Rewriting History: Narrative Resistance and Poetic Justice in Martin McDonagh's *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*

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ABSTRACT

Martin McDonagh's *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (2018) explores how the stories of exploited people have been written out of history. The play includes several storytellers, and it both replicates and deviates from the details of numerous existing narratives, including McDonagh's own plays. Set in 1857, the play imagines that Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales were written by a pygmy woman from the Belgian Congo who has traveled back in time; Hans calls her Marjory and keeps her in a box in his attic. Eventually Marjory writes herself out of the box and departs for Africa to prevent the colonization of her people. *Dark Matter* compels us to question the narratives about the past that have become embedded in our culture and to uncover the facts that official accounts have altered or suppressed; rewriting history is acceptable *only* in imaginative storytelling, as an act of poetic justice. (JL)

KEYWORDS: Belgian Congo, colonialism, disability, racism, revisionist history, storytellers

In her book *Professional Savages*, Roslyn Poignant reconstructs the lives of nine Aboriginal North Queenslanders who, in the late nineteenth century, were abducted from their homeland by a recruiter for P. T. Barnum's circus and toured around the United States and Europe as an exotic spectacle for western eyes. Poignant argues that, to retrieve the Queenslanders' story, it was not only necessary for her to unravel "the socioeconomic and cultural processes" by which the Indigenous Australians were commodified, but also to interrogate "the narratives

we have told ourselves" about such matters in discourses ranging from "anthropological and newspaper reports" to "triumphalist histories of nation" (9). At the core of Martin McDonagh's 2018 play *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (hereafter referred to as *Dark Matter*) lies an interrogation of similar exploitative practices and of the cultural and historical narratives about race, gender, truth, and justice that have eclipsed and obliterated the voices of the victims of such abuse. McDonagh explores the power of these narratives by means of a highly contrived plot about storytellers, in which he alludes to, replicates, and deviates from the details of numerous "narratives we have told ourselves" in the past, including his own plays. The Narrator of *Dark Matter*, who provides the framework for the dramatic action, suggests that the play could be called "a puzzle" or "a poem" (3): a puzzle, because it is up to the audience to uncover the historical narratives behind the fictional stories presented in the course of the action; a poem, perhaps, because by going against the grain of official versions of historical events, those fictional counter-narratives constitute a form of poetic justice for those whose stories were appropriated and overwritten by those more powerful, or erased from the historical record.

McDonagh's negotiation of race and gender in his work has not been uncontroversial. In several of his earlier plays, he created strong female characters—Helen in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), Girleen in *The Lonesome West* (1997), Mairead in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001)—but in his first movies the emphasis fell on male characters and the relationships between them. Aware of this bias, McDonagh made the protagonist of his third feature-length film, *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), a fierce middle-aged woman on a quest for justice. There was, however, a sense among some critics that the movie, "for all its powerful and compelling female lead," appeared "obtuse on race and blackness by making it a subsidiary function of the white characters' moral journey" (Bradshaw). This was not the first time such accusations had been leveled at McDonagh. In 2010, Hilton Als took

him to task for his "offensive" portrayal of the Black character Toby in his play *A Behanding in Spokane*: rather than painting "an honest portrait of racism" in the USA, McDonagh had used blackness as "a Broadway prop, an easy way of establishing a hierarchy" (81). Some reviewers, too, expressed strong reservations about *Dark Matter*: Desiree Baptiste called it "a play about race matters by a writer for whom race matters not." McDonagh's answer to such criticisms is that his depiction of race and racism is "deliberately messy and difficult" because the world itself is "messy and difficult" (Jagernauth), and while *Dark Matter* is arguably McDonagh's most direct engagement with the exploitative nature of racism and misogyny, his approach to these subjects in the play is, once again, complex and provocative.

Set in Copenhagen in 1857, *Dark Matter* imagines that the real author of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales is a one-footed pygmy woman from the Belgian Congo named Mbute Masakele. A survivor of Leopold II's brutal colonial regime, she has traveled back in time from 1895 with her sister Ogechi—whose name, we are told, means "Time Spirit" (54)—so that she can return to the Congo before the atrocities against her people begin and prevent them from ever happening. Hans calls her Marjory and keeps her in a glass-fronted wooden box in his attic; Ogechi is held captive in England by Charles Dickens, who calls her Pamela. Hans and Dickens appropriate the women's stories and publish them as their own. Why the Congolese sisters traveled so far back in time and how they ended up where they are is a missing piece of the play's puzzle, but since Marjory has been in Hans's attic for sixteen years, she would have arrived in 1841, around the time when Andersen (who was also a dramatist) was writing his "African" plays, *The Mulatto* and *The Moorish Maid*. Early on in *Dark Matter*, Marjory suggests that her presence in Copenhagen is not entirely involuntary: "If I'd wanted to escape, I'd've escaped years ago" (16).

The box in which Hans keeps Marjory locked up for much of the time is suspended from a rope and swings back and forth like a pendulum. Andersen wrote in his diary that he

must have been born under a star called Pendulum: "I am bound to always go backwards and forwards, tic-tac! tic-tac! till the clock stops, and down I lie" (Bain 400). As a young man, he had assumed that he would become great, but whether as an angel or a devil was "hanging in the balance!" (Andersen, *Diary* 7). The see-saw motion of the pendulum in McDonagh's play, apart from representing time, which plays a central role in the plot, likewise suggests an alternating motion between opposite moral and aesthetic positions. Marjory likes her tales to conclude on a downbeat note, while Hans prefers upbeat endings; in their attitudes to life, however, their positions are reversed. The play's Narrator characterizes Marjory as "one of the most iconic writers" of her generation, but he points out that it is unlikely anyone will ever know she existed, because she is a small Black woman with a disability, born in the Congo at "the worst time for anybody to be born anywhere ever." Speaking on her behalf, he wonders: "So what are you going to do?" (4). Marjory's ambivalent authorial relationship with Hans points to the sacrifices and compromises she is prepared to make in order to have her stories put on the record, even while she also strongly objects to the way her captor changes her tales to erase all traces of their original creator. In McDonagh's play *The Pillowman* (2003), too, the storyteller will accept anything—even torture and death—so long as his stories are preserved for posterity.

Dark Matter is the convoluted end-product of a process of bricolage. In 2009, McDonagh worked with Tom Waits and Robert Wilson on developing "a creepy fucked-up musical" based on Hans Christian Andersen's tale "The Shadow," provisionally entitled "A Very Dark Matter." When the project fell through, McDonagh kept the idea "in the back of his mind" (DiGiacomo), until it resurfaced in 2018 as the starting point for his play. In *Dark Matter*, the plot of "The Shadow" is summarized in an anonymous letter sent to Hans as a veiled threat involving Marjory: "A writer, after a strange trip to Africa, becomes haunted by his own shadow," which "turns out to be smarter than the writer, takes over his entire life, and

then executes him" (17). In the tale as Andersen wrote it, a writer, while staying in a North African town, casts his shadow across the street into the house of Poetry. When his shadow does not return, he suppresses the fact because "there was already a story about a man without a shadow," and he might be accused of plagiarism. Much later, the writer's shadow returns. Instead of gaining poetic enlightenment, it had acquired access to the wicked secrets people hide behind closed doors; and instead of revealing that knowledge publicly, the shadow had used it to blackmail the guilty parties (Andersen, "The Shadow").

Plagiarism and the suppression of unpalatable or immoral truths are central themes in McDonagh's play. Andersen often stole material from other writers, making sure to disguise the fact by altering the stories' details. His fairytale "The Emperor's New Clothes," for example, was closely based on a medieval Spanish story. It is therefore ironic that the tale concerns itself with concealment and exposure: with the fear and shame of illegitimacy in the original, and of being perceived as inferior in Andersen's version. In *Dark Matter,* Hans receives a letter from "the King of the Spaniards" expressing incredulity at his story's premise that an emperor would expose himself by going around "with [his] cock and [his] balls out for all the world to see": he wonders about the "moral implications" of such a scenario. The "moral implications" of the issues explored in the play are precisely that people often suppress, turn a blind eye to, or make excuses for blatantly obvious obscene truths, for a variety of self-serving reasons. Indeed, Hans himself, gratified at having received a letter from a King, chooses to ignore the criticism and decides the royal missive is "positive . . . overall" (14).

In his play, McDonagh combined the premise of "A Very Dark Matter" with two other "very dark" ideas. The first of these builds on a story mentioned in *The Pillowman,* in which Shakespeare keeps a "little black pygmy lady" in a box and "gives her a stab with a stick" whenever he wants her to write a new play (62). Nicholas Hytner, the artistic director of

London's National Theatre, where *The Pillowman* received its premiere, recalls details that were omitted from the final script: "She writes the play she wants to write in her own blood on the walls of the box," and it is "the best play ever written." In the end, however, she dies and the box "goes up in flames, so nobody ever gets to read it" (66-67). In *Dark Matter*, however, the Narrator announces at the beginning that Marjory is not going to kill herself but instead is going to "write [her] way out of it" (5). Storytelling, then, is both the reason for her captivity and the means of attaining her freedom.

The third "very dark" strand of the play is historiographical and draws on Belgium's colonial past, of which McDonagh likely became aware while making his movie *In Bruges* (2008). Between 1885 and 1908, the Congo was the personal property of King Leopold II, under whose regime the relentless demand for rubber led to the brutal exploitation of the Congolese workers and the deaths of some ten million people. Those unable or unwilling to collect enough rubber were killed by soldiers of Leopold's Force Publique, who preserved the bodies' right hands to account for the bullets they had expended on them. Sometimes they cut off other body parts; sometimes the victims were still alive; sometimes they were children. Roger Casement, who investigated the excesses of the colony's "infamous, shameful system" for the British Crown, wrote in his diary that "5 people from Bikoro side with hands cut off had come as far as Myanga intending to show me" (Hochschild 203). To help audience members explore such historical resonances in *Dark Matter*, copies of *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hochschild's book about the Belgian Congo in which these incidents are related, were available from the Bridge Theatre's box office during the play's 2018 run.

McDonagh used the severed hands motif in *A Behanding in Spokane*, where Toby (who is Black) and Marilyn (who is White) steal a preserved "aboriginal" hand from a museum display case to placate Carmichael, a White, racist, one-handed man in search of his lost body part, who turns out to be in possession of a suitcase full of severed hands of all sizes

and colours. Patrick Lonergan suggests that the museum exhibit is a reminder "of the way in which race is constructed in order to be *seen* and looked at; it also shows McDonagh's awareness of what it means for someone to exploit a culture that they don't belong to" (123)—something he himself was accused of in his Irish plays when he turned a stereotypical version of Irishness into a spectacle for outsiders to laugh at. In *Dark Matter*, the objectification and exploitation of Othered human beings occupies a central thematic position.

Historically, the word "dark" is closely associated with western views of Africa: with blackness and with the perceived inscrutability of Africans and the African continent. It is found in each of the titles of the explorer Henry Morton Stanley's three books about his Congolese expeditions: *Through the Dark Continent*, *In Darkest Africa*, and *My Dark Companions and Their Strange Stories*. Joseph Conrad called the fictionalized account of his journey up the Congo River *Heart of Darkness*. The "darkness" in the title of McDonagh's play resonates with all these texts and contexts, but also points at the great lengths to which the Belgian authorities subsequently went to keep people in the dark about the atrocities that had been perpetrated in Leopold's Congo. King Leopold himself once ridiculed a cartoon of himself slicing off hands with his sword by saying, "Cut off hands—that's idiotic! I'd cut off all the rest of them, but not the hands. That's the one thing I need in the Congo!" (Hochschild 224).

Several reviewers of *Dark Matter* wondered what Andersen and Dickens had ever done to deserve being cast as the perpetrators of enslavement and torture. McDonagh, however, suggests that it is precisely the towering reputations of these two nineteenth-century writers that have made us overlook or suppress their respective dark sides. Andersen's biographer Michael Booth describes his subject as a pathological narcissist "wracked with sexual confusion, driven by fame, obsessed with his own reputation and tormented by insecurities," but argues that "the Danes tend to gloss over some of the more problematic

aspects of Andersen's character; he is, after all, the sacred cash cow of Danish culture and tourism." As for Dickens, most readers are more familiar with the sentimental characters of his fiction than with his racist views and the appalling way in which he treated his wife, whom he tried to have confined to a lunatic asylum when she got in the way of his affairs.

Andersen's fairytales have a darkly misogynistic streak that is seldom acknowledged but is brought to light by McDonagh's pairing of Hans with Marjory; at the same time, McDonagh hides Hans's cruelty behind a bumbling façade that is designed to win over the theatre audience. Jack Zipes writes that in Andersen's tales women must be "put in their place" (63) and are often punished in physical ways for acting on their desires. Because the girl in "The Red Shoes" cannot stop dancing she begs the executioner to cut off her feet; in compensation, he makes her a pair of crutches. The Little Mermaid also suffers excruciating pain in her new feet after her wish to become human has been fulfilled so that she can be with her beloved prince. As part of the bargain, she gives up her ability to speak, which allows the prince to ignore her. In *Dark Matter*, Hans has cut off Marjory's foot and made her a crutch. He also robs her of her voice by appropriating her stories: "I change the bits I don't like and then erase all the rest from history" (27). He modifies "The Little Black Mermaid" by taking out the word that links the narrative to the African origins of its real author: "No colour specified. Which means she's white" (10). Zipes sees Andersen's mermaid as a metaphorical representation of the artist dependent on indifferent patronage and concludes: "What is there for her to do but to kill herself, thereby creating an artistic tragedy?" (112). If Marjory is the Mermaid, however, she resists such a fatalistic ending to her own life.

In McDonagh's play, Hans is a self-centered bigot and racist whose pronouncements echo colonialist constructions of non-Europeans as cannibalistic barbarians and the Irish as indolent "Paddies"—a stereotype McDonagh provocatively deconstructed in his "Irish" plays of the 1990s. Hans prevents the Press Man from recording his opinion that the Chinese are

"absolute savages" prone to eating puppies and children, because "small normal children might get frightened of that savage image and small normal children are both the lifeblood of Denmark and my core fan base" (6). He later slits the Press Man's throat because the journalist has discovered the secret in his attic. Hans mocks a fan letter from a little girl in post-Famine Ireland by joking that she probably wrote it using "a little potato, dipped in ink" (15) and by reading it in an "Irish voice" (16). In a sentimental scenario worthy of Dickens, the child writes that she had cried at Hans's story "The Little Match Girl" because it reminded her of "[her] own harsh life, orphaned and destitute at the age of eight," and of the time they buried her youngest sibling "in a Connemara peat bog." Hans comments that her name, "Maureen . . . Currflurrrgghh" (16), is even more unpronounceable than Marjory's African name—which has "too many 'M's and too many 'B's. 'Mbubba bububbaba'" (10)—and tosses the letter away.

Catherine Bennett noted in *The Guardian* that McDonagh's depiction in *Dark Matter* of Dickens, the creator of Tiny Tim, as a "foul-mouthed, lecherous fraud" struck many audience members "as not so much counterfactual as wildly blasphemous." In the alternative reality of the play, McDonagh allows the female characters associated with both Dickens and Andersen to take control of their destiny in ways they do not in more historically accurate narratives. Historical misdeeds are irrevocable, but literature can offer poetic justice by reimagining the past in ways that are eye-opening and recuperative. The scenes in which Hans visits Dickens at his home in Kent and outstays his welcome by three weeks are, as Aleks Sierz points out, not only based on an historical occurrence but also "alarmingly similar" to Sebastian Barry's 2010 play, *Andersen's English*. Rather than being "unoriginal," however, McDonagh's act of appropriation allows him both to rewrite history and implicitly critique the limitations of Barry's plot, which largely remains faithful to the historical details, except for the addition to the Dickens household of a sixteen-year-old Irish maid. Perhaps McDonagh

was also aware that the play's director, Max Stafford-Clark, had intervened more controversially when he cast a Black actor in the role of Andersen, whose skin colour, in Karen Fricker's reading, was "seemingly meant to underline the sense of [Andersen] being an outsider—a troubling reduction and objectification of ethnic difference." Like little Maureen in *Dark Matter*, Aggie, the Irish maid in *Andersen's English*, is a Famine survivor: "My mam and daddy died in a ditch, and four brothers and sisters were thrun in after" (57). Dismissing her from her position because she is pregnant, Dickens offers to arrange her passage to Canada and have her baby adopted, but Aggie refuses to be a "fallen woman" (80); once back in Ireland, however, she can only find work in a brothel, where she gives birth to a son, who will eventually take her with him to North America. Barry, then, traps Aggie in a circular pattern where any progress can only be incremental. In *Dark Matter*, on the other hand, Marjory fast-forwards to the same outcome for the colonized Irish that she intends to engineer for the colonized people of the Congo: "They'll be alright. They'll be free soon" (16). In its refusal to dwell on the dark side of rebellion, however, this "upbeat" historical assessment contains its own element of erasure, in that it elides the bloodshed of the revolutionary period and the violent aftermath in Northern Ireland (graphically addressed by McDonagh in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*), just as Marjory's own revolutionary plan to forestall the colonization of her people minimizes the violence required to achieve it: "Coupla hundred dead Belgians, then everybody shuts the fuck up and goes the fuck home" (57).

Both Barry and McDonagh exploit the fact that Andersen spoke English very badly and failed to notice the strained relations between Dickens and his wife at the time of the visit. In Barry's play, Charles and Catherine Dickens address each other in formal literary prose even while the author is forcing his wife to leave her home and abandon her children. In *Dark Matter*, by contrast, the characters' disconcertingly plain and obscene language mirrors the family's ugly dysfunctionality. McDonagh's radical revision transforms Catherine from a

helpless victim into an enraged woman who confronts Dickens about his "pygmy lady": "Who else has been writing all this stuff while you've been fucking everything that moves?" (48). In forcing her husband to come clean she exposes, as it were, the emperor's "cock and balls": indeed, when Charles denies his adulteries, Catherine accuses him of "being a cock" (36), while she dismisses his lies about Pamela as "Bollocks!" (50). Once Charles has made a full confession, his wife declares that *she* is leaving *him* and taking just one of the children: "The others are annoying" (50). After Catherine has revealed to Hans that Pamela is dead, Dickens produces her skeleton from a cupboard and admits that there is "probably a joke in there somewhere" (49).

Dickens's championing of the poorer classes in England stands in stark contrast to his disparagement of racial and ethnic Others. In an 1853 essay he argued that the likes of "Ojibbeway Indians" and "Bushmen" were "very low in the [human] scale" and should be "civilised off the face of the earth" (179). Referring to the "party of Zulu Kafirs" then on public display in London as "odiferous," if "rather picturesque to the eye" (181-82), he went on to suggest that such "scenes of savage life," while offensive to the English, would be "extremely well received and understood" by the Irish (186). In *Dark Matter*, Hans's persistent confusion of Dickens with Darwin is a kind of narrative Freudian slip, a reference to the way in which Dickens's thinking about biological and social evolution was influenced by the "scientific racism" of his day, something he shared with the explorer Stanley. It was Stanley who, in 1888, first encountered and identified "pygmy" tribes in the Congo; he later described one of these groups as "the link long sought between the average modern humanity and its Darwinian progenitors," classing them as "an extremely low, degraded, almost a bestial type of a human being" (Murray 8).

The public exhibitions of non-western human beings alluded to by Dickens in his essay play a veiled but central role in McDonagh's play. From the eighteenth century onward,

displays of Indigenous people who "were subject simultaneously to both the intense anthropological gaze and the prurient gaze of the public" were not uncommon in Europe and the USA (Poignant 196). In 1897, Leopold II exhibited 267 Congolese subjects in the grounds of his colonial palace outside Brussels. Even as late as 1958, a "typical" African village was set up at the Brussels Expo, "where the Congolese spent their days carrying out their crafts by straw huts while they were mocked by the white men and women who stood at the edge" (Boffey, "Belgium Comes to Terms"). Several years after reporting on the horrors of the Belgian Congo, Roger Casement brought two Indigenous teenagers back with him to London from the Putumayo district of Colombia, where he had also investigated the maltreatment of rubber workers. He displayed Ricudo and Omarino at meetings to raise awareness about the atrocities committed in the rubber trade, and while his motives may therefore not have been ignoble, Lesley Wylie points out that "his exhibiting of the Putumayo youths as living curiosities and 'native types' was consistent with . . . the 'machinery of representation' dominant in European imaginings of its racial and cultural Others" (316).

In *Dark Matter*, Mbute shares several characteristics with Mbye Otabenga, a young Congolese man of the Mbuti tribe, who was brought to the US by the American missionary and explorer Samuel Verner to be part of an exhibition of pygmy people at the 1904 St. Louis World Fair. He had returned from a hunting expedition to find his village decimated and his wife and two children murdered by the Force Publique. In McDonagh's play, Mbute's husband and children were killed under similar circumstances. Just as Hans and Dickens replace Mbute and Ogechi's African names with English ones, Americans ignored Otabenga's first name and referred to him variously as Ota Benga, Otto Bang, and Otto Bingo. In 1906, he was displayed in a cage at the Bronx Zoo. He eventually ended up in Lynchburg, VA, where he killed himself in 1916. Other aspects of Mbute and Ogechi's story are derived from what little is known of the young South African Khoisan woman known as Sarah or Saartjie

Baartman; her African name is lost. She was brought to London in 1810 and exhibited on a raised stage as the "Hottentot Venus." After her death in Paris in 1815, her skeleton, parts of her anatomy, and a plaster cast of her body were displayed in a glass case in the *Musée de l'Homme*, where they remained on view until 1974.

The audience of *Dark Matter*, faced with Marjory in her box on stage, are uncomfortably placed in the position of the spectators of such historical human exhibits, just as McDonagh knowingly implicates himself in the exploitative and racist practices depicted in his drama, which are both disavowed and acknowledged by the play's layered construction. Marjory—a captive, Black, female character with a disability, put on the stage by a White, able-bodied, privileged male author—is contained within a frame story presented by a White male Narrator (voiced by Tom Waits in the London production) who sometimes speaks with her or for her. Even if the Narrator positions himself as an ally, Marjory can only perform her resistance within the remit of the predetermined, retrospective narrative box that encloses her. Throughout the published script of *Dark Matter*, the female protagonist is referred to as Marjory; commentators who cite the play are thus forced into the realization that, if they follow the authority of the script and disregard the character's African name and origin, they, too, are guilty of privileging the European narrative. At the end of the play, however, both Hans and the Narrator depart from the script by consciously referring to Marjory as Mbute. McDonagh's historical references in the play, too, initially reinscribe the racist narratives that underlie them before deliberately moving away from them. At the end of Part One, when the lights briefly reveal "the pygmy skeleton" of Ogechi suspended above Marjory inside the glass box (30), McDonagh directly mirrors the historical exploitation of African individuals like Otabenga and Baartman whose bodies were objectified and who were subjected to the intrusive gaze of an audience. However, at the end of the play, when Hans gently hangs Ogechi's skeleton inside the box which Mbute has just vacated to go and save her people, he

presents a new, "upbeat" narrative that deviates from the historical record while still acknowledging it. *Dark Matter* suggests that White Europeans continue to profit from the inequities of the colonial past; that we must question the historical narratives handed down to us; and that we have a duty to recognize the facts that official accounts have suppressed. Starting from that basis, alternative histories may then be presented as acts of poetic justice, within the confines of imaginative storytelling.

In narrative, time can be manipulated by means of flashbacks and flash-forwards in ways that resemble time travel. "I'm jumping way ahead of myself here," the Narrator self-consciously states at one point, "but time travel allows that" (29). For the imaginative time traveling plot that allows Marjory to alter history, *Dark Matter* borrows the premise of the 1984 movie *The Terminator*, which features Arnold Schwarzenegger as a cyborg assassin sent back in time to kill Sarah Connor before her son John is born; in this way John will not exist in the future to form the resistance against the cyborgs, who are planning to kill the humans in a nuclear holocaust. In *Dark Matter*, Mbute travels back in time with Ogechi so that she can resist the colonizers when they first arrive in the Congo. She is followed to Copenhagen by the two Belgians who, back in Africa, had killed her family before they in turn were killed by her. Stitched back together and entirely covered in blood, Dirk and Barry arrive in the attic while Hans is away. While they prepare to execute Mbute, she plays a "haunted tune" on a concertina Hans had obtained from some (time)traveling gypsies in exchange for her severed foot. As she faces her adversaries' guns, her arms spread wide as she holds the instrument up high, she presents "a Goya-like tableau" (47); the allusion is to "The Third of May 1808," a painting depicting a Spanish civilian suspended in the moment of his execution by French soldiers for resisting Napoleon's invasion. In a sudden and violent reversal of fortune, however, it is Mbute who kills Dirk and Barry with a machine gun hidden in the concertina. Following this gory, "Peckinpah-like" scene (52), Marjory turns to her favourite animal

puppet and gloats: “Not so dark now, is it, Spider?” The bloody death of the Belgians may constitute an “upbeat” ending for the underdog, but the grim irony of Marjory’s remark is accentuated by the return of Hans, who appears in the doorway preceded by his “shadow” and carrying Ogechi’s skeleton (53).

The spider marionette is the play’s presiding spirit. In African folklore, the trickster-spider Anansi gave human beings the gift of storytelling. Among enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, moreover, Anansi’s cunning use of trickery to turn the tables on his opponents made him a symbol of resistance and survival. For these reasons, Marjory identifies with Anansi in the same way she identifies with Scheherazade, who for 1001 nights evaded death at the hands of the jealous king by ending each of her bedtime stories with a cliffhanger, at the suggestion of her sister Dunyazad. Marjory has always created stories in her head, and at this point has “a thousand and two” of them, but she “never had any paper” before she came to Copenhagen (45). Perhaps this explains why she hints that her collaboration with Hans is not completely involuntary. The spider marionette is identified in the play’s opening stage direction as a tarantula, which links *Dark Matter* to McDonagh’s 2015 play *Hangmen*, where Peter Mooney refers to big African spiders as “triantulars” (88), which in turn evokes a section in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* called “The Tarantulas.” In Nietzsche’s parable, the speaker contends that demands for justice by “preachers of equality” often mask a desire for retaliation: “Tarantulas are ye to me, and secretly revengeful ones!” (116). In *Dark Matter*, hiding a machine gun in a concertina is a tricksterish ploy, but the brutal and gleeful manner in which Marjory kills Dirk and Barry suggests that she is as much a vengeful Tarantula as she is an Anansi-like survivor.

Nietzsche’s parable about tarantulas goes on to argue that “*for man to be redeemed from revenge*” is “the bridge to the highest hope” (117). In *Dark Matter*, Marjory tells her own parable about spiders, which appears to argue the opposite: that revenge, not redemption,

is the highest (and only) hope for those who are disqualified from participating in society's grand narratives about justice and equality, because they are regarded as less than human—as "extremely low, degraded" (Stanley) or "very low in the scale" (Dickens). In Marjory's parable, eight spiders live in a church basement in Tennessee, where the "gentle words of Jesus" filtering down through the floorboards fill the "rebel heart" of the youngest with "peace and love." When his brothers discover that he has released all the bugs from their traps, they crucify him. His soul rises up to Heaven's gate, but he is refused entry because a spider would "just scare the little kids." Pacifism and martyrdom have got him, literally, nowhere: floating back down, "he doesn't know where he is now. . . . He just knows it's very very very very dark" (22). McDonagh made a similar case in *Hangmen*: justice is supposed to be blind, but the system "cannot be equal and impartial if it is reflective of a society that is deaf and blind to its own biases about all sorts of 'otherness'" and "drowns out the voices of those who are weak, different, and marginalized" (Lanters 324). How, then, can the oppressed and marginalized establish a place for themselves if not through acts of violent resistance?

Although Marjory had earlier claimed that she liked "doomed cripples in stories who die" (12), the confrontation with her sister's skeleton forces a change of plot. She literally and metaphorically writes herself out of her predicament by refusing to get back into Hans's box and by taking charge of the narrative's conclusion, in which she sets off for the Congo with the assistance of Hans, who calls her by her full African name for the first time. If there is any redemption from revenge, it is in Mbute's forgiving attitude towards Hans, who took her liberty, her foot, and her stories, but also provided her with the means to record those tales for posterity. She departs armed with the machine gun and with Dirk and Barry's revolvers in her pockets, their blood daubed on her face and clothes, and a Cuban cigar clenched between her teeth. The attributes are those of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Commando* (1985) and Sylvester Stallone in *The Expendables* (2010); in these violent movies, and indeed in Mbute's violent

Congolese mission, the lines between justice and vengeance are not clearly drawn, but the mere act of replacing these muscular White male action heroes with a diminutive, Black, female, one-footed resistance fighter has the effect of shifting the moral imperative. As the play ends, Hans "watches Mbute go, her long shadow very slowly disappearing out of the doorway" (60); it mirrors and reverses the shadow that preceded Hans into the doorway when he arrived back from England with Ogechi's skeleton.

For Hans, morality is not about negotiating fixed concepts of good and evil, but about defeating an adversary in a contest, as it is for Coleman and Valene in McDonagh's *The Lonesome West*. When Marjory is shocked to find that her sister's skeleton has been turned into a marionette, Hans tells her to blame Dickens and compares himself favourably to the English writer: "at least I didn't take your foot *and* your hand off. . . . So in terms of who's the best looker-afterer, it's me, isn't it, really? *I* win." When Marjory explains that Ogechi's mutilation had taken place in the Congo, Hans accuses Dickens of being "a non-stop fucking liar" before revealing that he "definitely slept with her, though." Marjory wishes that he had kept this disturbing information to himself, but Hans claims she had to be told because "it's true. Like the Congo," before undermining the sagacity of that remark by claiming, "I *do* win over Dickens then, don't I? At least I never did any of that funny business." Marjory's retort that he did not because he prefers men and is "in love with Edvard Collin" (55) reveals that she, too, can play this discursive game. Moral relativism is also evident in her mission of violent resistance: if she is successful, the torture and murder of ten million Congolese will never take place, but she will have killed several hundred Belgians. Hans expresses the conundrum by way of a rhetorical question. Surveying the attic where life-sized marionettes hang from the ceiling like the eerie ghosts of past lynching victims, he takes in "the skeleton, the rotting Press Man, the dead Belgians and their bloodstained walls," and nods to the

audience: "*Upbeat!* More or less. (*Pause*.) Be good if she did it though, wouldn't it?" (60). Any answers hang suspended between swings of the pendulum.

When Hans muses that the killing of ten million Congolese will "probably define the century," Marjory disagrees because she will prevent the deaths from happening (57). That is the poetic answer; the historical reason why the twentieth century was not defined by the Congolese holocaust is that Belgian officialdom, in an active deed of forgetting, "went to extraordinary lengths to try to erase potentially incriminating evidence from the historical record" (Hochschild 294). To use Hans's words: officials changed the bits they didn't like and erased all the rest from history. While Congolese bodies were put on display as exotic curiosities well into the twentieth century, the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Brussels, until very recently, offered not the slightest hint of "the stolen land, the severed hands, the shattered families and orphaned children" the Force Publique left in its wake (Hochschild 293). The Narrator of *Dark Matter* proclaims that it is "a sad and sorry truth" that statues of Leopold II still stand all over Belgium, "never with blood on them" (59), while there are no statues to any of the pygmies who died in his colony. Indeed, the massive statue of the King in Ostend includes a group of adoring Africans representing "the gratitude of the Congolese to Leopold II for liberating them from slavery under the Arabs," while the Congo Monument in Brussels proclaims that Leopold "undertook the Congolese work in the interest of civilization and for the welfare of Belgium." Leopold himself had denied any accusations of cruelty and wrote, "I will not let myself be soiled with blood or mud" (Hochschild 224). Yet in *Dark Matter* it is Hans who suggests that the suppressed historical blood and mud will eventually materialize in a story; when Dirk and Barry make their first appearance, he exclaims, "Oh, other people can't see the blood-covered men . . . . What blood-covered men? Exactly! All part of a new story I am making up but which I will save for another day" (7).

In *Dark Matter*, all stories must be examined for missing information, including the Narrator's "truth" that the official Belgian narrative about the Congo has never been challenged. If Hans's reference to Dirk and Barry as "Bloody men! Or what is that, jam?" (6) implies the use of stage blood, it also signals that suppressed historical violence and injustice can be exposed by being metaphorically represented on stage, as is the case in McDonagh's play. Over the course of the last fifteen years or so, the Belgian monuments have often been turned into sites of protest. In 2018 activists covered the bust of Leopold in Ghent in red paint three times within a period of five weeks; the statue in Antwerp had its hands painted red twice, while on two occasions red paint was also poured over the bronze figure of the King in Brussels. In 2017 the same was done to the monument in Ostend. In 2004 activists used a hacksaw to remove the hand of one of the monument's Congolese figures. They subsequently offered to return it, "but only if the royal family and the Belgian State apologized for their colonial history." In February 2019, having again failed to obtain an apology, a spokesperson for the group vowed he would take the severed hand to his grave and perhaps "stick a raised middle finger to it" (Boffey, "Reappearance"). It seems a suitably McDonagh-esque gesture.

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