



Embodied Geographies of the Nation

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Who gets to be in the national body? Whose body represents the nation?
How does the national body move? How permeable are its borders?

Fearghus Ó Conchúir

Public geographies of nationality have very little to do with how the body interacts with place. They tend to become about the gaze. They appropriate and interpret particular landscapes intellectually and emotionally. Ultimately, private geographies cannot help but be about our bodies in place.

Bryonie Reid

How do artistic practices and knowledges enhance scholarly interrogations of Irish pasts and presents, and contribute to more publicly-minded ways to remember possible futures? This special issue of *The Irish Review*, edited and written by Irish Studies scholars, artists and cultural geographers, builds upon recent work calling attention to the significance of place-based and embodied creative practices that imagine and perform alternative Irelands.¹ Coming at the midpoint of the Irish ‘Decade of the Centenaries, 2012–2022’ (and following the 2016 commemorations in particular),² the essays below ask how artistic and scholarly research might contribute to rethinking the nation across varied Irish geographical settings, north and south of the border, and beyond.³ Through a range of voices, disciplinary backgrounds and practice-based approaches, ‘Embodied Geographies of the Nation’ analyzes how lived geographies and knowledges produced by artists critically interrogate the literal and symbolic ‘emplacement’ of bodies living and working across the island of Ireland, as well as inviting more inclusive forms of encountering, performing, imagining and realizing the nation. Dealing with issues such as visibility, audibility, legibility and performance, in addition to being alert to the politics of translating languages, accents, histories and body memories, the essays open

up questions concerning who is included in the Irish body politic – how do queer, gendered and migrant bodies comprise the body politic (Kearns, Nedeljkovic, Ó Conchúir, Till)? – while also considering how places can operate both as contact zones and spatial thresholds (Till) that mould, regulate and connect the people that move through and inhabit them (Collins, Cronin, Reid).

The authors advance fresh conversations between art and geography broadly conceived in contemporary Irish contexts to open up new discursive spaces about co-constituting public knowledges across arts practice, academia and public policy. Expanding on recent work by Irish Studies scholars in the fields of Feminist and Queer Theory, Postcolonial Studies, Memory Studies and Space/Place Studies, this issue investigates and widens understandings of ‘belonging’ to the national body, its representation and performativity in the contemporary moment.⁴ The essays also move from traditional approaches in reading culture as a ‘text’ to embracing methodological flexibility when analyzing the dynamic experiential, performative and relational geographies inherent in artistic practice and its impact on public dialogue in Ireland today.

Remembering Future Irelands

The seven essays included here are all concerned with how the spaces of the Irish nation have been critically and creatively reimagined, particularly in response to recent crises experienced in Ireland since 2008 and national commemorative events marking the Decade of Centenaries. In opening up the fault lines of the ‘national project’ in their own ways, the authors here seek to ‘challenge the canon of history’⁵ and the making of modern Ireland. As Gerry Kearns argues, this is not just about the enunciation of a proclamation of freedom but the possibility of articulating a radically different future, ‘the freedom of a tradition to renew itself within a modernity it also shapes’. In gaining a better understanding of how artists, dancers, writers, visual and performance artists have queried received ideas of Ireland as nation-state and partitioned-state, the essays here offer new ways of asking us to think about how we might remember alternative futures, attending perhaps to what Walter Benjamin termed the ‘weak Messianic power’ of the current generation.⁶ While much debate surrounding the 2016 commemorations focused on what got left behind when the ideals of 1916 became sidelined after 1922 – women’s, feminist and labour movements in particular – one criticism of the official 2016 events was that the task of ‘reimagining’ the future was forgotten in the historical craze of ‘remembering’.⁷ Reviewing the ‘birth’ and articulation of the ‘nation’ in the Irish and

English languages in the 1916 Proclamation, Kearns asks who frames the nation and what principles inscribe the script of nationhood and citizenship; a script that was very much questioned by the #WakingTheFeminists movement that ignited a whole new way of rethinking the narrative of who speaks for the Irish nation. Indeed, as this special issue highlights, the legacy of the interconnections between art, politics and the public sphere continues to resonate over a hundred years after the Rising.

Critical social commentaries and artistic practices also emerged from both state-funded and non-funded practices in 2016 that remembered, reflected and reimagined new ways of being and belonging to Ireland. The public as 'audience' is thus reconfigured in Fearghus Ó Conchúir's practice as audience-member-participant-citizen, signalling the possibilities and politics of welcoming the stranger to the Irish body politic through his dance work on Roger Casement, *Féile Fáilte*. Ó Conchúir's essay foregrounds the relative 'invisibility' of Irish bodies (in all forms) as literally problematic in the creation of the body politic of the nation. His work on *The Casement Project* thus considers the emplaced body as a site of historical knowledge, a literal 'body of knowledge', where new vocabularies of becoming can be explored and created. The implicit gendering and sexing of the Irish body, its public performance and private persona, have either been taken for granted or ignored for too long, he argues.

Bryonie Reid's essay and artwork also suggests how historical pasts and private/public geographies may play a critical role in the reframing of critical presents; the act of historical reclamation and contemporary bilingual enunciation is important in making those other, hidden pasts part of our national, multilingual narrative today. Reid navigates the either/or binaries of being Irish and living in the north by attempting to occupy both/and subjectivities through her visual arts practice, and creative and reflexive forms of writing, finding inspiration in the historical pathways, place-based traces and utterances left behind by Roger Casement and Erskine Childers. In a different vein, Tim Collins describes how artistic productions of performing Irish bodies that 'sound the nation' yet cross borders may also include broadcast media and broader music cultures. He argues that, in the early years of Irish Free State, traditional music was shaped for the airwaves by 2RN's aesthetic policy, a policy very much informed by European art music traditions rather than by locally-inflected performance practices. Yet, by setting audition guidelines that favoured a BBC aesthetic, 2RN created a 'national' sound that masked its regional origins as its Irish audience heard music that was quite place-specific in terms of repertoire, register and mode of performance.

This special issue calls attention to the under-recognized creative work of contemporary Irish dance and theatre companies that innovatively

engage with embodied performances.⁸ Kearns pays attention to the role of the Irish language, print and media technologies in the making and performing of the Proclamation of the Republic as choreographed by six female artists in *Embodied*, curated by Liz Roche and staged at the General Post Office (GPO) in 2016. Karen E. Till creatively responds to *These Rooms*, a collaboration of ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre that invited audiences to bear secondary witness to the female body as a 'post trauma political site'.⁹ Situated between dance, theatre and visual arts, the project was inspired by the artists' archival discovery of women's testimonies describing civilian deaths in north Dublin during Easter 1916. Through the embodied and intimate encounters of *These Rooms*, the artists radicalize the potential of the archive and ask audiences to take responsibility for their responses.

Nessa Cronin observes that activists and artists had already begun to articulate how the Irish state had indeed become 'broken' following its Celtic Tiger and neoliberal forms, as evidenced by the anxiety depicted through residual, dominant and emergent landscapes of Irishness and related archaeological imaginaries. In her critique of the new landscapes of Celtic Tiger Ireland, she argues that 'the idea of *valuing place* in an Irish context is ideologically and culturally loaded, as some culturally charged places are seen as metonymically "standing in" for the nation, and are therefore regarded as being more representative of Ireland and Irishness than others'. She argues that Gerard Donovan's *Country of the Grand* (2008) is one of the first literary responses to the radical speed of change that Irish society underwent in this period, with many of Donovan's stories exploring how to belong in this 'new Ireland'.

The three pillars of the newly minted Irish Free State – public health, housing and education – have become the latest casualties of a Republic willing to gamble the ideals of 1916 away. Sadly, the welcome Ó Conchúir imagines through *Féile Fáilte* taking place on the edges of the nation (the shoreline of Banna Beach, County Kerry) is one not yet extended to those seeking asylum upon reaching Irish shores. Vukasin Nedeljkovic gives us a unique personal insight, through his archive of diary entries, critical writing and photography, into the experience of seeking asylum in Ireland. The carceral geographies of Ireland's Direct Provision Scheme that he describes, speaks to a darker history of the containment of bodies in Ireland that continues to this day. These residential centres, termed 'holding camps' by Ronit Lentin,¹⁰ are here reconfigured by Nedeljkovic through the 'memory of incarceration in Direct Provision centres' which 'may be transformed into resistance' by providing an archive of 'the stories of those affected' that is 'heard and not appropriated'.

4 CRONIN and TILL, 'Embodied Geographies of the Nation', *Irish Review* 54 (2017)

Creating Encounters

Current scholarship in much of the humanities and social sciences, including art history, often treats artists' engagements by classifying specific project outcomes according to 'types' of art, or uses artworks and artists as examples to illustrate trends and 'turns' (spatial, creative, collaborative) in scholarship and theory.¹¹ The recent highlighting of the role of 'creativity' by the Irish government (particularly as a result of the 2009 Farmleigh Convention, the 2016 commemorations, and the establishment of Creative Ireland), also comes with a health warning as its overuse and misuse runs the risk of 'creativity' being reduced to mere rhetorical function, or 'advertising slogan', as noted recently by President Michael D. Higgins.¹² By way of contrast, the contributions in this volume suggest that enriching social and scholarly understandings of the nation must include artists *as knowledge producers*, rather than merely *objects of study*. Indeed, the artists contributing to 'Embodied Geographies of the Nation' make significant theoretical interventions across shared fields of practice and individual disciplinary formations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the essays of this special issue emerged from various fora hosted by the sister networks, Ómós Áite research network at the Centre for Irish Studies, NUI Galway and the Space&Place Research Collaborative based in the Department of Geography, Maynooth University, networks with a shared goal of creating dialogic and supportive spaces of conversation for scholars, artists, community leaders and practitioners to explore new ways of creating alternative knowledges.¹³ Working at times with the Mapping Spectral Traces international network,¹⁴ participants have engaged in a variety of critical and creative interventions and discussions on the contemporary experience of place and the body in an Irish context, through international conferences, workshops, exhibitions, performances, pop-up public events, masterclasses, artist residencies, student projects, online blogs and social media. The distinctive voices in this special issue speak from and to a wide range of practices and experiences, fostering dialogue between academia, arts practitioners and civil society groups. In many ways then, this issue is as much about rethinking the cultural spaces of public discourse in Ireland as it is concerned with 'the place and boundaries of scholarly research in the humanities', the social sciences and arts more generally.¹⁵ The range of knowledges foregrounded here has the potential to create a crack in academic practices, the 'dissensus' which for Jacques Rancière heralds new social relations.¹⁶

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Notes and References

- 1 Gerry Kearns (ed.), *The Geographical Turn*: <https://geographicalturn.wordpress.com>; Ómos Áite, Centre for Irish Studies, NUI Galway, 'Mapping Spectral Traces: Body-Space-Memory': http://www.nuigalway.ie/research/centre_irish_studies/mst_2012.html; Fearghus Ó Conchúir (ed.), *The Casement Project*: <http://www.thecasementproject.ie>; Karen E. Till (ed.), *The Place of the Wound*: <https://theplaceofthewound.wordpress.com>.
 - 2 See the Decade of Centenaries official website: <http://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/>. Programming associated with this initiative is co-ordinated through the Government of Ireland's Commemorations Unit, Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.
 - 3 See, for example, Harriet Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2013); Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004); Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City* (London: Routledge, 1997); Ann Schilo (ed.), *Visual Arts Practice and Affect: Place, Materiality and Embodied Knowing* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Karen E. Till, 'Artistic and Activist Memory-work: Approaching Place-based Practice', *Memory Studies* 1:1 (2008), 95–109.
 - 4 See Anne Mulhall, Wanda Balzano and Moynagh Sullivan (eds), *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland: Volumes 1–4* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010; 2012; 2014); Eóin Flannery, *Ireland and Postcolonial Studies: Theory, Discourse and Utopia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Christine Cusick (ed.), *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010); Donna L. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2011).
 - 5 ANU Productions, 'ANU Launch 2016 Productions': <http://www.missionpr.ie/anu-launch-2016-programme/>.
 - 6 Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: On the Concept of History, Writings 1938–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). See also David Lloyd, *The Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day, in association with the University of Notre Dame, 2008). On 'remembering the future' see Michael Perlman, *Imaginal Memory and the Place of Hiroshima* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).
 - 7 As noted at a Plenary Panel by panellists Mark McCarthy and Nuala Johnson, 'Memory, Identity and Landscape: Geographical perspectives'. Conference of Irish Geographers, Dublin City University, 5–7 May 2016.
- 6 CRONIN and TILL, 'Embodied Geographies of the Nation', *Irish Review* 54 (2017)

- 8 Ríonach Ní Néill's dance company, *Ciotóg*, is another such example. See: <http://www.ciotog.ie>.
- 9 ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre, 'These Rooms': <http://theserooms.ie/room03/>.
- 10 Ronit Lentin, 'Anti-Deportation Ireland: End Deportations Now', *Free Radikal* (4 October 2012): <http://www.ronitlentin.net/2012/10/04/anti-deportation-ireland-end-deportations-now/>.
- 11 Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn" in Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson (eds), *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005), pp. 15–31; Anne Harris, *The Creative Turn: Toward a New Aesthetic Imaginary* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014); Sarah de Leeuw and Harriet Hawkins, 'Critical Geographies and Geography's Creative Re/turn: Poetics and Practices for new Disciplinary Spaces', *Gender, Place & Culture* 24:3 (2017), 303–324.
- 12 President Michael D. Higgins, as quoted in Lorna Siggins, 'President urges universities to return to "humanistic" values', *The Irish Times*, 10 April 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/president-urges-universities-to-return-to-humanistic-values-1.3044201>.
- 13 See the webpages for these networks: Ómos Áite: <http://www.nuigalway.ie/colleges-and-schools/arts-social-sciences-and-celtic-studies/humanities/irish-studies/omos-aite/>; Space&Place: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/geography/about-spaceplace>.
- 14 On Mapping Spectral Traces, see <http://www.mappingspectraltraces.org/>.
- 15 Laurent Dubreil, 'From the Editor: A Plea for Research', *diacritics* 41:4 (2013), 3.
- 16 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2015 [2010]), pp. 150–55.