

Queer Postnationalism in 'Breakfast On Pluto'

Sascha Pohlmann

SUMMARY: This article seeks to analyze Patrick McCabe's 1998 novel *Breakfast on Pluto* with regard to its representation of national and gender boundaries, arguing that the text, while not exactly fully qualifying as queer, employs similar deconstructive strategies with regard to identities constructed by discourses of nationality and gender alike, and is indeed especially successful in this project when these subversions converge. To this end, the essay establishes a theory of postnationalism, defining the term as anything that seeks to challenge the hegemony of nation-ness as an abstract concept as well as its ideological and material manifestations. As such, postnationalism clearly profits from learning from a similar project undertaken by queer theory with regard to identities of gender, sex, and sexuality. *Breakfast on Pluto* offers an important textual example of how these discursive and material practices of resistance against essentialist views of identity parallel each other, and how a literary imagination can work to question these boundaries.

No Irish writer is better at dissecting the romantic glory of Irish stereotypes and modern-day pastoralism than Patrick McCabe, an author with no patience at all with any sentimental cultural constructions of Irishness. McCabe's fiction has been appropriately categorized as "Bog Gothic" (O'Mahoney): his *Butcher Boy* (1992), Francis Brady, is the antihero of small-town Ireland, a young sociopath most Roddy Doyle characters would be afraid of. *The Dead School* (1995) continued the strategy of presenting destructive human relations in a highly conservative, Catholic, postcolonial society; *Mondo Desperado* (1999) transposed the Mondo film genre to Ireland as a literary counternarrative technique; the best example of McCabe's project of disruption may be that a young, ambitious, pure candidate for priesthood in one story gets literally blown up with an air-pump at a gas station, inserted rectally into "his sad but acceptant buttocks" (30). The pieces left of him strewn across the pastoral green landscape symbolize perfectly what McCabe is up to. *Emerald Germs of Ireland* (2001) presents the dark underbelly of that romanticized society by showing episodes from the life of its protagonist Pat McNab, the Norman Bates of the Irish village. The novel this essay is concerned with, *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) is no exception to this general fictional strategy of deconstructing romanticized Irishness and essentialist assumptions, and yet it

goes a step further than the other texts in McCabe's oeuvre. It deals with Irish village life and its larger social context, but it is also the most explicit treatment of Irish sectarianism McCabe offers; it is furthermore told from the perspective of Patrick "Pussy" Braden, a transvestite prostitute from Tyreelin, who claims he is "not the slightest bit interested in politics at all" (BP 142). There seems to be a discrepancy between the novel's subject matter of nationalism and sectarianism and its first-person narrator; I want to show in this paper that the two stand in a productive relationship, pointing towards a more general link between gender and national identities. *Breakfast on Pluto* is not first and foremost a queer text, but neither is it merely a political novel. It derives its critical edge from a critique of national and gender boundaries, and is most effective where these converge. While it may not be among the first choices for a canon of queer fiction, it does employ queer elements together with postnational strategies and shows how the two can inform and support each other.

One can imagine that Patrick has plenty of private problems growing up in a small Irish village as the illegitimate son of a priest and with a gender identity that does not conform to the accepted standards. However, he also gets entangled in the political problems during the Troubles of the '60s and '70s, has friends and lovers killed by either side of the sectarian conflict, and is even accused of terrorism

himself when he moves to London. He states that he "was much too preoccupied with my own personal revolution to be bothered with anything so trivial" (BP 22) as the sectarian conflict. Yet even though his autobiographical tale of "The Life and Times of Patrick Braden" (BP 4) - which is more often than not a tall tale, though where is not always clear, and it is in fact "difficult to tell if *anything* happened in the manner that Pussy presents it" (Jeffers 157) - remains mostly focused on personal problems, the political situation is an undercurrent that never quite vanishes. Patrick's gender identity is so outrageous because Irishness as a national identity relies on a rigid concept of masculinity and male heroism, and especially the sectarian terrorists strive to embody this idea in a conflict which on both sides is "inevitably constructed in masculine, even hypermasculine terms" (Jeffers 25). Patrick does not conform to an idealized masculinity and therefore does not conform to an idealized national identity. *Breakfast on Pluto* points towards the similarities in these hegemonic identity constructions, and hollows them out together. I will give examples from the novel to show that it queers both gender and nationality after theorizing the two in conjunction.

Anne McClintock argues in her essay "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism" that "[a]ll nationalisms are gendered; all are invented; and all are dangerous - [...] in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the

technologies of violence" (89). *Breakfast on Pluto* connects gender identity to national identity, especially where both relate to such political power and violence. Strangely, nationality is a latecomer when it comes to contested identities. While feminism, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies and queer studies have worked for decades to challenge patriarchy, essentialism and heteronormativity, and while other categories such as race and class have also been contested for a long time, nationality has not come under as much fire, or only very recently. The critical tools provided by the discourses of poststructuralism and postmodernity have been employed successfully to dislocate the metanarratives of patriarchy and heterosexuality, but the metanarrative of nationality, or rather nation-ness as an abstract concept, remains virtually intact. Above, I wrote of "postnational strategies" that combine with queer elements in *Breakfast on Pluto*; as I understand it, the term *postnationalism* signifies anything that challenges the hegemony of nation-ness as a metanarrative. The critical theory and practice of postnationalism involves deconstructive acts that question the legitimacy of one of the most powerful ideological constructs in a globalized world whose reality has in fact moved beyond it. This is not to say that nations do not exist, or that nation-states do not exist; postnationalism seeks to attack the dominant status of nation-ness as a provider of identities, especially where nation-ness excludes or subsumes other

identities.

Benedict Anderson famously described the nation as an "imagined political community" (6) and initiated a social constructivist school of national theory that denied it any essential or transcendent properties. However, *imagined* does not mean that nations are not *real*, and nationality exerts a power over human identities that is comparable to that of gender and sex. This power is visible in two facts. Firstly, the national metanarrative is so strong that people die for it, whereas they would not die for most of the other groups they are members of. Secondly, it is virtually impossible to conceive of a nationless person in today's nationalized world (this does not mean statelessness). Ulrich Beck asks how nation-state societies today "generate and preserve [...] the quasi-essentialist identities of everyday life" (64), and his choice of words points to the power and the mechanisms of nation-ness: while it is clearly socially constructed, national identity still often presents itself (and is even more often perceived as) something essential, a "'natural unit'" (Woolf 2) of human categorization. This quasi-essential or quasi-natural quality of a category of identity must ring overly familiar to anyone who is even marginally acquainted with second-wave feminism, queer theory, or any related disciplines. Postnationalism shares the impulse to challenge such quasi-essentialism with these discourses, and can make use of the

critical work already done in these fields. For example, a postnational reading drawing on queer theory can interpret Anderson's statement against the grain when he explains the "formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept" by saying that "in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as he or she 'has' a gender" (7). Of course, he states this from the point of view of national theory, yet the words are also remarkable for those concerned more with gender than with nationality. Anderson uses the alleged inevitability of gender to illustrate the inevitability of nationality, which means that theories arguing for an instability of gender can be used as models to argue for an instability of nationality. Furthermore, the parallels speak of a necessity to challenge both gender and nationality where they dominate human identities and present themselves as essential (and especially where they combine to do so). Postnationalism can justify its theorization of nationality as constructed, fluid, unstable and complex instead of essential, unalterable and deterministic by pointing towards similar theorizations of gender, sex and sexuality. Questions of the possibility of leaving one's stable national identity then run parallel to those of leaving the constraints of one's gender identity, since if biology is not destiny, nationality is not destiny either.

These connections work not only through queer readings of national theorists, but also through postnational readings of queer theorists.

For example, the words Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses to describe the effect of the invention of the term *homosexual* in the late 19th century have postnational relevance: "What was new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality" (2). At the same time, the world was firmly mapped using the nation as a fundamental category. The boundaries were not only inscribed on the earth, but also on human bodies and minds, as national identities were gradually assigned to every human being while humans were also categorized according to the alleged binary of homo- and heterosexuality. There are people who fall through the meshes of the systems of nation-ness and homo-/heterosexuality, yet both are generally envisioned as complete, and exceptions are seen as only proving the rule instead of challenging it. A postnationalism that seeks to dismantle this totalizing system of identities can, I would argue, be seen as a part of queer theory if the latter term is understood as always designating a critical process instead of a fixed system of thought. David Halperin defines queer as " *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without essence" (62). The postnational positions itself at odds with the dominant normality of nation-ness, which is open to challenge just like gender or sexuality

in its alleged essential nature and the legitimacy derived from it.

Breakfast on Pluto presents such a challenge by employing a queer viewpoint that adds to the variety of postnational strategies, and it thereby places itself among other works that can be called postnational but go about their deconstructive work differently. The works of Robert McLiam Wilson and Glenn Patterson address questions of Irish identities from different angles that all serve to undermine assumptions about the immutability of these identities; an earlier and more famous challenge to an essentialist Irish nationalism can be found in *Ulysses*, in which Leopold Bloom's national and religious identities contradict what his fellow Irishmen's definitional horizon allows them to conceive of as Irishness. Of course, the postnational in literature is not limited to a single national culture: Borges rewrote the narrative of Martin Fierro and countered nationalist mythmaking; Nabokov literally imagined the community of Zembla; Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* redefined the Western genre so as to deprive it of all value for the romanticized depiction of the processes of nation-building and the invention of tradition; Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex* parodies Yeats's poem "Easter, 1916" by changing it from a fundamental nationalist text to a half-hearted motivational speech of a forgetful military leader; the works of Philip K. Dick and other authors of science fiction imagine a future (or alternative

history) in which the national boundaries that seem so stable and inevitable today are either changed beyond recognition or completely irrelevant; Kurt Vonnegut never missed a stab at any nationalism and declared himself *A Man Without a Country* in his last publication; Thomas Pynchon's works represent all-out attacks on essentialist national identities, nation-states as forms of social organization, the myths nationalism thrives on, and especially the nationalist abuse of narratives of community to serve the ends of government. The list of works that qualify as postnational material is by far not limited to those mentioned here, and it is certainly not limited to the sphere of literature. *Breakfast on Pluto* shares with them the critical impulse to question the epistemological boundaries set up and maintained by nation-ness, and it does so by combining a challenge to national identities with one of gender identities, both of which necessitate a critique where their categories remain static, exclusive and binary.

In *Breakfast on Pluto*, Patrick's identity always falls between the meshes of the nets of both national and gender binaries. His sexuality and gender identity are not that clear at the outset. He identifies as a transvestite, but also admits that he wants "a vagina of [his] own" (BP 36). On the one hand, his performance of femininity is often incomplete and fools nobody, only earning him "compliments" such as: "'Look at him! He's wearing women's' clothes!'", 'Jasus! Look

at that!', and other assorted idiocies!" (BP 38). Remarkably, it is especially the nationalist-minded Irwin who cannot deal at all with Patrick's performance of what he perceives as the wrong gender, and calls Patrick's bluff when he sings "Stop! In the Name of Love" as one of the Supremes: "It's a load of bollocks! Look at Braden the eejit dressed up as a woman!" (BP 17). On the other hand, Pussy's performance is credible enough for another character to claim: "He's my girlfriend, you fucking old cow!" (BP 92). Neither an operation nor hormones are ever mentioned; Patrick Braden's narrative is not a tale of sexual transformation from one identity to another, but rather one that leaves such questions open and retains a queer element throughout by not allowing the reader to fall back on fixed categories. Instead of presenting a man wanting to become a woman, or a man dressing like a woman, *Breakfast on Pluto* presents a person who unites these aspects, and more. There is not simply a male/female binary and a narrative of clear change from one to the other, but a narrative of uncertainty. It does not help that Patrick is a highly unreliable narrator, so that even his own identifications must be doubted, and he ultimately remains outside any fixed category of gender identity, even though he enters them occasionally. From a queer point of view, the novel may not offer that much material, and it could even criticize the representation of the queer as cliched or simplified; yet the novel does more than simply use Patrick's queer identity to sneak in a challenge to national

identity in general, and Irish identity in particular. It sets up parallels that reflect back on both gender and nation as categories of identification and ultimately question both instead of just one. When Patrick admits that he has not "the slightest intention of [...] trying to fit in" (BP 11), he rejects more than categories of gender and sexuality, but also those of a stereotypical Irishness, a Catholic nationalism and a Protestant Unionism. He is indeed "a twilight zone of a disaster" (BP 62) that shows the ideological failure of any imposed identity construction; to many others, he is simply the "fucking queer" (BP 105).

He does not care for Sectarianism and is bored with the performative aspects of nationalism, with everyone "waving a tricoloured flag or singing an Irish ballad" (BP 14) to commemorate the Easter Rising of 1916. He much prefers singing along to the Beatles' "We can work it out" (BP 19) instead. When his male lover, who was probably "[i]mporting arms for the IRA and any amount of old nonsense" (BP 32), is murdered, "there are those who say it was the IRA and others the UDA and then some who say it was the two of them together" (BP 33); Patrick only comments: "I didn't know, and didn't fucking care" (BP 33). He presents neither side of the conflict as worth supporting; he gets away from an IRA interrogation by doing a Mata Hari impersonation in a "Doris Day outfit" (BP 44), he describes how some Protestants killed Laurence, "the first Down syndrome's boy

shot in the Northern Ireland war" (BP 46); furthermore, he is very shocked by the events on Bloody Sunday, not least because of an earlier encounter with a British soldier:

"By the time we got home - ten more Harps on the bus - I was so tiddly that I just about knew my own name. 'Paddy Pussy, dahling!' I had decided to say to anyone who happened to cross my path. 'At your service, deah! How can I help, you behstud?' Not only 'intended', but in fact -actually did !

And to a British soldier, of all people! 'Name, please?' - *Why, Paddy Pussy, dahling !*

Not a very good idea! Especially when we got home and heard thirteen people had been shot dead by the parachute regiment in Derry. I was absolutely mortified, and not feeling quite so tough then, I can tell you! (BP 39)"

When Patrick goes to Ireland, he leaves the sectarian binaries but enters a new one of Irish versus English. All the clichés about his identities mix when somebody asks him: "Lots of little fairy boys like you back home then, Pat? Not just murdering bombers then, after all!" (BP 71). The very masculine Irishmen in a London pub, "most definitely not chiffon-sporting Pussies" (BP 73), are indeed whiling

"away the hours crushing cans of Holsten and alternating between blowing up England and vowing they didn't agree with the deaths of civilians" (BP 73). Patrick fits in with neither group but is routinely put inside one by others; especially as IRA bombings increase, he gets to feel English outrage at the stereotypical "bleedin' Paddies" (BP 86), as exemplified in a passage told in a Cockney accent: "Blahdy bog Arabs! I'm sorry, guv, but that's the way I feel! [...] Send 'em all back, that's wot I say. Back to the bleedin` bog wot shat 'em aht in the first place!" (BP 86). Patrick is arrested under suspicion of being a high-ranking IRA terrorist, not only because he is untrustworthy enough as an Irishman, but also because he is even more untrustworthy as an Irish transvestite. In the eyes of the police, he might be a "wicked little fucker who would stop at nothing in his determination to mutilate and maim, even going so far as to disguise himself as a tart" (BP 143). If this is described as "going so far," it indicates how inconceivable transvestism must be to the policemen. National categories and stereotypes are responsible for Patrick's arrest, and they add to the violence he had to experience due to his identity, or rather his refusal to conform to a clearly identifiable identity.

In Tyreelin, his friend Jojo saves him from being beaten up by explaining to the angry mob in a pub that "He's a Tyreelin man!" (BP 50). This reconfirmation of his gender identity averts the violence

which almost breaks out after "someone enquir[ed] as to my gender" (BP 50), and the ensuing cries of "Kill the hooring nancy queen!" (BP 50). Such scenes of threatened or actual violence are told in the characteristic style of hysterical exaggeration prominent in the novel as a whole. Patrick writes down his experiences for a psychiatrist, and yet he employs a camp narrative style that is more appropriate for a cheap yellow-press magazine. While this style used in much of the novel differs from the in-your-face representation of heteronormative violence in *Stone Butch Blues* or of anti-sectarian novels such as *Eureka Street*, *Breakfast on Pluto* also presents sectarian violence in all its gruesome details, such as when "the first policeman on the scene tugged at a woman's leg only to find it coming away in his hand" (BP 142). While its explicit portrayal of sectarian terror leaves little room for misunderstanding, one could argue that the camp narrative style mocks and misrepresents the queer person against whom acts of violence are committed; however, the style rather affirms the queer protagonist in his/her difference from what threatens him/her. Patrick's writing cure not only consists of his recording of past events, rewriting them in order to understand them and make them more bearable, but also of an imaginative escape from the situation he is in. He affirms his identity by imagining himself as a superhero, with perfume his weapon of choice, "Perfume to take the smell away! Perfume one million! Stench - nothing!" (BP 165).

Part of that moral stench is exemplified in the terrifying chapter before, in which Pat McGrane, a Catholic man, is tortured and killed by the UDA for having a relationship with a Protestant woman. His eventual murderers tell him that

"they didn't like him associating with protestants - or 'their' kind as they put it. After reviving him with a bucket of cold water, they told him that they didn't mind him 'riding taigs' or 'screaming wee Catholic witches' but when it came to clean, God-fearing protestant ladies, they could not stand by and countenance Catholic cocks squirting the poison of Rome into their spotless, untainted vaginas. (BP 163-4)"

Sexuality and gender are clearly employed as weapons in a sectarian discourse, which shows how the policing of one pure identity entails the policing of other pure identities. Transgression in this case is punishable by torture and death, especially since the sin is not only sexual but also national. Similarly, the Unionist terrorists who shoot Laurence rape his mother before the murder, but do not kill her (BP 46), thereby employing a different weaponry for different victims.

Patrick is the epitome of transgression to those who police purity of identity, especially as he knows exactly that the expected standards

do not work either, since he has seen enough women in Tyreelin who are "barely older than 14, and already pushing buggies and looking years older than they are" (BP 106). Having suffered from the violence of pure identities, he imagines his revenge as a cleansing, replacing the stench with his perfume. His ultimate imaginative act is turned against his father, the priest, a symbol of Irish corruption: "You're going to die, Daddy! [...] You and all of you who brought poison to the valley! I'm going to burn your church with you inside it!" (BP 170). His revenge on nationalist terrorist Big Vicky combines sex and politics just like his men had done when murdering Pat McGrane; he shoots him in the face and then aims at "his you-know-what" (BP 173). He deprives the masculine terrorist of his sexual identity as part of a revenge spree against both heteronormativity and nationalism.

Ultimately, however, the burning of the Tyreelin church and the murder of Big Vicky are only a "crazy hallucinatory vengeance trail" (BP 182). The final outcome of it all remains as uncertain as the ontological status of Patrick's whole story, and he himself acknowledges his unreliability:

"Although I did dream a lot of nutty stuff and get real vengeance thoughts and trails of retribution into my head, at least in jail the sedatives weighed me down a little and I didn't feel like I did the very

minute I got outside -yes! -stuffed into a ballista and sent rocketing a couple of million miles across the sky. (BP 181)"

Yet this does not mean that telling his fictional stories has had no effect of Patrick; indeed, he wakes from his dream of vengeance "totally incomplete" (BP 180) and sees Police Inspector Routledge enter his London prison cell "with a big tin mug of steaming tea and a beaming smile that said: 'You're free!'" (BP 180). This means that Patrick is released from custody, but also implies that his imagined vengeance has liberated him from past constraints. He does come to terms with his past to some extent, having "gone and complete forgotten all about that [church burning]" (BP 193), and yet *Breakfast on Pluto* offers no happy ending with regard to hegemonic discourses of sexuality and nationality. Back in Tyreelin, Patrick gets into a pub fight after he is asked "Who or *what* are you?" (BP 193). Conversations in the supermarket stop dead when he walks in (BP 193). His "dresses and things [are] stolen from the washing line" (BP 194), which robs him of the outward signs of what is perceived as a wrong gender identity. In the end, Patrick still dreams of a community that will accept him by saying "He's ours" (BP 199), but also of a community he could want to be accepted in, a different one than the violent exclusive communities he has encountered in his past. He knows that "a small minority was responsible" (BP 186) for the sectarian violence, "the sort of people who weren't happy

themselves and seemed to have nothing better to do than dedicate their lives to making sure no one else was either" (BP 186). However, his happiness is also denied him by those who police gender boundaries as fanatically as those who police national ones. With his queer identity, Patrick can assume a viewpoint that lays bare the ideologies behind those constructions. His theme song, "Breakfast on Pluto", shows how this occurs: "Up on the moon / We'll all be there soon / Watching the earth down below / We'll visit the stars / And journey to Mars / Finding out breakfast on Pluto!" (BP 29). The song tells of traveling away from earth and removing one's point of view; just like national boundaries become less visible and significant as that imagined camera moves away from the globe, all other divisions on earth become less significant and arbitrary. McCabe stated that the novel is "about politics and borders and gender borders" (Lacey 50); seen from Pluto, all such human boundaries are revealed as arbitrary and imagined, no matter what significance they may really have locally. By imagining himself removed from this divided planet, Patrick escapes into a fiction of borderlessness, and even though it may not change much in his political reality, it nevertheless makes it more bearable for him. The novel *Breakfast on Pluto* imposes a similar narrative movement on the reader as it combines the removed viewpoints of two different abnormalities, and seeks to bring the imagination of readers outside the limits of gender binaries, heteronormativity, sectarianism, and nationalism - all in a single

push.

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