



## Embodying an Other Relation to Language: A Geocritical Topopoetic Reading of Brian Friel's *Translations*

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### ABSTRACT

My paper studies the entangled relationship between language and an embodied sense of place in the Irish dramatist Brian Friel's play *Translations* (1980), which is set against the backdrop of British colonial linguistic hegemony. Within a postcolonial framework, my paper studies how Friel uses language as a decolonizing trope. I deploy literary scholar Sten Pultz Moslund's topopoetic approach which brings forth human-place relations by reconnecting language with a sensory relation to the world in order to study how language not only performs another (nonrepresentational) dimension of itself but also challenges the 'supra-sensory ego-logic of modernity' (Moslund). By approaching spatiality as an embodied human-place relation, a topopoetic reading locates how the materiality of place presents itself in language to resist territorial ideologues and posits instead, an agency of space and embodied relation with the phenomenal world in language. Language's "sense-effect" (Deleuze) embodies a relationality between the word and material world, thereby contesting the imperialistic use of language as a representational semantic tool for meaning-based signification. *Translations* in its colonial resistance offers a topopoetic reading since Friel inheres in the play a *felt* sense of platial locatedness and geographical affect which impacts (in affirmative and/or negating capacities) not only the locals and the transformed natives of Baile Beag but the colonizers as well. Hence, through the tropes of language, place, and embodiment, I study how the text's aesthetic dimension (poetic-aesthetic) offers an alternative decolonial strategy in relating to the word and the physical material world.

### KEYWORDS

language, embodiment, geocritical, topopoetic, decolonial.

The Irish dramatist Brian Friel (1929-2015) was one of the founders of Field Day Theatre Company<sup>1</sup> which premiered as its first production, his widely celebrated three-act play *Translations* on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1980 in Northern Ireland's Guildhall in Derry. The play locates the power of language as a cultural byproduct that shapes realities, experiences, personalities, and histories of not just individuals alone but of communities as well. Set in 1833 in North Ireland's rural Irish-speaking community in Baile Beag in County Donegal, the play concerns itself with the arrival of a platoon of British Royal Engineers to perform the administrative task of making the first Ordnance Survey by renaming Ireland's Gaelic place-names into standardized English equivalents for better land valuation and taxation. The Irish language is to be replaced in the education system with the colonizer's language (English) and the local hedge-school system is to be abolished and replaced by a new state-run national school system. In mapping the linguistic utterances of a place, Baile Beag is thus made to jostle between two meaning-making paradigms — of the colonized (Irish) and of the colonizer's (English). Within the framework of a postcolonial literary intervention, by positioning the act of translating Irish into British English as a decisive point of inflection, the play's thematic interrogates linguistic and cultural tensions arising not only due to the British colonizer's Anglicization of Gaelic place-names but also due to nationalist endeavours of revisionist history. It is interesting to note that, historically speaking, Ireland not only contributed towards dismantling the British Empire but also in its building, as its own people played an influential role as colonizers<sup>2</sup>. In Ireland's conflicted status as a colonized country, its revisionist histories which subdue the role of colonial legacy<sup>3</sup> and narrow sentimentalist nationalist histories that search for "authentic" Irishness; Friel's text assumes significance as it delineates anxieties pertaining to cultural resistance by a community in flux and explores its cultural moorings through a postcolonial framework. In order to address how *Translations* critically maps the "cultural density" (Ashcroft 77) of a habitus as well as the hermeneutical changes that it encounters when its cultural constitution undergoes re-writing, my paper addresses two inter-connected aspects pertaining to language as a decolonizing tool within a postcolonial literary imagination. The first aspect studies how Friel contests language's representational<sup>4</sup> facet by exploring language's poetic sense-aesthetic quality which brings to surface the bodily and affective responses that translate language from a language of meaning to

<sup>1</sup> Co-founded with actor Stephen Rea in 1980.

<sup>2</sup> On Irish contribution to the empire, see Jeffery, Keith (ed.) *An Irish Empire: Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (1996) and David Fitzpatrick 'Ireland and the Empire' (1999).

<sup>3</sup> On revisionist positions, see Boyce, George D. and O'Day, Alan (eds) *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (New York, Routledge, 1996) and Roy Foster (1988) *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, Allen Lane, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Representation occurs "whenever the aesthetic object invites us to leave the immediacy of the sensuous and proposes a meaning in terms of which the sensuous is only a means and essentially unimportant" (Dufrenne, 1953, 312).

a language pertaining to the senses. I deploy literary scholar Sten Pultz Moslund's<sup>5</sup> 'topopoetic' (*topos*- place, *poesis*- bringing-forth) way of reading which illustrates how language can also perform an epistemological function wherein instead of representing, it presents a preconceptual and prelinguistic *sensory* relation to the wor(l)d. Producing landscape as a presence legible to English colonizers by textualizing it in the colonizer's language is destabilized by a topopoetic reading which engages with a place that is not represented to speak in terms of/through an identity-based representational language but presents an embodied way of thinking and seeks to gauge an environmental and immersive experience of platial settings. Approaching language in terms of its sense-aesthetic quality engages with the "silent place relations in language outside any metaphysical ego-logic of the cogito... a silent embodied level in linguistic renditions of place where the power of discursive meaning ceases to work in language as words come to trigger spontaneous sensations of the heterogeneous appearance of things and the place world" (Moslund 24). By approaching geographical spatiality of a colonized place in terms of an embodied human-place relation, a topopoetic reading locates how the materiality of place presents itself in language to resist territorial ideologues and posits instead, an agency of space and embodied relation with the phenomenal world in language. If "[a]ffect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" (Gregg, et al. 3), the primary relevance of reading *Translations* by focusing on its spatial discourse helps to analyse how the dramatic text that is fundamentally a language-based medium offers the possibility of another insight into the different modes of perceiving space and the evocation of different responses to the same geographical place. Furthermore, within the context of a postcolonial text, apprehending language's "sense-effect" (Deleuze 138 qtd. in Moslund 68) functions as a conduit to the second underlying aspect of my paper which studies how the playwright also subversively emphasizes upon language's "meaning-effect" (Deleuze 138 qtd. in Moslund 68) and deploys language in terms of its instrumental use to critique the colonizer's representational tactic. The interface between this dual engagement with language (as sense-effect and meaning-effect) makes for an interesting study as Friel inheres in the play a rejection of binaries and presents instead, an in-between hybridity. My paper argues that while Friel also explores language as a meaning-making paradigm, he illustrates the notion of an in-betweenness as a viable option to contest the homogenization of language propounded by both, the anti-colonial nationalist discourse as well as the imperialist project. Thus, through the trope of language, my paper studies how the utterances of verbal expressions pertaining to the physical material world evoke nonverbal sensations in the play's characters in order to critically analyse

<sup>5</sup> Moslund references to the works of Heidegger, Mignolo, Deleuze and Guattari in order to position his topopoetic approach within critical discursive engagements that study the intersection of nature, body, linguistics, and dwelling.

the relationship between language, place, and the body.

### Embodying a Topopoetic Approach

The twentieth century poststructuralist linguistic and cultural turn in the field of humanities enabled the methodological lens of postcolonial studies to approach place primarily through the coordinates of a historico-discursive analysis. This temporal perspective addressed the metaphysics of modernity and the territorialization of colonial lands by positioning Western suprasensory values inherent to the processes of imperialism and universalism over and above (spatially) situated sensory experiences and relation to reality. This inevitably resulted in a shift from spatial matters of geography to temporal matters of history (Moslund 18). While a temporal and discursive reading of colonized spaces is crucial in the political endeavour of subverting colonial histories; approaching histories of colonized places from a spatial perspective, particularly through the “body’s relation to other dimensions than those of the socially organized space” (Moslund 27) is equally necessary and crucial to the anti-colonial project insofar as it foregrounds “non-identitarian interrelations between the body and the phenomenal dimensions of reality” (Moslund 28). The subsequent cartographic anxieties that are made to inhere in the sensibilities of natives and the Heideggerian “ego-logic of modernity” can be effectively upturned by listening to the sounds of how “geo-graphia” (Moslund 11) or “earth-writing” occurs in the play. In other words, focusing in works of literature on an intense sensory contact with the landscape can facilitate a contestation of the representational facet of language that disembodies and dismembers the “sense-effect” of signs (Deleuze 138 qtd. in Moslund 68). It is pertinent to note that this dwelling on bodily sensations in language does not perform the function of mere descriptive narration. Instead,

the very exercise of describing sensations provoked by the text involves the mobilization of an extra-discursive, embodied form of thinking, as the very act of describing sensations requires of us that we become conscious of and reflect on the heterogeneity of nonverbal sensations that may be triggered by the verbal expression (Moslund 40).

Thus, by dovetailing place with a subjective embodied sense of place peculiar to each character, Friel’s text problematizes conceptual homogenized constructions of places as fixed and reiterates the relationship with landscape as a subjectively *felt* interaction. Such a perspective contests the negation of the body as a site of knowledge and the colonialist mentality that pedestalized ‘rational’ over embodied, since the former marked the hallmark of progress and enlightenment while the latter was espoused by ‘subhuman’ brute creatures devoid of the faculty of ‘rational’ thought. In order to address the phenomenality of space within literary studies,

literary texts should not be understood only as a discursive medium to understand how the production of space and identity takes place through language. As the literary scholar Moslund argues, literature is also an aesthetic medium and he proposes to approach aesthetics not in the Kantian sense of universal and disinterested but as *aisthesis* (in Greek) which refers to that which is produced by sensory experiences/bodily feelings. Such an approach facilitates in reading places in literature as “sensuous geographies” (Rodaway 1994) which can in turn steer our attention towards how literary language can cull out places in literature through the quality of sense-aesthesis which resist simplistic translations into metaphysical and ideational relations to the world. In proposing a topo-poetic approach, Moslund understands poetic as *poiēsis* (Greek for bringing forth)<sup>6</sup>, thus, a topo-poetic mode of reading entails understanding the poetic qualities of language that calls forth the place world in an *aesthetically*-attuned manner. In other words, reading in a topo-poetic manner “engages with place worlds in literature that occur or happen as sensuous experience (*poiesis-as-aisthesis* and *aisthesis-as-poiesis*)” (Moslund 11). Thus, his proposition to explore the triad between language, place, and the sensing body through literature’s sense-aesthetic can provide us with a different route of relating to places which are other to the discursive relations which inform our primary perceptions of relating to the world. In a way, a topo-poetic mode of reading can make the lingering traces of the colonial project face the music through other ways of relating to the word and the world, i.e., by engaging with place as a sensuous experience which calls forth a nonlinguistic (sensory) relation. In attempting to recover a bodily felt relation with place as opposed to the limited and limiting ego-logic of reasons, a topo-poetic reading counters processes of disembodiment that have been the colonizer’s tool in dehumanising and alienating the colonized people. Moreover, such an approach does not render the platial setting as a passive literary landscape upon which the story develops; rather it brings into action the environment as a participating whole and recognizes the materiality of the landscape in itself.

### Part I: Geocritical Exploration and Phenomenality of Space

The word “environment” in its ability to signify “whatever surrounds or, to be more precise, whatever exists in the surrounding of some being that is *relevant* to the state of that being at a particular moment” (Harvey 2) does not merely locate the landscape environing the play as a surface upon which the colonizer (re)maps. Instead, it facilitates in locating it as a site which enables the interface between subjective aesthetic experience of spatiality and the conflicting socio-cultural contexts which produce that space through language. While the primary site at which the play is performed is the hedge-school room, platial memory and

<sup>6</sup> For more, see Heidegger, 1935, 42, 44.

relationality with the landscape of Baile Beag is a significant trope in navigating the interface between language and landscape. The specificity of Baile Beag's landscape is not relegated to the margins; it is an active participant in the performance of the dramatic text as it intervenes in characters' nonchalant conversations, place memories, situated knowledges, and cartographic anxieties. All of these work towards inhering a sense of place for not only the colonized peoples but also for the colonizers as well. By dovetailing place with a subjective sense of place peculiar to each character, the literary text problematizes conceptual homogenized constructions of places as fixed and re-iterates the relationship with landscape as a subjective interaction. Linguistically mapping "every patch of ground" of the rural Irish speaking community evades the experiential dimension of relating to places and spaces that constituent one's environment. By surveying the minutest, the colonizing act attempts to write over not only the linguistic signifier but also effectively efface the embodied relationality felt between language, landscape, and subjective experiences (of an individual's, of a community's) sense of a place.

At the very outset, the play sets the tone and tenor of premonitory decadency of colonial territorialization and shifting terrains of engagement with the environment of Baile Beag. The hedge-school (where natives receive their education of/in English) architecturally flows into the living quarters and is also described as a space of fading and neglected agrarian lifestyle. Described as "comfortless and dusty and functional" (Friel 1), "disused barn" (Friel 1), "where cows once milked and bedded" (Friel 1), and where "broken and forgotten implements" (Friel 1) are strewn around the room, the hedge-school's room becomes a storehouse archiving the fading agricultural life of Baile Beag. The note of disintegration continues as the characters that are housed seem to be withered as well. "She [Sarah] is sitting on a low stool, her head down, very tense"; Manus "works as an unpaid assistant"; "Sarah's speech defect is so bad that all her life she has been considered locally to be dumb and she has accepted this" (Friel 1); Jimmy's clothes "are filthy and he lives in them summer and winter, day and night" (Friel 2). The relational aspect with their land constantly surfaces in memory as the stories recollected by the characters are infused with a sense of connectedness with the landscape of Baile Beag. If the colonizer's disembodied sight dispossesses; the olfactory senses of the characters sense the presence of Baile Beag's flourish through the everlasting memory of the "sweet smell" of the crops. Maire exults, "Sweet smell! Sweet smell! Every year at this time somebody comes back with stories of the sweet smell. Sweet God, did the potatoes ever fail in Baile Beag? Well, did they ever- ever? Never!" (Friel 18). Jimmy, fluent in Greek and Latin brings through a different language register the richness of the land that they dwell with, by stating, "[N]igra fere et presso pinguis sub vomere terra"<sup>7</sup> (italics in original). The characters' mindscapes are not disconnected

<sup>7</sup>"Land that is black and rich beneath the pressure of the plough" (Friel 14)

from their platial settlements and acts of dwelling. Interactions between them inhere natural elements that constituent their environment and recognition of movement of colonial devastation distinctly embeds human subjectivities in their environing worlds. Physical infiltration of the British troops by way of their invasive and devastating movements is illustrated through impingement upon Baile Beag's natural lifeworld wherein characters attending the hedge-school verbalize such acts of violence. Doalty exclaims, "Prodding every inch of the ground in front of them with their bayonets and scattering animals and hens in all directions!"; Bridget continues, "And tumbling everything before them-fences, ditches, haystacks, turf-stacks!" she declares, "Not a blade of it left standing!" (Friel 73).

*Translations'* social milieu is circumscribed by the colonizer's endeavour at writing over the Gaelic language. Hugh, the hedge-school master states, "it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language" (Friel 88). By attributing a personalized liveness to the conceptual understanding of language per se, the character of Hugh voices the power of language. Colonial project understood language's importance as a tool to wield power. "The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (Thiong'o 9). Hugh's understanding of language is not devoid of an experiential reality since for him (and his community), embodied proliferation of the past resides in the unfolding of language. Hugh posits language in experiential terms by embedding in it a collective past to establish an individual's relational continuity with his/her past and by using language to enable actualization, representation, and articulation of their reality embedded in the Irish countryside. By disregarding facticity that is often attributed to history, he validates language's centrality as a discourse that effectively shapes sensibilities. Irish writer Thomas Davis stated, "language which grows up with a people, is conformed to their organs, descriptive of their climate, constitution, and manners, mingled inseparably with their history and their soil, fitted beyond any other language to express their prevalent thoughts in the most natural and efficient way" (cited in Crowley 161). Hugh's statement visibilizes colonial appropriation of language and colonial preoccupation with defining the colonized land and its language. Stating that it is not 'facts' that hold the ability to shape, Hugh negates the presence of and efforts undertaken by the colonizer and renders them as an ineffective trope to dismantle Irish identity and reshape it in the image of the English entity. The colonial enterprise, well-versed with the knowledge that "[m]astery of language affords remarkable power" (Fanon 9), constantly strives to usurp Gaelic. Hugh's statement also contests the apparent sense of universalism inherent in the colonizer's attempt at standardizing the colonized peoples' language by finding its English equivalent. Anglicizing Irish by reworking Baile Beag's system of signification to equalize it to 'Ballybeg' is ruptured by the hedge-school master's words which present the community's past

as embodied occurrences that cannot be described and contained within the forcible anglicized equivalences. The act of translation thus evinces the failure of the English language to capture the materiality of ‘non-English’ places. British Lieutenant Yolland who is assigned the task of standardizing Gaelic place-names observes, “[s]omething is being eroded” (Friel 53). This moment of in-betweenness where a member of the British troop acknowledges the linguistic, geographical, and cultural effacement that underlies the act of translation obliquely brings to light the deep-rooted entanglement between land, language, and sense of affiliation. Yolland’s acute awareness of his position as an outsider makes him poignantly observe, “[e]ven if I did speak Irish I’d always be an outsider here, wouldn’t I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won’t it? The private core will always be... hermetic” (Friel 48). Friel dovetails the colonizer’s personal dilemma with the overarching political inflection of colonization, which also encounters a sense of displacement even after adopting the colonized peoples’ language for ‘technical’ governance. Colonizing subjugated native’s personality not only sought to condition a Western ‘modernizing’ sensibility but also strove to put in place, an internalization and acceptance of European superiority. Yolland in the act of gazing back at the colonizer/himself, acknowledges the negative impact of colonization’s forced enculturation. Interestingly, Gaelic language that lends the Irish a sense of belonging is also exhibited by him.

— 45 — Wearing an English soldier’s demeanour, Yolland is persistently seen admiring Irish language and culture that finds an expression in referents in the countryside. He says, “I think your countryside is- is - is very beautiful. I’ve fallen in love with it already” (Friel 35). Yolland extrapolates this sense of *philia* in order to counter the colonial process of othering that deftly put in place, the imperialist rise of the empire. He does so through his oblique act of resistance by confronting his authoritarian overlords by stating, “[y]ou cannot rename a whole country overnight” (Friel 41). Interestingly, this moment of the colonizer’s self expression as a subjective self is attributed by him to an environmental affect - “[y]our Irish air has made me bold” (Friel 41 ). The strong bond of affinity developed between Yolland and Baile Beag punctures the notion of divisibility between human and his environment, in particular when the individual hails from a different topographic location (here, the metropolis of London). However, aware of his status as an outsider not only in terms of his association with a different geographical locale but also in terms of his identity as a colonizer, Yolland hesitates, “I hope we’re not too- too crude an intrusion on your lives” (Friel 35). Friel deftly juxtaposes a British Lieutenant’s celebration of Ireland with an unsettling feeling of discomfort and unwontedness due to his colonial presence in a colonized native land. The burden of an acute awareness of the intrusive role of an imperial entity’s presence in Baile Beag surges alongside in Yolland as he also experiences a sense of connect with the spatial, spiritual, and cultural aspects of the Irish county. If Yolland’s presence



strives to find a presence through the environment of Baile Beag, natives like Maire who embody marks of laborious engagement with the nonhuman life and landscape of Baile Beag (“black calf has to be fed... My hands are that rough; they’re still blistered from the hay. I’m ashamed of them. I hope to God there’s no hay to be saved in Brooklyn” (Friel 78) yearns to leave for America.

A moment of in-betweenness in terms of linguistic incomprehensibility, incomplete semiotic communication, and structurally different parole patterns emerges in an important conversation between Maire, native Irish speaking girl and English-speaking Lieutenant Yolland in Act II. Structurally, between Act I and Act III, stage instructions to create an atmosphere of in-betweenness — “This scene *may be* played in the schoolroom, but it would be *preferable to lose* - by lighting- as much of the schoolroom as possible, and to play the scene down front in a *vaguely ‘outside’* area” (italics mine) (Friel 61-2). Eager to communicate with Yolland, Maire speaks Irish and Latin and struggles to enunciate the few English words she knows. Their stutter, indecipherability, and inhibitions (“I-I-I”, “What-what?”, “sorry-sorry?”) (Friel 63) are interlaced with precise, articulate yet separate phrases in Irish and Latin (Maire) and English (Yolland) to confess mutual love. They experience the desire to communicate by uttering elements of nature (“water”, “fire”, “earth”) that become the ideal planetary connect. They weave a communication with entangled threads of linguistic and cultural difference, confessing love by circumventing language’s ‘decipherability’. Postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi locates “the trope of friendship as the most comprehensive philosophical signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging” (10). Even when Gaelic and English language registers according to each’s linguistic culture possibly sound like jabberwocky, they still manage to understand and extend towards each other, beyond notions of belongingness offered by their respective languages. This episode undercuts the heightened awareness of politics of (un)translatability of language that grips the thematic through standardization of words that is both unsettling and welcoming to differing ideological positionalities. The words uttered by both acquire a tonal affect that melts into their hearts, even when semiotically they hear chaos.

### Part II: Energizing the in-between

As a literary text coming out of a former colony of the British Empire, *Translations* punctures the colonialist project of appropriation by positing translation as an enabling mechanism for the Irish to articulate their postcolonial identities of 1833 as they deem fit. By problematizing a narrow understanding of tradition, Friel visibilizes fossilization and lifeless living that the natives suffer at the behest of mythic reification and narrow (puritanical)

nationalism. ‘Fifth Provence’<sup>8</sup> for Friel and Field Day was understood as “a province of mind through which we hope to devise another way of looking at Ireland, or another possible Ireland” (“Field Day Five Years On” 7). As a dramatist and co-founder of Field Day Theatre Company, Friel’s ideological stance vis-a-vis the arts was that “[f]lux is their only constant; the crossroads their only home; impermanence their only yardstick” (Friel 1967, cited in Russell 12). His theatre company believed “genuine and beneficent societal change could be introduced and wrought by artists, who could “translate” politics and literature—culture generally—into accessible language for the masses through traveling plays and writings” (Friel 1967 cited in Russell 149). A playwright who understood the affective quality of theatre as performance where “[t]hrough their physical presence, perception, and response, the spectators become co-actors that generate the performance by participating in the “play” (Lichte 32), Friel’s medium of representation (theatre) compliments the idea he wishes to put forth. Interestingly, Friel admits that, “a fundamental irony of this play is that it should have been written in Irish” (“Talking to Ourselves” 59). However, by actively involving the reader/viewer through a suspension of disbelief, he makes them hear Irish *in* spoken English. Friel punctures the colonial project and the play’s thematic that is working towards appropriating Irish by overtly infusing English with Irish undertones. By bringing the personal of the individual reader/viewer into the text through its form and content, an active negotiation with Friel’s play blurs boundaries between personal and political. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said defined culture not only as “all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure” (xii) but one that also exists as a “concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought... [c]ulture in this sense is a source of identity... In this second sense culture is a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another” (Said xiii). Interlacing culture as performance proper (theatre) and qualifying culture as ideological and political, Friel’s play rests in an ideologically-driven translation that acquires its political dimension through a postcolonial context imbricating notions of identity and subjectification. Friel also extrapolates translation beyond its literal meaning by translating the threat of cultural imperialism’s ideological coercion into facilitating a postcolonial self-definition that articulates an Irish surcharge through English colonization. He does so by energizing a state of flux that holds the possibility of creating an Irish English identity that adopts and becomes adept at commingling the past in terms of the present. Friel’s text “embraces [cultural] difference and absence as material signs of power rather

<sup>8</sup> Explored by Richard Kearney and Mark Hederman in *Crane Bag*, (1977). Mind’s “the secret centre...where all oppositions resolved...such a place would require that each person discover it for himself within himself”.

than negation, of freedom not subjugation, of creativity not limitation” (Ashcroft 165-66) to accord to a postcolonial Ireland a sense of self-assertion through language and culture. Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe who chose to write in English while recognizing its colonial baggage opined, “*But* it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (emphasis mine) (“English and the African Writer” 30). In rendering porous the boundaries between the Irish and the English language, an utterance develops which routes itself by destabilizing linguistic essentializations.

The character of Owen (Irish master’s son who has returned to his native town) performs the function of the transformed native. Employed on a part-time basis by the British to carry out the English Ordnance Survey, he along with Yolland has to perform his “official function as translator [which] is to pronounce each name in Irish and then provide the English translation” (Friel 38). Performing the “official function as translator” and his command “Put English on that, Lieutenant” (Friel 41) implicates him in creating a dichotomy- firstly, for the Irish community, he becomes an accomplice of the British in endorsing, participating, and commanding for the native’s ideological coercion and secondly, he sketches himself as a modern man willing to adopt English language and establish a contrast to his community’s way of living — 48 — that continues to thrive on potatoes and buttermilk (Friel 45). Owen functions as the archetypal figure of the transformed native upon whom cultural imperialism operates by “disrupting and changing the context within which people give meanings to their actions and experiences and make sense of their lives” (cited in Bush 123). Owen’s disregard for his native community completes the colonial process of acculturation. Thus, the combined task for Lieutenant Yolland (attached to the British toponymic department) and Owen at the beginning of Act II, Scene i is to “*take each of the Gaelic names—every hill, stream, rock, even every patch of ground which possessed its own distinctive Irish name—and Anglicise it, either by changing it into its approximate English sound or by translating it into English words*” (Friel 38, italics in original). Appropriating by way of translation, either an aural approximation or an approximate meaning raises pertinent issues relating to language as they emerge in the context of colonization- as a cultural tool of hegemonic control, in terms of politics of translation, and as a concept negotiating notions of tradition and modernity from the vantage point of Western imperialist project of modernity. The colonial act of translation seems to not only write over Irish names but strip off cultural resonances interwoven into the Irish language register by reducing the signifier to an empty sound. The emphasis on land infused with cultural undertones of “its own distinctive Irish name” is offset by Lieutenant Yolland’s response on hearing the Gaelic word ‘Bun na hAbhann’<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> the beach point at which the stream enters the sea.

- “Let’s leave it alone. There’s no English equivalent for a sound like that” (Friel 39). His response that identifies the absence of an equivalent sound and not an equivalent (approximate) meaning points out the meaninglessness in disassociating the place-name from its site specificity. The littoral point of the beach where the stream enters the sea mirrors the littoral contact zone between the colonizer and colonized that fails to meet in terms of equivalences. Friel states that even when the British leave Ireland “ the residue of their presence will still be with us.... and that brings us back to the question of language for this is one of the big inheritances which we have received from the British” (“ Talking to Ourselves” (60-61) cited in McGrath 3). He insists, “[w]e must make English identifiably our own language” and English words must become “distinctive and unique to us” (“Talking to Ourselves” (60-61) cited in McGrath 3). Gaelic and English are shown to perform diametrically opposing functions wherein,

‘Gaelic’ view of language sees it as the means to express an essential privacy, the hermetic core of being, to divine origins and etymologies, thus enabling a community to recollect itself in terms of its past. It is opposed by the technological, ‘English’ view of language, which sees it as a system of signs for representing, mapping and categorising — for ‘colonising’ the chaos of reality... danger with the ‘Gaelic’ model is that it can imprison a community in the past and lead to political stagnation... [the] ‘English’ model, taken to the extreme, reduces language to a mechanistic, totalised and ontologically depthless system of arbitrary signs (Andrews 170-71).

This view weighs Gaelic against English to posit language between two conflicting positionalities. “Possession of two languages is not merely having two tools, but actually means participation in two psychical and cultural realms. Here the two worlds symbolized and conveyed by the two tongues are in conflict: they are those of the colonizer and colonized” (Memmi 151). The former (Gaelic) presents communal language as a synthesizing device via the personal and the Gaelic land while the latter (English) presents a consolidating language as a usurping agent via the political. Towards the play’s end, the hedge-school master Hugh takes Marie (local Irish girl) under his wing to teach her English. He postpones the beginning of English lessons by stating that they would start “[n]ot today. Tomorrow, perhaps. After the funeral. We’ll begin tomorrow (*Ascending*)” (Friel 89). Friel uses the form (theatrical representation) and stage directions to juxtapose this postponed acquisition of English (a language understood as static) with Hugh’s physical movement wherein he climbs steps to ‘ascend’. If learning of the colonizer’s language is delayed, the body of the native is seen in motion. Contrast between deferment and Maire’s enthusiasm to learn English and move to America problematizes any simplistic acceptance of the fate of the colonized peoples’ negotiations with language and culture. He further says to Maire, “don’t expect too much. I will provide you with the available

words and the available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies? I have no idea. (*He is now at the top*)” (Friel 89-90). Even when natives have access to English grammar devoid of its quality as an embodied language, it does not reassure competent entry and participation in the language’s intimate privacies decipherable only to the natives. Precariousness of adopting the other’s language either as an imposition or assimilation is exemplified through this interaction. However, to penetrate the privacies of language, Friel suggests that individuals need to energize English language by injecting into it their private sense of a language that embodies Irish linguistic history. Chinua Achebe had opined, “let no one be fooled by the fact that we write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it” (9). Advocating for an intercultural transfer by attempting that “[w]e must learn to make them [English words] our own. We must make them our new home” (Friel 88), the play seems to bring to life identities of individuals which are shaped by a language that can emerge as fluid, complex, intertwined, and hybridized and can demystify attempts at homogenization and essentialization of subjectivities in the name of language, culture, history, and/or the nation-state. As Hugh says, “we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise” (Friel 88 ). The play locates language’s power as a cultural byproduct that shapes realities, experiences, personalities, and histories of not individuals alone but of communities as well. Friel uses language to reflect upon cultural atmospherics of a colonized Irish settlement and problematize fixed positionalities vis-a-vis English and Irish. He uses colonial language to establish a postcolonial critique and thus complicates relegating language within either nationalist or colonialist puritanical tendencies.

Hugh’s statement to Lieutenant Yolland: “remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen — to use an image you’ll understand — it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of...fact” ( Friel 52) critiques the colonial act of writing over the landscape of North Ireland’s Gaelic language. Interestingly, his statement offers both, a critique and an appreciation of refurbishing their Gaelic linguistic expressions. Hugh points out language’s functional signification (“words are signals, counters”) (Friel 52). He dismisses language’s timelessness by attributing to it a liveness of its own. Hugh re-iterates language’s experiential and personal associative quality that enables comprehension. He locates an understanding of the colonial project from the colonized perspective to explain the colonizer’s machination to Yolland himself by stating “to use an image *you’ll* [Yolland] understand” (emphasis mine) (Friel 52); thereby re-reading the colonizer’s anglicization of Irish by upturning the colonizer’s motifs to establish a dialogue with the British soldier himself. He articulates the inextricable link between a civilization and its linguistic framework by positing that linguistic incarceration either through dispossession of a culture’s traditional linguistic utterances or through imposition of a colonizer’s

verbal imagination can effectively rupture a civilization's collective consciousness. Lastly, as an oxymoron, by conflating embodied language with "landscape of fact" (Friel 52), he verbalizes a relational characteristic of the facticity of a language's embeddedness in a particular cultural domain as language "inhabits us and we inhabit it... Language introduces us to an identifiable world, initiates us into a family, providing those most basic concepts — 'me', 'us', 'them'" (Ashcroft 95). Thus, Hugh expresses affective charge between language and land, traditional customs and beliefs, historical and mythic memory wherein each shape one another.

Friel's play is not a mere telling of a colonized people's story. It directs the viewer/reader's attention to moments of in-betweenness that enable one to destabilize and problematize well-differentiated identities of the colonizer as dictator and the colonized as submissive and devoid of agency. If postcolonial writings reclaim histories by resisting narratives presented by the colonizers that rendered them without a subject position and instead chose to represent themselves to regain an identity; Friel's text problematizes the nationalist act of retrieval and reclamation. He does so by reflecting upon the liminal space between the hegemonic erasure of Irish identities through 'standardized' semiotics via the English language and the divergent positionalities taken not just by the colonizer but by the colonized as well that throw into disarray clear distinctions between preconceived dichotomies. Furthermore, Lieutenant Yolland's dejection that he feels "so cut off from the people here. And I was trying to explain a few minutes ago how remarkable a community this is" (Friel 50) finds his appreciation and astonishment in the place name "Termon, from Terminus, the god of boundaries" (Friel 50). Boundary-blurring acts of finding 'equivalences' that tip the scale towards English paradoxically entrenches the boundary deeper into cultural differentiations that will always stand apart. However, Friel insists upon creating an 'Irish English' that takes cognizance of not only Ireland's expression in a Gaelic tongue but also of infusion of English language due to colonization and thus, the natives "must learn those new names...[and] make them [English words] our own. We must make them our new home" (Friel 88). Friel suggests that this paradox or the quality of the in-between or fluidity qualifies language as an "[e]xpression [that] must occur in the transition between old and new, between text and interpreter, between past and present, between the already spoken and the speaking of the yet to be expressed" (Diprose et al., 156). Friel's commitment to creating mental, cultural, and linguistic spaces that constantly refurbish themselves with changing times to avoid fossilization and transforming perspectives of characters' advocates for accepting linguistic fluidity that does not build borders to sieve out 'outsider' influences to retain their 'untainted' pre-modern linguistic past. By situating the text in a colonial setting, Friel postulates not one historical truth of Irish identity, culture, and language

disposition but argues for reading many translations of the historical narrative of Ireland's linguistic reality and possibilities. As critic J. H. Andrews points, the play is "an extremely subtle blend of historical truth - and some other kind of truth" (167).

Friel's commitment resides in creating mental, cultural, and linguistic spaces that constantly refurbish themselves with changing times to avoid fossilization. By presenting a case for retaining elements that enable the community to keep its embodied imagination, platial and planetary connectedness, and linguistic articulation well lubricated without suffering cultural erasure; Friel advocates for accepting a linguistic fluidity that does not build borders to sieve out 'outsider' influences to retain their 'untainted' linguistic past. Instead, he extrapolates translation beyond its literal meaning by translating the threat of cultural imperialism's ideological coercion into facilitating a postcolonial self-definition that articulates an Irish surcharge through English colonization. Thus, in attempting to make language their own, the act of defamiliarizing the colonial language by infusing it with Gaelic surcharge and in looking beyond their own nativism locates a decidedly political intervention.

### Conclusion

— 52 —  
 Seamus Deane (one of the directors of *Field Day*) stated, "[e]verything, including our politics and our literature, has to be rewritten — i.e. re-read. This will enable new writing, new politics, unblemished by Irishness, but securely Irish."<sup>10</sup> Negating Ireland's co-option by mindless translation of Irish names as an anglicized reflection of the colonial master's language, Friel advocates for a processual becoming that acknowledges interconnectedness between Irish and English by claiming a personalized sense and prevalence of a modernity that the Irish could acquire on their own terms. Though initiated as an endowment upon the Irish through Western imperialism, Friel argues for resisting the Eurocentric discourse embedded within by presenting a case for retaining elements that enable the community to keep its embodied imagination, platial and planetary connectedness, and linguistic articulation well lubricated without suffering cultural erasure. Renewing colonial translation by re-presenting it as Irish English, Friel's engagement with such a linguistic interaction puts forth a positive outcome insofar as it is through the character of Hugh that the playwright makes the students of language and culture unlearn the colonial(ist) reading of translation. Instead of othering English, Friel suggests othering their homogenized and puritan selves that perpetuate exclusionary, decontextualized, and stagnant perspectives. By infusing embodied language of Irish culture into English, Friel makes the colonizer's language stutter. He subverts the stutter embodied by characters struggling to enunciate English and vouches for accepting an Irish English on the tongues of the natives. By

<sup>10</sup> Seamus Deane in "Field Day: An Introduction," quoted in Russell, 2013, p. 149.

not mitigating the natives' sense of self and sense of place, Friel locates meaning, expression, articulation, and identity in a fluid in-betweenness. Contesting the idea of home (oikos) as fixed, he proposes it as fluid to counter colonial machinations of cultural dispossession and construction of a monolithic national identity. Moreover, a spatial reading transgresses territorialization espoused by national boundaries and places instead, place as a site of study that renders open, a sense of relationality through a subjective experience of the place inhabited.

In attempting to make language their own, defamiliarizing the colonial language by the Irish and looking beyond their own nativism locates a decidedly political intervention. Bodies of different characters enable minute intimacies interconnected with the embodied enviroing landscape that posit multifarious translations of the transitional notion of in-betweenness. Friel's insistence on situating his play away from the political cannot be read as self-explanatory. As a dramatist writing in the late twentieth century, post the advent of literary theory, and encasing the problematic relation between language and culture in a colonial discourse in the form of a dramatic play that commands interaction with its audience, Friel's literary creation subtly makes a political statement vis-a-vis the colonial discourse. In the act of energizing the void created due to cultural difference and alterity (by way of listening to the sounds of the planet, sighting fast evading bounties of the earth, smelling fragrances of plantlives, tangibly experiencing nonhuman lifeworlds and tasting the utterances of an Irish English), Friel indeed posits many translations.

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**BIO**

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