good”, he is not usually associated with political activism. And yet, there was one key political agenda running through his work (besides a relatively non-threatening Irish patriotism), and it had its roots in the degree of marginalisation he experienced during his childhood –

¹⁶ Although this is the line-up that got signed to Decca and that would endure until the end of 1973, it should be noted that, “for the first few months of their existence, Thin Lizzy were a four-piece”: Lynott, Downey and Bell plus Belfast keyboardist Eric Wrixon (who was, like Bell, a former member of Van Morrison’s group, Them) (Thomson 99).

¹⁷ Downey did have to take two short breaks away from the group: one due to exhaustion between August and December 1978 and another to recover from injuries suffered after being attacked by a Danish bouncer in February 1982.

including, as we have seen, at the hands of a close friend. Through his musical compositions and performances, Lynott wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to be both proudly Irish and proudly black.

Justine Nakase has incisively demonstrated how Lynott “articulate[d] a black Irish identity” with the 1972 Thin Lizzy single “Whiskey in the Jar” (265). Simply by singing a rocked-up version of a traditional Irish ballad while being visibly black, Lynott was challenging people’s fixed ideas regarding “Irish skin” and was also embodying the fraught equation of the ethnic disadvantage of “Irishness” with the racial disadvantage of “blackness” that has so often been made in journalistic and artistic works in Ireland, Britain, and the United States “since the seventeenth century” (Nakase 265). As Nakase explains, through “speeches, marches, and charity work the Irish [have frequently] performed themselves as black allies, drawing on a shared experience of colonial oppression”, but they have also “distance[d] themselves from blackness in moments of self-advocacy”; this “simultaneous affinity towards and rejection of blackness ... informed the context of Lynott’s intercultural production and reception” in Ireland (Nakase 267). Meanwhile, in Britain, the United States, and Australia, Lynott faced audiences with long love/hate relationships with both Irishness and blackness.

The black Irish Lynott’s reaction to all of this was to embrace his hybridity, and to use it to demonstrate to those inclined to reject him on one pretext or another that a black Irishness was not only perfectly possible, but also powerful and appealing. We can see how he achieved this if we extend and adapt Nakase’s arguments regarding Lynott’s “positionality” while singing “Whiskey in the Jar” to other important performances by him (260). As we shall see, when the visibly black Lynott performed explicitly Irish material, he suggested the possibility of, and can even be said to have brought into being, a black Irish identity. The same task was also accomplished when he sang proudly “black” material while fronting an Irish band and introducing songs in a strong Dublin accent. However, there are

also many examples from Lynott's oeuvre of the singer-songwriter deliberately (if sometimes subtly) *blending* Irishness and blackness in his lyrics and concert performances.

An important early example is the song on the B-side of the 1972 "Whiskey in the Jar" single, "Black Boys on the Corner", which was originally supposed to be the A-side before Decca (against the wishes of the band) privileged the more commercial trad-rock song. John Brannigan has suggested that Lynott is effectively mimicking American blackness in "Black Boys on the Corner": "This is Lynott's closest attempt to give expression to black identity and black politics in his work, but of course he can only do so in the masquerade of Afro-American culture and politics" (211). However, as will become clear, Lynott addresses black concerns openly in various other songs, and the suggestion that there is only an African-American influence at work in "Black Boys on the Corner" misses the complexity of what Lynott is actually doing in the song. Brannigan admits that the song strikes "a note of black pride, or at least defiance" (211), but the lyrics are actually quite a personal statement aimed at those who would exclude Lynott on the basis of his skin colour: indeed, he really *owns* his blackness in the song, singing in the first person and proudly boasting that he is a "black boy" who "doesn't know his place". The lyrics may include African-American expressions ("back lip"), but they also include Hiberno-English ("stick about" versus the American "stick around") and even archaic British English ("to boot"). There is also one line in which Lynott fuses American and Irish/British expressions: he refers to "pull[ing] chicks", which uses the American "chicks" instead of the Irish/British "birds" and the Irish/British "pull[ing]" instead of the American "pick[ing] up".

There are two very obvious Irish links in the 1973 song "Vagabond of the Western World", from Thin Lizzy's next album. First, its title is a variation on J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), and Synge's classic play is actually namechecked in the lyrics. Second, the song opens with Lynott repeatedly singing the vocal motif "Toora

Loora Loora Loora Loora Loora Loora Lye” – an echo of the seventeenth-century Irish ballad “Spanish Lady”, the mid-nineteenth-century Irish ballad “Courtin’ in the Kitchen”, and the classic Irish-American showtune “Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral (That’s an Irish Lullaby)” by J. R. Shannon (1913).¹⁸ In the rest of lyrics, Lynott details the story of a “vagabond” from a “gypsy” background who has impregnated and then abandoned “a fair young maid, a country girl”. This heartbreaker’s pick-up line to the girl is, “Hey baby, you got eyes of blue” and the chorus repeatedly emphasises her blue eyes. The strong implication is that the titular vagabond does not have blue eyes but presumably dark ones. The link to Lynott himself (who seems to admire this caddish rogue) and to Lynott’s own father (who only stayed in touch with Philomena Lynott for four years after his son’s birth) becomes very clear in the second verse:

Gave a girl a baby boy
He said “This child is my pride and joy
I’m busy running wild and free
Make sure he grows up just like me
And I’m a vagabond”.

Listeners even vaguely familiar with Lynott’s biography are intended to link this “baby boy” to Lynott, who often publicly projected the image of a lothario (see Thin Lizzy songs such as “The Rocker” (1973) and “Don’t Believe a Word” (1976)). In this song, Lynott makes clear that he is the progeny of a white Irish colleen and a dark “playboy”, and that he, like his father, will not be afraid to woo any Pegeen Mikes that come his way. And he is defying listeners to have a problem with that.

¹⁸ Like Lynott, Kevin Rowland of the Birmingham band Dexys Midnight Runners (who was partially raised in his parents’ native Co. Mayo) also incorporated a “toora loora”-style refrain into a rock number: his group’s worldwide hit “Come On Eileen” (1982).

A similar provocation is, of course, his famous speech before the live version of the Irish myth-inspired song “Emerald” on *Live and Dangerous*. Lynott says to the audience: “Is there anybody out there with any Irish in them? Is there any of the girls who’d like a bit more Irish in them?” This proposition – delivered in Lynott’s strong Dublin accent – makes clear that he is Irish, even if he also has dark skin. And he is, as in “Vagabond of the Western World”, challenging those who have any issues with interracial sexual relationships.

While one might assume that Lynott is primarily targeting whites with these challenges to accept his mixed-race status, in the Thin Lizzy song “Half Caste” from 1975, he targets both white *and* black people who have a problem with his “mixed” blood. He portrays the father of a black British girlfriend from Brixton and the father of a white British girlfriend from Richmond as viewing mixed-race people negatively. Lynott takes comfort from London’s multiculturalism (“it’s a half-caste town”) and both sides of his racial heritage.

By taking pride in his black blood in “Half Caste”, Lynott is definitely not downplaying and is indeed highlighting his own blackness, as he had in “Black Boys on the Corner”. In light of the racism and exclusion he had experienced since childhood for possessing black skin, he was not going to let anyone doubt his blackness. Similar assertions of his blackness occur in the Thin Lizzy song “Johnny the Fox Meets Jimmy the Weed” (1976) and the solo song “Ode to a Black Man” (1980).

In “Johnny the Fox Meets Jimmy the Weed” (a funk-rock song inspired by time spent in predominantly black Oakland in the San Francisco Bay area), Lynott notes that “Down Skid Row,¹⁹ only black men can go” and the strong implication is that Lynott himself is able to go there. And there are Irish traces in the song’s lyrics: Johnny Fox’s Pub in Glencullen, Co. Wicklow (established in 1798) is one of the most famous pubs in Ireland, and Lynott

¹⁹ This may be a nod to Lynott’s pre-Lizzy Dublin band, Skid Row, who kicked him out, but only after one of its members – Brush Shiels – agreed to teach Lynott how to play the bass.

borrowed the name of the song's other protagonist from Manchester-Irish gangster Jimmy "The Weed" Donnelly (Thomson 153).

In "Ode to a Black Man", Lynott pays tribute to several black heroes, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Jimi Hendrix, Mohammed Ali, and Bob Marley. Lynott's solidarity with these black figures (and with their blackness) is perhaps clearest in the lines, "The people in the town that try to put me down / Are the people in the town that could never understand a black man". While Lynott had become a much-loved figure in Dublin by the time of "Ode to a Black Man" (as evidenced from the reaction he gets from passers-by in the "Old Town" video, filmed in his home city two years later), there were still people in Dublin – and there still are some – without a high degree of racial sensitivity. One cannot help but wonder if "the town" referred to in this song might be Dublin, where some people understood him and others did not. What is clear is that, when Lynott introduced songs such as "Johnny the Fox" and "Ode to a Black Man" in his Dublin accent – and, in the case of the Thin Lizzy track, as the frontman of an Irish band – he was clearly embodying a black Irishness.

Jon Bon Jovi has suggested that one of Thin Lizzy's biggest influences on later hard rock was the band's demonstration that it was possible to do songs about the Wild West in a rock as opposed to a country idiom (McGoldrick).²⁰ Bon Jovi was clearly thinking of Thin Lizzy tracks such as the early "Buffalo Gal" (1972) and the classic "Cowboy Song" (1976), which undoubtedly influenced songs that Bon Jovi did with his own band and as a solo artist, such as "Wanted Dead or Alive" (1986) and "Blaze of Glory" (1990). Of course, in films and other forms of popular culture, American cowboys have usually been depicted as white. As such, this cowboy trope in Lynott's work might seem like an example of him exclusively

²⁰ He has stated, "Our whole electric guitar cowboy theme came from Thin Lizzy" (qtd in McGoldrick).

emphasising the white side of his heritage. It is not known if Lynott was aware that a quarter of cowboys in the Wild West were African-American (Nodjimbadem). What is known is that, in his Wild West songs, he often troubles his “whiteness” by making references to Latin America (where, of course, his father was from). In “Cowboy Song” (1976), the narrator/Lynott gets a job “down below the border in a town in Mexico”, and refers to someone as “amigo”. Similarly, in “Southbound” (1977), he expresses a desire to go as far south as Brazil. A connection to Latin American ancestry is, of course, also made in the Thin Lizzy track “Mexican Blood” (1981), in which the Latino ancestry of the romantic protagonists is deliberately contrasted with the presumably white blood of the villainous Texas lawman.²¹

While Irish subject matter may be quite understated (or even missing) from some of these post-1975 songs concerned with racial politics in British and American contexts, such as “Half Caste”, “Johnny the Fox”, “Ode to a Black Man”, and the Wild West songs, that does not mean that Lynott had effectively backed away from the intricate – if subtle – blending of Irishness and blackness which had marked the early track “Black Boys on the Corner”. Consider, for example, one of Thin Lizzy’s best-known songs, “The Boys are Back in Town” (1976) – a track on which Lynott (as he had done on “Black Boys on the Corner”) inserts a subtle Irishness into what might otherwise seem like American subject matter. In the lyrics, Phil refers to his associates as “cats” – an expression which originated with and is still current among African-American jazz musicians. This speaks to the blackness of Phil’s friends and/or the blackness of the Dubliner Phil himself. The name of the place where these “cats” are hanging out – “Dino’s Bar and Grill” – might initially seem like an exclusively American reference. This is especially true for fans who are aware that Lynott included it in

²¹ Although no specific country is named in the lyrics, “Randolph’s Tango” from 1973 features a “ranch”, a “señorita”, and “Latin moonlight”.

the song because, on Thin Lizzy's first trip to Los Angeles, he wanted to see what exactly was located at 77 Sunset Strip (the name of a "comedy-detective series Lynott had loved as a teenager") and found an eatery there called Dino's Lodge (Thomson 191). However, Dubliners famously have a habit of adding an O sound at the end of men's names (e.g., "Tom" becomes "Tommo" and "Dean" – a surprisingly popular name in Dublin's working-class areas – becomes "Deano", which is not audibly distinguishable from "Dino"); and we know for certain that Lynott was aware of this, since his own nickname was "Philo" (hence the name of the tribute concert held in Dublin every January in his honour, the "Vibe for Philo"). What's more, Dublin already had American-style restaurants in Lynott's day, such as a celebrated "bar and grill" in Grafton Street called Captain America's, which was established in 1971 and is still open. When all of these hybrid references are taken into account along with the Hiberno-English included in the song's lyrics – "we just fell about the place" – it once again becomes clear that Lynott is not a black man simply interested in copying the culture of multiracial countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. Instead, Lynott, while happy to take inspiration from the culture of other countries, never forgets either his Irishness or his blackness – presumably knowing, as he had learned from his childhood in Dublin, that people who see his skin and hear his voice are confronted with a stunning embodiment of black Irishness.

Probably the most noteworthy example of Lynott deliberately blending Irishness and blackness in a song is the epic "Róisín Dubh (Black Rose): A Rock Legend" from Thin Lizzy's 1979 *Black Rose* album. "Róisín Dubh" is the name of a sixteenth-century love song in the Irish language, which later had its lyrics transformed so that the black-haired beloved became a metaphor for Ireland (like Cathleen ni Houlihan, the *sean-bhean bhocht*, or – indeed – the narrator of Sinéad O'Connor's "This IS a Rebel Song", previously mentioned). Famous English-language versions of the "patriotic" version of the poem include translations

by James Clarence Mangan (“My Dark Rosaleen” (1837)), Eleanor Hull (“Roisin Dubh” (1912) and Pádraig Pearse (“The Little Dark Rose” (1915)). Lynott’s lyrics – like the versions by Mangan, Hull, and Pearse – sometimes give the impression that an actual woman is being discussed, but it ultimately becomes clear (as in their versions) that the work is primarily a love letter to Ireland. Lynott praises Irish mythology and namechecks or alludes to famous Irish people from the worlds of literature, sport, and music, including James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde, Brendan Behan, Edna O’Brien, George Best, Van Morrison, J.M. Synge, Bernard Shaw, Seán O’Casey, and the aforementioned Mangan. Likewise, he and the band lyrically or musically allude to several famous Irish songs, including “Danny Boy”, “The Mountains of Mourne”, “Will Ye Go, Lassie, Go?”, “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”, “The March of the King of Laois”, and “Rakish Paddy”, as well as songs from countries with strong musical links to Ireland, including “Bonnie Charlie” from Scotland and “Oh Shenandoah” from America.²² For our purposes, what is notable is that Lynott chooses the word “black” (as opposed to “dark”, as Mangan and Pearse had done) when describing Róisín. And even more noteworthy is Lynott’s description of the great hero from Irish mythology, the warrior Cúchulainn from the Ulster Cycle: “his eyes were *dark*, his expression sullen” (emphasis mine). Between Róisín’s hair and Cúchulainn’s eyes, Lynott is emphasising that an Irish person need not be fair-haired with blue or green eyes; that is to say, he is leaving space within Irish identity for someone who looks like he does.

Phil Lynott was, in the main, adored in Ireland after he found fame, and, as Nakase has pointed out, he “has frequently been cited” by Irish commentators “as proof that the Irish are not racist” (Nakase 275). While it is certainly true that many Irish people genuinely loved

²² The addition of these songs is also presumably a tribute to members of Thin Lizzy’s later line-ups: Glaswegian guitarist Brian Robertson (who had left the band by the time of the *Black Rose* album) and Californian guitarist Scott Gorham (who played on *Black Rose* alongside celebrated Belfast guitarist Gary Moore).

– and still love – “Philo”, the “casting of Lynott as an intercultural hero works to obscure and dismiss legitimate issues of racism in Ireland”, in both its past and present (Nakase 275). In terms of Ireland’s past, we can see how the prejudice and stigmatisation that Lynott experienced during his Dublin childhood hurt him on a personal level. (And this pain lingered into his days as a teenage musician in Dublin, when he was routinely and casually referred to as “the spade singer” and when it was made clear to him that his skin colour meant that the showband circuit was off-limits to him (Thomson 24, 56, 94).) In fact, it is hard to believe that his early death from substance abuse, which has parallels in the serious issues with drink and/or drugs among black and mixed-race people raised in Ireland during Lynott’s lifetime (including celebrated Irish soccer player Paul McGrath, who has battled alcoholism for years) has absolutely nothing to do with the early racial discrimination (Hertz). However, something very positive came out of Lynott’s memories of being singled out (and stigmatised) for being black during his Dublin formative years: in his work, he consistently demonstrates to doubters that a black Irish identity is not only perfectly possible but also, when embodied by him and encapsulated in his beguiling music, very attractive.

Conclusion

Landsberg has rightly noted that “memory” is often depicted as “an obstacle to, rather than a catalyst for, progressive politics and [subsequent] collective action” in both scholarship and art (“Prosthetic Memory” 144–161). However, going back into memory does not automatically mean that someone is indulging in nostalgia or examining old traumas in a way that is “privately satisfying rather than publicly useful” (Landsberg, “Prosthetic memory” 145).²³ The sung protests of Sinéad O’Connor, Bono, and Phil Lynott are not just examples of

²³ It should be noted that Landsberg herself fears that the “commodification” and “privitis[ation]” of memory is “atomising ... different groups of people ... rather than building collective solidarities” (“Prosthetic Memory”

artists making their painful memories “tangible” in an effort to shine a light on forbidden topics and to sooth inner demons (Frawley “Introduction” xxiv). They are also shining examples of people using memory to – in Le Goff’s words – “serve the present and the future” (99).

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145). However, she suggests that “commodification does not necessarily mean atomisation. Paradoxically, it can help overcome the atomising effect of private memory ... by making memory more radically public”, especially with the aid of “new technologies and the further development of old ones”, such as “museums, the cinema, [and] the Internet” (“Prosthetic Memory” 158).

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