



## Historical duty, palimpsestic time, and migration in the Decade of Centenaries

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*“How to Keep An Alien and Vardo:  
Historical Duty, Palimpsestic Time and Migration in the Decade of Centenaries”  
Charlotte McIvor*

This article analyses Sonya Kelly’s *How to Keep An Alien* (Dublin Tiger Fringe, 2014) and ANU Production’s *Vardo* (Dublin Theatre Festival, 2014) in relationship to the performative backdrop of the Irish Decade of Centenaries (2012-2022) and a series of key extra-theatrical political events that featured asylum seekers and migrants prominently in Ireland and to a limited extent, in Europe at large, from 2012-2015. Both theatrical productions centrally engage tropes of Irish national memory vis-à-vis engagement with migration through a primary focus on women’s stories and premiered against the backdrop of the Decade of Centenaries which commemorates key events in the founding and formation of the Irish state stretching from the “introduction of the third Home Rule bill in 1912 to the conclusion of the Irish Civil War in 1923.”<sup>1</sup>

*How to Keep an Alien* and *Vardo* fold time in order to critically question contemporary ethics and the limits of political agency when it comes to the entanglement of gender and migration. Kelly’s autobiographical work traces her struggle to bring her Australian female partner to live in Ireland while *Vardo*, the final installment in ANU’s four-part Monto cycle, focuses on contemporary sex work performed by both migrant and Irish-born workers. These works are joined by their thematic focus on what M. Jacqui Alexander terms “palimpsestic time,” time which is both “here and there, then and now,” and which makes visible “the ideological traffic between and among formations that are otherwise positioned as dissimilar.”<sup>2</sup> *How to Keep an Alien* slides between Ireland and Australia in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the present by way of letters from a long-departed great-great grandmother while *Vardo*

draws together the threads of events rooted in inner-city Dublin's Monto district since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*How To Keep An Alien* and *Vardo*'s embrace of palimpsestic time and critical focus on gender during this moment of the Decade of Centenaries models a theatrical dramaturgy that aids in reading key theatrical and extra-theatrical events featuring asylum seekers and migrants against one another. These works also reveal the relationship between these events and the ongoing redefinition of Irish national memory and political community, a process thrown into sharp relief by the present commemorative mode. These performances' focus on gendered asylum seeker and migrant bodies resonating across time and space in and against political structures that limit their movement. They insist that a turn to the past is inseparable from querying the lived political structures of the present, structures that have repeatedly displaced as well as instrumentalised the bodies of migrant women from the post-inward migration of the mid-1990s onwards. In 2014, Kathleen Gough asked of the Irish theatre, "is there a way to understand the absence of immigrant female characters/actors on the stage at the same time that these same women are being figured as a problem, as illegitimate (non-national) mothers or prostitutes, in 'ordinary life'?"<sup>3</sup> *Vardo* and *How To Keep An Alien* partially contribute to filling this absence (although only Kelly, an Irish-born performer, appears on stage in *Alien*) and in doing so, they dramatize the relationship between gender, migration, memory and political possibility.

Significantly, the 2014 premieres of these performances coincided with a cluster of extra-theatrical performative events beginning in the early 2010s that have exposed the continuing role of migrants and particularly asylum seekers as the constitutive (and gendered) Other of the Irish state post-Citizenship Referendum and

post-economic crash. These more recent events have thrown into sharp relief the relationship between Irish state formation, national identity and race/ethnicity/gender. They include the 2012 death of Savita Halapannavar after being refused termination for a miscarrying pregnancy that devolved into septic shock<sup>4</sup> and the forced August 2014 caesarean section of Miss Y. After arriving in Ireland as an asylum seeker (since receiving refugee status), Miss Y's request for termination following a series of sexual assaults was rejected. Despite presenting as suicidal, she was made to deliver at 24 weeks gestation while in psychiatric care.<sup>5</sup> Finally, a building wave of protests including hunger strikes by asylum seekers at direct provision centres<sup>6</sup> calling for the abolition of Ireland's Direct Provision system initiated in August and continuing through September 2014. I contend that reading these extra-theatrical events against the backdrop of *Vardo* and *How to Keep an Alien* in conversation with the Decade of Centenaries provides an opportunity to rework the oft-cited "historical duty argument"<sup>7</sup> which posits sympathetic engagement between the Irish and the "Other" as migrant as the primary foundation of a post-inward migration political encounter.

The palimpsestic temporal dramaturgies of *Vardo* and *How To Keep An Alien* instead make visible the concrete political work and materially grounded analysis necessary to make the concept of historical duty *politically* as well as *affectively* viable. These performances refocus attention from the suggested use of historical duty primarily as a tactic of persuasion directed towards *Irish* reactions *to* migration. They instead reimagine historical duty as an interrelational site of possible collaboration and strategizing *between* Irish and migrant and/or minority ethnic citizens. Using these works, I advocate for an approach to historical duty that, while acknowledging the co-existence of the past with the present, moves beyond analogies that offer a primarily sympathetic mode of engagement at the affective level of the individual

body. I instead consider how the staging of encounters between the present and past, the Irish citizen and migrant, within the framework of historical duty might instead make manifest the need for a more concrete (and shared) collective politics to emerge on the ground.

As the Decade of Centenaries collides with Ireland's ongoing economic crisis and the return of high rates of emigration (which has prompted wrongful assumptions that post-Celtic Tiger migrants are not here to stay), the potential use-value of historical duty takes on even greater stakes. I hope to reconceptualise it as a practice that might not only activate flashpoints of one-way recognition rooted in the Irish historical past, but engender critical openings in the present that encourage shared futures through collective political action and structural transformation.

### **Historical Duty Then and Now**

From the beginning of increased inward-migration to Ireland in the mid-1990s, historical analogies were drawn between the Irish and the spectrum of those newly arrived in Ireland- from legal migrants with work visas in specialized fields to those employed (legally or not) in more casual economies to asylum seekers- from the perspective of Irish histories (and present realities) of emigration and political persecution related to histories of colonialism, the Famine, and economic underdevelopment. The first ever statement on integration by then Minister of Integration Colin Lenihan argued that: "This Ministerial Statement of Policy is predicated on the idea that Ireland has a unique moral, intellectual and practical capability to adapt to the experience of inward migration" due to Irish experience of emigration."<sup>8</sup> This constellation of analogies has been grouped under what Steve

Garner terms the “historical duty” argument.<sup>9</sup> Jason King summarizes the thrust of it thus:

the remembrance of migration has an ethical significance that should engender a sympathetic identification with the experiences of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees because they represent “the economically and politically persecuted Irish of other times.”<sup>10</sup>

The goal of historical duty as an affective (something that must be felt) and practical (something that must be implemented) Irish capability might be summarized by Emilie Pine’s definition of “ethical memory” as “a form of justice that recognizes the political nature of remembering and forgetting.”<sup>11</sup> Crucially, it needs bodies to be animated as a formation. As Rebecca Schneider puts it pithily, “we refigure ‘history’ onto bodies, the affective transmissions of showing and telling.”<sup>12</sup>

The turn towards historical duty in the late 1990s and early 2000s therefore marked a widening though arguably limited reconceptualization of the historical networks that Ireland recognized itself as implicated within. Migrants were presented as figures capable of reinvigorating or purging traumatized past Irish selves through their availability as a surface for projection that would return a view of the Irish themselves in the present. In 2001, Declan Kiberd went so far as to offer that migrants were giving the Irish-born citizenry a “priceless service, reconnecting people with their buried feelings.”<sup>13</sup> Taking a different tact, Ronit Lentin instead calls out “the pain of emigration, returning to haunt the Irish through the presence of the immigrant “other” and in its wake invoking the unseemly presence of the “less than fully Irish” indigenous and non- indigenous minorities - the Traveller, the Asian, the Black, the

Jew.”<sup>14</sup> In both analogies, however, when Irish-born people look at migrants, they are supposed to see a version of themselves looking back with this recognition either fuelling personal recovery from trauma or prompting racism. What happens to the migrant however in this transformative intersubjective encounter? Are they in fact absented through their hyper-presence?

The embrace of historical duty as an organizing analogy reflected a wider preoccupation with what Emilie Pine terms “Irish remembrance culture” from the 1990s to the present.<sup>15</sup> She argues, “While representations of the past have always been an integral element of Irish culture, they are now one of its most compelling subjects. And the tone that characterises this subject is trauma.”<sup>16</sup> The analogies drawn between the struggles bringing new migrants (and/or long-existing minority ethnic individuals and groups) to Ireland and Irish indigenous and diasporic histories of emigration and poverty draw most explicitly on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries legacies of emigration, catalyzed by the Famine but stretching forward for generations. Kathleen Gough offers that: “Analogy does not elide difference but looks for ‘kinship’ so that difference does not become a way to curtail the possibility of seeking ‘both/and’ in place of ‘either/or.’”<sup>17</sup> She elaborates that:

analogy does not work by turning two into one in order to subsume difference into a greater universal body, thus abjecting different bodies from the scene of history (metaphor). Instead, analogy is attuned to seeking correspondences of “two or more things *with* each other” that may or may not elicit the strong invitation to compare.<sup>18</sup>

I would argue that the subsumption of one history by another that Gough rejects as inherent in the performative extension of analogy does frequently occur in the Irish context (as Kiberd's comment reveals). This is partially because in the early days of the Celtic Tiger, Irish historical duty was enabled by a teleological logic that positioned Irish trauma as past (even while being obsessed over in the present as Pine also suggests). In other words, the hospitality demanded by way of historical duty became viable because of the prosperity briefly engendered by the Celtic Tiger that rendered migrants theoretically unthreatening. In 2015, it is a much different landscape socially and financially as the call for papers for this issue has suggested, as Ireland has shifted in less than 20 years from "an emigrant-sending to an immigrant receiving society and then into a nation of emigrants once again."

But the analogy of historical duty as an affective touch-point for Irish responses to inward-migration still persists and continues to mutate, emerging once again as a key refrain following the April 2015 Mediterranean mass drownings in public statements by Taoiseach Enda Kenny and a diverse group of stakeholders including NGO workers, journalists, and activists.<sup>19</sup> Edel McGinley, director of the Migrant Rights Centre, Ireland, contended that:

These boats are the coffin ships of the 21st century, and Ireland has remained silent on this crisis for too long...Ireland must play its part by responding positively to migrants and refugees who reach Ireland, as well as by advocating for comprehensive rescue programmes, and by helping to bring stability abroad.<sup>20</sup>



The immediate linking of these deaths with those suffered in the aftermath of the Famine reactivates Irish historical duty as an ethical imperative that signals the need for Irish citizens to take individual and collective responsibility within national *and* international frameworks of political and social power. In 2015, historical duty can no longer be viewed as a retrieval (or necessary humbling reminder in the context of prosperity) of the Irish past due in particular to the resumption of emigration of Irish-born individuals in significant numbers and our continuing austerity measures and economic crisis. Therefore I wonder if the post-2008 destruction of the Celtic Tiger redemption narrative makes possible a more multivalent and multi-directional revision of Irish historical duty that might operate, in the words of Schneider, as a “freighted cross-temporal mobility” that can empower multiple stakeholders in negotiating and working with its multidirectional force for politically efficacious ends.<sup>21</sup> I will investigate this possibility by turning to what *How to Keep An Alien* and *Vardo* illuminate through their use of *gendered* palimpsestic time as a dramaturgical strategy of discernment.

### **Gender And/As Analogy/Allegory**

I next explore how the political possibilities of Irish historical duty as an analogical relationship can make themselves known through pursuing analysis of the frequently unacknowledged role of gender in making these affective compulsions stick or repel, a condition that Kathleen Gough pursues extensively in *Haptic Allegories: Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic*. The productions of *How to Keep An Alien* and *Vardo* make this interdependent relationship between gender and analogy/allegory in Irish formulations of historical duty manifest. They not only dramatize previously unrecovered female archival figures that have long underwritten

this symbolic economy as a whole, but draw attention to the gap between political feeling and political action that the systemic erasure of women as political *actors* in fact exacerbates.

In her rigorous and provocative work, Gough anchors the major thrust of her argument around allegory as opposed to analogy. She defines allegory as “an incoherent narrative or image wherein a writer or artist says other than she means, and means other than she says.”<sup>22</sup> She is in major pursuit of the women absented from 19<sup>th</sup> and early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century circum-Atlantic exchanges between Irish and African-American political formations and figures but often invoked as allegorical symbols (woman as nation, suffering slave mothers, starving Famine mothers, etc.). Gough focuses on “the challenge of reading women’s objective reality as separate from their allegorical images and metaphoric constructions.” She elaborates: “What intrigues me is the challenge of finding a ‘body’ in the archive that comes *before* the construction.”<sup>23</sup> *How to Keep An Alien* and *Vardo* stage this search and materialize these bodies through their theatrical practice.

Sonya Kelly’s one-woman show, *How to Keep An Alien: A true story about falling in love and proving it to the government*, premiered at the Dublin Fringe Festival produced by Rough Magic Theatre in September 2014. Featuring only herself and her stage manager Justin Murphy onstage, *How to Keep An Alien* walked a line (as in Kelly’s earlier work *Wheelchair on My Face*) between autobiographical solo performance and stand-up comedy and was likewise conceived in collaboration with director Gina Moxley.<sup>24</sup> The piece chronicled Sonya meeting and falling in love with her partner, Kate, who just happened to be from Australia (and female), and in the country on a limited work visa. After a dramatic and passionate beginning followed by an equally dramatic and passionate separation and reunion, Sonya and

Kate decide to apply for a de facto partnership visa and the second half of the piece becomes about their quest to build a relationship through the assembly of paperwork and transnational visits between Scotland, Ireland and Australia. Kate is linked to Ireland not only by Sonya, but by her great-great grandmother, Ann Flanagan who had been “thrown off her land in Offaly, and sent to foreign clay” (Queensland, Australia) in 1862.<sup>25</sup> The only evidence of this familial link however seems to be letters sent during Ann’s passage.

*How To Keep An Alien* makes a clever critique of historical duty as Sonya and Kate initially and naively believe that the Irish state will blindly accept their claim of historical exceptionalism. Kate even forcefully asserts “Ireland is my spiritual home”<sup>26</sup> on the basis of her short visit. A visit to the Garda National Immigration Bureau challenges this unexamined expectation. Facing immediate rejection, they protest:

Sonya: What about her ancestors, the Flanagans, evicted off their land in 1862? What about the 15,000 people leaving for Australia every year? Could you not just let *one*, tiny one of their lot in?

Bacon Face: Listen now the pair a yous. Are there bullets whizzin’ over your heads? No. Is it chicken wire for walls yiz have? No. Are you one of the 4,800 asylum seekers living on a bunk bed here for €19.50 a week? Can’t even make your own dinner! No. Swanning in here waving cheque books! Count your blessings you’re only in the state you’re in, not like half the people sitting there behind you!

...

*SFX. We hear a swell of multi-national voices, babies crying, people crying, general panic and bing bongs rising to an arresting crescendo. It is abruptly cut off by one final bing bong.*<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the scene leading up to their encounter with “Bacon Face” (their name for their imposing immigration officer), there had been a steady series of calls for other would-be migrants: “Bing Bong! Venezuelan national, Valentina Rosario... Bing Bong! Japanese national, Riyeko Fujikage... Bing Bong! Filipino national, Allan Woriah, Allan Woriah.”<sup>28</sup> None of these characters are ever heard from or seen in *How to Keep An Alien* and the sonic tableau of less privileged fellow visitors to the Garda National Immigration Bureau that punctuates the officer’s dismissal of their request does set up a binary between Sonya and Kate (white albeit queer partners of Irish and Australian descent) and the “Other” migrants. These “Others” are non-English speaking, cacophonous, similarly yet perhaps more legitimately desperate but, unlike Kate, without legibly “direct” claims to Ireland (even a tenuous archivally unstable great-great Irish grandmother). In an interview about the creation of the piece, Kelly admits that in making the show:

I learned about the policies around asylum-seekers in Ireland, how they’re living on €19.50 a week, sleeping in bunk-beds, not able to cook their own dinner. These were elements of my own government’s policies that I was blithely ignorant of beforehand. So the show is, in part, a vessel for bringing one or two issues to the fore.<sup>29</sup>

Giving voice to all migrants is not the objective of Kelly's show but what *How to Keep An Alien* does make visible is how the living practice of migration *and* historical duty makes necessary not only access to a verifiable archive of legitimate documents or performative traces that establish relationships whether familial (as in the case of Ann and Kate) or analogical (as in the broader example of historical duty). Rather, *How to Keep An Alien* dramatizes the necessarily active and mediated interpretation of archival materials that make history's meanings transferable to and/or legitimate in the present. This process of interpretation necessitates the ongoing negotiation of outside agencies and structures, and not just individual translation of the content in isolation.

To this end, Kelly stages not only her and Kate's assembly of their own relationship archive which proves their romantic relationship in order to ultimately submit an ultimately successful visa application, but her engagement with Ann's letters from her crossing from Ireland to Australia. These letters are left behind accidentally by Kate on her initial departure back to Australia and serve as comfort and guide to Sonya thereafter within the frame of the play. Ann's journey *to* Australia and her struggles and losses (including the death of her daughter) are represented as an indirect dramatic parallel to Sonya and Kate's own story. For example, when Sonya and Kate reach an impasse in their relationship, Sonya reads out loud a letter describing Ann's "doldrums" at sea and so on.<sup>30</sup>

The dramatic use of Ann's letters in *How To Keep An Alien* begin with Sonya reading her words, before Ann's voice (in voice-over) takes over reading her own diary entries from the passage between Cork and Queensland, Australia. Eventually, Ann speaks directly to Sonya when she hesitates about getting close to Kate's family during a camping trip in the Australian outback:

*Sonya Kelly this is Ann Flanagan. Come here to me now you. If I managed this journey in a leaky boat a hundred and fifty years ago, you can find your way out of a bit of old scrub! Come on! You're letting the side down!...Now get up off your arse. Off your arse, I said!*<sup>31</sup>

There is, of course, an utter incommensurability in the emotional and material stakes of Sonya's immediate situation as compared to Ann's, who earlier describes the loss of her infant daughter at sea:

*She breathed her last at eighteen months and slid from our arms in the lavender deep to the sound of seabirds and Our Fathers. I pray to God in his mercy to spare us Margaret and Mary, that they will have a welcome in this place we call Queensland, that sickness will not taint us with the name of "unsuitable immigrants."*<sup>32</sup>

*How To Keep An Alien* stages critically rather than accepts complacently the problematic equivalencies frequently posited between the experiences of Ann and Sonya/Kate. The resurrection of Ann from the archives is not entirely self-serving for Sonya and Kate as her sonic (if not physical) animation also points toward the invisibility of women affected by the Famine on melodramatic stages in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stephen Watts and Julia William consider how "impossible it might be to represent women victimized by famine onstage if, that is, they were to be portrayed according to eyewitness descriptions as nearly naked, emaciated and screaming."<sup>33</sup> Gough urged for discovery of the female "body" in the archives before allegories

swallow her up, and Ann's re-animation by Kelly feels like an attempt to do this through giving her a future in which to intervene in Sonya and Kate's love affair. As David Lloyd notes regarding the legacy of the Famine, "what the dead require is a place in the futures which were denied them" and Kelly stages this.<sup>34</sup>

In *How To Keep An Alien's* double dramatization of the creation of Sonya and Kate's own contemporary migration archive and the animation of Ann's archived letters, Kelly highlights sharply the contingent conditions dictating passage and the lived experience of migration as a bureaucratic *and* affective process. As Schneider argues, "in the archive, the performance of access is a ritual act that, by occlusion and inclusion, scripts the depreciation of (and registers as disappeared) other modes of access."<sup>35</sup> By highlighting bureaucracy alongside affect, Kelly trains the audience's attention on the structural conditions of migration and archival access that render some bodies "unsuitable immigrants" (as Ann Flanagan fears) and some bodies legitimately traceable for reasons not only of worthiness, but of privilege.

In publicity shots for the production, and within the staging of the production itself, the accumulation of paper and documents take on central importance as Sonya says of their dossier for their visa application: "It's a masterpiece. An eight month paper trail of indisputable devotion."<sup>36</sup> But, that paper trail *is* disputable depending on who will ultimately sit on the other side of the application, and the laws that govern suitability for de-facto partnership visas in the first place where thankfully in Ireland a "person may be considered the De Facto Partner, opposite or same sex," a right only strengthened after the May 2015 passage of the Marriage Referendum.<sup>37</sup> Without this crucial legal protection, this might have been a very different play or no play at all with Sonya and Kate's lives, like Ann's, rendered illegible to the optics of official archives.



Kelly weighed down by paper in one of the publicity shots for *How to Keep An Alien* with Kate in the background

Photo: Anthony Woods

A queer utopian impulse therefore rests at the heart of *How to Keep An Alien's* deadpan but frothy earnestness. The audience gets a happy ending for Sonya and Kate. Their queerness is seemingly a non-issue thematically, and their relative privilege subtly acknowledged in the Immigration Bureau episode and confirmed by the successful and smooth processing of their visa. While Ann Flanagan faced hardship and loss, Sonya and Kate navigate a quicker, more direct and less deadly road to happiness. In *How To Keep An Alien's* queer utopian milieu, Sonya and Kate get to be together because they deserve to be, and despite a lot of paperwork and soul-searching, the Irish system works the way that it is supposed to.

Yet while *How To Keep An Alien* ends joyfully, not everyone in the piece gets a happy ending, particularly the other applicants left behind in the Garda National Immigration Bureau. And while the legacy of Ann's journey results ultimately in the birth of Kate and their union, Ann's future is only a fiction of Sonya's imagination and conceived only in relationship to Sonya and Kate's immediate personal situation.

I would suggest that this incompleteness and imbalance is not a contradiction but a crucial qualification of the queer utopian performative that *How To Keep An*



*Alien* drives forward. Jill Dolan defines a utopian performative as arising from “a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as never finished gestures towards a potentially better future.”<sup>38</sup> *How To Keep An Alien* is finished in one sense for Sonya and Kate (though they will have to continue developing in their partnership) but it is certainly not close to finished for Ann or the others waiting in the Bureau. Roger I. Simon muses that:

To be touched by the past is neither a metaphor for being simply emotionally moved by another’s story nor a traumatic repetition of the past reproduced and re-experienced as present. Quite differently, the touch of the past signals a recognition of an encounter with difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998) that may initiate a de-phasing of the terms on the which stories of others settle into one’s experience.<sup>39</sup>

*How to Keep An Alien* does not allow an unconflicted settling of “the stories of others” into “one’s experience” but rather questions who can claim privilege from the “touch of the past” and how the structural inequalities of the past continue to be reproduced by contemporary systems of management. In juxtaposing Sonya and Kate’s better future with futures deferred, annihilated or on hold, *How To Keep An Alien* invites speculation as to the forms of historical or contemporary justice that are required to multiply these other possible futures.

### **Palimpsestic Time in the Monto**

If *How To Keep An Alien* brings the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the present, *Vardo* handles the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. This production concluded ANU

Productions' critically acclaimed four-part Monto Cycle, a "geographical project five years in the making that explores the quarter mile history of Foley Street and its surroundings over the last one hundred years."<sup>40</sup> As Brian Singleton describes, "The area is bounded by Gardiner Street, Talbot Street, Séan McDermott Street, and Amiens Street, and is a short stroll from the Abbey Theatre, where Ireland as a nation was imagined more than a century before, and from the General Post Office (G.P.O.) where a new Irish state was proclaimed."<sup>41</sup> The Monto Cycle also included *World's End Lane*, *Laundry*, and *The Boys of Foley Street*, each unearthing 'four time capsules, with each segment reflecting one of four periods of regeneration spanning 1925-2014.'<sup>42</sup> All these site-specific and immersive works were created collaboratively using documentary materials, interviews and devising techniques by members of the company and directed by Louise Lowe with production design and visual art by Owen Boss.

The Monto Cycle works are non-linear and blur the line between performance and installation. While there is spoken dialogue, there is no coherent narrative to trace in terms of story or characters. All four works heavily utilize movement and dance and are designed to make use of the scenography of the neighborhood, whether within buildings or on the streets themselves. Participants move between physical sites guided by performers (often not knowing what is part of the performance and what is daily life on Foley Street). They are confronted with a series of encounters that often ask them to "make choices about whether or not to intervene in the stories or dilemmas of the protagonists."<sup>43</sup>

Technically set after the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, the Monto Cycle slides over this temporal barrier with *World's End Lane*, for example focusing on the "savage existence of prostitutes trafficked by brutal Madams in the period

1900-1920.”<sup>44</sup> Like the Decade of Centenaries, the Monto Cycle widens its frame to the past 100 years, bridging the gap between the colonial and the postcolonial, the power of the Church in the Free State and its downfall, and pre- and post-Celtic Tiger and increased inward-migration (all themes explicitly addressed by the cycle).

The interpenetration of the past and present is a hallmark of ANU’s work that constitutes not only a dramaturgical strategy but a political position. In the Monto Cycle, the past is not past, but still playing out in the lived conditions of those resident within this neighborhood, whose experiences are arguably metonymic of a wider Irish social, economic and political consciousness (despite key differences regarding class among other factors).

ANU’s evolution as a company coincided with the beginning of the Decade of Centenaries. Their general focus on documentary historical work has led to them being commissioned to produce work for related events and programmes by a variety of collaborators and supporting agencies including Dublin City Council, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Irish Heritage Trust, the National Museum of Ireland, the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, the Abbey Theatre and the National Archives of Ireland. The full range and complexity of the work produced through these diverse partnerships (and in comparison to their independent work) lies outside the scope of this article and I focus on *Vardo* within the Monto Cycle here due to its explicit focus on migration.

*Vardo* is the only one of the four works that explicitly inserts migrant and minority ethnic characters into the Monto mise-en-scène although its folding together of the entire cycle as a whole in the concluding moments of the piece suggests that a teleological understanding of their presence in the neighborhood now is not enough. As this is the piece that dealt most explicitly and directly with the contemporary as a

theme, ANU did not have a clear idea of the final focus of the piece when beginning rehearsals. They began only with the idea that they would draw inspiration from the life of Terriss Lee, Owen Boss's wife's grandmother. Significantly, she was of Romani descent and lived in the Monto from the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. She made her living partially through fortune telling in the neighborhood, even, "in 1934" being "brought to court on charges of 'sorcery and witchcraft.'"<sup>45</sup> ANU's ultimate focus on sex work in *Vardo*, reprising the themes of the first part of the cycle *World's End Lane*, was therefore unanticipated. They went into the project intending to focus instead on the high concentration of migrant and minority ethnic populations in inner city Dublin where Bryan Fanning and Neil O'Boyle found in 2009 that "non-Irish nationals accounted for 30 per cent of the population, or three times the national average."<sup>46</sup> What the company discovered however was a revitalization of the sex work industry in the area involving both Irish-born and migrant workers. As Lowe summarized, "We're back in flats in private ownership being used for illicit purposes, and people being crammed into them."<sup>47</sup>

Migration and racial and ethnic diversity of the area enters *Vardo* as a theme through three performers primarily: Rebecca Warner (who plays a Russian sex worker who has been trafficked into Ireland), Kunle Animashaun (who tells the story of watching his father's funeral in Nigeria on Skype while simultaneously engaged in care work for an elderly Irish man) and Emma O'Kane (who references Terriss Lee in the cycle's concluding movement sequence structured around the gestures of tarot card reading).

Warner and Animashaun's characters animated the relationship between labor and migration in the present and were both sited in Bus Éireann. Warner's storyline as a trafficked Russian sex worker highlighted the high percentage of women among

victims of trafficking, 80% in 2014 according to Eurostat.<sup>48</sup> Trafficking to Ireland has been relatively numerically limited with statistics from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform between 2009-2012 revealing fewer than 100 cases per year reported to An Garda Síochana with a high of 78 cases in 2010 with the majority each year related to sexual exploitation.<sup>49</sup> These statistics should not however be understood as totally representative due to the possibility of under *or* misreporting.

Animashaun's story presented the frequently unregulated area of domestic and care work (typically a predominantly female profession) heavily populated by migrants in Ireland. His story was made powerful through its juxtaposition of scenarios of care happening simultaneously in Nigeria and Ireland. Unable to take off work or travel home for his father's funeral, Animashaun's character must watch the service on Skype as he works. As he bathes the body of his elderly Irish charge, his family bathes the body of his father for burial at home.



Kunle Animashaun in *Vardo*  
Photo: Patrick Redmond

Warner and Animashaun both actively elicit sympathy from the spectators with whom they engaged one on one during the performance. With Animashaun, my direct involvement with him was limited to the witnessing of his story as told in his

own words in the public space of Bus Éireann, while Warner petitioned me to help her escape while we were together in Bus Éireann's downstairs corridor (a request which mirrors performer Laura Murray's request in *Laundry* to be helped with her escape as a Magdalene penitent from the laundry on Séan McDermott Street). As spectators, we understand their situation as migrants primarily in relationship to their lived experiences of exploitation. For both, few concrete details were revealed about the precise material circumstances of their story. While this scantiness of individual character narrative matches the dramaturgy of the Monto Cycle as a whole, their status as migrant characters intensified the effect of their emblematic presentation as exploited individuals marginalized through race, ethnicity, gender and class. These two characters' particular lack of integration into the world of the neighborhood both dramatized and confirmed the abjection/marginalization of migrant and minority ethnic individuals within Irish national (and local) narratives. They were presented as doubly outside in a neighborhood whose fraught and localized history precedes and engulfs them even as these characters are mapped onto the performative network of the Monto Cycle through their appearance in *Vardo*.

The staged encounters between the spectator and Warner, Animashaun and many other figures within the Monto Cycle remove the "historical" from "historical duty" and question the meaning of intervention on behalf of individuals in the present within the relatively protected frame of performance. Haughton and Singleton comment extensively on the potentially efficacious nature of spectator participation in ANU's immersive work. Writing on *The Boys of Foley Street*, Haughton terms the encounter between performers and spectators "communion," elaborating that:

This “communion” occurs as moments of sharp, tense and interior reflection for the individual, without the security of an audience or a theatre building. One is guided into alien places, where the histories of the sites explode with such powerful energy that one no longer seeks to distinguish between performers and community, but the ghosts and the living. One is shell-shocked by what they see, and shell-shocked that they had not noticed it before.<sup>50</sup>

Speaking of *Laundry* again specifically, Singleton concurs:

The dramaturgy of the performance meant that the ethical encounter was within each spectator, and further, at the moments of seeming acts of agency by spectators, such as helping a woman to escape, spectators’ agency with the ghosts of a shameful past was seen to be too little too late.<sup>51</sup>

Haughton and Singleton both highlight the interiority of the spectator’s experience (“sharp, tense, interior reflection,” an “ethical encounter...*within* each spectator” [emphasis mine]). Their critical focus on contemplative interiority proceeds from the small number of spectators in each performance rotation and the frequently one-on-one nature of the performance, but for both Haughton and Singleton, this inward-looking activation does not result in a narrowing of focus, but a widening of social and historical perspective arising out of the experience of the performance. In this way, they understand ANU’s work to resist what Keren Zaiontz terms the threat of “narcissistic spectatorship” in interactive and immersive performance where the viewer is encouraged to “fully engross herself within an artistic production in a way that highlights her own singular relationship to the piece.”<sup>52</sup> While a spectator

experiences themselves singularly in the moment of performance, ANU's body of work and *Vardo* in particular is directed towards using these one-on-one or small group immersions to highlight the larger structural systems of power that comprise the workings of the Irish state and mark the limits of the imaginary of the Irish nation as a shared community.



Emma O'Kane in *Vardo*  
Photo: Patrick Redmond

O'Kane is the final figure encountered in the piece and is situated in the Lab on Foley Street, Dublin City Council's Arts Office, which also features rehearsal and gallery spaces.<sup>53</sup> This is where the Monto Cycle rehearsed in part, and three of the four parts of the cycle featured performances in this space. The Lab also features as one of the most visible symbols of gentrification in this still impoverished area, a building that has both injected enormous activity into the area, in collaboration with local groups and individuals, but still architecturally startling in its sharp cosmetic and functional contrast to the buildings it is surrounded by. Locating O'Kane in this space offers her as a figure caught between the folds of time as her loose hair and simple negligee did not locate her concretely in any of the cycle's specific temporal frames, past or present. Beside her, a television flickered through intercutting scenes from all



four parts- fragmented still further from their original staging. This television presented the most literal and accessible visual metaphor of the cycle's core theme, materializing the pulsing presence of palimpsestic time as a force in continual rotation.



Emma O'Kane in front of an image of Terriss Lee during the in-development showing of *Vardo* in October 2014  
Photo: Patrick Redmond

In this performative vignette, O'Kane's dream-like movement sequence evoked Terriss Lee and her mid-20<sup>th</sup> century fortune-telling trade through suggestion rather than literal enactment. Her repetition of these fortune-telling gestures gathered centrifugal force as they played out against a two-way glass that is opaque from the outside but allowed us to see the performance starting over again from the inside. In these final moments of the cycle, we watched layers of history accumulate on top of one another, time stopping and restarting through the loop of the video and the repetition of O'Kane's gestures. To be clear, O'Kane did not *play* Lee and she did not *tell* any fortunes. Nevertheless the decision to embrace her occult trade as her primary if scrambled point of reference as a figure risked another migrant stereotype - that of the pre-modern and superstitious Roma defined entirely by their alterity. Yet O'Kane's position next to the television with its intercutting temporalities placed her at the Monto Cycle's center rather than its margins.

If Warner and Animashaun appeared to be adrift and violently blocked from settling in, O’Kane in contrast was situated at the heart of the forces that draws these stories together, if not initiating this gathering herself. Ultimately, O’Kane drew together “the ideological traffic between and among” stories that might “otherwise” be “positioned as dissimilar.”<sup>54</sup> Lee’s presence in the neighborhood in the 1930s was indeed exceptional, but Roma had been “travelling in Ireland since the beginning of the nineteenth century,” mostly for “temporary, seasonal farm labour” prior to the 1990s.<sup>55</sup> O’Kane as Lee troubles teleological views of Irish history and belonging that place minority ethnic individuals and migrants outside of not only the present but the past, while *Vardo* as a whole urged recognition that patterns of structural neglect, exploitation and violence continue in new guises that re-perform repertoires of abuse familiar from the past with ongoing cost to women in particular. The Monto Cycle forces recognition that historical duty should not only be a present duty that makes sense of a past, but one that acknowledges that history is not past, but often repeating and folding back on itself in a manner that may necessitate structural and not only affective transformation. The Monto Cycle’s staging of four failed regenerations in this area over a 100-year period demonstrates that attempts at politically structural transformation often fail, but must continue to be attempted anew unless history is to continue to repeat in new guises.

### **From the Black and Green Atlantic to the Mediterranean**

On May 2, 2015, “Historian Donal Fallon from [comeheretome.com](http://comeheretome.com), Ellie Kisyombe from the Irish Refugee Council and Shane O’Curry from the European Network against Racism Ireland” laid a wreath at the Famine Memorial outside the Irish Financial Services Centre (IFSC) in Dublin in memory of the thousands drowned in

the Mediterranean while attempting to migrate to mainland Europe in recent years.<sup>56</sup> This act ties together the histories of the “Black and Green Atlantic” (to follow Peter D. O’Neill and David Lloyd)<sup>57</sup> and the Mediterranean by way of the Famine, calling on an Irish response to this contemporary European crisis. These activists’ decision to physically lay the wreath as a step beyond rhetorically invoking the comparison demonstrates that historical duty must go a step beyond interior identification and reflection to action.



Donal Fallon, Ellie Kisyombe and Shane O’Curry at the Famine Memorial

Photo: ?

This action literally lays the claims of historical duty at the doorstep of not only the Famine Memorial but the IFSC. Pine writes of the Famine Memorial’s proximity to the IFSC:

the bastion of the IFSC represents the reverse not only of the journey that the sculpted famine victims are poised to take out of Ireland, but also the converse

of their impoverished famished state. Despite -or rather because of- the fact that the past being remembered is one of the most traumatic events in the history of Ireland, it underlines the prosperity and security of the present.<sup>58</sup>

Ultimately, Pine argues, through this juxtaposition, the memorial “insists on the inherent past-ness of the Great Famine.”<sup>59</sup>

The memorial’s situation next to the IFSC adds however a key layer to this wreath-laying due to its status as a “hub of foreign direct investment... a symbol of selling futures, rather than pasts.”<sup>60</sup> The question is, futures for whom? Certainly not the would-be migrants lost daily in the Mediterranean whose movements from unstable or impoverished regions are often driven by the capriciousness of neoliberal capitalism’s expansion and influence across the globe. What if we could read Fallon, Kisyombe and O’Curry laying this wreath as not only a challenge to the past-ness of the Famine but a challenge to the central tenets of historical duty itself? A challenge that does not simply ask the “Irish people” to recognize themselves and their own history in those losing their lives today and therefore act primarily out of a sympathetic (and perhaps narcissistic) self-identification? What if we could read this laying of the wreath as a challenge that instead activates the seething force of palimpsestic time where similar but historically mutated systems of power, privilege and oppression mark out some as “unsuitable immigrants,” maintain this separation through the flow and delivery of financial resources and in doing so, ostensibly sentence those removed from these resources to death, whether on the sea or elsewhere? The Famine Memorial’s situation in the shadow of the IFSC makes unavoidable recognition of contemporary Irish enmeshment with financial systems and their regulating governments, a network of relationships that directly and

indirectly stokes the continuing flow of present-day coffin ships across the Mediterranean to European shores.

By reclaiming the notion of historical duty as a mode of action and analysis rather than simply feeling in regards to the Irish past vis-à-vis inward-migration, I have tried to suggest the possibility of a coalitional politics that might close the gap between “Irish” and migrant “Other” in this post-Celtic Tiger era. This possibility is represented by an event like the wreath laying of Fallon, Kisyombe and O’Curry that is connected to a wider programme of collaborative political action aimed at structural transformation in the Irish (and European) present. The current Decade of Centenaries’ focus on the past should likewise be understood as an opportunity to reimagine the present and future more equitably, by reaching into its deeper or lost archives as in *How To Keep An Alien* and *Vardo* and recognizing that moving forward means not just marking the past, but realizing that perhaps it is not past.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Gough, *Haptic Allegories*, 161.

- <sup>4</sup> 2014. Paul Cullen. "Staff in Savita Halappanavar case 'disciplined' after review. *The Irish Times*, September 11. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/staff-in-savita-halappanavar-case-disciplined-after-review-1.1924510>
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- <sup>8</sup> Office of the Minister for Integration, *Migration Nation*, 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience*, 159.
- <sup>10</sup> King, "Interculturalism and Irish Theatre," 24.
- <sup>11</sup> Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory*, 14.
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- <sup>13</sup> Kiberd, "Strangers In Their Own Country," 72.
- <sup>14</sup> Lentin, "Responding to the Racialisation of Irishness," 250.
- <sup>15</sup> Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory*, 3.
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- <sup>17</sup> Gough, *Haptic Allegories*, 9.
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- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>33</sup> Watts and Williams, "Representing a 'Great Distress,'" 257.
- <sup>34</sup> Lloyd, "The Indigent Sublime," 153.
- <sup>35</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 104.
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- <sup>40</sup> ANU Productions, *Vardo*, 3.
- <sup>41</sup> Singleton, "ANU Productions and Site-Specific Performance," 22.
- <sup>42</sup> Publicart.ie, "*The Boys of Foley Street*."
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