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STAGING HISTORIES IN MARINA CARR'S MIDLANDS PLAYS

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Marina Carr is one of Ireland's foremost contemporary playwrights. Still at a relatively early stage in her career, she already has an impressive list of plays to her credit and has received critical acclaim not only in Ireland but internationally, particularly in the US where she won the E.M. Forster Award for Literary Achievement in 2001¹, and the AIF Literary Award in 2004. Her first plays: *Low in the Dark*, *The Deer's Surrender*, *Ullaloo* and *This Love Thing*, performed between 1989 and 1991, are characterized by a distinctively Beckettian style of writing. These plays are influenced by the theatre of the absurd and contain a strong feminist orthodoxy. 1994 saw the beginning of a new phase in Carr's work with the performance of *The Mai*, which marked a complete change from the absurdism of her earlier plays. Those works including and after *The Mai* have formed a phase of writing known as the midlands plays. Carr's change of direction at this point in her career has not been adequately explained, but what is certain is that it moved her firmly into the mainstream, where she began to attract more critical attention. This is illustrated by a quick glance at where her plays have been performed over the years. The absurdist plays were staged in the Project Arts Centre and the Peacock, *The Mai* was also performed in the Peacock and subsequently ran in Paris. Its positive reception won her the Dublin Theatre Festival best new playwright award and resulted in Carr's appointment to the post of writer-in-residence at the Abbey in 1995. *Portia Coughlan* premiered at the Peacock in 1996; in 1998 *By the Bog of Cats* was first performed in the Abbey as was *Ariel* in 2002. Carr has gone from strength to strength internationally in this time too. Her plays have been put on in the Royal Court in London and in Toronto; she was the Trinity College writer in residence in 1999, and in 2004 *By the Bog of Cats* has been performed in Wyndham's Theatre in the West End with Oscar-winning actress Holly Hunter playing the lead role. Her plays have had several US productions and there have already been

translations into Russian and German. More recently, her newest play *Woman and Scarecrow* premiered in London's Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in June 2006. This play has marked a move away from the thematic direction [p.390] of the midlands plays and a further distancing from their realist dimension.

Despite the growing success of Carr's career, some critics have cautiously registered their disappointment at what may be perceived as her surrender of artistic integrity. Claire Wallace states that '[f]rom the perspective of positive, politically aggressive feminism, Carr's work might be said to have developed in a negative sense veering from a playful satirical feminism to grim patriarchal tragedy'². It does seem more than a little strange that the first female Irish playwright in decades with a relatively high profile, in a time of unprecedented economic prosperity, should choose to set her plays in antiquated rural communities and pen such hopeless tragedies. The lack of female playwrights in Irish theatre is well known, but the low profile of those that do exist suggests that the critical reluctance to engage with women writers is exacerbating the problem. Of the recent crop of female playwrights like Mary-Elizabeth Burke Kennedy, Marie Jones and Emma Donoghue, Carr is the one who has so far received the most sustained critical attention. Until the last decade, the only woman playwright to be in the forefront of Irish theatre in this manner was Lady Augusta Gregory, and in her case, this was at least partially because of her influence in the formation of the Abbey. Because of this lack of precedent, it is inevitable that much of the writing on Carr has examined her as an Irish female voice rather than an Irish voice. This viewpoint is not necessarily helpful, however, as the female characters in Carr's drama bear little relation to their counterparts in contemporary Ireland.

Carr's plays both affirm and deny any easy definition as distinctively 'Irish', and to suggest that she represents modern Irish identity is even more problematic. The midlands plays *are* steeped in Irish culture, and the flat, guttural accents of the characters serve as a geographical marker of this identity.

But although these plays, with one exception, are set in the present, the identity that she represents does not cohere easily with contemporary Ireland. Her characters inhabit primarily rural communities, and are characterized by their isolation and inwardness: they depict an Ireland that the Celtic Tiger would seem to have left far behind. Also, her appropriation of classical forms and themes, particularly Greek tragedy, places her on a literary stage that crosses national boundaries. *The Mai* is based on Sophocles's *Electra*; the plot of *Portia Coughlan* is derived from *Medea*³, and *By the Bog of Cats* owes a debt to this story too. *Portia Coughlan* is also influenced by the Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris while the eponymous Portia takes her name from Shakespeare's Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and *On Raftery's Hill* is in many ways a re-enactment of the myth of Hera and [p.391] Zeus⁴. A palpable tension is evident between the cultural, geographical and temporal specificity of her plays and the timelessness of the dramatic forms which influence their creation. The three plays that form the basis of this article, *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats*, are often regarded as forming a trilogy because each depicts a protagonist that is shaped by longing for a lost other. Through the use of this thematic device, Carr stages the universal human tragedy of the subject cut off from the real, who yearns for the *objet petit a* that promises to fill the void. In a culturally specific manner, however, Carr's plays suggest the transformed Irish nation, adrift in modernity and desperately grasping for the symbolic fragments of its former identity. It is Lacanian psychoanalysis that provides the conceptual paradigm for this reading of the plays. The lost other, as I shall argue, may also represent the history haunts every present action, a theory that can be developed into relation to the writings of Jacques Derrida.

The central argument of this article is that the literary influences of the midlands plays, Shakespeare, ancient Greek drama and ancient Egyptian narrative, mirror the plays' concern with the lost other and the theme of history repeating itself, combining to comment on contemporary Irish society, despite the fact that the plays appear to be removed from the Ireland that exists today. Many of

Carr's characters experience history repeating itself in their lives, and the influences of the play also produce the repetition of literary history when they are superimposed onto a contemporary Irish setting. While the content of the plays seems to be frustrating static (characters frequently repeat destructive behavioral patterns through generations of family members) and the presentation of Irishness also seems fixed in the past (there is little acknowledgement of access to the wider world through technology or travel), the fusion of these themes with the literary influences of the play creates a new perspective on contemporary Ireland by representing the cultural anxiety about moving from being a relatively insular, economically unsuccessful island nation to being part of a wider global community, politically, culturally, and technologically. In other words, this article argues that the plays should not be interpreted as completely realist drama. Instead, through historical literary influences and the theme of history, the plays can be read as symptomatic of the unease about the rapid social changes that have occurred in the last two decades.

According to Lacan, there can never be an objective representation of history. The articulation of past events is necessarily influenced by all that has occurred in between, and the actual verbalization of experience brings with it its own distortions. He states, 'history is already producing itself on the stage where it will be played out, once it has been written down, both within the subject and outside him'⁵. At the moment an event occurs it is metamorphozised through the [p.392] symbolic order: the realm of social law and cultural structures, so that even while the event is happening, it is distorted by the language and social values through which the subject interprets the event. The longer the time between the event and the recollection, the more likely it is that it will be further distorted. Social values and cultural codes change over time, and so the frame of reference is altered, meaning that the gap between the event and the interpretation widens even further. However, the principle method of psychoanalysis is to facilitate the articulation of the analysand's history in order to interpret it in the

present, thereby allowing the analysand to achieve resolution. This method is analogous to Carr's plays: history is presented in the themes – the Irish history of the subjugation of women, the sometimes destructive loyalty to family, the intimate connection with place, and in the literary influences. But, this history is played out in the present, allowing the audience to identify with the familiar Irish themes, and also, albeit unconsciously to recognize the disharmony of these themes with contemporary Ireland.

Carr sheds light on her self-conscious appropriation of dramatic forms, her persistent allusions to other literary texts and the historical imperative of her characterization in a lecture entitled 'Dealing with the Dead', stating that, 'The whole world and all its civilizations have been shaped by this great panoply of the dead, whose voices we hear all around us'⁶. It is clear that this fascination with ghostly presences, both literary and fictional, has informed her writing, with the midlands landscape functioning as an imaginary space where the living and dead co-exist. In Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, he philosophises on the possible implications of living with the dead in this manner. Like Carr, for Derrida 'this being-with specters would also be...a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations'⁷. Derrida's writings on death stem from the concept of hauntology: a deliberate play on ontology. The similarity of the two words in spoken French and their inter-dependence conceptually, deconstruct the binaries of being and non-being, death and life. According to Derrida, the future cannot be comprehended without coming to terms with the Other, whether this Other signifies ghosts, death, or both. Hauntology is, therefore, present in ontology, even if these ghosts that inform being are silent. It represents a spectral paradigmatic chain, without which meaning or being cannot be expressed. This concept applies particularly to literature, assuring its significance for Carr's writing, which is haunted by the ghosts of those who have gone before her. Indeed, in this same lecture, Carr articulates her desire for her plays to be judged for their literary merit rather than their performative merit. These literary specters hovering

around the [p.393] dramatic text conduct, as Derrida suggests, ‘a *haunting*, of both memory and translation’⁸.

The landscape of the midlands plays reflects Carr’s dramatic world, which is quite literally ‘mid’ or in between, wedged in the interstices of realism and fantasy, ancient and modern, local and global⁹. In *By the Bog of Cats*, even ‘dramatic time is on a cusp’¹⁰, because when the play opens ‘It’s that hour when it could be either dawn or dusk, the light bein’ so similar’¹¹. Eamonn Jordan provides a possible reason for this liminal setting, noting that in Irish dramaturgy, ‘Writing practices have clearly drifted in many respects from being predominantly post-colonial to postmodern, but now are neither fully one nor the other’¹². He cites Marrienne McDonald who addresses how ‘key Attic texts are reworked during moments of political and cultural crisis and transition’¹³. Her drama reflects the liminal status of both Irish dramaturgy, poised between post-colonial and postmodern, but also Ireland itself, which having rushed headlong into modernity and postmodernity finds its communal identity an un-cohesive blend of old and new. Carr is not alone in her appropriation of ancient stories to articulate present experience, because it is a trait shared by many Irish playwrights, particularly in recent decades,¹⁴ and the significance of this phenomenon may well reside in the fact that these translations or adaptations are a response to social change. Melissa Sihra argues that it occurs because Irish modernity is superficial and that, in fact, ‘old preoccupations prevail’¹⁵. It is true that the social and cultural changes of the last twenty years have not always been accompanied by converse changes in national identity and it perhaps the case, as sociologist Micheal O’Connell puts it, that ‘we’re enjoying the pithivier of pigeon with fondant of kumquat but wonder...maybe the bacon and cabbage tasted better?’¹⁶. The proliferation of ancient narrative in Irish drama may articulate a desire for further development to be firmly rooted in past experience and not entirely detached from it, in order to maintain a sense of continuity and stability.

In this way, the literal and literary haunting that is evident in Carr's drama can be interpreted as an attempt to negotiate, and respond to, social change.

The first play in the series, *The Mai*, is the only one that is not set in the present. Act One takes place in 1979 and Act Two a year later in 1980. In many respects, though, the play outlines the themes that were to become central to her writing. *The Mai* depicts a co-dependent, dysfunctional family that is the source of the dramatic action in all of the midlands plays. Although The Mai is financially independent, she is emotionally dependent on a man who has already abandoned her for a period of years before the drama begins, and who continues to be [p.394] unfaithful to her in the course of the play. Like many of Carr's protagonists, The Mai exists in a fictional world of her own creation, and is devastated when reality doesn't match up to her expectations:

[I]ittle did I think as I played around the cliffs of Fraochlan that I would ever be like this. I used to dream that a dark-haired prince would come across the waves on the wings of an albatross and he'd take me away to a beautiful land never seen or heard of before and he'd love me as no girl has ever been loved¹⁷.

As the play draws to a close and the arguments between The Mai and her husband Robert increase in intensity, he confronts her about her romanticism:

Robert: What do you think, Grandma Fraochlan, of The Mai and me?

Grandma F: Ya needn't be using me as a decoy. If ya've anathin' ta say ta Tha Mai, say ih to her.

Robert: The Mai will not listen, because, you see, The Mai thinks in absolutes. And I am The Mai's absolute husband and when I refuse to behave as The Mai's absolute husband, The Mai shuts down because the reality of everyday living is too complicated for The Mai¹⁸.

Like Grandma Fraochlan who regales unwilling listeners with tales of her one true love, the nine-fingered fisherman, for *The Mai*, love can only exist in the past tense. This play outlines what is arguably the central theme of the midlands plays: the inescapability of heredity and the endless repetition of mistakes from generation to generation. This is evident when the audience discover that Grandma Fraochlan's mother had also constructed an elaborate fantasy about the father of her child, pretending that he was the Sultan of Spain. At the end of the play, it is discovered that *The Mai* has passed on the familial curse to her daughter Millie. 'You'll be different, won't you, Millie? You won't be like me and Robert'¹⁹. But Millie is condemned to relive her childhood in the house by Owl Lake, which becomes, as does landscape in almost all of the midlands plays, a metaphor for self-destruction. 'None of the *Mai* and Robert's children are very strong', Millie says. 'We teeter along the fringe of the world with halting gait, reeking of Owl Lake at every turn. I dream of water all the time. I'm floundering off the shore, or bursting towards the surface for air, or wrestling with a black swan trying to [p.395] drag me under'²⁰. This repetition of the past through generations of family, and the fact that *Electra* is the inspiration for the play, makes clear the staging of literary and personal histories that can be regarded as symptomatic of the societal inability to entirely detach from Ireland's historical identity in spite of the changes effected to that identity in recent years. The idealism of the *Mai*'s romantic aspirations that are fixed in the past however, verifies Lacan's theory about the inevitable distortion that occurs when history is recounted. On a national level, it may be a comment on the danger of nostalgia when it does not engage with present in any way. Both levels of meaning can be qualified in the light of Derrida's hauntology, which is a reminder that the past is necessary in order to define the present, no matter how complex the relationship between the two.

In *Portia Coughlan* the fetishization of the past is also evident on two levels: in the literary allusions of the play and in the mechanisms of the plot. As well as the Greek and Egyptian influences

already mentioned and Portia's Shakespearian name, Belmont river takes its name from Portia's place of residence in *The Merchant of Venice*. This literary haunting is mirrored by the play's content. In the opening scene, the audience is introduced to Gabriel Scully, Portia's twin. Although Gabriel is dead, he is in many ways the most important character, as his presence in absence influences all of Portia's actions. The inseparability of Portia and Gabriel is presented in a visual manner at the play's opening. Two isolating lights come up on both characters simultaneously, and 'they mirror one another's posture and movements in an odd way; unconsciously'²¹. He is Portia's lost other and the fact that he does not speak indicates the impossibility of accurately resurrecting history. Instead, he communicates to Portia by singing and his appearances are characterized by the eerie haunting of his voice. At the beginning of scene five, the stage directions specify that he 'wanders by the Belmont River singing; effect must be ghostly'²². Gabriel's ghostly presence illuminates the reasons behind Portia's failed marriage. Deeply unhappy with her husband Raphael, she admits 'The only reason I married [him] was because of his name, a angel's name, same as Gabriel's, and I thought be osmosis or just pure wishin' that one'd take on the qualities of the other. But Raphael is not Gabriel and never will be'²³. Raphael's efforts at reconciliation are doomed from the start, because he can never compare to Portia's idealized twin. She feels her separation from him physically: 'sometimes I think only half of me is left, the worst half'²⁴, she says. As though seeking a physical symbol of her loss, she remarks: 'sometimes I think if I had me eye gouged out, I'd ne'er wear an eye patch at all'²⁵. Without [p.356] Gabriel, Portia feels as though there is a gaping hole in her life. This image operates on another level too, in symbolizing Portia's blindness to her total reconstruction of the events that have tainted her life.

The premature death of Gabriel and Portia's subsequent sentimentalization of his memory condemn all of her relationships to failure. The landscape itself is saturated with his memory. She tells her father:

He's everywhere, Daddy. Everywhere. There's not a corner of any of your forty fields that don't remind me of Gabriel. His name is in the mouths of the starlin's that swoops over Belmont hill, the cows bellow for him from the frosty barn on winter nights. The very river tells me that once he was here and now he's gone²⁶.

Memory and history are intimately bound to place in Carr's work, and this is not surprising given the traditional Irish attachment to land. Faced with a ghost who possesses not only his wife's psyche but the landscape itself, Raphael's quest to win her affections is hopeless. In a heated argument before her eventual suicide, Portia tells her husband: 'I despise you, Raphael Coughlan, with your limp and your cheap suits and your slow ways. I completely and utterly despise you for what you are in yourself, but more for who you will never be'²⁷. Here again, the play relates the danger of focusing on the past to the exclusion of the present.

In *By the Bog of Cats*, too, landscape plays a central role as the source of the magical past and a way of sustaining the connection with it, however unhealthy it may be. The plot focuses on a stand-off between Hester Swane and her ex-lover Carthage Kilbride. At the opening of the play, Carthage is set to marry his fiancé Caroline, but a shadow is cast over the impending union because Hester refuses to move out of the home on the bog she shared with Carthage, in spite of the emotional and financial pressure she is forced to endure. Hester regards the bog as both her physical and spiritual home and, as the play progresses, it is evident that it has mystical properties. It is even the source of the wisdom of Catwoman, a blind soothsayer. When Hester tells Catwoman that she will never be forced out of her house, she replies, 'Sure I know that too. Seen it writ in a bog hole'²⁸. The bog is also a vehicle for communion with the dead. As Hester recounts the death of her mother when she was seven years old, she says, 'I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I'll watch her return'²⁹.

Portia's death occurs *in medias res* at the beginning of Act Two on her thirtieth birthday, mirroring the death of her brother fifteen years [p.397] before. She drowns herself in Belmont River just like Gabriel did, and is even pulled out from exactly the same spot, in another incidence of the repetition of the past. Portia, like so many of Carr's heroines, is doomed to suffer a seemingly unending repetition complex, unable to purge the source of her pain. Hester's daughter, too, is forced to repeat the pattern of her mother's life. Echoing her mother's words almost exactly, she envisages her life as a hopeless wait for her mother to return and a desperate longing for the void to be filled: 'Mam', she says, 'I'd be watchin' for ya all the time 'long the Bog of Cats. I'd be hopin' and waitin' and praying' for ya to return'³⁰. As Grandma Fraochlan states in *The Mai*, 'we can't help repeatin' Robert, we repeah an' we repeah, th'orchestration may be different but the tune is allas tha same'³¹. The influence of history is highlighted in *Portia Coughlan* in Act Three where, reversing chronological time by returning to the period before Portia's death, it is revealed that Gabriel's death was enacted as part of a suicide pact that had been planned by the twins. 'At the last minute I got afraid' Portia says, 'and he just went on in and I called him back and at the last second he turns thinkin' I'm behind him'³². Her suicide underlines the inescapability of the past, which operates in self-perpetuating cycles. Characters' deaths are symbolic of their actions in life according to Carr, and in her work the influence of past emotional traumas cannot be escaped even in the final act of dying: 'I love reading about how people die' states Carr, 'I think it says everything about how they have lived'³³. Portia's suicide compelled by her obsession in life with her brother, verifies the truth of this statement, but critics are frequently frustrated by the inability of Carr's characters to do anything to help themselves. Wallace states that her heroines 'seem to abdicate from a confrontation with patriarchy, or if they do engage they, disappointingly, throw in the towel by committing suicide'³⁴.

Carr claims that she structured *Portia Coughlan* in this manner to avoid melodrama, and to allow Portia's death to resonate through the third act³⁵, mirroring the prophesy of death by The Ghost Fancier in Act One of *By the Bog of Cats*. I would suggest another reason for this structure, however. Carr's reversal of chronological time in Act Three presents a seemingly conclusive working out of Portia's destiny, which completes the suicide pact with her brother. But in Act Three, Portia's account of her relationship with Gabriel is undercut, making her suicide all the more tragic because of the misconceptions that brought it about. In an emotionally charged argument between Portia and her mother, two conflicting versions of history collide. The idyllic relationship between Portia and Gabriel is thrown into doubt by her mother's testimony: 'I seen what he used do to you!', shouts her [p.397] mother, 'How he used start ya chokin' by just lookin' at ya! How he used draw blood from ya when ya tried to defy him!'³⁶. It becomes evident that the relationship between the twins was mutually destructive, both emotionally and sexually. In the last scene of the play she confesses to her husband, 'me and Gabriel made love all the time down be the Belmont River among the swale, from the age of five – That's as far back as I can remember anyways – But I think we were doin' it before we were born'³⁷. Portia reveals too that she has never forgiven her mother for separating her and Gabriel: 'Why did ya have to sever us?'³⁸ she accuses. Her insistence on the bond with her twin is revealed to be based primarily on guilt. She is culpable in his death not only through their suicide pact but because she abandoned him for other friends: 'Gabriel stopped singin', Portia, when you stopped talking to him', her mother tells her, 'when ya refused to go anywhere with him, when you refused to ate at the table with him...you done away with him as if he were no more than an ear of corn at the threshin''³⁹.

Portia illustrates the Lacanian notion of the necessary fictiveness of history and on a broader level too, it could be argued that Carr's work forces the audience to confront atavistic aspects of Irishness that in spite of our rapid modernization seem to lurk in the wings waiting for their cue. Victor

Merriman criticises Carr's work in this vein saying, 'The dramatis personae of these plays specifically mark out figures of the poor which are over-determined in their Irishry. Gross caricatures with no purchase on the experiences of today's audiences, their appeal to the new consumer-Irish consensus lies in their appearance as ludicrous Manichaeian opposites'⁴⁰. It is unlikely that the audience's enjoyment of these plays is based on the purely therapeutic experience of laughing at how we once were. The dynamic is altogether more complicated, questioning whether it is possible to recollect the past accurately at all, making the audience aware of the creative work of memory, and suggesting that obsession with the past is ultimately unhealthy, although its acknowledgement is necessary to re-imagine identity. This serves as a cogent warning in the current re-assessment of national identity in contemporary Ireland in the light of factors such as the peace process, the economic boom and the changing racial demographics of a society with a growing immigrant population. The Irish are adjusting to living in a multi-ethnic society at the moment, and in Carr's midlands plays, the issue of ethnicity is also foregrounded. Portia's mother comes from a traveling background and experiences distrust as a result. 'We don't know where ye came from, the histories of yeer blood', says Blaize, Portia's paternal grandmother. 'There's a devil in that Joyce blood, was in Gabriel, and it's in Portia too'⁴¹. Hester Swane in *By the Bog of Cats* also has 'tinker blood'⁴². Choosing to ally her [p.399] heroines with travellers, a traditionally marginalized section of Irish society, perhaps belies Carr's intention to hold a mirror up to her audience. She forces them to acknowledge their history of ethnic prejudice against travellers; a history that the Irish are reminded of daily in the new multicultural society in this country.

Carr's emphasis on the influence of the past and the repetition of history is strengthened by the revelation that Portia's parents are half-brother and sister: they have the same father but different mothers. The fact that their children 'make love' is another incidence of the repetition of family history, which this resonates with the literary history that inspires the play, echoing the incest theme of the Greek

tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. Incest also occurs in *On Raftery's Hill* and it is strongly suggested in *By the Bog of Cats* when Mrs. Kilbride reveals that she and her son Carthage slept in the same bed after her husband had died: 'When his father died he used come into the bed to sleep beside me for fear I would be lonely. Often I woke from a deep slumber and his two arms would be around me, a small leg thrown over me in sleep'⁴³. This oedipal confusion is echoed in the relationships between other mothers and their children in the play. Big Josie is a looming figure for Hester, the misinterpreted source of the hollowness in her life, a role which Hester comes to represent for her daughter, also called Josie. And like Mrs. Kilbride, Hester too has an unhealthy bond with her child. Her love for her daughter is so overpowering that it manifests itself as a desire for ultimate possession by ingestion: 'Ya beautiful, beautiful child', she tells Josie, 'I could ate ya'⁴⁴. For Hester, the only promise of escape from this unremitting cycle of love and loss is unity in death. At the end of the play, she slits Josie's throat with a knife and then kills herself. The over-whelming obsessional love for family members in these plays, which is taken to the extreme of suicide and infanticide, may be a reflection on the inward-looking nature of some aspects of Irish society in the past.

The constructed nature of history is the basis of the inherent tragedy in all three plays. They reveal that the act of remembering actively constructs history, and these constructions are never fully accurate. As Lacan states, 'Integration into history evidently brings with it the forgetting of an entire world of shadows which are not transposed into symbolic existence'⁴⁵. The unstoppable force of destructive cyclical personal and familial histories contributes to the sense of hopelessness that is generated at the end of these plays. Perhaps it is this sense of despair that causes Frank McGuinness to comment, 'There is no knowing what is going to happen in any play by Marina Carr, except the inevitable'⁴⁶. The determinacy of history in the lives of Carr's [p.400] characters is mirrored in her dramatic influences when she self-consciously imitates classical modes of drama. On a cultural level,

Carr also stresses the polyvalency of history through her representation of Irish identity. She superimposes contemporary issues such as exclusion, discrimination, and sexual deviancy onto an ostensibly outmoded rural setting, staging a national identity that fuses old and new.

Merriman interprets Carr's setting as culturally necessary, because 'The illusion of a new future can also be engendered by staging the past as a place we're all glad to have left behind'⁴⁷. This analysis does Carr a great injustice. While her drama ostensibly portrays the gulf between pre- and post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, she subversively illustrates their similarity through her insistence on the persistent recurrence of social, familial, and personal problems, a stance that is strengthened by her use of the almost universal themes of classical drama in an Irish context. The recent uncovering of clerical sexual abuse and the public tribunals investigating state corruption has revealed that national history too is not fixed, but is constantly being re-imagined in the present. Carr's vision of Ireland is not always a comfortable one. A patron at an American performance of *Portia Coughlan* commented, '[t]he Irish may drink and swear and fight but surely they're not as they were portrayed in the play...*My kind of Irish* are not interested in such trash'⁴⁸. This comment by an indignant audience member unwittingly suggests that Carr stages the impossibility of any objective definition of identity, whether personal or national. Everyone has their own 'kind of Irish' that they believe to be authentic, but every version is a creation. The midlands plays can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the anxiousness that has emerged in the light of the many social and cultural changes Irish society has undergone in the last few decades. They play out the tragic consequences of idealizing and glamourizing a past that can not be fully accessed in any case. They also show the importance of acknowledging the effect of the past on the present, because, as Derrida suggests, there can be no living without being defined by the dead: no ontology without hauntology. Perhaps then, Carr's drama could be interpreted in the context of

contemporary Ireland as a coming to terms with the Other, the ghosts from our past and creating a space in which they can speak to the living.

¹ Melissa Sihra, 'Reflections Across Water: New Stages of Performing Carr' in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"*, edited by Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), pp.92-113, p.92.

² Claire Wallace, Claire, "'A Crossroads Between Worlds': Marina Carr and the Use of Tragedy", *Litteraria Pragensia* 10.20 (2000), pp. 76-89, p.87.

³ *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, edited by Cliodhna Ni Anluain (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2000), p.51.

⁴ Marianne McDonald, 'Classics as Celtic Firebrand: Greek Tragedy, Irish Playwrights, and Colonialism', in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, edited by Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), pp.16-26, p.18.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989), p.57.

⁶ Marina Carr, 'Dealing with the Dead', *Irish University Review* 8.1 (1998b), pp.190-196, p.190.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.xix.

⁸ Derrida, p.18.

⁹ Melissa Sihra concurs with this point, describing the dramatic landscape of her plays as 'an existential never-never land hovering somewhere between the real and the imaginary' ['Stitching the Words: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*', *Irish Theatre Forum*, 3.1 (1999) <<http://www.ucd.ie/-irthfrm/issue52.htm>>].

¹⁰ Mary King, 'The Body Out of Place: Strangers, Intimates and Destabilized Identities in Synge's *When the Moon Has Set* and Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...*' in *Critical Survey*, 15.1 (2003), pp.48-59, p.54.

¹¹ Marina Carr, *Portia Coughlan* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1998a), p.14.

¹² Eamonn Jordan, 'Unmasking the Myths? Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...* and *On Raftery's Hill*' in *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, edited by Marianne McDonald and J. Micheal Walton (London: Methuen, 2002), p.4.

¹³ Jordan, p.4.

¹⁴ Sihra states that 'Pre-Christian systems of belief, the landscapes of ghosts and the dead, of myth and historical reference are repeatedly evoked in the narratives of McGuinness, Murphy, Kilroy, Friel and Carr' [Sihra, 'Reflections Across Water', 93]. To this list could also be added Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, and Brendan Kennelly, all of whom have translated versions of Greek drama, although in a manner more faithful to the original texts than Carr's literary borrowings.

¹⁵ Sihra, 'Reflections Across Water', p.93.

¹⁶ Michael O'Connell, *Changed Utterly: Ireland and the New Irish Psyche* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2001), p.7.

¹⁷ Marina Carr, *The Mai* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1997), p.58.

¹⁸ Carr, *The Mai*, p.62.

¹⁹ Carr, *The Mai*, p.72.

²⁰ Carr, *The Mai*, p.71.

²¹ Marina Carr, *Portia Coughlan* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1998). p.11.

²² Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.26.

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- ²³ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.27.
- ²⁴ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.27.
- ²⁵ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.22.
- ²⁶ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.30.
- ²⁷ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.38.
- ²⁸ Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1998a), p.23.
- ²⁹ Carr, *Bog of Cats*, p.42.
- ³⁰ Carr, *Bog of Cats*, p.78.
- ³¹ Carr, *The Mai*, p.23.
- ³² Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.56.
- ³³ Sihra, 'Reflections Across Water', p.112.
- ³⁴ Claire Wallace, 'Tragic Destiny and Abjection in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats...*', *Irish University Review: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 31 (2001), pp.431-450, p.435.
- ³⁵ Ni Anluain, p.53.
- ³⁶ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.64.
- ³⁷ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.68.
- ³⁸ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.64.
- ³⁹ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.65.
- ⁴⁰ Victor Merriman, 'Decolonisation Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash', *Irish University Review: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 29.2 (1999), pp.305-317, p.313.
- ⁴¹ Carr, *Portia Coughlan*, p.31.
- ⁴² Carr, *Bog of Cats*, p.16.

⁴³ Carr, *Bog of Cats*, p.52.

⁴⁴ Carr, *Bog of Cats*, p.68.

⁴⁵ Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar, Book 1, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-4*, translated by John Forrester, with notes by John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.192.

⁴⁶ Frank McGuinness, 'Writing in Greek: *By the Bog of Cats...*' in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"*, edited by Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), pp.87-88, p.87.

⁴⁷ Victor Merriman, 'Poetry Shite': A Postcolonial Reading of Portia Coughlan and Hester Swayne' in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"*, edited by Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), pp.145-159, p.151.

⁴⁸ Sihra, 'Reflections Across Water', p.102.