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Programme of Study: Photography in the arts Module: Research in Practice
(ADAD5004)

Module Lecturer: Paul Duerinckx

Word count: 2484 words

Proposed question for Independent Project (Part One in Independent Project in Year
Three) Three Key Words: Contested Landscape, Colonisation, Cultural Identity

Proposed question:

If modern conflict leaves a scar of suffering and death embedded in the terrain
(Saunders & Cornish, 2021, p.3), can artists working with the contested landscape
create art which has no trace of war?

List of Figures

List of Figures

Fig 1: *Screenshot The city of Derry as titled by Google maps, 2022* [Online]

Available via:

<https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Northern+Ireland/@53.5225965,-8.7480868,7z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x485e10ca99a69975:0xf7e528ef6eb7e3d8!8m2!3d54.7877149!4d-6.4923145> [Accessed 14 April 2022].

Fig 2: *Road sign in Northern Ireland with the reference to London obscured, Mack, n.d* [Online] Available via:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derry#/media/File:Vandalised_road-sign_Londonderry_P3010060.jpg [Accessed 18 April 2022].

Fig 3: *Blue skies of Ulster, Doherty, 1986* [Online] Available via:

https://issuu.com/darragh-kerlin/docs/doherty_unseen_issuu/280 [Accessed 4 May 2022].

Fig 4: *The other side, Doherty, 1986* [Online] Available via:

https://issuu.com/darragh-kerlin/docs/doherty_unseen_issuu/280 [Accessed 16 April 2022].

Fig 5: *Nsala of Wala with the hand and foot of his five year old little girl, Seeley, 1904* [Online] Available via:

<https://www.antislavery.org/roger-casement-anti-slavery-rebel/belgian-congon-latest-banner/> [Accessed 1 May 2022].

Fig 6: *British Watchtowers, Wylie, 2007* [Online] Available via:

<https://donovanwylie.studio/index.php?page=work&album=3&img=17> [Accessed 3 May 2022].

Fig 7: *British Watchtowers, Wylie, 2007* [Online] Available via:

<https://donovanwylie.studio/index.php?page=work&album=3&img=17> [Accessed 3 May 2022].

Fig 8: *Other Lands, Spreadborough, 2022*

Fig 9: *The Gathering Ground, Poulson, 2019* [Online] Available via:

<https://www.abbypoulson.co.uk/home> [Accessed 3 May 2022].

Fig 10: Image of Poulson's *Gathering Ground* in *Many voices, One nation*, Ffotogallery, (P.15), 2021

In this proposal for my dissertation, I will explore three key terms within the personal and wider interests of my practice. I will propose a final question which will relate to these themes, in preparation of the written dissertation in my third year.

The three terms that I have chosen to research are contested land, colonisation, and cultural identity. I will be exploring how the contested landscape has an influence on identity and respond with a question which will be the first draft for my dissertation research.

In John Berger and Jean Mohr's *A Fortunate man: The story of a Country Doctor*, themes of the contested landscape is discussed. Berger writes,

“Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than the curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place”

(Berger & Mohr, 1967, pp 13)

It is this relationship between humans and landscape which has begun to shape the first theme that I would like to explore in this proposal. The importance of land has been deeply rooted in the world of photography. ‘Photography was made for landscape; landscapes have been remade for photography; and landscape photography has remade the way land is seen’ (Giblet, 2011, p.15).

The contested land is particularly important to the past and ongoing history of Ireland. This theme is discussed in *Conflict Landscapes: Materiality and Meaning in Contested Places*, 'Every landscape embroiders the past with the present' (Saunders & Cornish, 2001). It is through this combination of landscape and war that the boarder has become a reminder of the past which continues to affect the future. Historically in Ireland this notion of separation in the land spans from an unrest in political and religious opposition. For Ireland, Protestantism and Catholicism are intertwined as both political and religious stances. Liz Wells writes about how politics and religion intertwine in *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, culture, and Identity*. "Site and space and spiritual identity, are complexly interwoven... this often implicates tensions over national identity." (Wells, 2011, p. 211)

In the Separation of Northern and Southern Ireland, also comes a change within the language which surrounds identity. The term 'Irish' and 'Northern Irish' are both politically charged terms which come from the identification of either side of the boarder.

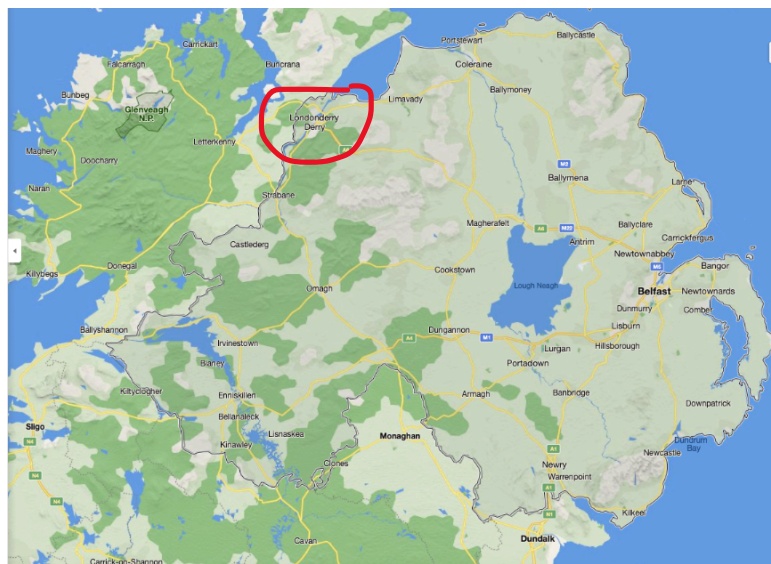


Fig 1: *Screenshot The city of Derry as titled by Google maps, 2022*

Derry sits at the border of Ireland and has been a centre for political unrest in Northern Ireland. The name 'Londonderry' came from the British colonisation of Ireland and replaced its original name 'Derry', or in Irish 'Doire' (Art Agenda, 2013). In Nicholas J Saunders' *Conflict Landscapes: Materiality and meaning*, Saunders explains that landscapes hold themselves in contexts which are communicated through the past (and present) histories of the people who live there. And it is through these memories that Northern Ireland suffers through the future of our political parties. The suffering of death in these places makes itself apparent for centuries to come (Saunders, 2021, p.3), in Derry especially.



Fig 2: *Road sign in Northern Ireland with the reference to London obscured, Mack, n.d*

Many people in Northern Ireland disagree with the terminology of the word 'Londonderry' and would use terms deemed widely as neutral instead. This is because a discomfort has been created between identity and the history of Northern Ireland. This bleeds into the terminology we have used to label Northern Irish land. With many people associating with neutral terms such as 'Derry-Londonderry' or 'Stroke-City' rather than 'Derry' or 'Londonderry'. A discomfort is created between identity and the history of Northern Ireland.

This separation has become an ingrained part of identity within Ireland. Willie Doherty's *Unseen* is an exploration of the contested landscape in his childhood hometown of Derry.



Fig 3: *Blue skies of Ulster*, Doherty, 1986

The context of contested landscape comes into text Doherty uses to overlay his work. Doherty carefully selects bold sentences which give a sense of the language used to surround Ireland's divided landscape.

Doherty's *The Other Side* is a prime example of the way Northern Ireland speaks about the difference in political outlook over landscape. Using terms such as 'West is

South', 'East is North' and 'The Other Side' makes the viewer question which stance the artist's narrative sits within, while also highlighting the borderlines and land beyond.



Fig 4: *The other side*, Doherty, 1986

Landscape is complex and slippery, a concept rather than a single place in historical time, a cultural image as well as a physical location... How much more so for landscapes of modern conflict... created by the suffering and death of those whose remains have become part of the terrain- sometimes indistinguishable from, and at one with, the shattered earth and debris of war.

(Saunders & Cornish, 2021, p.3)

Within the notions of contested land in Ireland, issues of colonisation come into play. For the past 800 years, since the Norman invasion of Ireland (Sky,n.d) many Irish citizens were burnt out of their homes in an attempt to keep Ireland's allegiance to England. With conversion to Protestantism being a driving force for attacks.

The Irish need for enlightenment came from a common misconception that Irish citizens were uncivilized and lazy. However, Ireland as a country was seen as the 'Island of Wonders' (Sky,n.d). If only the English could come and restore the order, then the Irish would be 'brought to the light' and in turn the land could be used for resources.

These links to the suffering of Irish people have scarred Irish landscape beyond the surface. Not only geographically but also within the histories of families dealing with the effects of colonisation and sectarianism. Saunders discusses how the roots of war become the marks left on the earth, and the two become intertwined.

It is true that colonisation and its legacy has changed our landscape. Not only in Ireland, but throughout the world. Landscapes once that were once unconflicted by themselves, have been broken and divided by humanity. Creating boundaries which divide one side of a community from another.

This commonality within colonisation, that the landscape is waiting to be exploited by the right person, has been adapted by the English and covered over by the mission-field.

It is the spread of the Protestant faith that has been at the epicentre of sweeping these tragedies under the rug, not just with the cruelty of Catholics in Ireland but even more severely, in the treatment of Africans in the Congo.

The objective of these missionaries in the Congo was to produce Christians who had been 'nurtured out of cultural darkness and into the light of modernity' (Sealy, 2019, pp.44-45).

English missionary Alice Seeley Harris photographed the slave trade and continued abuse of Africans under the rule of King Leopold II. Who was exposing the land of its natural wealth and minerals, while simultaneously enslaving the people of the Congo (Forcedwalks, 2022).



Fig 5: *Nsala of Wala with the hand and foot of his five year old little girl*, Seeley, 1904

One of Seeley's most shocking images depicted the remains of Nsala's Daughter. This image was toured widely along with a collection of other images she made on her trip. Although this trip focused centrally on the documentation of brutality in the Congo, Seeley's images were toured by lantern slide show and soon became a spectacle for the west.

It became the representation of these events, by a white, privileged westerner who became the sole voice for the oppression and racism which took place under King Leopold II.

Western photographic documentation of the 'foreign' has caused a tainted spectacle for the real, 'Photographers make fiction just as skilfully as writers do' (Magnum Ireland, 2005) The photobook *Magnum Ireland* correlates images of Ireland over the 1950s to 2000s. Most of these images are made by artists who didn't grow up in Ireland. In the introduction to the book, it is discussed that many people in Ireland struggled with the representations of Ireland that were made from visiting photographers. There was a similar misconception that the Ireland was war-ridden, and the Irish were uncivilised. This was heightened during the years of the Troubles when the rebellion was shown in a negative light through news reports.

Donovan Wylie is a Northern Irish photographer who documented the British watchtowers which were built in South Armagh during the 1980s. These watch tower structures seem to blend into the green spanse of land which they dominate (Thompson, 2020).



Fig 6: *British Watchtowers*, Wylie, 2007

They seem to blend so much that they aren't disturbing the nature they sit in. Until the other images in this series are seen.



Fig 7: *British Watchtowers*, Wylie, 2007

At first glance this image from *British Watchtowers* looks like it is simply depicting a skyline in Northern Ireland, however the further in you look, the darker this image becomes. Each image in this series was taken on a military helicopter, with a similar eyeline, to portray the sheer height of the tower structures and how invasive they were in the spaces they surveyed.

Although they were demolished in 2007 (Thompson, 2020), the presence of British colonisation and control continues to scar Northern Ireland even today.

In L. McDowell's *Undoing Place?*, Stuart Hall presents two different ways of seeing cultural identities (Hall, 1997, p. 223). Cultural identity can be perceived as one idea, which is shared from all who are related through ancestry and the history. It underpins the idea that all that share these things can exist united, as one body of people. This makes us 'who we really are' (Hall, 1997, p. 223) and identity is formed from this. However cultural identity can also be a recognition of the differences we have, despite the similarities and shared experience (Hall, 1997, p. 225). In this case identity influences who we are becoming not just who we are. 'Being' is not set in stone.

This allows humanity to be unbound from the time frame and place where culture began. This detaching from those histories allows for transformation (Hall, 1997, p.225), they are no longer bound to the power that is intertwined in their history – which is usually colonisation.

Themes of human identity were at the foreground of my most recent project, *Other Lands*. This project looked at the contested landscape by the boarder of County Cavan.



Fig 8: *Other Lands*, Spreadborough, 2022

I began to question the blur of the boarders by the edge of Northern Ireland, at some points a hiker can be unsure of which part of Ireland they stand in. In the same way, the language I used to describe my own identity was blurred. The term Irish was too nationalist, and the term Northern-Irish was too British. Both terms seemed to be rooted in the political troubles of Ireland's past.

Living in Wales made me realise that there is a big contrast between the way that culture is owned in Wales and Ireland. This is because Welsh identity roots itself in difference, as Stuart Hall writes in his *Cultural Identity and Dispora* essay. Welsh

history isn't fully attached to the impact that England has had on its land – however this is not ignored.

Ffotogallery's *Many Voices, One Nation* is a photobook celebrating Welsh based photographers. The main theme which runs in this book is the examination of 'the relationship between identity and nationhood, revealing not only what divides us but also the ties that bind us together as a nation' (Ffotogallery, 2021, p.4). One cannot exist without the other, we cannot be aware of our differences without celebrating how our nations are working to overcome these things. Included in the artist selection is a range of work which relates to humanity and landscape, and how they are linked.

Abby Poulson's *The Gathering Ground* is included in the selected work of *Many Voices, One Nation*. *The Gathering Ground* is a response to the significance of Welsh water and its link to the English boarder. In this project Abby collated a range of archival images and responded with images and sculptures relating to the areas where Welsh water has supported England.



Fig 9: *The Gathering Ground*, Poulson, 2019

In some respects, this project is dealing with the same issues of boundary lines and land colonisation which Northern Ireland has dealt with during our many years of English rule. The water source is one of the main roots of exploitation within Welsh history, 'Reservoirs in Wales have a longstanding history within these conflicts of Self-Rule' (Foster, 2021).

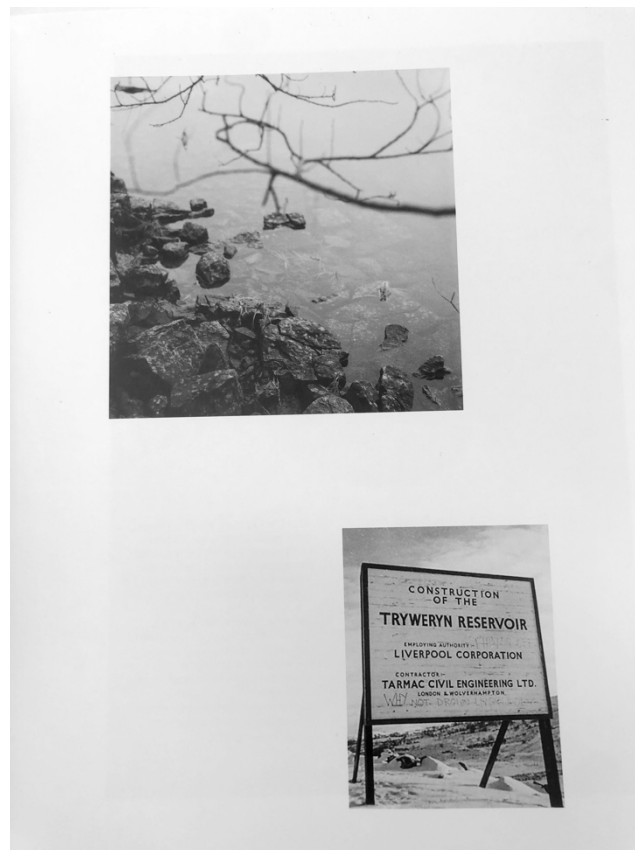


Fig 10: Image of Poulson's *Gathering Ground* in *Many voices, One nation*, Ffotogallery, (Page 15), 2021

The reservoirs of Wales have been a constant water source for England, with some cities getting all their water from Wales (Welshnotbritish, 2012). However, many of

these reservoirs were built against Welsh will. Capel Celyn, a town in North Wales was flooded in 1965 to provide water for Liverpool. 35 out of 36 Welsh MPs voted to overrule the decision to flood the town but it was overturned by the English Parliament, and the English decided to flood the village anyway.

Wales began to move towards independence after this as it was a massive injustice to the Welsh-speaking community living there. Forcing the residents to move 'undermined the Welsh language and it's heritage' (Bowen, 2020).

In the research for my three key words, I have begun to understand some of the original histories which have influenced the way in which culture has become intertwined with landscapes and its history.

Landscape is complex and slippery, a concept rather than a single place in historical time, a cultural image as well as a physical location... How much more so for landscapes of modern conflict... created by the suffering and death of those whose remains have become part of the terrain- sometimes indistinguishable from, and at one with, the shattered earth and debris of war.

(Saunders & Cornish, 2021, p.3)

It is this quote by Saunders which I would like to form the basis of my dissertation inquiry into conflicted landscapes and the impact this has on identity and culture in the decades after the bloodshed. My dissertation will explore Northern Ireland's discomfort with Irish culture and how this is contrasted by the way that Wales embraces culture and independence.

There are common themes within the histories of Wales and Ireland regarding the way that the land has been treated by English colonisers; with both being exploited for the natural resources that the land had to offer. It is these links to England that I was hoping to find as an entry point to issues surrounding identity and culture in wider parts of the UK.

In conclusion to my essay, my proposed dissertation question is
If modern conflict leaves a scar of suffering and death embedded in the terrain
(Saunders, 2021, p.3), can artists working with the contested landscape create art
which has no trace of war?

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