

Natalie Boonyaprasop

Narrating and Performing Place Identity  
in Contemporary Irish Culture

Heritage Beyond the Local



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Natalie Boonyaprasop.-

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# 1 Introduction: Narrating and Performing Irish Place Identity

Ireland has arrived. [...] We are borrowing, spending, shopping, shagging, eating, drinking and taking more drugs than any other nation. We are Europe's hedonists and the most decadent Irish generation ever. [...] We are the full-on nation.

David McWilliams (2005)<sup>1</sup>

The more Ireland became globalized during the latter half of the twentieth century, the more it entered into the global flow of culture, the more it moved from a Catholic culture based on practices of chastity, humility, piety and self-denial to a liberal individualist consumer culture of self-indulgence.

Tom Inglis (2008)<sup>2</sup>

Fear, rage, despair and distrust have been in the pot for two years. The new ingredient is shame.

Fintan O'Toole (2010)<sup>3</sup>

There is no point therefore in seeking to return to the spirit of Tiger Ireland. The country needs to make not just a single step forward but a series of quantum leaps. These will be based on new ideas, propounded mainly by those who work outside our sclerotic political system.

Declan Kiberd (2010)<sup>4</sup>

The governments who set up these [cultural] institutions, and fund them, have understood that culture is a human construct and, despite its innocence and its natural ability to flow and fly, it has a strange way of looking like a commodity – it can fail, it can thrive, it can be competitive, it can be made powerful, it can be helped along.

Colm Tóibín (2010)<sup>5</sup>

Watching contemporary history unfold right in front of their eyes must have been a spectacularly enthralling task for artists and writers, scholars and commentators of Irish Studies in recent years. Within hardly less than three decades, the construct of 'Ireland' as an object of inquiry has undergone several major transformations. The historic chain of events leading up to present-day conditions has been described as a turbulent journey of rise and fall: Ascending from the long plight of poverty and backwardness, Ireland in the 1990s quickly experienced unprecedented rates of eco-

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- 1 McWilliams, David. *The Pope's Children: Ireland's New Elite*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2005. 3-4.
  - 2 Inglis, Tom. *Global Ireland: Same Difference*. New York; London: Routledge, 2008. 2-3.
  - 3 O'Toole, Fintan. "Fear, Rage, Despair and Distrust Have Been in the Pot for Two Years. The New Ingredient is Shame." *The Irish Times* 20 Nov. 2010. Web. 26 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2010/1120/1224283750167.html>>.
  - 4 Kiberd, Declan. "'Returning to the Tiger Spirit is Pointless. Only a Completely New Political Movement Can Tackle the Changes.'" *The Irish Times* 13 Mar. 2010. Web. 13 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2010/0313/1224266184020.html>>.
  - 5 Tóibín, Colm. "Spreading the Real News From Ireland." *The Irish Times* 18 Nov. 2010. Web. 18 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/features/2010/1118/1224283615611.html>>.

conomic growth which would also impact heavily on societal and cultural attitudes. The boastful term of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ provided a particularly apt and widely adopted image for a collective representation that combined contradictory elements of a pre-national, nostalgic and primordial Celtic identity with animalistic drives of aggressive capitalism and individualism.<sup>6</sup> The former poorhouse of Europe had become not only a role model for European integration but had also finally managed to turn its back on a century-long history of oppression, frugality and suffering. It seemed, finally, that Ireland had arrived. Yet critics also warned that Ireland’s rise to prosperity had been spurred on with such complacency and callousness to reach economically unsustainable heights that a hard landing was simply inevitable. So, since late 2007, triggered by a financial crisis that affected the capitalist system at a global scale, Ireland has again found itself in the worst recession the country has ever faced, clocking up a massive bill of €93.4bn in national debt by the end of 2010,<sup>7</sup> and effectively having to hand over its financial sovereignty to the IMF and EU creditors.

This story of tragic failure that has befallen Ireland and its people can only be interpreted as a tragedy because it automatically refers back to previous stories which have become naturalised as part of the inventory of Irish history and national mythology. The function of myth to make sense of social and cultural situations in the present by referring to a *specific* version of the past has been explained as ‘naturalisation’, an effect which transforms history into nature.<sup>8</sup> The naturalised evolution of a national story thus subsumes contemporary and historical events under the same narrative framework and makes them legible in an exclusive, teleological way by confirming a dominant discursive order and dismissing all alternative readings and deviant meanings.<sup>9</sup> In order to comprehend the infinite complexity of present-day situations, continuities and coherences are sought that will explain a certain phenomenon according to already existing world-views and knowledges, rendering it thus less alarming. The successful integration within mythical narrative patterns therefore not only reduces complexity as well as collective anxieties but also aims at gaining discursive control over unpredictable or contradictory conditions that could potentially destabilize those naturalised identities which are constituted by the discursive order of the myth. For example, the economic downturn in Ireland has been interpreted as a crisis by artists, journalists, and social and political commentators (quoted above) referring to three major narratives:

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- 6 See Keohane, Kieran, and Carmen Kuhling. *Collision Culture: Transformations in Everyday Life in Ireland*. Dublin: Liffey Press, 2004. 139-164.
  - 7 See National Treasury Management Agency. Level of Debt, 2010. Web. 2 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.ntma.ie/NationalDebt/levelOfDebt.php>>.
  - 8 See Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. 1957. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 129.
  - 9 See Hirsland, Andreas, and Werner Schneider. “Wahrheit, Ideologie und Diskurse: Zum Verhältnis von Diskursanalyse und Ideologiekritik.” *Handbuch Sozialwissenschaftliche Diskursanalyse*. 2nd ed. Ed. Reiner Keller, et al. Wiesbaden: VS, 2006. 377-406, here 396.

First, the Catholic mindset reads the return of the recession to Ireland as atonement for the sins committed during the material excess and overindulgence of the Celtic Tiger years. It confirms the continuation of Catholicism as a relevant narrative which interprets current financial hardships as a just punishment for the Irish people who ‘as a nation’ had lost sight of their ‘true’ Catholic selves by getting drunk on capitalism, individualism and materialism. According to the Catholic narrative, a solution could only be provided by returning to those pre-Tiger ‘traditional’ values that had been promoted as the essence of Irishness in the past: de Valera’s vision of Ireland as “a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit”<sup>10</sup> was based on values of family, communal spirit and austerity. While it was dismissed, rejected and ridiculed for its parochial, hypocritical and discriminatory ideology and religious fanaticism by Celtic Tiger society, to many this vision suddenly does not seem quite so outlandish any more under current circumstances.

Second, globalisation is mentioned as a recurring narrative which helps to explain the current phenomenon as a crisis made *elsewhere*. Globalisation is thought of as an exogenous cause (i.e. someone else’s narrative), which on the one hand did bring prosperity to Ireland during the Celtic Tiger – however, at the considerably high cost of falling prey to global market forces and financial speculation. According to this world-view, globalisation is thus equated with economic development, the impact of global flows on local conditions either being praised as a saviour or vilified as the root of all evil. The religious connotations are apt here in this case because this second narrative neatly complements the aforementioned Catholic narrative. As Inglis argues above, increasing degrees of globalisation in the second half of the 20th century are interpreted to have successfully managed to seduce Irish people into abandoning Catholicism and turning towards the worship of new idols of capitalist consumer culture. Within this familiar biblical script, Ireland’s fall from grace simply had to be inevitable.

Third, O’Toole adds the new ingredient of collective shame into the debate by interpreting the economic situation as a historic loss of national sovereignty by placing it in a historico-political context of colonialism and Ireland’s successive assertion of national independence over the course of the 20th century. The economic phenomenon is thus not only interlinked with globalisation but globalisation is further equated with the narrative of colonialism and neo-colonial dependence on outside forces. Writing in that fateful last week of November 2010, just after the Irish Fianna Fáil government had eventually conceded in public that a bailout deal with the IMF and EU had been agreed, O’Toole states:

At every significant point over the past 90 years Irish sovereignty was expanding. This week, for the first time, it contracted. There is no point in minimising the meaning of

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10 De Valera’s St Patrick’s Day broadcast in 1943 cited in Moynihan, Maurice, ed. *Speeches and Statements by Éamonn de Valera, 1917-73*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1980. 466.

this reverse. No point either, though, in merely wallowing in our own powerlessness. Something has ended, and it is the entire tradition, decent and disastrous, that Fianna Fáil represents. The ignominy of its last days should not blind us to the opportunity *to begin again*.<sup>11</sup>

For the first time since the foundation of the Republic as an independent state, the enormous loss of faith in the political leadership of the Fianna Fáil party following these events has irreversibly interrupted and discontinued a national narrative of almost unbroken political rule. Such reiterations of narratives, which forge a specific version of the past, continuously construct the nation as an imagined community according to Anderson.<sup>12</sup> Myth creates social coherence *qua* repetition, its narrative pattern structuring and regulating not only how the world is being interpreted but also how it is enacted through social practices following specific discursive rules.<sup>13</sup> But then the question that arises from this must necessarily ask whether it is even possible “to begin again”, as O’Toole and Kiberd postulate above, and if so, how? How can there be a possibility for a new beginning when national mythology keeps going round in circles, and history keeps repeating itself? How can new stories be invented when the past seems to provide such a convenient and stable archive for the collective imagination in the present? What kinds of conditions are necessary to be able to break with inherited narratives of the past and to allow for new narratives to emerge?

With these topical and unresolved developments given as a starting point for reflection, the present study will enquire how place identities in contemporary Irish culture are being narrated and performed in relation to other places and other times. Emphasizing how narratives are not only embedded within a symbolic network of other texts and narratives but also within a physical network of social practice and materiality, this book argues that place and identity are inextricably connected with each other. The place named ‘Ireland’ is thus constructed with the help of materially embedded narratives which naturalise identity in relation to place. The reciprocal interplay of place and identity must be constantly reiterated to maintain coherence between narration and material contradictions. The analysis of three different, yet similar, case studies will reveal how specific narratives imagined in relation to ‘the past’ are being retold and retraced in the present. They are narratives that matter because not only do they reiterate a specific version of the past but they also contain in the material quality of their performance the potential for a new beginning. The idea of heritage as a reflective form of nostalgia will thus become a key concept in the conclusion of this study because it manages to connect place, identity and culture in a way that acknowledges both the material drag which perpetuates inherited structures as well as the potential

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11 O’Toole 2010; emphasis added.

12 See Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. London; New York: Verso, 1991.

13 See Viehöver, Willy. “Diskurse als Narrationen.” *Handbuch Sozialwissenschaftliche Diskursanalyse*. 2nd ed. Ed. Reiner Keller, et al. Wiesbaden: VS, 2006. 179-208, here 180.