CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE HEADACHE AND THE ASPIRIN: SEX AS DISEASE AND CURE IN SHERMAN ALEXIE’S THE TOUGHEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD, COLUM MCCANN’S THIS SIDE OF BRIGHTNESS, AND OTHER CONTEMPORARY STORIES

The construction of the novel *Warp & Weft* out of the short story, “The Warp and the Weft”, shows how Delaney has embedded the Irish-American experience in the midst of other ethnic identities in order to show how ephemeral identity is. When we look at other works in which Irish identity collides with various American identities, we find a similar situation. In the concluding chapter (“Imagining Irish Studies”) to *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd argues that Irish nationalists countenanced

… the notion of Irish exceptionality. Preening themselves on some occasions for being “like no other people on earth”, arraigning themselves on others, they often failed to regard Irish experience as representative of human experience, and so they remained woefully innocent of the comparative method, which might have helped them more fully to possess the meaning of their lives.¹

Application of the comparative method to New York-based, Irish writer Colum McCann’s *This Side of Brightness* suggests some of the dimensions of the void of Irish identity. Comparing McCann’s work with that of the native-American writer Sherman Alexie, Indian-American writers Akhil Sharma and Jhumpa Lahiri as well as Vietnamese-French writer Phan Huy Duong reveals how common the Irish experience really is, as Delaney has shown in his multi-ethnic novel.

¹ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 641.
One common focus of all these writers is the contemporary fixation on sex, as if sex may cure all maladies, especially the pain of existence. We have seen how this idea of sex drives the artist in McDermott’s *Child of My Heart* to seek the “blood of a virgin” as cure for the malady of aging. He is quite like men in some far-flung places. In vastly different cultures superstition holds that sexually transmitted diseases may be cured by having sex with a “pure” partner. In a 1994 *New Yorker* essay, Ted Conover describes how long-distance truck drivers were spreading AIDS throughout Africa. At one point he recounts a discussion with a few drivers:

> And if you did get AIDS, Cromwel [an African truck driver] added, there was always a virgin.
> “What?”
> “Yes, you know, if you sleep with a virgin it will often take away your AIDS,” Cromwel assured me. He knew people who had done it.
> I winced and told them [the drivers] it wasn’t true. If you slept with a virgin, you would probably just give HIV to the virgin. They didn’t argue with me, but I doubt whether they believed me. Modern medicine, which I took to be a challenge to traditional beliefs, they saw as merely a complement to them. My rebuttal of every African idea about AIDS probably sounded closed-minded to them.3

Similarly, a 1996 feature story about the prostitution of children in Southeast Asia in *The New York Times* reports: “A Chinese superstition holds that sex with a virgin helps makes [sic] a man young again, or that it can cure venereal disease.”4

The rarefied air of *belles-lettres* and critical discourse may not seem to share the seedy worlds of brothels in Africa and China, but McCann, Alexie, and other contemporary fiction require us to pause before we dismiss all contemplation of such a similarity. Reading the works of these writers suggests that there is something deeper to the belief in sex as a life-saving epistemology. While surely it is not new to equate knowledge and sexuality (as in the Bible), much more seems to be afoot these days. Hardly a day goes by without a call for papers

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2 McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 188.