

Mirrored Asylum: Reflections on Naming, Home and Subjectivity in Ireland

Sara McKinnon

“What’s in a name? A great deal. Or so I shall argue. My case rests on the most meager memory of a person: remembering her name. Or rather on the horror lest the name be forgotten. Why do we care about that? The memory of a person’s name is all we need to get our basic question going: Is there room for an ethics of memory?” ~Avashi Margalit¹

Seven forty-five in the evening, I am waiting for the bus that will pass by Smyth’s Pub. I didn’t check the bus times before leaving the flat so I’ve ended up waiting in the misty air for nearly an hour. Moist. Cool. Open. Rejuvenated. An older woman sits on the bench right next to the one where I rest. Moments later we both watch as a man scolds a dog for trying to urinate on a pole while his other dog executes the act. We both chuckle and chat quietly about the dour man’s inattention.

“You Irish?” she questions curiously.

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¹ Avashi Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 18.

“No,” I sigh, revealing how much I’ve been asked that question since arriving in Ireland.

“Where do you live?” She questions in jostling, short syllables.

“The United States, Arizona.”

“I could have sworn you were Irish sitting there, you look Irish,” she expresses with more disbelief, “Is your family Irish?”

“My father’s, we’re not so sure. But my mother’s family name is Flanery,” I say already aware of the probable response.

“Ah, that’s an Irish name!”

“Yes, from Galway I believe,” I state, trying to show that I’ve done my research.

“Galway, yes that’s right. O’Flannery, O’Flaherty, they’re all from the Galway side,” she confirms. “Was it your grandparents that left?”

“No, I believe it was my grandfather’s grandparents.”

“What time?” she probes.

“Around 1837 I think,” I say with uncertainty as I left the documents in Arizona with all of the information.

“Ah yes, they could have been some of the first from the famine,” she remarks. Happy with her silent prediction she asks, “So you’re home then. Do you feel home?” She invites me to call on an ancestry I know hardly anything about.

“There are things that feel like home, like some stories are really familiar, and the music. The green everywhere feels like home,” I speak with optimism in my voice.

“Ah yes then, you’re home,” she says. Without knowing my common name she welcomes me into this nation, into a belonging I had never considered.²

Home. What is home? Where is home? What does it mean to be home? This text employs modes of performative writing to explore the meaning of home as it exists in relation to subjectivity, naming and migration. Along with Charles Nero, I understand home to be a

² Fieldnotes, 26/06/05, 2-4

“site of both contradiction and contention” that is constituted through our personal experiences with various discourses and practices of belonging and exclusion.³ This is particularly the case for individuals who experience home in relation to migration. Svetlana Boym discusses the experience of diasporic intimacy as always “haunted by images of home and homeland, yet it also discloses some of the furtive pleasures of exile.”⁴ Because of this, home must be theorized as a personal and embodied experience. Ronald Pelias explains that methods of performative writing are perfectly situated to access and illustrate embodied, experiential knowledge: “Performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life. With lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective.”⁵ While Pelias is careful to explain that performative writing cannot be instantly equated with scholarship, the strength of performative writing is its ability to illuminate the nuances of experience, particularly the body in space: “Performative writing, when done well, understands its place within disciplinary history. As it participates in that tradition, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, it hopes to provide ‘thick descriptions’, ‘experiential particularity’, ‘deconstructive verisimilitude’, and ‘theatrical narrativity.’”⁶ Performative writing is thus a mode for incorporating the epistemic and the aesthetic.⁷ David Román explains that this method of reporting potentially intervenes

³ Charles I. Nero, "Black Queer Identity, Imaginative Rationality, and the Language of Home," in *Our Voices: Essays in Culture, Ethnicity, and Communication*, ed. Alberto Gonzalez, Marsha Houston, and Victoria Chen (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 1997), 55.

⁴ Svetlana Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabadov's Installations and Immigrant Homes," in *Intimacy*, ed. Lauren Berlant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 228.

⁵ Ronald J. Pelias, "Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote," *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies* 5, no. 4 (2005): 418.

⁶ Pelias, "Performative Writing as Scholarship," 420.

⁷ Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, "Autoethnography's Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2005): 312.

in discussions of the body as text.⁸ In this piece, I explore most specifically race and nationality with performative writing to highlight the crisis of both when propelled across national and cultural borders. Performative writing provides a venue to center individual understandings of cultural issues and phenomena as theoretical positions. Moreover, performative writing embeds self-reflexive practices of locating research subjectivity into the landscape of the actual research field, data, questions and writing. In this sense, understanding the research subject as an enflashed body and being is essential to the illuminations of the cultural issues called into question.

We Irish Americans visit Ireland
in hopes of finding some piece,
some portion of our former selves
in the land we are told is ours.
Fierce pride we hold for a nation
we know nearly nothing about:

“The famine?”

“When was that?”

“Potatoes?”

“Now why didn’t they grow?”

“Remind me again, is Northern Ireland the
Catholic side or the Protestant side?”

“I always forget.”

“The IRA?”

“Is that some sort of tax break?”

Yet knowledge about the nation, the

⁸ David Román, *Acts of Interversion: Performance, Gay Culture, and Aids* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

Sara McKinnon

history, the place, matters
not
as I step onto the soil meaning
nothing
except a claim to a name.
In Ireland I am not just a part of the
white America cream-of-wheat blah.
In Ireland I am Irish.

Flags wave high here for
the nation of J.F.K, Mayor Daley
and his Chi-town crew. While we
Irish Americans assimilate into
American nothingness,
and everythingness,
the Irish seem acutely aware
of what the Irish are doing around the world.
We long-time-gone from this lush land,
serve as stunning extensions
of what it means to be authentically, Irish.

Across the ocean,
over on Emerald Isle,
my freckles, fair skin and flaming hair
sing of the ways that once you are Irish
you can never not be Irish:
I'm reminded at bus stops,
bars, even bathrooms.

And indeed it feels good to be placed,
to have a home, a name I never claimed.

So we search records for other names, places,
some root, some clue to an essential self.

we call up forgotten, lost, could-be family members,
second, third, fourth cousins,
hoping that stories will match stories,
mirror something, anything
about what it means to be Irish,
what it means to be.

For on this Isle I feel more Irish
 than I've ever felt American.
On this Isle I'm named a name
finally different, finally distinct.
On this Isle I am a perfect fit, a marvelous match
to the people, places.
On this Isle I am called home, invited to be home,
 and feel entitled, a right to an essence.⁹

Avashi Margalit, in asking what is in a name, explains, “one’s name is not just a convenient tool for preserving one’s memory but is taken as intimately related to one’s essence. If the name survives, the essence survives as well.”¹⁰ Along the banks of the Liffey in Dublin, along the Atlantic Ocean shore etching out the edge of Galway, I was constantly named, my “essence” reflected back to me. Whether it was walking past familiar sounding (and looking) names on merchant signs or the ways that strangers would confirm my Irishness upon seeing my fair features, I was named, name(able).¹¹ And my name certainly was everywhere—a hotel in Galway proudly held the name,

⁹ This poem was written in my fieldnote journal on 24/06/05 in response to being hailed as “home” while simultaneously questioning the entitlement of being an Irish American and claiming “Irishness” in Ireland.

¹⁰ Margalit, *The Ethics*, 22-23.

¹¹ This notion of being nameable derives from Judith Butler’s consideration of who counts as fully human, for to be namable, recognizable as an individual is necessary as a fully human, dynamic being. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 17-25.

a pub too.¹² Strangers spoke the name as if it were a frequently used Irish preposition: Flanery, Flannery, O'Flannery, O'Flaherty, and Flanagan. My name has many forms.

My family's movement to the United States has been told to me as a passionate series of cutting ties with Catholicism. An O and N were dropped from O'Flannery turning our family into the infamous Flanery family, known perhaps too well around our small hometown in Michigan. I'm not sure who decided that the dropped O and N would be sufficient to sever ties with the church. My mother tells me that my family was forced to cut up the very Irish name; I remember other renditions making it seem as though the shortening was done in defiance, a proclamation. Who knows if this Catholic split story is even true? So many Irish families lost their names crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

In Ireland I felt torn between the inspiration to investigate more about my name and family and the doubts about what the point of such a quest would be. More specifically, I questioned whether the search for connections to history was a project of self-actualization, or perhaps a project of finding an "authentic" home. While Irish immigrants arriving in the U.S. around the time of my grandparent's emigration were not considered white,¹³ most Irish Americans traveling and immigrating to Ireland today are indeed white. In the U.S. they are constituted as subjects through systemic and institutional whiteness that:

is maintained and produced not by overt rhetorics of whiteness, but rather, by its 'everydayness,' by the everyday, unquestioned racialized social relations that have acquired a seeming normativity and through that normativity function to make invisible the ways in which whites

¹² Fieldnotes, 21/06/05, 1.

¹³ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); David R. Roedrigger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1991); Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, "Beyond a Black-White Dualism: Racialization and Racism in the Republic of Ireland and the Irish Diaspora Experience," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 2 (2002).

participate in, and derive protection and benefits from, a system whose rules and organizational relations work to their advantage.¹⁴

In this, white U.S. Americans—whatever our names—are full speaking subjects, as the institutions and systemic rules work to our advantage and meet our needs best. Moreover, the discourse of whiteness is invisible, making it easy for whites to deny the privileges they gain in the U.S. because of the ways they signify race.¹⁵

In traveling to Ireland, white U.S. Americans who call on their Irishness and claim home in Ireland, subsequently engage in a project of gaining further subjectivity. Judith Butler describes this as a project of subjectivity in talking through the Lord-Bondsman relationship, where the “lord” furthers his/her desire to “remain sated, and hence, to banish desire and its possibilities.”¹⁶ But, the ability of the lord to engage in this project of desire necessitates a fracturing of history, disavowing the moment when he was not lord. Having previously been on the other side of the lord-bondsman relationship, the break with history enables him to participate in the circulation of the bondsman’s work as his own, without ethical reflection on his intersubjectivity to/with the bondsman. In this, the bondsman’s work is appropriated by the lord as his own when it is given over to him and subsequently signed or marked in some way indicating it as the lord’s property. It is this act that constitutes the lord’s subjectivity. The material making of the lord’s subjectivity however does not completely erase the name, the signature of the bondsman.¹⁷ The attaining of subjectivity always involves some form of erasure or writing over.

¹⁴ Raka Shome, "Outing Whiteness," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17, no. 3 (2000): 366.

¹⁵ Shome, "Outing Whiteness."; Judith N. Martin, Robert L. Krizek, Thomas K. Nakayama, and L. Bradford, "Exploring Whiteness: A Study of Self Labels for White Americans," *Communication Quarterly* 44 (1996); Mab Segrest, "Of Souls and White Folks," in *Born to Belonging: Writings on Spirit and Justice*, ed. Mab Segrest (New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 55.

¹⁷ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*.

While my family name no longer appears or sounds the same as it did when my grandfather's grandparents left Ireland, the name is still intelligible. Indeed, the ability to be named in Ireland and called home, testifies to the resiliency of the signature. Being an Irish American in Ireland proves that the name, in all its forms, still remains comprehensible, in-tact, intelligible, an essence. And now, being called home in Ireland as a white U.S. American illuminates the ways that I am subject in Ireland, and around the world, because of my nationality and fair skin. This cannot be said of many subjects and names, those that have been erased, signed over completely, in my country of birth as well as in Ireland. Even so, the abandoned letters and erased names speak of a motion that moves us all, though we don't always want to admit that. To admit such motion would be to recognize and lay claim to connection. It would be to lay claim to the connection extending out of my white skin, nameable name, and the individuals, families, histories and lives working to cross borders all over. While I may not be lord over individuals working to enter nations, as the metaphor suggests, my subjectivity is still in-tact, still flourishing, and I have the ability to be invited home throughout the world. I guess that's why, as an Irish American in Ireland, I wrestle with the point of knowing my name, my essence, all the while being named all over the streets of Dublin and Galway. Caught in the tension, I ask, what is the risk in identifying with this name and being named as home? Can you understand the survival of a name and not get swept up in it, not claim to own it?

On my way one day to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, the traditional music society in Ireland, I pass a stone wall in front of an unassuming yet elegant white house. My limbs know to stop.¹⁸ I stand alone on the pavement in the quiet Monkstown neighborhood feeling the acute awareness that I am not-at-all alone on that path. Round sounds of ocean breeze sweep past, through my stand-still body, pricking the skin along my legs. Though the air is quiet, resting, it

¹⁸ Fieldnotes, 23/06/05, 2

remains thick with bodies filling this deserted street, the trees feel it, the stone walls sense it, and I know it. I peer into hollow, long windows, skim my palms along purple flowers peaking out of walls and settle my eyes on the center of commotion in the quiet street. Placed in the stony wall is an engraved block unlike any of the other stones along the barrier:



I freeze on the pavement not at all sure what to do with the information abruptly presented to me. 1848. That wasn't much after the year my family left Galway. 1848. I wonder if the famine struck first in locations outside of Dublin. 1848. Was escaping Catholicism the real reason my family fled? On that empty-yet-strangely-crowded street corner, I was not so sure.

I think often of what it must have meant to leave Ireland. Most of the emigrants leaving Ireland with my great, great grandparents might be called refugees today. In 1951 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees legalized the term explaining that a refugee is "someone outside his or her own country and unable to return as a result of a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, public opinion or membership of a social

group.”¹⁹ Refugees indeed they would be: Irish emigrants left because of devastation, they left because of persecution, they left because of famine, they left because they had to. This term however did not protect them then. The term doesn’t always protect people today. Instead, Irish emigrants learned to slip through cracks, even on the boats they boarded to leave Ireland, change their names into something new, working to hide hints of the past. And yet, I question whether it was just the era that allowed the Irish, Irish Americans, myself, to slip through spaces so easily. While my name signifies a connection to the past, my body is a signifier of all of the ways that I am signifiable as a subject, both in the United States and in Ireland. It is whiteness, not Irishness that allows me to be both subject in the U.S. and Ireland. Whiteness allows me access to an array of subject positions—U.S. citizen, Irish American—how did my family negotiate this privilege granting signifier?²⁰

Saturday morning of my first week in Dublin and I am wandering the streets trying to keep my mind open, my senses open for something to emerge from this Dublin experience. I am utilizing and following the Four Seasons of Ethnography methodology set forth by Sarah Amira De la Garza. Through embodiment of the methodology De la Garza pushes researchers to question the received guiding ideals²¹

¹⁹ U.N.H.C.R., *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

²⁰ I recognize in posing this question that the Irish were considered non-white in the United States during this time and thus were marginalized as an immigrant population. What I am arguing here however is that the signifier of whiteness perhaps allowed flexibility to name and negotiate subjectivity upon entering the United States. See Frederick C. Corey, "Crossing an Irish Border," in *Readings in Intercultural Communication*, ed. Judith N. Martin, Thomas K. Nakayama, and Lisa A. Flores (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001).

²¹ De la Garza notes four received guiding ideals often underlying positivistic, naturalistic and critical theory research. She notes these as 1) *Opportunism*, which implicitly assumes that data collection and reporting should fit appropriately within planned forms of writing, design and timing. 2) *Independence of researcher*, or the notion that the researcher is disparate or somehow not connected to what is under

present in assumptions about culture and subjectivity, and to consider ways of embodying the Four Seasons guiding ideals.

The first of these guiding ideals concerns *natural cycles* (*appropriateness*), or the belief that “all natural experience is ordered in cycles, which are then reflected in the processes and experiences of all living beings.”²² I was struck most with this guiding ideal as I reviewed my fieldnotes and found stories of asylum, emigration/immigration ripe in what I thought to be an ethnography concerning traditional Irish music. Though I was charting Dublin for sound-stories, I was also audiencing and responding to living histories of mobility and displacement. Second, through this methodology, researchers must be aware of the *interdependence in all things*, or the “arbitrary nature of boundaries that we construct for ourselves in our social experience.”²³ Third, De la Garza posits a guiding ideal of *preparedness* whereby “one simply can not enter into that for which he or she is not prepared appropriately.”²⁴ Part of reflexive inquiry is doing the work prior to field work so that you can be ready for and open to the natural cycles, as well as invested in the interdependence of self in the context. In staying open to the Four Seasons methodology, I had to recognize that my study of refugee and asylum contexts in the United States was part of the preparation for my fieldwork and this narrative. While I had also done research about Irish history, traditional Irish music, even my family history in preparation, De la Garza asks us to consider preparation holistically. In other words, our whole lives must be understood as preparation. Finally, De la Garza sets forth the guiding ideal of *harmony/balance* or

consideration. The researcher might be in contact with a culture but they are not intricately a part of the cultural practice or context. 3) *Entitlement*, or the taken-for-granted nature of social hierarchy that most often manifests in relationship to questions and expressions of ownership over material, data, experiences, presentations and methods. 4) The *primacy of rationality*, or the positioning of thought (through the mind) as the appropriate point of data inquiry and recording. Sarah Amira De la Garza [published as Maria Cristina González], "The Four Seasons of Ethnography: A Creation-Centered Ontology for Ethnography," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24 (2000): 629-32.

²² De la Garza, "The Four Seasons," 632.

²³ De la Garza, "The Four Seasons," 633.

²⁴ De la Garza, "The Four Seasons," 634.

discipline. From this ideal, ethnographers must recognize that “with their necessary responsiveness to the awareness of nature and relationships within it, will manifest themselves in the ultimate awareness that all forms of experience must be respected and given attention, due to their interdependent state.”²⁵ Try as I did to focus solely on contemporary manifestations of traditional Irish music, the complexities of this narrative were not there, or at least not completely there. Instead, the guiding ideals propelled me across the Liffey where a non-descript white woman who I took to be a solicitor, shoved a white half-page flyer into my hand.

At first I move to push the flyer into the nylon purse resting over my shoulder, brushing it aside as needless information about something-or-another, but something stops me. The title across the front.

—RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM—

I think to myself, RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM: Isn't Ireland one of the leading European nations accepting refugees and immigrants? RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM: I'd seen brown bodies around Dublin, right? RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM: What is this group all about?

Millions of questions stream like tickertape through my head and I halt my path north, stand-still in the street, then creep closer to the station where two other white women and one white man are working to get the attention of passersby just like me. Behind the crew is a black fence that is covered ten-feet wide with rows and rows of black print on white paper—nearly fifty newspaper clippings, tokens of racist and xenophobic violence in Ireland creating a haunting backdrop for this group's cause. I stop to read the print on the now crumpled paper clenched between my fingers:

²⁵ De la Garza, "The Four Seasons," 634.

National Day of Action Against Racism: Saturday June 18th, 2005. Michael McDowell's deportation machine has got worse than ever in recent months. He has sent his snatch squads into schools, attempting to drag children away from their classmates and teachers. He has separated mothers from their children. He has torn people away from communities they are now a part of, ignoring calls for compassion from their friends and neighbours.

Curious, I wonder who Michael McDowell is and if the accusations are accurate. Wanting to know, I scan all of the articles posted on the fence for clues, answers. Act after act of racist violence against immigrant and/or refugee persons of color is splayed across the stark black fence.²⁶ I think almost without thinking that I should study this organization while I am in Ireland—I am after all researching refugee issues and asylum in the United States right now. Wary of the ways that entitlement and opportunism function as my guiding ideals, I move on.²⁷

A week later and I am back in the same spot: walking around the streets of Dublin 2 in search of 12 Brunswick Place, the address listed on the RESIDENTS AGAINST RACISM flyer I got earlier. I walk and walk with my map in hand ready for whatever may come my way. I am diligent today as I have had quite a bit of mis-fortune finding things in Dublin. After almost three weeks of not quite going the right way, I've resigned myself to the fact that I'll probably get lost along the way, if I'm trying to get somewhere

To my surprise I find a stage lighting company at 12 Brunswick Place, Dublin 2. It's the sort of place I'd go to buy a new spotlight, or gels to color the lights of a theatre, certainly not a center, a haven for victims of racist violence. I hesitate, turn around back into the street ready to forget the whole idea. But my fear that I never follow things

²⁶ The history of racism in Ireland includes anti-Semitic, anti-Traveller manifestations as well as racism against the Black Irish. Contemporary forms are more focused on racism linked to xenophobic sentiments. For more insight on this turn see Robbie McVeigh and Ronit Lentin, "Situated Racisms: A Theoretical Introduction," in *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*, ed. Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2002).

²⁷ Fieldnotes, 12/06/05, 2-6

through stops me. I must at least knock on the red door. After a few seconds a slim white man with fair skin and very short blondish-white hair comes to the door, "It's open you may come in," he says with ease. "Can I help you find something?"

"I'm actually looking for an organization called Residents Against Racism, I think I must be lost," I say in uneasy fashion, conscious of how my body and voice have been read all throughout Ireland and how they are read now.

"That's here," the man states, "we get our mail here."

"Oh, so there is no center where I could get some information about the organization?" I ask, somewhat disappointed at the thought of this being a dead-end lead.

"Well you could talk to me, I am a member of the organization," he says responding to the disappointment in my voice. "My name is Mike," he states, extending his hand.

My hand meets his half way as I introduce myself.

"Well, what are you interested in knowing about the organization?" he questions leaning his elbow on the store counter. His body is relaxed in stance yet fully committed to the conversation in gesture. He reminds me of many lighting guys I have worked with in the theatre in his well-worn jeans and faded red tee-shirt, with an equally faded red handkerchief hanging out of his back pocket.

"I'm not sure exactly," I state truthfully, "What does your organization do?"

"We do lots of things," he says in a breathy sigh signaling that he's not sure where to start. "We protest each Saturday, keep a hotline open for individuals to call if they've been harmed by racism, we lobby at the governmental level, and most recently we have been fighting the deportation."

"What sort of deportation?" I ask seeking clarification.

"Well, in Ireland it happens most often with asylum seekers," he starts, aware that this could be a long explanation. "Are you familiar with asylum seekers?"

"In the United States yes and I'm learning more about how it works here," I state vaguely affirming his continuation of the explanation.

“Deportation of asylum seekers happens at all stages of seeking asylum. Seekers should have rights at some point but they don’t always. The government has been known to send people back to where they came from when they enter Irish borders and claim to be asylum seekers. That’s not supposed to happen, even if the seekers do not have papers.”

As he speaks I nod my head, eyes and ears intent on what Mike is saying.

“Deportation also happens after asylum seekers’ applications have been refused. The application process is long and intense, sometimes people have to apply multiple times and are still not accepted as asylum seekers though the experiences at home make them necessarily qualify as refugees. This is where we most often step in right now.” He continues, “Several of our staff members can serve as counsel to asylum seekers. This helps out a lot but it doesn’t guarantee anything.”

Mike goes on to explain the details of life in Ireland for asylum seekers waiting for their cases to be heard. Roughly forty-thousand individuals have applied for asylum in the Irish Republic in the past ten years, with approximately six thousand gaining access to asylum. The main countries of origin for Irish asylum seekers are Nigeria, Romania, Democratic Republic of Congo and the Czech Republic.²⁸ While asylum seekers wait for applications to be reviewed they receive a Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) of nineteen Euro and ten cents a week, the lowest welfare payment allotted in Ireland.²⁹ Since 1999, asylum seekers living in Ireland for one year can find employment while awaiting their asylum decision; however, the government placed extreme conditions on the seekers right-to-work. First, those eligible to work may only be employed through the sponsorship of an employer who must pay for their permit. Second,

²⁸ Steven Loyal and Ciarán Staunton, "The Dynamics of Political Economy in Ireland: The Case of Asylum Seekers and the Right to Work," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 2 (2001).

²⁹ Drazin Noznic, "One Refugee Experience in Ireland," in *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*, ed. Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2002), 74.

workers are bound to the employers because the permit is not transferable. Consequently, asylum seekers often suffer abuse because they are dependent upon their employers for work. In their study, Steven Loyal and Ciarán Staunton found that asylum seekers “likened the non-transferable work permit to a feudal tie between a landlord and a serf, which was the most obvious exploitative relationship beside which they could draw a parallel with the experience of working in these conditions in Ireland.”³⁰

“Why are refugees and asylum seekers such a big issue in Ireland right now?” I question, “I mean you see the same things in the United States, perhaps in different forms, but the threat is definitely there. How would you explain what’s going on here?”

“That’s an enormous question. I’m not sure how to answer that,” he states with a tight-lipped smile, searching his thoughts. Tentatively Mike continues, “Perhaps it’s fear. Ireland’s a nation that came into money quick. The rest of Europe had to pay attention to us for the first time in probably forever. It felt good, ya’ know? But the fear of loss and poverty, being weak keeps us keeping everyone else, everyone that could bring us down, out. It’s crazy because it was us not that long ago. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I know. My great, great grandparents were a part of that group,” I say nodding my head as we stand facing one another with our heads turned to the floor.

We go on to discuss the economic situation in Ireland and how it impacts immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. After steady economic growth periods in the 1970’s and 1980’s, Ireland experienced an economic boom in the 1990’s, charting annual growth in the gross domestic product (GDP) upwards of eight percent, with the labor markets expanding by more than forty-three percent during the decade.³¹ With the dot-com bubble burst and the global financial crisis in the late 1990’s, Ireland too began to experience a slowing economy. As Benjamin Kline explains, “Suddenly there were fewer

³⁰ Loyal and Staunton, "Dynamics of Political Economy," 38.

³¹ Benjamin Kline, "The Changing Social Environment of Modern Ireland: Immigration and the Issues of Politics, Economics, and Security," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2004).

and fewer 'good' jobs available to returnees and to immigrants from the EU and the United States, and their numbers dropped off sharply. Other immigrants—from what the Irish government classifies as the 'rest of the world'—quickly began to fill the void. Their numbers soared, from 4,200 in 1999 to 16,400 in 2002."³²

"You should join us on Saturday at the Bank of Ireland," Mike adds, wrapping up our conversation, "We will be there protesting and talking about these issues."

"Maybe I will," I state nodding my head slowly, thinking to myself that I will already be in the United States by then. "Do you have an email address? If it's possible I'd like to converse more about these issues."

"You can use the one of our organization." He hands me a white half-sheet flyer. "I already have one of those," I say smiling, "I'll email you there."³³

Currently individuals are trying to enter Ireland from other nations. Ireland's population finally reached four million again in 2003, the first time since 1871,³⁴ and the nation is now experiencing racist-xenophobia similar to that of continental Europe.³⁵ Lentin and McVeigh are right to note that racism and xenophobia are not contemporary phenomena in Ireland.³⁶ Indigenous ethnic groups including the Travellers as well as Black Irish people and earlier Jewish, Italian, Southeast Asian and Chinese migrant groups have all negotiated discourses of racism in Ireland. Contemporarily, fifty percent of immigrants seeking entrance into Ireland are returnees from the United States, Australia, Canada and England, and another large majority of immigrants are European Union (EU) citizens with

³² Kline, "The Changing Social Environment," 196.

³³ Fieldnotes, 27/06/05, 2-7.

³⁴ Kline, "The Changing Social Environment."

³⁵ Mac an Ghail, "Beyond a Black-White Dualism.;" Saskia Sassen, *Guests and Aliens* (New York: New Press 1999).

³⁶ McVeigh and Lentin, "Situating Racisms."

the right to work throughout Europe.³⁷ Yet, the home that remains home to those with Irish ancestry is now faced with comprehending how the Isle home might be home to individuals with non-Irish names, non-Irish faces.³⁸ A small percent of individuals moving to Ireland are asylum seekers. Under the Refugee Act of 1996, fully ratified in 2000, individuals may arrive in Ireland and ask for asylum in the nation because of persecution at home.³⁹ This persecution cannot just be any persecution. It must be fear of political persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or membership in a social group. Poverty doesn't count. Health doesn't count. In making these claims individuals must name their home-state as inhospitable, meaning that their home could not, or was unwilling to secure their safety. In speaking these words, asylum seekers grapple with the ways "home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, and the repression of differences within oneself."⁴⁰ In claiming asylum, individuals consequently grapple with the multiple constitutions and contradictions of home.⁴¹

Jacques Derrida theorizes the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe through hospitality.⁴² Derrida uses the double meaning of the French word *hôte* as both host and guest, to work through and consider the significance of the relationship between ethical hospitality and political hospitality, whereby political hospitality, ideally, forecloses upon the contingent limits of ethical

³⁷ Kline, "The Changing Social Environment," 187.

³⁸ Fieldnotes, 27/06/05, 3.

³⁹ McVeigh and Lentin, "Situated Racisms," 26-27.

⁴⁰ Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It" in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis (Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 1986), 196.

⁴¹ Etsuko Fugimoto, "Home, Belonging, and Community: Refugees' Construction and Negotiation of Identity in Their Transplanted Lives." (Paper presented at the National Communication Association Convention, San Antonio, TX, November 2006.)

⁴² Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, ed. Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, *Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2001).

hospitality. Asylum seekers make claims for asylum through the political system that structures hospitality, and yet when they make these claims they are calling upon ethical hospitality, asking for refuge within the hospitable home-space. Yet, for the ethically hospitable situation to actualize, the host must allow, even invite, the vulnerability of self, space and family. Ethical hospitality requires that the host open up her/his home without invitation, without common language, knowing nothing of the guest and without expectation for reciprocity. This would mean that the host would have to recognize the ways in which his/her position as host is completely contingent on the other, that she/he is always, already given over to the other.⁴³ This form of hospitality is ethical because it positions both guest and host as full subjects in the hospitable relation for both become host to one another in that they endow each other with the gift of surviving life. As such, ethical hospitality disrupts notions of ownership and property, for the home is no longer owned in a singular sense.

19 Euro 10 cents a week⁴⁴
6,000 stamped through in four years⁴⁵
the others—seekers of asylum—go underground
under the table, to live, sleep
feed the family towing in feet,
survive the system demanding
dehumanization, abjection, or else,
or else deportation.

New names, new famine.

⁴³ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Books, 2004).

⁴⁴ This is the Standard Welfare Allowance (SWA) in Ireland at this time. Fieldnotes, 27/06/05, 5; Nozinic, "One Refugee Experience," 74.

⁴⁵ Fieldnotes, 27/06/05, 5.

Sara McKinnon

This happened before
though trails were opposite
we couldn't leave fast enough
we raised fists for food
against golden fingers,
greedy fingers forcing us into famine.
And then—

And then we fled. To England
America, Australia and Canada—
Anywhere the boats would go
we Irish went. The Flanerys,
Flanaghans, McDowells and
Maloneys—all in search of
refuge, relief, rain in whatever form.

We Paddys spread over the planet.

It was easier then to slip between
the cracks, not be seen, meld
and mold into what the space would
hold. Families moved easily enough
over borders of nations, states, provinces
and surely providence reigned many times
as names, nationality, even religion and
language found a new flag to salute,
a new anthem to proudly sing.
This is indeed the luck of the Irish.

This history remains engraved on granite walls,
whispered in commerce halls, commemorated
in song and poetry of lovers leaving, families
fleeing, famine, loss—
these are the stories, histories written

everywhere. Except the present.

Now strangers come in
escaping elsewheres all over
and 19 Euro 10 cents a week
is what a person gets to eat,
sleep on this emerald isle.

These strangers are not so strange,
not so strange indeed. The names may
not resound as fixtures of Irish ancestry,
ripe with O's and Mc's that make the Irish,
Irish wherever they are.

No.



Sara McKinnon

The not so strange indeed are reflections in
Memory's mirror of those who left
a century ago. Remembered, renamed
in songs—drenching laments of daring to go with-
out a sense of what comes after.
The reflection pours out in all directions.
Over the sea, pictures of people
boarding boats, leaving port
as newer versions of mass
transportation glide in air and sea.
But. The reflection ends. Evaporates
upon arrival.

Yet this rocky isle is keeping watch
over the cracks, surveying schools,
raiding restaurants to make sure
they stay out, they can't contribute,
they can't become—

Part of the presently prospering Ireland
with booming business boasting
of “near zero percent unemployment”
and exorbitant estates. You've
come a long way Paddy.

The luck of the Irish continues.

And the threat works. To
a person “who has nowhere
to go but must go somewhere”
as Dostoyevsky pointed out,
the threat is clear. “Don't
break the rules or you'll be
sent back.” Threat Understood.

So 19 Euro 10 cents a week goes
as far as it will go. While
six percent of those seeking asylum,
those newly named (un)
name (ables)
will be allowed to stay.

Supplementing the weekly wage?

Hope that a story of survival will
surpass hours of interviews.
Hope that the Irish luck will
spread elsewhere.
Hope that reflections will be re-
membered, renamed
in the waters waving out in the
distance. Of grandmothers,
great uncles, whole towns even—
In this way, we must always trace mirrors,
those created in story, song, water and memory,
for hints, glints, haunts of happenings
happening again, happening always,
happening today.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ This poem taken from my fieldnote journal on 28/06/05 is a response to the conversation in fieldnotes, 27/05/06.



Those entering Ireland—as asylum seekers, immigrants, even tourists—function as mirrors who compel the Irish to remember what it means to be Irish. Margalit makes distinctions between communities that remember, or have knowledge of the past together, depending on how an event is remembered. A common memory is held when communities remember an event, but they remember it as individuals. A shared memory, Margalit explains “requires communication,” as the fragmented versions of what happened become a cohesive, unified narrative shared by all, even those who didn’t actually experience the event.⁴⁷ The Irish community, in remembering knowledge of the past through the reflection of all sorts of people entering Ireland, relies on a cohesive sense of what those reflections will reveal.

⁴⁷ Margalit, *The Ethics*, 52.

Margalit contends that “to remember now is to know now what you knew in the past, without learning in-between what you know now. And to know is to believe something to be true. Memory, then, is *knowledge from the past*. It is not necessarily knowledge *about* the past.”⁴⁸ And mirrors are possibly the only way for us to remember in the present; for when we stand before a mirror we are face-to-face with the “what” of that day, crawling out over the color of skin, staking a stance in our half-attempt to return a smile.

I, white Irish American, full-faced and freckled, stand as a mirror and reveal an Ireland of perseverance, strength, fight. The shared memory reveals millions who looked like me, fled before me, had to leave or else. The shared memory is haunted by those who died on this isle, died aboard boats going elsewhere. I am a remembering of great-grandparents, neighbors, friends I never knew. Though I don’t know, don’t hold those stories—even those of my family—the shared memory remembers for me, remembers me as a member of those who stand before my reflecting exterior. In Ireland, my skin and voice reveal the promise of modernity that my ancestors, in moving to the U.S., were recuperated into in being named as white; though they were not at first white in the U.S., dynamics of subjectivity changed and they gained the power to speak in the public. Moreover, the reflection of my nationality with the essence of Ireland in tact, reflects the Irish Republic as actor in global flows of capital. Face-to-face with Ireland, the light reveals for both of us that I am always recognizable here: I am a face that demands visibility, for my reflection reveals that Ireland is globally mobile. Ireland is prospering. Ireland cannot be held down. My reflection reveals that the trauma of emigration is now Ireland’s gift. Ireland is everywhere. And Ireland is always home. And this is indeed what it means to be a subject everywhere; you are hospitably welcomed as home every where you move.

In contrast, asylum seekers, arriving from all over, reveal an Ireland of shadowed weakness, devastation and oppression, with race as the primary signifier in the mirror. When the light shines on the seekers of asylum, Ireland re-members itself as floods of people once

⁴⁸ Margalit, *The Ethics*, 14.

fleeing, as porous borders,⁴⁹ a land lorded over, ruled, raped, and a nation not considered white. The asylum seekers asking for hospitality remember Ireland as an inhospitable home. The asylum seeker's mirror, when shimmering through shared memory of past emigration, reveals an image Ireland would rather forget; this is the residue of a third-world, colonized existence propelled into first-worldness.

Yet the shared memory in the midst of first-worldness does not let go of the remembered knowledge of struggle. Ireland must keep track of these images and stories so that it does not happen again, and so that Ireland does not slip from the present day prominence. And even as Ireland hates its reflection, it looks face-to-face with asylum seekers, peering into faces, because Ireland cannot not look, something too familiar keeps Ireland staring, glaring. Once it sees, examines every so-called weakness and imperfection, it turns away, denying resemblance, denying connection.

It is increasingly important to understand how contemporary and historical flows of people around the world are connected. In this paper, I attempted to bring into dialogue the ways that my mobility and positionality as a white, U.S. citizen with Irish heritage in Ireland intersect the current ways asylum seekers are recognized in Ireland. While I was hailed as belonging to and at home in Ireland, asylum seekers are asking for hospitality because their home-state is inhospitable. While I was invited as the welcomed guest, asylum seekers are regarded with suspicion. And though we as the welcomed guests indeed feel welcome, it is vitally important to question the ways that exclusion is always bound up in the invitation home, for as Yu-Fang Cho explicates in theorizing belonging, "mobility is always already haunted by immobility, freedom to move by the threat of

⁴⁹ McVeigh and Lentin, "Situated Racisms," 28.

imprisonment, and open landscape by enclosure.”⁵⁰ Part of the responsibility for white U.S. American subjects then is to question the erasures and exclusions that underlie mobility and the ability to be named home in many locations worldwide. There must be a questioning of how discourses of whiteness and U.S. citizenship in globalization allow certain subjects to take for granted the ways bodies and subjects are constituted and move. In this way, the inhospitality asylum seekers in Ireland experience and my being welcomed as home in Ireland are bound up in the same discourses of recognition. It is these connections and disconnections linked to whiteness and nationality that we must push to consider. Rather than recuperate spaces as our home spaces, it is vital to question what home means in that context, who can call the space home and how.

Interrogations of this nature reveal the ways that home is unstable and in crisis. In foregrounding asylum seekers, this paper illustrates the ways in which home is always, already political. Emma Haddad insists that refugees and asylum seekers be recognized as residual of the formation of the global nation-state system whereby separate states came to maintain sovereignty over their territory and people: “refugees are not the consequence of a breakdown in the system of separate nation-states; rather, they are an integral part of the system—as long as there are political borders constructing separate states and creating clear definitions of insiders and outsiders, there will be refugees.”⁵¹ Moreover, those who don’t fit the within the national imaginary of belonging in the home-state are often persecuted, pushed out, forced out of belonging to the primary state. In this system, affiliation and allegiance to a nation happen in opposition to the excluded refugee subject. Those who belong, belong primarily because they don’t have as immutable identities, or aren’t associated with the persecuted characteristics that propel asylum seekers and refugees to flee. Asylum seekers and refugees move because they do

⁵⁰ Yu-Fang Cho, "Rewriting Exile, Remapping Empire, Re-Membering Home: Hualing Nieh's Mulberry and Peach," *Meridians: Feminism, race, transnationalism* 5, no. 1 (2004): 160.

⁵¹ Emma Haddad, "The Refugee: The Individual between Sovereigns," *Global Society: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations* 17, no. 3 (2003): 297.

not fit within the national-imaginary of the home. They flee because home is no longer hospitable; rather, home is hostile.

As asylum seekers then turn and ask for hospitality elsewhere, they are calling on host nation-states to discursively intervene in the sovereign contract, and to name their home-state inhospitable. Moreover, asylum seekers call on host-states to intervene in their own sovereign projects of constructing and maintaining a national imaginary that includes some, and excludes many. In asking for hospitable space within the host-state, to reside, live and belong, asylum seekers are rupturing the constructions of belonging within the host-state, because they are naming themselves as proper-subjects of/within that home. Moreover, in being granted or denied asylum, the discourses that maintain the national imaginary come into view. It is when these discourses emerge from invisibility that changes to the national imaginary of belonging begin to take place.