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Troubling national commemoration in Dublin, London and Liverpool: ANU Production and CoisCéim Dance Theatre's *These Rooms*

ABSTRACT

The cultural production These Rooms challenged traditional nationalistic commemorations of war and rebellion during the 'Decade of the Centenaries'. Created by the Dublin-based ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre, and funded by the Irish and UK governments, this series of theatre/dance performances, installations and public outreach projects in unconventional urban venues ran from 2016 to 2019 in Dublin, London and Liverpool, cities with mixed British and Irish populations. Fragmentary, embodied stories about the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin communicated the perspectives of working-class Irish civilian women and confused young British soldiers through intimate domestic encounters that productively disrupted heroic narratives. Audiences were instead invited to create temporary communities of encounter and 'unlearn' dominant concepts supporting colonial, imperial and national spaces–times. As a critical agonistic artistic intervention, These Rooms offered

KEYWORDS

agonistic art
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memory-work
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everyday urban
settings
temporary
communities
national
commemoration

more inclusive 'potential histories' and forms of belonging across political, social and temporal borders during the geopolitically uncertain times associated with Brexit.

On 28 April 1916, five days into the Easter Rising, 15 civilian men were killed in house-to-house raids by British soldiers on a single Dublin street. [...] *These Rooms* tells two stories: those of the civilians who were victims of and witnesses to the North King Street Massacre, and those of the men of the South Staffordshire Regiment who committed this act [and were] [...] controversially exonerated at a military enquiry.

(London International Festival of Theatre 2018: n.pag.)

A DANCE OF MOURNING (JUNE 2018, LONDON)

We enter another room. Mrs Hickey (performed by Emma O'Kane) dances with the ghost of her husband (performed by Jonathan Mitchell), one of fifteen unarmed innocent civilian men murdered in Dublin by young British soldiers of the South Staffordshire regiment during the 1916 Easter Rising. O'Kane's dance of longing and loss slowed the pace and intensity of the interactions we audience members had experienced up to this point. Standing close to others against the walls of a basement room in the Shoreditch Town Hall, her grieving movements reminded me of a different performance of hers, in 2016 Dublin, where, playing the same character and dancing in a building close to the site of the actual murders, she mourned the loss of a son (Till 2018). Months later, in February 2019, in Liverpool I would witness another dance in a large bright warehouse building with multistoried windows (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Emma O'Kane and Jonathan Mitchell in *Beyond These Rooms* (Liverpool Tate Modern Museum, 2019) by ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre. Photograph courtesy of Hugo Glendinning.

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In that performance, Mrs Hickey/O’Kane looked out across the harbour, as if towards Dublin, as though she were remembering another loss, those who died or emigrated as a consequence of colonial violence.

We exit the room and follow Mrs Hickey to a dark corridor where she joins three other women facing their black funerary dresses in painful silence (Figure 2). These recently widowed women experienced ‘an uninvited rebellion’ that had broken into their homes (Lowe cited in Bolger et al. 2016, n.pag.); their stories would lie forgotten in the archives and not be publicly acknowledged for a century. After the funeral, the women will ‘return home’, never fully able to become again part of the mundane daily rhythms of their densely settled north Dublin tenement neighbourhood. Instead they will live their lives in the unresolved aftermath of this rebellion, including further multiple wars at home and abroad in which the categories of victim and perpetrator are unclear. How should their lives be remembered in this Decade of Centenaries?

The women get dressed. We follow them to where we began this journey, a pub staged in Dublin 1966 with decorations indicating loyalism to Britain, 50 years after the funerary scene. As we watch another small audience group enter the room, I remember the women’s cold stares cutting across the dart-throwing, drinking and banter, as if their trauma were passed down through generations and now presented to us (Figure 3). I go back upstairs to the city streets, recalling other domestic battlefield scenarios performed and the complex and fragmentary emotional geographies communicated.

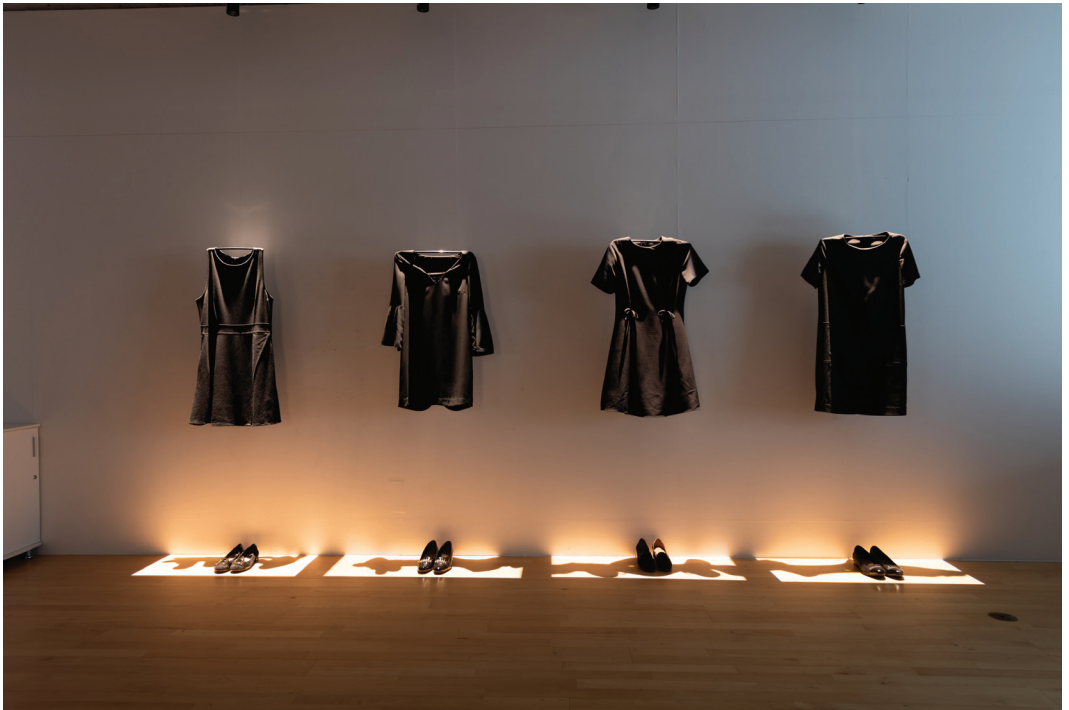


Figure 2: Installation by Owen Boss in *Beyond These Rooms* (Liverpool Tate Modern, 2019) by ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre. Photograph courtesy of Hugo Glendinning.



Figure 3: Niamh McCann and Justine Cooper in *These Rooms* (Shoreditch Town Hall, London LIFT Festival, 2018) by ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre. Photograph courtesy of Hugo Glendinning.

As an American living in Dublin, I knew nothing about this history previously, and wondered how London audiences would respond to depictions of this difficult shared Irish and British past, performed shortly after a divisive Brexit vote.

These Rooms embodied the stories of rebellion and war as experienced from the perspectives of working-class Irish civilian women and young confused British soldiers during the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916. The project ran in multiple venues from 2016 to 2019 in Dublin, London and Liverpool – cities with sizeable Irish and British populations that include families with multiple cross-border political allegiances and mixed ancestry. The translocal cultural production took place in dilapidated buildings, basements, public squares and other non-traditional venues, as well as in museums, and included live performances, public outreach dance projects, film and archival installations, interactive exhibitions, public discussions, symposia and a webpage/archive; in total, it engaged about 38,000 people (CoisCéim Dance Theatre 2021). Conceived and produced by the Dublin-based ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre, *These Rooms* was one of nine nationally funded Irish Arts Council projects commemorating the 1916 Easter Rising; it later received funding from the UK 14–18 NOW WWI Centenary Art Commissions, London International Festival of Theatre and Shoreditch Town Hall (Irish Arts Council 2016; UK Arts Programme 2014). *These Rooms* received the 2017 *Irish Times* 'Audience Choice' Theatre Award for its sold-out and extended 2016 Dublin performances.

This article describes *These Rooms* as a significant artistic project that introduced audiences to a process of ‘unlearning’ hegemonic imperial, colonial and nationalist histories (Azoulay 2019). As a critical artistic intervention, the theatre/dance/installation/film/archive project productively challenged national narratives through unconventional urban stagings in which audiences witnessed difficult pasts across geopolitical, social and temporal borders. Rather than depict heroic male bodies in centrally located symbolic spaces, the production immersed audiences in stories of war primarily from the perspective of women in domestic working-class urban settings (Murphy 2018; Till 2018). This Irish cultural production, inspired by particular testimonies about civilians’ experience of violence and murder in Dublin during 1916, constructively questioned both Irish and British official national self-images which are often at odds with each other. *These Rooms* created temporary communities of encounter and belonging by inviting audiences to witness the complex and *interrelated histories and geographies* of the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) and the United Kingdom, as communicated through the changing space–times of the performances/installations. The shared difficult stories of an uninvited war in the past asked audiences to reflect upon what national belonging and commemoration meant in the ‘dangerous and challenging times’ (Lowe 2019) of the present.

In this article, I consider *These Rooms* as an ‘agonistic’ artistic intervention (Mouffe 2008) that offered alternative shared ‘potential histories’ (Azoulay 2019) for *two nations*. My discussion is based upon ethnographic research across three years, including (participant) observation of multiple performances, special events tied to the performances, installations and symposia (in Dublin and Liverpool), and formal and informal discussions with many of the artists in all three venues, including an interview/conversation with ANU Productions and CoisCéim directors published on the ‘TheseRooms.ie’ webpage (Bolger et al. 2016).¹ I also draw upon visual analyses and close readings of archival, film, installation and performance texts related to the larger production. While my discussion is limited by my own experiences of the project and particular interactions with artists and audiences, I argue that ethnographic studies of critical artistic ‘memory-work’ (Till 2005) contribute to the larger processes of decolonizing national histories and academic disciplines, a project that has become even more urgent in recent years (Kearns 2020).

In the next section, I review how artistic projects should be considered in scholarly debates about national commemorative practices and I introduce ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre. I then discuss how the intimate performances, fragmentary narratives and hybrid art forms of *These Rooms* communicated unwanted and traumatic stories of war from the perspective of Irish women, some of whom were loyal to Britain. Audience members encountered fragments of testimony performed by artists in historically rich installations located in unconventional settings for theatrical and dance performances. With other onlookers, they were invited to consider how ordinary Irish and British lives were interconnected in the past and present. Communicating transnational, yet geographically particular, stories in everyday urban settings in Dublin, London and Liverpool, I argue that *These Rooms* created temporary communities of encounter in which audiences were challenged to become responsible urban inhabitants across national geopolitical borders. By acknowledging shared difficult pasts, the artists created the possibility of imagining less violent and more inclusive possible futures.

1. In an earlier article, I described the 2016 Dublin performance in detail, including its specific 1916, 1966 and 2016 contexts (Till 2018).

UNDOING NATIONALIST COMMEMORATION IN THE CITY: CRITICAL ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS

So Why Remember?

We are living in dangerous and challenging times. As our country begins to edge towards the end of the decade of centenaries, we are in the process of tentatively peeling back the plaster to check our wounds and to really look at ourselves. As we head towards the [Irish] centenaries of the War of Independence and the Civil War, we are reminded, more than ever, of the acute sensitivities at play. A special ministerial committee warned only last week that the '*commemorative programme over the coming years unfolds in the continued absence of agreement on operating devolved structures in Northern Ireland and against the backdrop of the ongoing Brexit negotiations*'. [...]

(Lowe 2019: 1)

In her keynote address for the *Beyond These Rooms* Tate Liverpool symposium in February 2019, the co-director of ANU Productions, Louise Lowe, highlighted the continued legacies of intertwined Irish and British colonial and postcolonial pasts. Lowe noted that national commemorative practice typically invokes the warning 'Lest We Forget' rather than ask 'Why Remember?'. Her critical comments intersect with interdisciplinary scholarly discussions about commemoration, in particular how the 'duty of memory' (Ricouer 2004) assumes a common but exclusive national 'we' (in this case either Ireland or the United Kingdom). Commemoration of this sort is tied to the desire by officials of the state to establish sacred topographies and rituals of the nation in the symbolic spaces of capital cities to communicate a sense of pride defined by a glorious and heroic past (Boyer 1994; Gillis 1994).

Historically, public statuary, memorials, monuments, museums, archives and ornate parks and buildings, as well as the ceremonial rituals associated with them – parades, traditional performances, exhibitions and dedications – were intended to materialize the story of national belonging through dramatic urban settings (Connerton 1989; Johnson 1995). Patriotic commemorations of war communicating myths about the nation often idealize heroic soldiers and leaders protecting the body-politic (Mosse 1990). Women, in contrast, are historically depicted as passive figures or as metaphorical representations of a timeless and sacred 'mother land' (Dowler 1998; Kearns 2004; Warner 1985). Such official gendered 'sites of memory' (Nora 1997) and their associated 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) often emanate from male cultural leaders who seek to maintain social stability and the status quo (Bodnar 1992). State officials were and continue to remain aware of the 'acute sensitivities' of commemoration that Lowe suggests above, such as who should remember whom and in whose name, and the many possible and conflicting representations of the past that can become the basis of national identity (Kearns 1993).

If we consider the First World War commemoration for example, national practices of remembering the dead presented contradictions for Irish and UK state officials because the experiences of the 'Great War' were unintelligible – the war dead were geographically dispersed, with people from different countries laying together along fronts and battlefields – and the demands made by different publics to mourn were diverse (Sherman 1994; Winter 1995). Unveiling memorials such as at the Cenotaph in the imperial

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city of London seemed disembodied from the historical events and political realities of the war (Heffernan 1995). In Ireland, peace parades and annual remembrance-day celebrations in cities and towns commemorated one war in the face of another; many Irish families had to grieve losses from more than one war and 'side' between 1914 and 1922 (Johnson 1999). Following partition, a divided Ireland meant that war commemoration was inflected by what became classified as Irish 'terrorism' in the United Kingdom. Later acts of violence in Ireland, including an IRA bombing of a First World War memorial in Enniskillen in 1987 that killed and injured civilians on Armistice day, helped undermine social support for the IRA. Following the 1998 Belfast Agreement, the first all-Ireland and British Great War commemorations took place. On Remembrance Sunday in 2017, a new memorial remembering the so-called IRA Poppy Day Enniskillen bombing was unveiled, including the names of the dead at the base and a poppy with 'Lest We Forget' at the top (Moriarty 2017). Yet, as Lowe notes above, the possible (re)closing of Irish-UK borders on the island as a result of Brexit negotiations may affect future forms of shared official commemoration.

Taken-for-granted social practices, such as national commemoration, are 'sedimented' in the city in ways that 'conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution' (Mouffe 2008: 9). Alternative forms of commemoration make visible the stories of groups marginalized in mainstream national narratives (Gillis 1994; Sturken 1997) and confront difficult national pasts to call attention to 'forgetful' forms of nationalist commemorative practices. In Germany, for example, Esther and Jochen Gerz's 12-m lead-clad column 'Monument Against Fascism' in Hamburg, located in a busy urban public square, disappeared after visitors had covered the monument with their etched names and committed themselves to standing together against injustice (Young 1993). Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock's decentralized 'Places of Remembrance' memorial in Berlin depicts how National Socialism became accepted in everyday life through colourful street signs of anti-Semitic and racist Nuremberg Laws in the present tense (Till 2005). As part of decolonizing and anti-racist movements in US cities, the Monument Lab of public artists in Philadelphia create 'speculative monuments' to question existing commemorative practice by collecting open-source data and running public studios about cultural memory (Farber and Lum 2019). The tours, installations and alternative memorials of 'Untold RVA' in Richmond, Virginia, founded by Free Efgeni Bangura, creatively present 'powerful self-determination narratives that are hidden in plain sight' to honour Black ancestors and include the 'missing pieces within Richmond's historical narratives' (Untold RVA 2019).

Chantal Mouffe (2008) considers such artistic projects as playing a significant social and political role as 'agnostic' interventions in public urban spaces. Mouffe argues that the seemingly 'natural' order of national cultural productions is always political because it is based upon some form of exclusion. Critical artistic interventions call attention to 'the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency' (Mouffe 2008: 8). Agonistic interventions, in contrast, do not assume the liberal idea of consensus but challenge normative categories, such as the nation, by exploring and opening up multiple and contradictory understandings of what is known (or not) about the past and present. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) similarly consider creativity as a form of resistance marked by a refusal to be tied down by sedentary categories of knowledge. Creative nomads are driven by a desire

to experiment, explore, learn and question the dichotomous binaries inherent to the western bureaucratic and rational discourses underlying social institutions and contracts (Deuchars 2011), including those that promote nationalistic identitarian categories.

I understand ANU and CoisCéim's work as critical agonistic artistic interventions. Lowe's description above of 'peeling back the plaster to check our wounds' at once questioned the sacredness of centrally located war commemoration glorifying heroic male bodies and challenged how the national imaginary has 'wounded' (Till 2012) citizens in *both* Ireland and the United Kingdom, offering a critical approach to what might have been expected with official calls to remember rebellion during the Decade of Centenaries. Lowe (2019) asked instead: 'how do we not forget that which we didn't remember?', especially during 'dangerous times'. If colonial histories of rebellion are 'unruly' (Stoler 2011), then, as Lowe notes above, the period 1912–22 is arguably the most dangerous and unruly period of modern Irish history, marking the campaign for Home Rule, Ireland's role in the First World War, the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence, the Irish Civil War, and the creation of the two jurisdictions of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland through the process of Partition in May 1921. Commemorating unruly histories of 1916 in 2016 Dublin meant celebrating heroes in the face of eight years of neo-liberal austerity marked by what has become the nation's worst housing and homelessness crisis. The 2016 vote of support by UK citizens for Brexit, creating what Boris Johnson suggested was an 'Irish problem', resulted in fears and concerns about the effects of (new) post-Brexit borders and relationships between Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) and the Republic of Ireland (European Union), as well as exacerbated and/or created tensions between Irish and British families living across borders. In such contexts, and during a time of right-wing conservatism and anti-foreigner sentiment in both countries, *These Rooms* troubled 'the prevalence of presentism, immediacy, and linear time' (Schneider 2011: 6) associated with traditional national commemorative forms.

Lowe argued, moreover, that art 'holds the capacity not just to show what happened, but to ask us to witness and to question *how* we might understand' (2019: 1, original emphasis). In this respect, I understand *These Rooms* as offering an artistic expression of what Ariela Aisha Azoulay (2019) describes as 'potential history', histories that are at once 'onto-epistemological' by questioning both what something is, such as national history, and how we understand it, such as through national commemoration. Potential history for Azoulay means to 'unlearn imperialism', and I would add national imaginaries, by rejecting temporalities that locate violence, such as war and rebellion, to a distant past.

Critical agnostic approaches that offer potential histories are evident in the corpus of work by ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre. Both Dublin-based award-winning companies story-tell the city/nation through diverse bodies and multiple space-times; produce artworks 'off stage' in non-traditional settings; and invite audiences to become active participants (ANU 2021; CoisCéim Dance Theatre Website 2021a; Haughton 2014; Sweeney 2008; Till 2018; Walsh 2013). I end this section with a brief overview of the artistic companies, after which I move to a discussion of *These Rooms*.

ANU Productions, founded in 2009 by director and theatre artist Louise Lowe and visual artist Owen Boss, challenges 'the history of national self-representation [...] by choice of subject and then by the complexity of form',

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and by situating their work in creative spaces between theatre, visual and dance artforms (Lowe 2019). ANU collaborates with professional and less experienced artists of different ages, genders and backgrounds to explore difficult Irish histories, including the incarceration of women and girls in Magdalen laundries; the sex trade and human trafficking; the heroin crisis; and reproductive, immigrant and trans rights. ANU's dramaturgies are temporally 'palimpsestic' yet historically responsible (McIvor 2016: 3). Their intimate and 'overtly politicized theatrical form and content' (Haughton 2014: 1) moves between colonial, Troubled, Celtic Tiger and neo-liberal (austerity) histories to examine unfolding legacies of difficult Irish pasts through particular urban places. For example, the 'Monto Cycle' (Singleton 2013), a series of four productions in streets, buildings, cars, bus stations, pubs, galleries and public spaces, blurred boundaries between the performance and everyday life in an historic working-class north Dublin area that is now gentrifying. Their series of 2016 projects, with productions in Dublin, Manchester and online, explored how Irish acts of rebellion shifted cultural thinking about what it means to be Irish at home and abroad at different moments in time, including in 1916, 1966, 1996 and 2016 (ANU Productions 2021).

CoisCéim Dance Theatre was founded in 1995 by David Bolger. Bolger considers contemporary dance as bringing audiences 'to an emotional place that the word might take longer to do' (cited in Bolger et al. 2016: 5). He choreographs different dance styles and bodies in a range of settings 'to demonstrate and articulate stories and emotions that are relevant to the landscapes in which we live' (CoisCéim Dance Theatre Website 2021a: n.pag.). His work interrogates: 'What is Irish dance? What is Irish? What is movement? What is storytelling?' (cited in Bolger et al. 2016: 4). Works such as *Ballads* (1997) explored the staging of Irish history through 'bodies and books writing/wrighting/righting history through performance' (Sweeney 2008: 209). *Chambermaid* (2004) was performed offstage, in hotel bedrooms and bar/foyer lobbies, to communicate the fragile, but often lasting imprints of place and body memory in the city. *Knots* (2005–06) explored intergenerational healing through the breaking of 'deeply rooted' knots (cited in Bolger et al. 2016: 3). Critically aware of the (post)colonial histories of censorship and control of Irish texts and bodies, CoisCéim artists include diverse bodies of different ages and genders in performances, such as *Swimming with My Mother* (2010–14), a duet of Bolger with his 77-year-old mother. CoisCéim, which means footstep in Irish, also includes a pioneering comprehensive artform awareness initiative, 'Broadreach', that has offered integrated programmes for the general public to encourage a curiosity in dance and choreography since 2006 (CoisCéim Dance Theatre Website 2021b).

As I describe in the next section, *These Rooms* challenged national histories through fragmentary, subaltern, conflicting and multi-temporal stories of ordinary Irish women and doubting British soldiers in everyday urban settings in Dublin, London and Liverpool. Audiences were invited to become active witnesses to potential histories and possible shared futures, productively questioning traditional forms of commemoration in two countries.

RETELLING STORIES OF WAR THROUGH FEMALE BODIES AND EVERYDAY URBAN PLACES

These Rooms emerged from the mutual desire of Bolger, Boss and Lowe to collaborate (Bolger et al. 2016). The opportunity for ANU and CoisCéim to

work together emerged somewhat accidentally in 2014 while ANU were working at the National History Museum of Ireland on a separate project. The archivist Lars Joyce called the artists' attention to *A Fragment of 1916 History*, a 1919 Sinn Féin publication detailing the murder of civilians during the Easter Rising from the perspectives of women living in tenement housing in North King Street where the violence took place. North King Street, located just north of the militarily strategic location of the Four Courts, was a major scene of fighting with many casualties over the entire week of the rebellion (Coogan 2001). On the evening of Friday 28 April and early morning of Saturday 29 April 1916, British soldiers from the second and sixth Territorial Force of the South Staffordshire regiment invaded residential flats and shot or bayoneted to death fourteen men and a 16-year-old boy; another man died shortly thereafter from his wounds (Reynolds 1919). At a time that Irish and British soldiers were fighting together on other shores in the First World War, the latter were given orders to kill in Dublin. The soldiers were told that the men were rebels, even though the men in question were neither armed nor part of the Irish Volunteers and some (as evidenced by later testimony) were British sympathizers. Local requests for justice, including an inquiry by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and a petition to the British House of Commons from the Lord Mayor of Dublin, were ignored (Reynolds 1919; Anon. 1916). The civilian murders were covered up by a British military inquiry in May 1916, with no individual officer or soldier held responsible, and the records sealed for 100 years (Reddin 2016). For the London performance, the artists gained access to those military records, which confirmed other documents indicating the confusion among the soldiers.

A Fragment was a nationalistic document forgotten in the archives for decades. Most of it detailed the testimonies of 38 female civilian survivors, who were related to or knew personally the people murdered in this district. It also included a sketch map of the location of the murders. Lowe said that in reading the testimonies she 'read for the first time of carnage in my community', at sites that she 'passed every day', but about which she 'knew nothing' (Lowe 2019). Both Boss and Bolger also noted that they had not heard of the King Street massacre before this project despite living and working in north Dublin (Bolger et al. 2016). In 2014 Dublin, this story of civilian murder was not marked in the landscape. Almost a hundred years later, when the artists went to walk these streets to try to find the locations of the murders, they were disoriented due to different urban renewal projects which changed physical layout of the streets.

In the earliest stages of the project, the women's testimonies were critical to the collaborative work of the ANU and CoisCéim artistic team. The artists found that the intensity of emotions in the women's testimonies offered them an alternative understanding of the dominant heroic narrative celebrating the 1916 rebellion (Bolger 2019). Bolger explained that the women described the 'soldiers crashing into their homes like wild animals', and how, as their husbands, neighbours and sons were taken into another room where they were detained for hours and ultimately murdered, the women could only listen to what was happening through the walls. They imagined and pieced together what took place through partial conversations, such as when the women took tea in to the men, or when they spoke to soldiers, or when they prayed (Bolger et al. 2016). When I asked Lowe (cited in Bolger et al. 2016) how she responded to the testimonies, she paused and stated:

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I was thinking about the female body. That is what took me first of all. The 38 testimonies, and the idea of the women's experiences in this space. In these places. [...] What would the impact of this be in your house, your home? How would you feel? [...] [S]uddenly the wars came through the walls to them.

[...] Then there is the opposite side of it, from the British side. Where you have a young soldier apologizing [for the murders]. First of all, the soldiers were speaking French because they thought they were in France. [...] They were being kept drunk on rum to keep them awake. They were only given instruction [from General Lowe], which was, 'Don't take any prisoners'. [...] Lots of them were in heavy spaces of fighting. And so they're angry. And exhausted. And young.

[...] It might be a hundred years ago [...] but looking at it now, we can see that impact across the world and the world we're living in.

(Lowe cited in Bolger et al. 2016: 5–6)

Lowe further explained:

I was thinking about the impact of what was happening on their [the women's] other senses. They couldn't see what was happening. They were listening to it. Feeling it. They're engaging with it and their houses in different ways. That seemed to be a good opportunity to *consider* how might we *ever* kinaesthetically respond to it [the 1916 Rising], rather than a robotic piece of theatre, the easy way to look at the testimonies. [...] [We] want to consider how we can interrogate it [the testimonies] in terms of the trauma on the body, let's say, or the place, or the architecture of the space.

(Lowe cited in Bolger et al. 2016: 6)

For the artists, '[o]nce we heard the stories, learned who they were, who they were to each other, where they lived', they also wanted to situate 'who they were to us' (Bolger 2019: n.pag.). They developed research, movement and mapping workshops to explore how the women 'were feeling about what was going on outside? How fearful were they? What were the smells in air? What were they feeling? How did they imagine what went on?' (Lowe 2016). Bolger added that the women's descriptions were so powerful that the artists used the testimonies, with physical spaces, to develop movement and theatre sequences for the later performances (Bolger et al. 2016). Ultimately, the artists considered the female body as a 'post trauma political site' (ANU and CoisCéim 2021), a radical gesture when considering the significant role of the Catholic Church in the Republic in repressing women's bodies in the more recent past (Haughton 2018; Sweeney 2008), and at a time when women were still demanding basic reproductive rights in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

What became *These Rooms* subverted national narratives of war through embodied, site-specific and multi-scalar performances, installations and conversations. The artists' depicted mundane urban locales as political spaces of encounter between public and private spheres. The artists translated the women's sense of the colliding space-times of unwanted wars – in their homes, neighbourhood buildings, streets, city and state – through what Taylor (2003) describes as scenarios of performance. Unlike a stage upon which theatrical acts are viewed by passive audiences, the scenario is an event that gathers an audience, producing its own constituency as a type of

forum. Such scenarios disclose through the knowing, perceiving, remembering and interacting body-selves of artists and audience members who find themselves emplaced in similar environments. Through our bodies we experience settings, environments and stories because our sensing 'bodies not only perceive but *know* places' (Casey 1996: 34, original emphasis). In the scenarios of the performance, the unspoken understanding of the knowing body was communicated through the artists' movements in familiar everyday settings, including a pub, a kitchen, a living room, a waiting room, a bathroom, a shop, a domestic stairwell.

As audiences experienced these detailed, sensually rich everyday scenarios (created by Owen Boss), the setting of the performances oscillated between the present-day, the historic, the traumatic, the surreal, and the experientially perceived, temporalities that 'took place' simultaneously. Storytelling through these emplaced and embodied scenarios in mundane urban and domestic environments also crossed the boundaries of what audiences might have known about Irish-British relations in the past and present. The theatrical productions in both Dublin and London began and ended with a pub set in 1966 Dublin, the historic 'Second City of the Empire' (Christopher 1997). The colours, wallpaper and artefacts used to create this scenario subtly suggested that the performers/citizens, while being Irish, also had an allegiance to Britain, an allusion to the fact that many families supported Britain during the First World War. The actors sat together, drank beer, played darts, danced and individual audience members were invited to chat with them, have a drink or throw a dart. The music and chatting were interrupted by radio and television broadcasts covering the pomp of the nationalistic 50th anniversary commemorative events celebrating the Rising in downtown Dublin. 1966 was also a time when civil rights struggles in Northern Ireland met such violent check that the trauma of the inherited division of the island was revived through two decades of violence otherwise known as 'the Troubles'. Evoking these parallel private and public, Irish and British histories meant that 'instead of deference to the authority of the past, we have the fleeting co-presence of multiple time-zones, in a continuum that activates and de-territorializes stable identities' (Braidotti 2010: 408). Moreover, Ireland, despite and because of its geographical proximity and historical relationships to the United Kingdom, occupies an unusual postcolonial status in Europe. Depictions of the (post)colonial Republic offered a 'different set of political and representational conditions' in relation to conventional western theatre practice (Sweeney 2008: 11).

The Dublin performance was held in a then empty part of a building on Upper Dorset Street, not at, but near, the original locations of the murders on North King Street. After the opening scenario, audience members were allowed to wander along three levels of simultaneous performance/installation. In the stairwells men fled or were shot and in the kitchen or basement the women nervously chatted, offering tea and biscuits (performed by Justine Cooper, Úna Kavanagh and Niamh McCann). Abruptly, their actions may have changed, in response to a sound or something remembered, and their movements turned frenetic, communicating their fear, resignation and loss as they abruptly left rooms (Till 2018). There were quiet moments as well, when we watched a woman dancing alone (performed by Justine Cooper) fearfully looking out of the windows of a dark room, or another (Emma O'Kane) in search of the memory of her son. I found myself alone with another woman (Úna Kavanagh) in the dining room, who told a joke she remembered about one of the men, while staring at the two coffins sitting atop chairs in the centre

of the room. I was taken into the bathroom by yet another (Niamh McCann) who, when cleaning off her feet and changing into her funeral clothes, talked about her childhood memories. In a corner room in the Dublin performance, a civilian man (Matthew Williamson) tried to escape, taking on the movements of his caged birds.

In the 2018 London performance, audiences were taken to the basement level of the Shoreditch Town Hall to the pub. After a stylized dance by performers, loud crashing sounds shifted the energy and the performers took the audience members to flee for cover. Crowding through a small door leading to an adjacent hallway, we saw the tragic fall of a young man (Matthew Williamson) bumping down the stairwell after he had been hit by a stray bullet. We were brought to the end of a very dark long hallway and waited, as a frontline of soldiers marched towards us, the men's movements throwing heavy shadows cast by the light coming through bullet holes in the walls. As they left carrying the limp body of a civilian male, we were broken into smaller groups and taken to other rooms. We met and listened to a young British soldier (Robbie O'Connor) who, in a local butcher's shop, confessed his confusion about being in urban guerrilla warfare and his emotional torment at having followed orders to 'take no prisoners'. A woman in a coat (Úna Kavanagh) brushed past us in a pantry as if in a trance, carrying all of her belongings, her cheeks tear-stained with mascara, her eyes in shock (Figure 4). We were invited to sit next to a young civilian man about the age of the soldier at a table (Damian Gildea), while another woman (Niamh McCann) offered us tea and bread and butter while we



Figure 4: Úna Kavanagh in *These Rooms* (Shoreditch Town Hall, London LIFT Festival, 2018) by ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre. Photograph courtesy of Hugo Glendinning.

waited. At some point we realized that the soldier we had previously spoken to will kill or had already killed the boy, remembering his anguish when trying to explain: 'He could have been me. We even looked the same'. We later hear the soldier asking a woman (Niamh McCann) for, and being refused, forgiveness. We keep another young woman (Justine Cooper) company in a living room, as she waited and listened, surrounded by loud sounds, shouts, dim lights and cramped spaces between which she flitted to allay her fears.

The embodied co-presence of artists and audience members created environments of kinaesthetic empathy (Reynolds and Reason 2012). Lowe (2013) describes these intimate exchanges between performers and viewers as a 'communion' that 'allows audiences to at once watch, reflect upon, and live it simultaneously'. In both Dublin and London, each performance was different for both the artists and audience members because, following the opening pub scenario, audiences were split into smaller groups that were split into even smaller groups, including some moments where an individual audience member might experience a performance in a different space alone with an artist. The artists were physically close to audience members regardless of the size of the small group, asking questions, reaching for and holding hands, offering a slice of toast or a cup of tea. People had to decide how to respond to the performers: would they act, move, pull back, nod, speak, hold an outstretched hand, follow someone, try to help, or just look? As audience members may question the situation, their role in it, or decide how to respond, abrupt shifts within scenarios forced audiences to move from familiar to unsettling affective environments quickly. This meant that the intra-subjective connections formerly made between artist and audience members had to be renegotiated with each new scenario (Till 2018); audiences had to try and make sense of what was/is happening with limited information. As audience members left one performance setting, they carried layers of sensory experiences into new scenarios, including spoken and embodied exchanges with the artists. As we overheard fragmentary conversations, we were also distracted by distanced noises or ringing phones, moved to new spaces to experience fluid dances that slowed the time-space of the performance to create a dream-scape (such as the dances described at the start of this article), or were quickly ushered into new worlds – sometimes through an invitation to share a conversation in close proximity with one or two others – the nearness of our bodies mingling with those of strangers. We inhabited and moved between shifting and uncertain scenarios together.

Lowe (2019) described their work as offering 'provocations', not answers, to difficult questions so that audiences 'can consider their own position'. This artistic 'provocation' asked diverse publics to question their understandings of and relationships to difficult pasts and presents for both Ireland and the United Kingdom. Audience members had agency in their experiences of these intimate encounters. Walsh notes that when real stories of violence that civilian women and men experienced at home are shared with audiences, the physical intimacy and emotional immediacy of the performance 'press us to question where we stand in relation to this suffering and its retribution. Who is to blame? What can I do? Is this real? – these are just some of the challenging questions that this work poses' (2013: 13). Indeed, the mostly positive reviews of the 2018 London performances included some commentators feeling uncomfortable because it was so visceral, with others alleging that basic historical facts were wrong (King 2018; Trueman 2018). This was not a series of stories to feel comfortable about. The working-class Irish women's testimonies

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of war and rebellion were filled with pain, shock, loss and grief, and the stories of doubting and regretful young, inexperienced British soldiers resulted in scenarios that punctuated the comfort of traditional heroic national narratives. Indeed, the active participation of audience members included a 'crafting, revaluating and re-questioning [of] the affective experience of reception, in particular, in one's capacity as a political (not passive) body in live space and time' (Haughton 2014: 1, 2).

In addition to the performances and post-show talks in Dublin and London, diverse publics also interpreted and represented archival and artistic materials on their own in related productions. The CoisCéim Broadreach non-professional dance outreach programme resulted in three public performances of '38 Women' in 2016. Adult women worked with a professional dance artist and choreographer, Philippa Donnellan, to develop a new dance piece based upon the women's readings of archival materials. In addition to reaching different audiences through their three dance performances, online publics can access the participants' written and podcast responses to the experience, available on the 'TheseRooms.ie' webpage. In April 2017 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival, the artists launched *Falling out of Standing*, three short films by Bolger, Boss and Lowe, displayed in an installation created by Owen Boss for a public venue in Temple Bar, Dublin. In 2019, the films were shown in different venues in London, Liverpool and Dublin (National Museum of History), and are now available on the 'TheseRooms.ie' webpage.

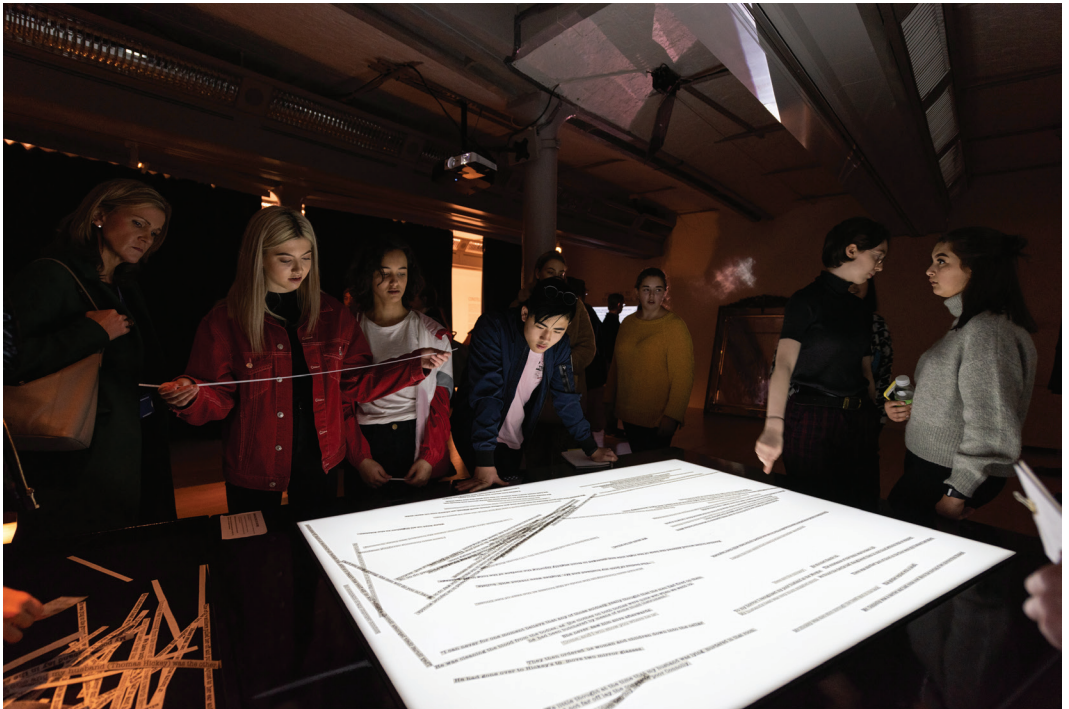


Figure 5: Beyond These Rooms *interactive living archive-table*. Installation by Owen Boss (Liverpool Tate Modern, 2019) by ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre. Photograph courtesy of Hugo Glendinning.

The *Beyond These Rooms* living history residency at the Tate Modern Liverpool (17 January–9 February 2019) included a multidisciplinary symposium with live dance performances and an exhibition. As part of Tate Exchange, the exhibition included ‘artefacts, imagery, video and deeply personal accounts’, including an interactive archive light table allowing visitors to create their own narratives (CoisCéim, in personal correspondence with the author). (Figure 5) The final live productions tied to *These Rooms* were held at Collins Barracks, National Museum of History in Dublin (7–18 November 2019), and included an interactive installation, live performance and symposium, *After the War; Peace, Conflict and Trauma*, which explored ‘the physical and psychological effects of war and conflict, at home and abroad, on the Irish population in 1919’ (ANU 2021). Finally, the *These Rooms* dedicated website tracks the legacy and different facets of the entire project, and continues to offer an online space for online audiences to explore (ANU and CoisCéim 2021). Through this range of projects in distinct urban and online settings, small groups of publics who may not have attended the Dublin and London performances were also invited to become active witnesses (Simon 2014) to these complex, yet intimate, histories of war that crossed geopolitical national boundaries.

CONCLUSION: EMBODYING ‘POTENTIAL HISTORIES’

How do you commemorate something that never ends? [...] Giving voice and body to women’s testimonies on the 1916 massacre of North King Street, when British soldiers stormed residences and killed 15 civilians, this is – in the truest sense – a haunting experience. When, early on, one woman writhes in agitation (Emma O’Kane), but calmly meets your eye to say, ‘I still want their watches back’, it opens up secrets of grief, guided by real detail, where time seems to stand still.

(Crawley 2016: n.pag.)

How do we engage in the difficult work of memory and imagine different possible worlds through the city? In Ireland, there was ‘little to no state interest in interrogating any significant challenging of the historical events themselves, or indeed any significant exploration of any progress, changes or diversification that may have emerged since these events’ (Murphy 2018: 146). In the United Kingdom, centenary celebrations of the First World War Armistice in 2018 included traditional parades and wreath-laying by the Queen, Royal Family and European dignitaries, and ‘A Nation’s Thank You: The People’s Procession’, in which 10,000 people walked past the Cenotaph to ‘pay tribute to the brave men and women’ who fought in the war to ‘defend democracy in Europe’ (UK Government 2018). Unlike these national productions, *These Rooms* called attention to the forgetful excesses of national commemoration in the past and present, and the inability of neo-liberal states to mourn for and respect inhabitants living within and beyond its geopolitical borders (Till 2018). The creation of temporary communities in which audiences engaged with differently situated bodies and stories through multiple possible encounters challenged traditional national commemorative practices for both Ireland and the United Kingdom.

ANU and CoisCéim contribute to a growing body of work by Irish performing artists who critically question who speaks for and narrates the history of the nation (Cronin and Till 2018). Neither a series of ‘one off’ time-based performances, nor housed only in ‘permanent’ theatre and gallery spaces, *These Rooms* crossed the formal and informal space-times of art and

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knowledge production in a range of urban settings. The performances, symposia, film and living archive installations took place in the living landscapes of urban streets, buildings, squares, town hall basements and dance studios, as well as being part of theatre festivals, and symposia at national archives and galleries. These productions created temporary communities allowing audiences to consider how their difficult stories of war resonate in an uncertain present. *These Rooms*, to borrow from Braidotti (2010: 408), was an artistic form of ‘community building against narrow nationalistic practices [...] [that] sustains multiple ecologies of belonging’.

The testimonies of civilian women – as well as the silences of official archives and commemorative landscapes – inspired the artists’ interpretations of events. Rather than depicting violence and war voyeuristically through what Foster (1996) describes as apolitical forms of ‘trauma art’, *These Rooms* constituted a kind of traumatic ‘rememory’ (Morrison cited in Schneider 2014): audiences experienced the artistic remembering of someone else’s forgotten memory through mundane domestic and social urban settings. It is fitting therefore to end with my first encounter of Emma O’Kane as Mrs Hickey (Till 2018). On a busy Dublin street, not too far from my home, as the other audience members were going inside the historic renovated tenement building where the performance was about to begin, Emma approached me and asked me if I would wait with her. She wore a 1960s style blue dress and held a Madonna statue and daffodils in her hands. Awkwardly, I asked her for whom she was waiting and she answered: ‘I’m waiting for the city to remember’. Moments later she placed my hand on her heart, and then began to dance on the street, creating an irruption in the ‘normal’ space–times of the city and reminding passersby of the complexity of the past and how the past is part of the now (ANU Productions 2021). Her dance invited urban bystanders to stop their routine of passive onlooking, transforming the street into a space of encounter where urban inhabitants could begin a journey of unlearning across borders and taking responsibility for shared pasts, presents and possible futures.

In her own reflection on *These Rooms*, O’Kane highlighted the ethical reasons for engaging publics to think differently about the past:

As an artist responding to the testimonies one hundred years since the North King Street massacre, the single most important element of this creation for me is that the voices of the testimonies are heard and their stories are told. It is my job to do this with an impartiality that allows the audience to see these people as people and not just victims of a crime, without that human connection they just fade back into the past and we never get to hear their voices. In hearing their voices one hopes that history does not repeat itself.

(2016: n.pag.)

These Rooms remembered the forgotten lives of ordinary people through its retelling of potential history. The fragmentary embodied stories of civilian women and doubting soldiers subverted past and present national commemorative narratives and forms, and engaged audiences as active witnesses to do the same. Intimate empathetic performances and settings invited multiple publics to unlearn the taken-for-granted ways of commemorating the nation through blurred private and public urban settings (Figure 6). When ANU and CoisCéim artists retold the stories of ordinary women in working-class



Figure 6: *Emma O’Kane in These Rooms*, by ANU Productions/CoisCéim Dance Theatre, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Pat Redmond.

neighbourhoods, those stories had not ended – they continued to ‘wound’ (Till 2012) the cities and inhabitants of Dublin, London and Liverpool. By staging the problem of not being able to remember what we cannot know about the past (Lowe 2019), *These Rooms* gave the difficult questions about national identity back to the audience members. At a time when national monuments are being toppled by activists in symbolic spaces in cities around the world, artistic projects such as *These Rooms* should make urban and cultural studies

scholars think carefully about the significance of agonistic creative interventions that productively disrupt national narratives of singular belonging defined by regressive geopolitical boundaries.

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