Everything Moves?
Beyond Culture and Multiculturalism
in Irish Public Discourse

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Living the sequel

Characterizing recent Irish history has come to involve a new temporal orthodoxy of pre- and post-1990s Ireland. Like the testaments of the Bible, it is divided into old and new, and many may argue that the comparison does not end there (although the promised land has been relocated to part two). Bonanza development and globalization,[1] the swift celebration of consumer society, and experiencing what Zygmunt Bauman caustically calls the 'two-sided coin of mobility'[2] has generated a vocal and complex consideration of Irish identities. In countless ways, the daily experience of social life and interaction produces negotiations and versions of what it is to be oneself, presumably including disparate and overlapping understandings of Irishness. Yet in general public discourse,[3] a fixation with received and assumed notions of culture and multiculturalism has privileged concepts that involve exclusion as a condition of their discourse. In common with many European countries, Irish conceptualizations and experiences of change have been accompanied by 'an anxiety about cultural change and cultural power',[4] even if the issue of power is barely articulated. This article contends that rather than passively adopting the obscuring parameters of culture and multiculturalism and grappling with issues thus (de)formed, considering Ireland's changes and futures necessitates developing and calibrating concepts capable of articulating what is actually invested in these debates. As they are now commonly deployed, culture and multiculturalism configure change as an end state, and lack the fluidity to encompass adaptations, hybridities and multiple allegiances. By transferring everything to an amorphous cultural register, they de-link from political economy, and obscure crucial dimensions of the politics of culture. Language

does not re-order lived experience, but engaging with the implications of the terms we use to order meaning in contemporary Ireland is a pressing task.

The slippery ubiquity of culture

For traditional modernists, or modern traditionalists, it must have been reassuring to hear Ireland described in 2003 as a 'modern and prosperous yet traditional culture' in the publicity for the Re-Imagining Ireland conference here.[5] Just like in the movies, public tag lines of this kind have a function not always related to content, and the statement has the reassuring touristic cadences that Ireland™ nurtures. Modern yet traditional translates roughly as 'secluded yet within walking distance of all necessary amenities'. Nevertheless, in an event entitled Re-Imagining Ireland it is puzzling that Ireland is represented as *a* culture: not as a nation, or a state, or as a piece of land inhabited by variously interconnected people negotiating geo-proximity. Discussing Ireland as a culture in this way presumably involves some unspoken notion of national culture, but also displays a realization that on the world stage, *culture* is all that needs referring to. Its vague senses of particularity, and the universal recognition of that assumed particularity, place culture as the central global concept of our time.

Almost needless to remark, its ubiquity sits problematically with its dizzying array of accents and sublimated senses. The regularly invoked caution that culture is one of the most complicated words in the English language[6] appears increasingly to be something of an understatement. Since Raymond Williams's famous and now almost compulsory qualification, culture has increasingly taken on the appearance of a free-floating signifier variously attached to ways of life and life practices, collectivities based on location, nation, history, lifestyle and ethnicity, systems and webs of representation and meaning, and contested realms of artistic value and heritage. It is hardly surprising then, that calls to transcend culture's totalizing usage are echoed across disciplines that have grappled with this term's often baffling viscosity.[7]

Yet Raymond Williams' circumspection was also informed by awareness of the tension between culture as a term with varied discursive histories and analytical purchase and culture as a discrete political idiom. Approaching the term now involves experiencing a similar tension, but one amplified by the elevation of culture to the globally performed rhetoric hinted at in Re-Imagining Ireland. While contemporary cultural theory between and across disciplines emphasizes the mobility and fluidity of culture as a concept, its assumed and often vague senses of distinctiveness seem

to provide, in a range of national and transnational contexts, a unifying language and self-evident marker of identity. As Jane K. Cowan and others observe in an anthropological analysis of approaches to culture and human rights, academic critiques of culture as intimating an essentialized, particular, bounded way of life, replete with internally coherent systems of meaning and values, have been helplessly paralleled by the 'increasing prevalence of culture as a rhetorical object – often in a highly essentialized form – in contemporary political talk'.[8] While discussing Ireland as a culture may at best be regarded as partial and obscuring, it does not even approach the heightened politicization of culture in other global conversations. Not for nothing did President Bush Jr. clarify in his pre-invasion speech to the nation that neither shock nor awe were directed at Iraqi culture, as opposed to hospitals, market places and the population in general.

The dimensions of this political ubiquity lie far beyond the scope of this article, and are variously imbricated in the centralization of culture in late-twentieth-century identity politics,[9] both challenges to and re-assertions of dominant notions of national culture and identity,[10] and high-voltage debates over understandings of globalization and perceived cultural imperialism.[11] In many ways this pervasive political appeal to culture works inversely to the labour the idea is required to carry out; as culture becomes even less capable of description, it becomes all the more employed in prescription. As globalizing processes forge and emphasize diffuse and uneven interconnections, culture becomes more and more the global currency of mutually assured construction. Under globalizations, culture has become the main rhetoric through which debates over identity, belonging, legitimacy and entitlement are refracted.

This article examines some of the issues raised by the 'culturalization' of everything in contemporary Irish debates on multiculturalism. Following Wolfgang Welsch, I contend that: 'Our understanding of culture is an *active factor* in our cultural life.'[12] In other words, employing culture is always already a commentary on the assumptions that underpin it, and an awareness of the political and ontological dimensions of culture is crucial as culture becomes the central currency for framing contemporary socio-economic change in Ireland. The similarly ubiquitous and often fuzzy adoption of multiculturalism in Irish public discourse has been argued to primarily assume cultures as static, bounded, nationally based entities, and to rehearse a politics of recognition of cultural difference, without adequate attention either to the nature of the cultural or the role of 'difference multiculturalism' in defining and codifying differences to be recognized.

The dominant strategy of liberal recognition of difference, it has been argued, necessitates an adequate 'politics of interrogation'; a critique of the

assumed Irish culture that anchors the multiplex.[13] An internal questioning of these dynamics of recognition will remain underdeveloped, however, while the performative notions of culture discussed in the next section influence the external recognition of Ireland and Irishness. A rhetorical 'we' in a matrix of recognition is ill-equipped to cope with the kinds of issues faced by multiculturalisms in other contexts, where multiple allegiances, strategic essentialisms and cultural nationalism have ruptured the cosy notion that multiculturalism involves facilitating and managing cultural difference.

The pressing view from everywhere

The debate over President McAleese's subsequent criticisms of Irish drinking and its cultural legitimation at the Re-Imagining Ireland conference is useful in teasing out aspects of culture as rhetoric, and the way in which speaking through culture exercises certain pressures. In an article in *The Irish Times*, Miriam Donohoe contended that 'washing our dirty linen' in front of Americans – even Irish-Americans – ran the risk of disinterring the 'drunken Paddy' stereotype presumed airbrushed and transformed by Celtic Tiger dynamism:

> We have emerged as a self-confident, prosperous country, which has taken its place proudly on the world stage. 'Dynamic' has replaced the word 'drunken' in many people's perceptions of us.[14]

Before engaging with the substance of this projection, it's worth expanding on the dynamics of culture-talk as a conceptual fait accompli. Cultural life in Ireland – in all its knots of coherence and flows of dissonance – is only settled and framed as culture when it is articulated within certain discourses. Its usage impels demarcation and presumes homogeneity; erasing the 'national' prefix does nothing to challenge the fundamental embedding of the term in romantic notions of a culture snugly congruent with the borders of the nation-state. Despite, or perhaps because of culture's chaotic multi-accentuality, its significant emphasis in contemporary Ireland is still an unreflexive notion of national culture, bounded at the point of articulation, and trapped in the dichotomous sorting office of ownness and foreignness. As Wolfgang Welsch argues, culture needs to be highlighted as an operative concept, rather than only struggling with its bloated descriptiveness:

> If one tells us that culture is to be a homogeneity event, then we practice the required coercions and exclusions. . . . The 'reality' of culture is, in this sense, always a consequence too of our conceptions of culture.

One must therefore be aware of the responsibility which one takes on in propagandising concepts of this type.[15]

Hence the new dynamism of Irish culture can only be ensured by paradoxically freezing it as dynamic, and excluding information and connotations that hint at inner differentiation. This is of course very far from the experience of daily life in Ireland, both in terms of a general cultural experience of 'us'-ness, and the stark inequalities in gain from this celebrated dynamism. Culture, as it circulates now, is a gate-keeping concept, and to continue with Welsch's argument, an automatic reach for a notion that is descriptively inadequate and often politically reactionary is problematic.

Donohoe captures something of the way in which national self-perception – as in any process of identity formation – is bound up in a recognition and negotiation of perceived perceptions of self. Central to this in contemporary Ireland is an awareness that Ireland as culture is an image that needs cultivation and protection, with projections compounding and enhancing that which is expected of the New Ireland. The President's foreign utterances should, she argued, be restricted to promoting tourism and business, even in a forum committed to re-envisioning the country. Much like the grandstanding pragmatism displayed over Shannon and its ramifications for US investment and tourism, the argument seems to be that those who perceive (and bankroll) us are incapable of processing internal divergence and dissent, and indeed will react punitively to an Ireland that displays anything less than a shiny coherence. The fact that investment is usually not determined by lofty political principles is irrelevant; we all remain configured as representative, and charged with curating a brand of Irish culture for global projection.

The ways in which global diffuseness increases surveillance of an imaginary collective is far from particular to Ireland. A performative politics of culture – presenting relativized spheres of fixed and supposedly unalterable tradition, value and meaning for outside recognition and validation – has become a widespread response to the perceived threats and dilutions of unequal global flows of people, images, information, capital and ideas. Ireland, it could be argued, is witnessing a situation where Irish culture is a soft-focus preserve of *consumer nationalism*; surveying and protecting images of Irishness because of their connotative capital in a burgeoning global consumer society, and their role in floating the domestic currency of this newly emergent 'we'. Ireland as destination, Ireland as investment base, and Irishness as ethnic brand have investments in the marshalling of cultural distinctiveness, re-packaged rather than transformed by the heavily emphasized dynamism of the tiger.[16] This has nothing to do with the fabric or otherwise of national culture, or the veracity of the projections in people's

lives. Rather, as globalization increases multiple forms of interconnection, a national brand becomes increasingly central to the dominant modes of economic activity that are inseparable from the episodic narrative of new arrival. The paradox in what has been astutely described as a 'self-serving version of history'[17] is that cultural protectionism is central to validating the seminal shift away from an era whose very insularity and homogeneity the new dynamism defines itself against. Marginalized by this are not only those whose exclusion from the myopic Celtic Tiger was central to its buoyancy, but those whose emblematic arrival during this period is now conceptualized as a colourful authentication of national arrival.

Multiculturalisms at large

If conceptualizing culture involves these issues, it is hardly surprising that the wholesale adoption of multiculturalism replicates and transfers them. For if Ireland as culture is bounded in relation to exogenous recognition, multicultural Ireland seems set to predominantly reproduce a thoroughly critiqued politics of recognition,[18] whereby the state and relevant institutions recognize and value distinct cultural groupings and traditions. Multiculturalism must surely qualify as an ideological franchise,[19] even if the reasons for its wholesale adoption are readily understandable. A common refrain is that Ireland is now multicultural, and the descriptiveness of the term seems to capture something of the visual diversity of people and products that has accelerated in recent times. Multiculturalism is advocated as a response to this diversity, both in terms of reactive policy initiatives, and the ways in which individuals understand and interact with that which is different. Yet while significant proportions of the globe can be labelled as multicultural in these terms, multiculturalism is a globalized concept that bears traces of a range of often competing ideological visions. These visions and attendant projects have developed in different national and regional contexts, where the perception of what constitutes cultural groups/communities, the relations that exist between them and the status and rights accorded by a responsible state are divergent and often incompatible. The recurrent symbolic focus on Muslim headscarves in schools of the French Republic, and the utter lack of a similar controversy in the UK,[20] serves as something of a blunt illustration of the gap between actually existing multicultural sites and the ideological responses of states. An awareness of the discursive nature of multiculturalism is well established in both Irish and international academic commentary,[21] yet the term has quickly congealed around a particular understanding in broader public debate. For this reason, elements of these analyses bear repeating here.

Ronit Lentin, in calling for the interrogation of Irishness cited earlier, sketches out how multiculturalism in Ireland generally involves a set of policy responses to the *problems* or *challenges* of cultural diversity, based on versions of what Terence Turner has described as 'difference multiculturalism'.[22] Under this formula, multiculturalism depends on fixing ethnic minorities as cultures – or cultural communities – and concentrating on managing and celebrating cultural difference. In responding to change, this dominant version of multiculturalism tends to prefer the bounded and static notion of culture discussed previously, which involves not just a focus on putative national cultures but also singular culture as the trump card of identity.[23] This has inevitably led in many contexts to separatist cultural identity politics, and the equally obvious privileging of rhetorically essentialized culture over gender, class, sexuality and other sources of identity and multiple allegiance.[24]

The unreflexive adoption of this schema could be regarded as puzzling, given the widespread critique of a multiculturalism configuring cultural traditions suspended in a parity of esteem in post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland.[25] Interrogating the Irish 'we' that recognizes difference in relation to arriving 'others' is therefore crucial for a number of reasons. As with the dynamics of international recognition, Irish culture only coheres when required to articulate within the logic of identification. Foregrounding complexity and difference within what is assumed in the discourse of Irish culture is surely a prerogative to opening up a similar space to those now framed as cultural representatives. And, as Barnor Hesse contends, questioning the centred 'we' opens the possibility to question the power dynamics of how difference is framed and valued, and the import of the perspective from which recognition is conferred.[26]

The difficulties with a naturalized politics of recognition, and attendant obstacles to a politics of interrogation, can be illustrated with a perhaps unfair if necessary focus on certain limited examples. Fine Gael's spokesman on social and community affairs, Brian Hayes, in calling for a national public holiday to 'celebrate the diversity of today's multicultural Ireland' argued that such a holiday would 'affirm community solidarity' and contribute to anti-racism. The symbolic nature of a holiday would grant recognition to the fact that:

> Until relatively recently, Ireland was an insular, largely homogeneous society. It is now rapidly evolving into a diverse, multicultural, exciting place to live.[27]

It is certainly not my intention here to sneer at well-intentioned sentiments or the excitement of cultural exchange, although the assumptions

and efficacy of this form of presumed education also need unpacking. What is of interest here is the construction of Ireland as a recipient of a certain type of cultural change. As observed in opening, and despite high-profile demonstrations to the contrary,[28] pre-1990s Ireland is usually explained in a dichotomy that mirrors simplistic dualisms of tradition and modernity, and characterized in shades of white that give way to the rainbow of multiculturalism and Celtic Tiger cosmopolitanism. Formulations of this kind illustrate not just the mode of difference recognition, but the perceptual framework of what is recognized *as* different. The artificial watershed presented by old Ireland not only collapses historical diversity, but consolidates the 'we' of difference multiculturalism by imagining a relatively bounded entity propelled into rapid if stimulating cultural collisions. If, as Raymond Williams observed, evocations of the past are often more important for their commentary on the present than their historical accuracy, the cipher of homogeneous Ireland can be read as anchoring Irish culture in relation to apparently novel difference. This narrative of monochrome to technicolour implies that difference arrives with the newly immigrant 'other', a fiction that not only airbrushes out the historical experiences of minority groups in Ireland, but implies that racism, like SARS, is imported by the traveller rather than incubated in the social environment.

Not only does this mythic articulation deny inner differentiation and fluidity to the constituent cultures of multiculturalism, it fails to recognize that historically existing hybridity openly contradicts the kind of cultural exclusivity that public discourses of multiculturalism rail against. Yet while the actual hybridity of Irishness is widely referred to, it doesn't seem to cross the threshold of now being different enough, and is either cited as evidence of assimilation[29] or as an attack on racism without reference to the political processes that have smoothed hybridity's import. The difference to be appreciated and celebrated, it appears, is the difference described by Mark McGuinness as

> easily recognizable differences, in skin colour, language, religion, dress, foods. Such 'differences' only actually register as differences if you look at them from the seemingly homogeneous and stable platform of 'mainstream' white urban culture.[30]

Diversity, in this formulation, flaunts with multifarious essentialisms; difference is always cultural and to be celebrated, minority cultures always express their culture to us and in authentic, recognizable ways, and difference exists objectively, without recourse either to the gaze that recognizes it, the parameters that encase it, or the power differentials in relationships of recognition. Indeed, celebrating difference rarely displays awareness of the

role it plays in centring difference as the crucial issue, and of the spectrum of differences that are enshrined in multiculturalist thinking. Beyond celebration it is not always clear if the recognition of difference involves anything more than the prescription of a primary identity, and a pluralism content to observe and conserve the putative margins of coexisting cultures structured by the very invocation of pluralism.[31] It is beyond the scope and competence of this article to examine the dynamics of being recognized, although research suggests that the conflation of all difference to the cultural register both provides possibilities to and inscribes limitations on the negotiation of ethnic minority status in a country feeling its way into the issues.[32]

The quote from Brian Hayes also inevitably describes post-homogeneous Ireland as a 'multicultural exciting' place to live, and this standard characterization is worthy of scrutiny. In Gerry Stembridge's satirical film *Black Day at Blackrock*,[33] the climatic scene portrays a tense town meeting, where views on the proposed dispersal of asylum-seekers are being – to understate – discussed. The film's characters are avowed ciphers, and after transparently racist, populist and moralist contributions, a form of consensus emerges around the hesitant, understated contribution of the moralist's teenage son, who quietly confides that the stuff that's going to happen is interesting, exciting and just life. It may well be, but grounding a political response to cultural change in the promise of an extended ethnography of exhilaration has worrying implications.

Two implications of the emphasis on excitement merit mention here. Quite obviously, framing purportedly new visual difference in terms of its inherent capacity to excite invites objectification and exoticism. During May of 2003, fairly similar magazines celebrating new multicultural realities appeared in the cities I straddle. *6 Degrees*, a monthly English-language magazine was launched in Helsinki, and the *Sunday Independent* 'Life' supplement ran a special edition entitled 'Ireland Goes Hot. The New Multicultural Melting Pot'.[34] In both cases, young black female models on the cover represented the new excitement. Racialized sexuality, it appears, is suddenly rendered neutrally positive by the newness of the epoch, and impervious to what Shalini Sinha argues is often common to the experience of women of colour in Ireland, whereby 'our glorified "differences", sometimes presented as "curiously attractive", are still used to undermine us'.[35] Exotic others embodying excitement is a shorthand commentary on the ways in which the differences recognized and celebrated in these partially coherent versions of multiculturalism may accept and compound historically embedded and frequently repressive ideas of difference. Difference compounds itself and maintains its own uneven distance, as bell hooks lucidly contends:

> To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.[36]

Who is found exciting, and why, also involves asking what one is expected to find exciting, and why. Underlying this prevalent conjunction of multiculturalism and thrill is a version of what Karl Popper termed a 'bucket theory of mind', whereby enough of the right kind of exposure results, by linear progression, in tolerance and understanding. Excitement and interest depend to a significant extent on the cultural and economic capital available to engage with the types of coded difference deemed to generate this frisson, which are rarely the types of differences activated in Ireland's uneasy and violent urban interfaces. That something is exciting, and should be found exciting, easily becomes a form of condescension that posits a confident urbane correctness at the heart of a set of correct attitudes, and regards deviance from them as at best pre-1990s parochialism. Significantly, approaches to racism and intolerance that locate the problem solely in the awareness of the individual have been thoroughly critiqued, as Alana Lentin writes:

> racism is typically described as an individual problem, often in psychological terms, that connects between 'attitudes' and 'prejudices' based, it is said, on 'ignorance'. Racism is, therefore, generally described as the problem of those with too little exposure to the positive qualities associated with 'cultural' or 'ethnic' difference; and too much exposure to the, mainly economic, disadvantages that such 'difference' is said to bring with it.[37]

By assuming the corrective properties of culture, the current stress on exposure situates racism as an affliction merely of the ignorant – it could almost read 'masses' – and marginalizes the elite racism of government, which is happy to fund awareness raising while it shirks off questions of asylum and broader migration to the realms of the pragmatic and commonsensical. The politics of excitement combines aspects of 'sushi and set-dancing' multiculturalism with a neo-liberal notion of shopping as a radical political act. The conceptual flabbiness of *cultural difference* is apparent when it functions as a general category including everything from performances and products to putatively immutable group characteristics. However, a feature of capitalist societies receiving limited if contentious

inflows of people is a widespread circulation and consumption of globalized cultural products, and these are contexts where distinction and visual projections of identity are increasingly bound up in the consumption and rearticulation of images and signs. Consumerist cosmopolitanism presents cultural differences as reified components of lifestyle bricolage, and as carriers of aesthetic diversity and globalized taste.

While consumerist multiculturalism has been theoretically differentiated from the various political projects that the term encompasses,[38] the cultural whirlwind of a changed Ireland deeply intertwines them. The *Sunday Independent* lifestyle supplement cited earlier leads with a bold statement:

> Until 10 years ago, Ireland was homogeneous – not so much white as grey. Then our economic boom brought an influx of colour, as migrants sought their brave new world. Still focused on our diaspora, we awoke slowly to the simmering melting pot. Ireland has grown hot, and we can benefit. Or not.

Beyond the implicit racialization of migrants in this statement, the by now familiar cultural watershed passively results in an embodied and commodified multiculturalism that appears as a badge of global modernity – we have arrived. It is unsurprising then, that general difference multiculturalism has developed conterminously with a market-driven globalization of Irish society. The fixation on particular practices of difference recognition coheres with the multiculturalization of society held to be a hallmark of the advanced globalization of capitalism,[39] as both hold out what *Public Culture* describes as 'the generous promise of a pluralist existence'.[40] The celebrated presence of others is locked to some extent in the realm of consumption, while their futures as producers are discretely quarantined in the projections of IBEC and governmental pragmatics. Decoupling cultural identity from work and the material indicates not only the significant transfer of personal identity from work to consumption in neo-liberal societies,[41] but it could be argued also that the overwhelming focus on cultural difference is useful to the present government, as cultural politics decoupled from the socio-economic complements a system that is happy to foster top-down notions of diversity without a transparent engagement with socio-economic rights.

Towards the transculturality of everyday life

This is an avowedly partial critique of ways in which essentialized notions of culture, and their rehearsal within an emerging sense of multiculturalism

in Ireland, poorly equip public discourse to engage with the realities of multiple identity and allegiance in inescapable relations of power, and paradoxically deploy immutability to tell a mythic story of exciting change. Invoking the 'we' invited by globalized cultural rhetoric sustains a multiculturalism that places people in predominantly national cultural groupings, in a matrix of depoliticized cultural relativism. In a post-Iraq conflict Ireland where *The Star* newspaper chooses to object to restricted pub opening hours with caricatures of the Minister for Justice as 'Mad Mullah Mickey',[42] the politics of difference are clearly of enormous relevance, and are certainly not being dismissed by a writer whose differences tend to sit unquestioned at the heart of multiple privileges. My aim here is not to marshal theoretical barbs and fling them at random, gauche pronouncements, but rather to argue that multiculturalism thus articulated inexorably hampers the intentions that undoubtedly underpin it. Take the ease with which conservative commentators already isolate loose pronouncements, elevate them to a supposedly representative status, and then proceed – in a manoeuvre perfected by the British right-wing press – to 'tell it like it is', undaunted by 'the pieties of political correctness' and 'singing, dancing tiresome multiculturalists'.[43]

More significantly, the logic of cultures germane to multiculturalism is precisely that of contemporary European cultural nationalisms. As Gerard Delanty observes, ethnic-cultural nationalism, fostered by 'the decline of the nation-state as a dominant normative point of reference' has reclaimed citizenship to a politics of cultural identity and belonging, and constructs migrants as both culturally other and as contributing to the erosion of state provision.[44] Yet as Delanty further points out, this very nationalism in many European countries is a product of social fragmentation and neo-liberal attack on the welfare state, and articulates cultural exclusivity through social contestation. While a sense of superiority is arguably implicit, much new nationalism operates within a paradigm of cultural relativism that recognizes and even valorizes cultural difference, as long as the embodiments of this irreducible and immutable difference are located in places where their cultural difference is natural and of no material impact. While this analysis is as yet partial in the case of Ireland, the presence of a loosely articulated cultural nationalism and – irrespective of actual numbers – the construction of immigration as a cultural threat are more than discernable in, among other things, opportunistic public pronouncements and the far from thoughtful on-air coffee shops of late-night talk radio. A culturally unreflective politics of recognition is ill prepared to engage with a politics of exclusivity where recognition is a central mechanism of exclusion.

Moving beyond culture as everything and as the irreducible component

nestling in multiculturalism primarily involves questioning what is at stake in the invocation of culture. C.W. Watson, for one, argues that contemporary culturalization articulates a need for particular dimensions of self-hood: expressive identity and self-respect, a sense of belonging and commitment to place, a sense of history and link to the past.[45] It is not inevitable that these dimensions become the preserve of cultural nationalisms struggling to bind identity to culture to (national) place in the face of political, economic and physical deterritorialization, or that they remain catered for predominantly by frameworks that inadvertently endorse exclusions in the pursuit of empowering group solidarities. Speaking of what it is that culture requests may, in a Frerian logic, name, unmask and engage the needs that the politics of culture often distorts. Given Ireland's implicit regression from a citizenship of birth to a *Volkisch* blood lineage, an open debate on identity, belonging, place, past and legitimacy is vital.

Culture is a deeply embedded notion that will not easily be transcended, but that is not to say that its currently hegemonic accents cannot be. Shifting to an insistence on living culturally rather than living in cultures, for instance, allows for the recognition that cultural meanings, traditions and practices facilitate our entry into and engagement with self and world, but that this does not take place in frozen corrals significantly bounded against time, space and others. If cultural identity is dialogically sustained in relationships with others, then even a cursory reflection on the praxis of everyday life reveals that this is not formed by simple thresholds of commonality and difference. Cultural existence is to varying, situated extents fluid, adaptive and syncretic, whereas culture, as a mode of managing meaning and articulating group identity, assumes coherence and requires politically expedient homogeneity. In dominant multiculturalism, it settles and arranges discourses of difference precisely when we require concepts that encompass transition and contingency. A stress on living culturally is conscious of the politics of culture, and therefore responsive to the issues that strategic essentialism signals. It can engage with the importance of communities of descent – and correlative levels of empowerment – while expecting and arguing for the ordinariness of multiple allegiances and sources of identity.

The myth of a new Ireland – where all is changed utterly, as opposed to changing – is a strategic essentialism in itself, celebrating a truncated cosmopolitanism capable only of anchoring its identity in a dialectic of consumer nationalism and the celebrated arrival of difference. The banal hybridity and multiplicity of experiences of Ireland and Irishness are subsumed in a dichotomy designed to underline dynamism, but which instead can only valorize time and place by profoundly undermining them.[46] As

opposed to this, emerging notions of transculturality[47] recognize national sites as being internally complex, externally networked in uneven and asystematic ways, and as having always been hybrid and contested. The prefix 'trans' implies crossing and transcending; engaging with the actual internal complexity and dissonance of rhetorical culture, and recognising – here the verb is appropriate – the transformations that render obscuring notions of culture descriptively and ethically exhausted.

Notes

1 While agreeing with Jan Nederveen Pieterse's observation that we can only speak of *globalizations*, I am using the term here in its dominant neo-liberal economic sense.

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 2.

3 This is an admittedly porous and strategic concept, and the examples discussed here are chosen illustratively rather than as a result of any structured, qualitative work. My understanding of public discourse for these purposes is mediated statements carrying debates on Irish culture and multiculturalism to a target audience of the nation, and whose profile can be argued to be influential in understandings of multiculturalism, if not people's actual multicultural practices.

4 R. D. Grillo, 'Transmigration and Cultural Diversity in the Construction of Europe', paper presented at the symposium 'Cultural Diversity and the Construction of Europe', Fundació Jaume Bofill & Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, 2000.

5 As quoted by Miriam Donohoe, 'More Sober Reflection Required', *The Irish Times*, Weekend 10 May 2003.

6 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1988), p. 87.

7 See for a recent example Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (London: Blackwell, 2001).

8 Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Bénédicte Dembour and Richard A. Wilson (eds.), *Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3.

9 ibid., p. 3.

10 Gerard Delanty, *Citizenship in a Global Age: Society, Culture, Politics* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

11 John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

12 Wolfgang Welsch, 'Transculturality: The Puzzling Forms of Cultures Today' in Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (eds.), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (London: Sage, 1999) p. 200. (Italics in original).

13 Ronit Lentin, 'Anti-Racist Responses to the Racialisation of Irishness: Disavowed Multiculturalism and Its Discontents' in Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (eds.), *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2000).

14 Donohoe, op. cit.

15 Welsch, op. cit., p. 200.

16 This is apparent if the relationship between drunkenness and dynamism mentioned by

Donohoe is probed further. The global ubiquity of Irish pubs, for example, works within ethnicized cityscapes where the recalibrated alterity of romantic Irishness provides a particular kind of brand. If I can resort to informal ethnography, barmen in Irish pubs in Stockholm and Helsinki testify that Irish pubs may be dynamic, but beyond the swirl of IT networking, success also owes a great deal to the level of alcohol consumption that Irishness sanctions for others, as opposed to different types of themed spaces. And awareness on the part of mobile youth of the gains to be made by slotting into the expectations of others has echoes of Declan Kiberd's discussion of earlier generations of emigrant Irish adopting the cultural roles allotted to them rather than negotiating a complex interstitial identity. See Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

17 Peadar Kirby, 'Contested Pedigrees of the Celtic Tiger' in Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds.), *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto, 2002), p. 27.

18 Amy Gutman, Jurgen Habermas and Charles Taylor (eds), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

19 Kirby et al., Introduction: 'The Reinvention of Ireland: A Critical Perspective' in Kirby et al., op. cit.

20 S. Poulter, 'Muslim Headscarves in School: Contrasting Legal Approaches in England and France', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 1, 1997, pp. 43–74.

21 See Lentin and McVeigh, op. cit. For a global comparative overview, see C. W. Watson, *Multiculturalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

22 Terence Turner, 'Anthropology and Multiculturalism: What is Anthropology that Multiculturalists Should be Mindful of?', *Cultural Anthropology*, 8:4, 1993, pp. 411–29.

23 Michael Pickering uses this metaphor to discuss national identity and its place in hierarchies of allegiance, and I have adapted it here given contemporary articulations of nation and ethnicity through culture as rhetoric. See Michael Pickering, *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

24 See for example Steven Vertovec and Robert Cohen, 'Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism' in Steven Vertovec and Robert Cohen (eds.), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

25 See Colin Coulter for a discussion of the 'cultural turn' of the Belfast Agreement, which he argues results in a limited prescription of opposing 'cultures' and 'traditions', thus consolidating 'identities and dispositions that were essential in producing the conflict in the first place' and ignoring the 'prospect that social actors in the province might actually prefer to construct themselves in terms of gender, sexuality, age or more individuated inclinations': *Contemporary Northern Irish Society* (London: Pluto, 1999), pp. 255–7. For a recent discussion of multiculturalist responses to a proposed Orange parade in Dublin in 2000 see Andrew Finlay and Natalie McDonnell, 'Pluralism, Partitionism and the Controversy Generated by a Proposed Orange Parade in Dublin', *Irish Studies Review*, 11:1, 2003, 17–32.

26 Barnor Hesse, 'It's Your world: Discrepant M/multiculturalism' in Phil Cohen (ed.), *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms* (London: Zed Books, 1999). Cited in Lentin, 'Anti-Racist Responses to the Racialisation of Irishness', p. 230.

27 'FG calls for a holiday to fête diverse culture', *The Irish Times*, 22 May 2003.

28 As a most recent and pointed example, see Bill Rolston and Mick Shannon, *Encounters: How Racism Came to Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2002).

29 Kevin Myers, for example, notes that 'no culture is pure' – and cites a series of cross-cultural influences on artistic forms and practices in Ireland, yet continues in his

argument to posit an indigenous culture that assimilates and must be to an unspecified extent normatively assimilated to: *The Irish Times*, 6 September 2001.

30 Mark McGuinness, 'Geographies with a Difference? Citizenship and Difference in Post-colonial Urban Spaces', in A. Blunt and C. McEwan (eds.), *Postcolonial Geographies* (London: Continuum, 2000).

31 David A. Hollinger, 'Not Universalists, Not Pluralists: The New Cosmopolitans Find Their Own Way', in Vertovec and Cohen, op. cit., p. 231.

32 Employing what has been termed 'strategic essentialism' – the often contingent insistence on cultural wholeness, often in relation to group rights – is clearly of temporary use to ethnic minorities. However as Ronit Lentin argues, this can lead to assumptions that everyone 'within' is represented by cultural leaders, regardless of their investment in and identification with the strategic culture: 'Anti-Racist Responses to the Racialisation of Irishness', pp. 230–31. Similarly, the privileging of culture in this sense over other factors of identity and allegiance may lead to a cultural legitimation of oppressions defined as internal, and to pendular relativist\universalist interventions. Current critiques in the UK also illustrate the political impotency of such totalizing frameworks. David Blunkett, in a speech reacting to the report of the Community Cohesion Review Team after the riots in towns in Northern England in 2001, comments: 'Young people, in particular, are alienated and disengaged from much of the society around them, including the leadership of their communities.' Yet it is only by assuming that 'young people' – whoever they might be – are represented within this form of top-down politics that Blunkett's righteous incredulity can be understood.

33 Gerard Stembridge, *Black Day at Blackrock* (2001).

34 *Sunday Independent*, Life, 25 May 2003.

35 Shalini Sinha, 'Generating Awareness for the Experiences of Women of Colour in Ireland', in Vertorec and Cohen, op. cit.

36 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 23.

37 Alana Lentin, 'Racial States, Anti-Racist Responses: Picking Holes in "Culture" and "Human Rights"' forthcoming in the *European Journal of Social Theory*.

38 See Stuart Hall, *The Multicultural Question* (Buckingham: The Open University, Pavis Papers in Social and Cultural Research, 2001) and Craig Calhoun, 'The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers: Towards a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism' in Vertovec and Cohen, op. cit.

39 Vertovec and Cohen, op. cit., pp. 12–14.

40 Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Cosmopolitanisms', *Public Culture*, 12:3, 2000.

41 See Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

42 *Daily Star*, 29 May 2003.

43 Myers' work provides ample material here. Discussing a question from 'Exploring Masculinities' that assuredly displays some of the totalizing culturalization discussed here ('What do I admire about Black Culture and Black people's lives?') he uses the question's clumsy juxtaposition to scoff at any notion that blackness is anything other than unspecified authentic African blackness. Latching onto de-contextualized examples allows the denial that racialization involves discourses of blackness and power, and the repellent comparison of 'ideological multiculturalism' with a catalogue of historical racisms. As is ever the case, no author, background or work needs citing or detailing beyond the opening salvo, a telling generality given the sweep and venom of the accusations: *The Irish Times*, 12 June 2002.

44 Gerard Delanty, op. cit., and 'Beyond the Nation-State: National Identity and Citizenship

in a Multicultural Society – A Response to Rex', *Sociological Research Online*, 1:3, 1996; http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/1/3/1.html.

45 Watson, op. cit., pp. 107–10.

46 In relation to this, Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin propose a notion of 'dynamic rooted-ness', which rejects the new orthodoxy of repressive homogeneity miraculously morphing into prosperous diversity. In particular, their emphasis that through 'fore-grounding the internal diasporic and dissident energies in Irish culture [that] a genuine openness towards others can be thus be affected' is of relevance here ('Conclusions and Transformations', in *Reinventing Ireland*, pp. 206–7). The point made in note 28, regard-ing historical racisms in Ireland, should be regarded as complementary to this, as is Lentin and McVeigh's analysis of Irish involvement in racialized colonial oppressions (op. cit., pp. 18–20). Both analyses interrogate Irishness, and recall histories and resources that can be translated into contemporary engagements. This has of course been done pointedly with the story of St Patrick, the Famine and histories of Irish emigration. Yet the emphasis must remain on translation rather than merely recounting; despite the particularity of national identity, historically longitudinal empathy is contingent, easily denounced and pedagogically unstable. As Debbie Ging and Jackie Malcolm put it, 'the extent to which such historical accounts might strike a chord with the relatively affluent, globally mobile and largely apolitical youth culture of present-day Ireland is question-able': 'Interculturalism and Multiculturalism in Ireland: Textual Strategies at Work in the Media Landscape', paper delivered at the conference 'What's the Culture in Multi-culturalism? What's the Difference of Identities?', University of Aarhus, 2003, p. 3.

47 Welsch, op. cit.