CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Heritage, social justice and Black Lives Matter in Ireland during COVID-19
Authors	McAtackney, Laura
Publication date	2023-07-14
Original Citation	McAtackney, L. (2023) Heritage, social justice and Black Lives Matter in Ireland during COVID-19, in Shepherd, N. (ed.) Rethinking Heritage in Precarious Times: Coloniality, Climate Change, and Covid-19. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, , pp. 169-185. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003188438-15
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	10.4324/9781003188438-15
Rights	© 2023, the Author. All rights reserved. This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Shepherd, N. (ed.) Rethinking Heritage in Precarious Times: Coloniality, Climate Change, and Covid-19.
Download date	2026-11-04 15:45:30
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14791

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Resilient Heritage: Rethinking Heritage in Precarious Times

Ed Nick Shepherd

Laura McAtackney

TITLE: Heritage, Social Justice and Black Lives Matters in Ireland during COVID-19

ABSTRACT: This chapter will reflexively examine the role of social media during the pandemic in bringing together issues of social justice and heritage in the context of racism in Ireland. While social media has a global reach, there are often culturally and nationally-specific conversations that take place on social media forums that not only shape wider debates in the mainstream media but can allow for a variety of perspectives and experiences to interact that would seldom do so offline. I will use three case-studies – two of which I have been tangentially involved with - to consider how the pivot online has not simply been a social crutch in isolating times but has allowed for broader conversations of social injustice that have been prompted by the pandemic to be explored in detail.

KEYWORDS: [5-10]: Heritage, Ireland, racism, #BLM, social media, statues, language, fake history

[5700 words excluding abstract and bibliography]

Since the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic became apparent with its spread from China to Europe - and the subsequent classification of a global pandemic in March 2020 (WHO 2020) - we have witnessed incredible changes that have most notably impacted the most socially marginalized and vulnerable, especially in the so-called Global South (UNDP 2020). Initially, it was notable the so-called Global North had significant problems with managing the virus, especially in more neoliberal and free market nations where the populace had little experience of constraining themselves for the public good. In comparison

some Global South countries, especially those more embedded in social development approaches, adapted well to the impacts of the pandemic through communal actions (Patel 2021). Over time the enduring but fluctuating nature of the pandemic has revealed fractures and pressures across almost all societies, especially as governments have attempted to navigate protecting the vulnerable while also facilitating some form of (economic) 'normal' life. During this extraordinary period of uncertainty and upheaval, physical isolation, lack of movement and government tracking of citizen movement have become a notable and not-uncontroversial feature of many of our lives. While aspects of 'normality' have continued, restarted, been reconceptualized as online and / or have reacted or shaped in myriad ways, it remains unclear how long-term these deviations from our previous experiences will be and what changes may remain with us. Media organisations have been quick to predict that the pandemic has 'changed the world forever' (Dans 2020), but historians who have studied previous pandemics – especially the 1918 flu pandemic – have shown that the ongoing and long-term impact of a pandemic is not predictable, straightforward or universal (Rogers 2021)

The ongoing and fluctuating nature of the pandemic means it is not entirely clear how the world will emerge or be changed by it. New variants are constantly emerging - and are often concurrent - in various parts of the globe, and the uneven roll out of vaccination programs means that it is still unclear how efficient and long-term they will be on a global basis. While Global North countries have saw a rise in vaccine-hesitancy, global inequalities have been writ large through the simultaneous hoarding of vaccines and notable delays in their distribution through to the Global South. It is against this background of stark inequalities, ongoing insecurity and the new normal of a truly global pandemic that my heritage-related musings are grounded. It is difficult to write about a moving moment but already it is clear that how we understand and interact with the world is being challenged if not changed by the pandemic.

While the virus is affecting individuals and societies in myriad ways, it is clearly playing a role in highlighting and exacerbating the underlying tensions and in/equalities that already pre-existed. It is not a coincidence that COVID-19 has provided the backdrop, if not the impetus, to a number of social justice protests, most famously in response to the brutal murder of George Floyd in May 2020, which began in the US and extended into wider #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) protests in many countries with Black minority populations. While these protests have taken on a different character due to the pandemic – with online and socially distanced protests being prominent (Nakhaie and Nakhaie 2020) - they have also been enhanced by racial inequalities in Global North countries being laid bare by the pandemic, including the differential health outcomes for 'Ethnic Minority' groups in many countries (Gilbert, Yearby, Johnston and Banks 2021). The pandemic has also resulted in opportunism by the Far Right to extend their reach by stoking fears and uncertainties about the impact of the virus and vaccine, economic insecurity and distrust of government (Far Right Observatory 2020). Most notably, in the Global North the far right has aligned with covid-denial and anti-vaxx conspiracy theorists (Buranyi 2020) and there have also been a number of concerns that elected, populist governments have been misusing the pandemic for their political advantage and in doing so endangering public health (Orzechowski, Schochow and Steger 2021). It is within this deeply unstable situation that I have been considering the role of heritage during the pandemic and how we might engage with it as researchers.

HERITAGE DURING COVID-19

Recognizing our wider social context is an important starting point because heritage does not exist outside of society. While heritage can be many things to many people – extended, extrapolated, used and abused to the point that Laurajane Smith could legitimately suggest 'There is, really, no such thing as heritage' (2006, 11) - at its essence heritage is about people and how they connect to, understand and make meaning of their cultural and natural world. Broadly conceived there have been a number of repercussions of the ongoing

pandemic on heritage as a concept, organisation, and initiative; a few notable examples will be briefly considered in this section. The impact of the pandemic has been clearly seen in the funding precarity and insecurity of heritage in many societal contexts. As heritage and tourism are often closely aligned, there is no doubt that widespread restrictions on communal gatherings and travel have left heritage as one of the sectors hardest hit globally by the pandemic. Many heritage organisations have acted swiftly to reconfigure to outdoors, socially distanced and online activities. They have utilized digital platforms to allow for continued audience engagement and access to materials and performances and in doing so have highlighted the important role heritage plays for the wider public (ICCROM 2020). The swift creation of initiatives that engage with the pandemic from a specifically heritage angle, such as the *Viral Archive*, have seen researchers use social media to crowd source pandemic-related material culture from the public to recording and analysis (Viral Archive ND). The community archaeology company, DigVentures, has not simply engaged with the pandemic as source of material culture but has strategized to counter one of its most notable side-effects - social isolation - by creating virtual citizen archaeology projects. Their response to the initial lockdown phase was to facilitate members of the public to excavate their own back gardens and share findings with an engaged, online community (ArchaeoBalt 2020).

Despite their best-efforts heritage and cultural organisations have seen drastic funding and subsidy cuts across the board (Kennedy and Minguez Garcia 2020) that cannot be simply answered by moving their operations online. In many countries the squeeze on economic resources have resulted in devastating financial cuts as governments pivot to finance public health and subsidize the public sector and industry. For example, in Mexico the Ministry of Culture lost 75% of its funding in the initial months of the pandemic, putting all its cultural institutions in jeopardy (Mistry 2021). But the biggest impact has been on independent and freelancer actors, who have often been left with little or no support from national governments (UN News 2020). On a more structural level, the financial changes

necessitated by the pandemic has opened up wider debates about what is considered important to fund, retain and potentially abandon in sustainably moving forward. In some countries, these conversations have been overtly political, including in England where heritage debates - labelled as “culture wars” - are largely focused on how and why the national past is remembered – and commemorated – in the present. These debates have been re-ignited by social justice protests during the pandemic, most notably the toppling of the statue of slaver Edward Colston into Bristol Harbour at the climax of a #BLM protest in June 2020. Interestingly, the statue – complete with graffiti from the toppling event – was eventually, if not uncontroversially, moved into the M Shed heritage venue for recontextualized display in June 2021 (Selvin 2021). Government pushback at grassroot actions have resulted in political interventions to ensure controversial statues to colonizers are subject to ‘retain and explain’ policies (Harris 2021) and there have been attempts to shut down and prevent future funding for projects such as *Colonial Countryside*, which was documenting and communicating links between National Trust properties and colonial wealth (Doward 2020). In Denmark, Far Right campaigners against race, historic colonialism, gender, and migration scholarship have been agitating in the media for political control of university researcher activities since an artistic ‘happening’ led by Art Academy department Head Katrine Kirckinck-Holmfeld resulted in a bust of King Frederik V being deposited into a Copenhagen Canal in the autumn of 2020 (Buckley 2021). The pressure on academics has resulted in demands from parliament that universities curtail so-called ‘academic activism’ (Friis and Legarth Sandorff 2021). These examples are indicative of how intense social pressure felt in many countries during the pandemic have created various pressure points that have precipitated various actions and counter-actions. There are heritage implications for many of these actions, as the public and politicians pivot from concern with how we navigate the present to heated debates about how we know and understand the past.

From a personal point of view a significant change that has been enforced by the pandemic - and has had a huge impact on many heritage researchers – is our lack of physical

interaction with the outside world during periods of lockdown or limited movement. As someone who does not live in a country I actively research in, it has been a learning curve to move and adapt to new ways of engaging with heritage issues that have long concerned me. For me, this has mainly taken the form of a pivot online in order to view how heritage debates are being shaped and interacted with by various actors from academics, journalists, activists and members of the public as social media has been repositioned from a distraction to a 'crucial communication tool' (Shu-Feng et al 2021, e176). The importance of the social media pivot online has been recognized and acted on by many heritage organisations, especially those who faced extensive lockdowns in the early months of the pandemic. Kate Guest has revealed how Historic England responded to lockdown by reformatting its existing 'Heritage Online Debates' to communicate crowd-sourced examples of how the pandemic was impacting heritage organisations in order to maximize dissemination of the challenges they faced to a wider public (2021, 9). She has argued that sharing of challenges online had multiple repercussions: from communicating the experiences of pandemic to a broad audience, providing inspiration and support to heritage organizations and advertising the types of supports organization were entitled to, as well as pressuring the government to do more (Ibid, 10-11).

Clearly the reasons to move to social media are many and complex, my experiences started as skeptical as to the importance of heritage in the face of wider social justice debates prompted by the pandemic in general and the revealing of its inequalities in particular. I was not sure how much social media could make any difference and, more particularly, I was pessimistic that wider, global reactions to inequalities would be translated to significant conversations that dovetailed with heritage. I wondered would there be any deep or meaningful discussions on contemporary and historic inequalities in Ireland and would heritage bring anything to these discussions? What has unfolded since 2020 has surprised, educated, enlightened and, at times, depressed me. The rest of this chapter will present some reflections on how the pandemic has shaped, and in many ways exposed, the unequal

experiences in Ireland – especially in terms acknowledging and acting against racism - and how heritage has, at times, found its place in these online conversations.

ONLINE SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HERITAGE IN IRELAND DURING THE PANDEMIC.

This section opens with a positional reflection on the subject of racial social justice and Ireland during the pandemic. I write this section from the position of a white, settled, Irish-born person. While I self-identify as part of the Catholic minority community in Northern Ireland – and I have experienced discrimination due to my background - I have never experienced Ireland from the perspective of being a person of colour, a visible minority or a migrant. My comments on how race, social justice and heritage have intersected online are from the perspective of an outsider. I am aware of my position of privilege as a white, critical heritage scholar. I have completed research on anti-Black racism and legacies of colonialism but I have no lived experience other than an active desire to be an anti-racist comrade.

Ireland is an interesting case in terms of historic and contemporary studies of race and racism, due to what Gardner has identified as its unusual experiences of being the subject of colonial racism in the past through to its present-day situation as a hegemonic 'white' European nation. Gardner has noted Ireland was one of the early targets of modern European colonization due to the early 17th century English conquest, which saw the Irish racialized to justify their subjugation but this was at 'an embryonic stage when there is racism without "race."' He then moves to what he views as 'the contemporary norm, in which there is "racism without racists," which is essentially reducing contemporary racism to the structural racism of neoliberal visa regimes and discriminatory citizenship practices that have existed in Ireland since at least the 1980s. (Gardner 2009, 14). It is important to note that mired within Ireland's neoliberal visa regimes is a dehumanizing and exceptionally cruel refugee-handling system – Direct Provision – which separates refugees and undocumented migrants from the rest of society, prohibits them from accessing work, and even disallows them from making their own food (Gessen 2019). The treatment of thousands of incredibly

vulnerable people – almost all people of colour - continues alongside a painfully slowly process for applying for leave to remain; a process that can take decades (Ní Chiosáin 2016). Racist structures are not ephemeral concepts, they have real world repercussions, including high mental health diagnoses and suicide rates amongst those incarcerated in Direct Provision (Ní Raghallaigh et al 2017). The shameful conditions of Direct Provision stands in stark contrast to the huge profits the private contractors who facilitate the daily running of Direct Provision have amassed through these for-profit ventures (Deegan 2021). Ultimately, while there is some validity to Gardner's distinctions, I argue they bypass the lived experiences of people of colour in Ireland, including those who are not in Direct Provision. Indeed, a broad spectrum of people of colour in Ireland have been vocal in sharing their more intimate and personal experiences of racism in Ireland since George Floyd's murder heightened public consciousness (the details of this will be explored in the next section). Added to this underlying post/colonial, neoliberal context, Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe without an electorally-successful Far Right. This situation is for a variety of reasons, and it does not mean that the Far Right do not have a significant presence in Ireland, but essentially the core political parties in Ireland are populist, paternalist and nationalist, which leaves little room for the Far Right to gain votes (Gardner 2009, 10). This combination of historical and contemporary factors has resulted in an environment in which racism enacted against traditional (Travellers) and emerging (migrants from the Global South) minorities is prevalent but widely denied or minimized. Despite the desire to reduce racism to structure – and in doing so absolving people - it is evident that racism did and does exist in Ireland at a structural level but also at an everyday and interpersonal level (INAR 2020).

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA, in May 2020, had a significant impact on Ireland, as it did in many white-majority countries with long-term denial of anti-Black racism (Fanning 2012, 8-29). Initially, George's death, and the resultant #BLM protests, prompted carefully-choreographed street protests in cities across Ireland that mirrored those seen in

the USA. Liam Kennedy has argued that the protests in Ireland constituted mixed responses that used the broader messaging and aesthetics of #BLM - largely adopted from social media - while referencing experiences of racism specific to Ireland, especially the much-criticized Direct Provision asylum system (2020). Since that initial social justice protest a number of directly and tangentially connected issues related to historic and contemporary racism have arisen on social media, which have been high-profile enough to reveal to the wider, whiter public the existence and experiences of racism. This includes the social media uproar – including direct parallels made with the murder of George Floyd – around the highly publicized killing of Black Irish man George Nkencko, who was shot dead after being pursued by *Gardaí* (Irish police) in the wake of a mental health crisis (McNamee 2021). The Nkencko family's ongoing demands for justice – and the resultant negative and positive reactions on social media, including orchestrated campaigns to spread misinformation about the dead man - have dented a lot of the 'white innocence' (Wekker 2016) that previously dismissed anti-Black racism as an experience of the United States rather than of Ireland. Due to pandemic lockdowns, many of these discussion, debates and protests have taken part online and have included media activity, public-facing online opinion pieces and online academic seminars. It has provided the possibility to meaningfully dissect the complex place that Ireland occupies in global discussions on the relationship between colonial legacies and contemporary racism. Many of these discussions intersect in interesting ways with wider critical heritage studies discourse and so I will consider how anti-racism social justice activism and heritage have come together online in compelling and sometimes unexpected ways during the pandemic.

'IRISH SLAVE' MEMES

In the wake of the anti-racism protests in Ireland there were a number of points of departure that occupied social media debates on Ireland's historic and contemporary experiences of racism and anti-racism. Initially this took the form of a recurring counter-action: the increased circulation of 'Irish slave' memes on social media. Internet memes are, broadly speaking, a

phrase, image or video that is created and then spread through the internet causing large numbers of people to replicate and share it (Castaño, 2013, 96). Successful memes rely on encapsulating shared cultural norms and attitudes that can be extremely broad or specifically appeal to niche groups. The circulation of so-called ‘Irish slave’ memes is now a longstanding counter-action when experiences of anti-Black racism become a discussion point on mainstream and social media (McNulty 2020). The ‘Irish-slave’ memes originated within white supremacist online networks in the US, and have moved through various history and heritage groups onto the (sometimes) unsuspecting general internet user.

These memes were originally a North American phenomenon that were intended to derail conversations about anti-Black racism through misrepresenting and conflating historic African-American experiences of enslavement with poor white experiences of indentured servitude (see Hogan 2020). Most commonly they are a mix of text and images that present deliberate distortions of historic Irish experiences of discrimination and hardship in the early colonial period (although there is also a Scottish version [Mullen 2016]). Their aim has been to misuse the undoubtedly difficult experiences of poor white people by exaggerating numbers involved and sensationalizing experiences to diminish and sideline discussions on Black enslavement and its ongoing impacts at times when the conversations are of heightened relevance. ‘Irish slave’ memes originally started circulating online in significant numbers in 2013 (Amend 2016) and often escalate in popularity around St Patrick’s day as well as times when anti-Black racism is prominent in public discourse (Perry 2018). Due to the nature of the internet, they have by now widely circulated beyond North America, Liam Hogan has shown they are particular popular in white settler colonial societies - as well as the UK and Ireland - and have become more mainstream alongside the Far Right politics of Donald Trump and Brexit since 2016 (Hogan 2016).

It was therefore hardly surprising to see ‘Irish slave’ memes resurface again as a reaction to #BLM protests in 2020 but, in my experience of researching and writing about them since

2016 (Hogan, McAtackney and Reilly 2016), they had a lot less reach and impact than in previous incarnations. This may be explained by meme fatigue – 'the state or condition of being tired of seeing a particular or overexposed meme' (Urban Dictionary 2013) - but we must also acknowledge the canny work of researchers, such as Liam Hogan, who has presented his critiques in social media-friendly formats such as open access publications (Hogan 2020) and Twitter threads so they can be utilized by social media users as easy-to-locate counterarguments to fake histories. Hogan's work has been picked up by the mainstream media a number of times and is, by this stage, largely uncontested (although this was not always the case). Alongside the uptick in 'Irish slave' memes circulated online on Irish twitter, this was the first occasion when a number of established Irish historians were at the forefront of online discussions about the accuracies, or not, of this myth. It was notable that academics who had hitherto refrained from commenting – or publishing public-facing articles - were writing twitter threads and public-access articles (including Kelly 2020) and engaging in extensive online debates on twitter, in particular, on the nature of the Irish colonial experience. One cannot be sure whether this would have happened in a non-pandemic alternative reality but it seems plausible that the pandemic move to online lives ensured many academics were more attuned to using social media and proactively decided to utilize it to contradict fake histories in contrast to their previous silence.

IRISH STATUE TOPPLING

As already noted, Ireland has a complex colonial legacy due to it being colonized at an early stage by its nearest neighbour – England, later Britain – to the extent it was considered a "laboratory for Empire" (Ohlmeyer 2005) but at various points in that long, unequal relationship, Irish individuals and groups within society were able to benefit from and exploit colonialism. It is not a straightforward story and likewise nor have been the fate of Ireland's once extensive colonial material remains. While Ireland had an abundance of colonial-era statues to British figureheads (such as Queen Victoria and the Duke of Wellington) up to limited independence (26 counties of Ireland became the Irish Free State in 1921), many

have been removed or destroyed, sometimes with notable reluctance, in the 100 years since independence. Statues of Queen Victoria have had some of the most convoluted post-independence trajectories in Ireland, including one version that was buried at University College Cork only to be excavated in time for the visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 2011 (Murphy 2011). The long-unwanted statue of Queen Victoria situated at the seat of Irish government at Leinster House since 1908 was only removed from the site under pretext of a carpark extension in 1948. By 1967 it was in storage at Royal Hospital Kilmainham, an old British soldiers' hospital and retirement facility, alongside other colonial-era statues that had similarly fallen out of favour. The Leinster House Queen Victoria now sits in a square in Sydney, Australia. Many others were helped to their final resting place by sticks of dynamite planted under cover of darkness (RTE 1967). While there are still a small number of contentious, colonial-era statues still in situ – including the slavery-supporter Irish nationalist John Mitchel in Newry, Northern Ireland (Corr 2020) – they tend not to be the focus of debates on historic colonialism or contemporary experiences of racism.

In the wake of the anti-racist protests in Ireland in 2020, a statue issue did arise through an unlikely and previously unconsidered avenue: decorative statues of two Nubian princesses and their torch-bearing slaves lighting the front of the exclusive Shelbourne hotel in Dublin (Heyward, 2020) [Figure 1]. These *objet d'art* – rather than colonial statuary - date to the so-called 'Egyptomania phase' that swept Europe in the 19th century (Colla 2007) and in the intervening years had receded into the background of the hotel's entrance before they were removed on 27 July 2020. The General Manager's official statement indicated it 'had been coming for a number of weeks given what has been happening in the world,' (McGreevy 2020), which clearly referenced the #BLM protests as an initiating point for the hotel's alteration. The removal sparked a significant mainstream and social media debate despite the fact 'no one seemed to notice them until they were gone' (Heyward 2020) and heritage issues were of central importance in how this debate unfolded. Online conversations prompted by this act included some of the well-worn tropes of 'culture wars' – that removal

was erasure, an attack on Irish cultural heritage and involved #BLM debates being imported to Ireland (Fenton 2020) – but there were also nuanced and measured discussions about how statues of enslaved women may or may not be relevant to contemporary African-descended women's experiences in Ireland today.

Figure 1: Nineteenth-century French statue of a Nubian princess, which was removed from (and later returned to) the front entrance of the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin in the wake of the global #BLM protests in 2020.

Academics took a prominent role in the online debates and it was notable how different disciplinary perspectives, claims of expertise and lived experience were utilized to argue their cases and were subsequently picked up by social and mainstream media. This was a case in which the mainstream media reacted to social media discussions - and frequently used twitter soundbites and commentators in their reporting - rather than leading and directing the discussions. From a heritage perspective, it was clear that more traditional materialist perspectives – focused on the historical origins and intentions of the manufacture and installation of the statues – came into conflict with more constructivist heritage approaches that allowed for the statues to have changing meaning and contemporary relevance. Art Historian Kyle Leyden widely publicized a detailed historical background for the statues, including their manufacture in France during the Egyptomania phase, which he used to argue that the statues were unrelated to the Transatlantic slave trade and therefore were irrelevant to issues connected to #BLM (McGrath 2020). Irish heritage agencies, including Dublin City Council planning office and the Irish Georgian society, followed this materialist interpretation of the statues and were swift to demand their restoration to the façade of the hotel, which was ultimately completed in December 2020 (McGreevy and Kelly 2020). In contrast, constructivist perspectives were provided by some Black Irish commentators such as Dr Ebun Joseph, a lecturer in Black Studies at University College Dublin, who articulated the view that restoring the statues was a 'missed opportunity' for

Ireland to engage with the statues as a contemporary issue (O'Donnell 2020). My perspective, as a critical heritage scholar, was presented in a number of twitter threads that emphasized the need to expand our understandings of colonialism beyond the TransAtlantic slave trade. From a constructivist point of view, I argued that the statues must be understood in their contemporary context and this means listening to Black women in dealing with this issue. Due to my twitter threads, I was contacted and then interviewed for *Atlas Obscura* who wanted to explore the potential connection of these statues to contemporary experiences of racism in Ireland. In the resultant article I was quoted as stating 'Black Lives Matters is seen as an American problem, not our problem ... But once it's about an object – here in Dublin, instead of there – suddenly Irish people don't think these statues are racist, and that we don't have these issues' (Heyward 2020), which is an opinion I continue to hold.

Watching and contributing to this (online) debate from Denmark was an important turning point for me in realizing that utilizing social media from a physical distant had a potential role to play in these emerging conversations, especially in pandemic circumstances. From a heritage perspective, I was surprised by the lack of constructivist perspectives displayed by heritage organisations in Ireland – and how keen many Irish academics were to follow narrow, materialist reading of the statues - which indicated how little critical heritage studies had impacted Irish heritage sectors and how keen many people were to continue to downplay contemporary racism in Ireland. But the biggest learning curve for me was to carefully listen to the varied perspectives of Black women in Ireland. In contrast to Dr Joseph's arguments, the broadcaster and author Dr Emma Dabiri reiterated through various twitter conversations that she thought the focus on the 'Shelbourne statues' was a distraction from dealing with the experiences of contemporary racism in Ireland.

BLACK AND IRISH (ONLINE) EXPERIENCES

Irish Times columnist Una Mullally suggested in March 2021 that the protests prompted by the murder of George Floyd in 2020 have been a turning point for Black Irish people in that

they ‘marked a new era of black Irish visibility, largely youth-led, dovetailing with a cultural moment across Irish music especially’ (2021). There is considerable truth to this claim if one looks to the online platforms that have developed since that time and that continue to flourish. *Black and Irish* was launched on social media on 3 June 2020 in direct response to the growing interest in race and racism in Ireland as a result of the protests that originated in the US (Black and Irish 2021). Their approach has been to utilize the individual experiences and perspectives of individuals who identify as Black or Mixed Race Irish to share a variety of stories primarily on social media – facebook, Instagram and twitter – to the general public. This strategy ties in with the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR), who have stated their most recent outputs have been directly reacting to the widening discussions on racism in Irish society. They have especially been keen to communicate the everyday, insidious experiences of what they called ‘silent racism’ (Ibid 2020) experienced by many visible minorities in Ireland. While each story published by *Black and Irish* is specific to the individual there has been a wide range of perspectives displayed – both positive and negative - and there has been a degree of strategic curation of individual stories to maximize public interest through creating timely posts – eg to coincide with Pride or the Tokyo Olympics (2021). It is interesting that within the thematic collections posted online, there has been a strong emphasis on Black Irish contributions to culture and heritage, especially music and language

In the short number of years since *Black and Irish* was launched, they have gained significant social media followers (over 16,000 people on facebook and 53,000 on instagram) and have diversified considerably, indicating the group’s creators have been adept in using social media for impact and reach. Their formats now include podcasts, mentoring networks and merchandizing while the content of their broadcast have moved from protests and discussing experiences of racism to educating the wider public on the nuances of Black Irish culture. There is a significant connection to heritage themes and issues in the contents of these diversification strategies, which can especially be identified in

the podcast series. Having now completed two series with the Irish national broadcaster, RTÉ, there is a clearly a strategy of balancing the desire to educate the public on negative realities and ongoing challenges for Black Irish people, including racism in schools and systemic racism, and the more positive messaging of the contributions of Black Irish people to Irish culture and heritage. The podcast has placed a particular emphasis on Black Irish representation in the Arts and the burgeoning Black Irish music scene, with episodes dedicated to rising stars, the use of accents and what defines an 'Irish' musician (Black and Irish Podcasts 2021).

Alongside the success of *Black and Irish*, interest in Black Irish experiences and perspectives has continued to maintain a heightened presence beyond the initial phases of the pandemic and are especially prominent online. In July 2021, the Irish National Terminology Database, *Foras Na Gaelige*, which governs additions to the national language, announced they have officially replaced the traditional *Gaelige* word for a non-white person - '*fear dubh'* (which when capitalized also means 'the devil') or '*duine gorm'*, (which literally means 'blue person') - with '*duine de dhath'*, which translates to English as 'person of colour'. While Donncha O Croninin, the chief terminologist, has publicly acknowledged the change reflects Ireland as a multi-culltural society, it is significant the public emphasis placed on the role of Ola Majekodunmi. As a board member and daughter of Nigerian migrants to Ireland (Carroll 2021), she has been central in selecting this term. The implications of this change are not simply acknowledging that *Gaelige* must evolve as a living language to become more inclusive but also includes a recognition that Black Irish people have what Homi Bhabha has called the 'right to narrate' – that is, a right to be heard, recognized and represented but also to perform, transform and bring about change (2014).

CONCLUSION

Initially I was not optimistic that social media would provide a significant outlet to challenge perspectives on Irish identity and heritage during the lockdowns and pandemic, despite the

pivot online, but I have been generally surprised. This does not mean that there have not been issues with how the Irish media and public have reacted to having what Gloria Wekker has coined their 'white innocence' (2016) disrupted. As noted already, there has long been a general minimizing of racism in Ireland generally, rather Irish people have emphasized their experiences of colonialism as if that somehow stops white Europeans from imbibing colonial messages. This stance can be seen in terms of heritage and the lack of nuanced engagement with the issue of the Shelbourne statues, especially the inability of heritage bodies to see how they reveal not only Irish entanglements with various forms of European colonialism but also acknowledging the changing meanings of such statues in contemporary Dublin. Likewise, the Direct Provision asylum system continues to exist, although it is now planned to be abolished by 2024 (Thornton 2020). Black men, in particular, continue to be the focus of police violence and social media innuendo in Ireland. The death of George Nkencho in late 2020 continues to be investigated but it was notable that social media displayed a range of reactions, from demands to abolish the *Gardaí* to the creation and circulation of memes with deliberate mistruths and lies about the deceased (MacNamee 2021).

The main positive factor that has developed since 2020 is the growing confidence of young, Black Irish people, in particular, in using social media to present their experiences, hopes and fears for their future in Ireland to a significant audience. The discussions on racism prompted by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis have reverberated in Ireland in ways that have not previously been imagined and they continue to inspire new conversations, which have also largely taken place online, but also in academic fora. At least part of the reason for the intensity and longevity of these discussions must be attributed to the move online and the importance placed on social media, especially during the initial months of the pandemic (Shu-Feng et al 2021). While not all these discussions have been positive – the largely anonymous trolling of white supremacists and racists has accompanied almost all these debates and discussions on social media – there has been significant

changes. This is especially in terms of acknowledging and incorporating Black Irish experiences and perspectives into mainstream Irish society and now there must be concerted moves to reconsider what was, and is, Irish heritage. This includes taking a critical heritage approach to heritage as an evolving aspect of the present rather than a material relic of an imagined past.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amend, Alex. 2016. How the Myth of the “Irish slaves” became a favorite meme of racists online. *Southern Poverty Law Centre*. 19 April 2016. (Accessed July 2021). https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/04/19/how-myth-irish-slaves-became-favorite-meme-racists-online

ArchaeoBalt. 2020. ArchaeoTourism and Social Media Round Table. 21 January 2021 (Accessed July 2021) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPDZsq__KnY

Barnes, Joel. 2020. Defunding arts degrees is the latest battle in a 40-year culture war. *The Conversation.* 2 July 2020 (Accessed July 2021) https://theconversation.com/defunding-arts-degrees-is-the-latest-battle-in-a-40-year-culture-war-141689

Bhabha, Homi. 2014. The Right to Narrate. *Harvard Design Magazine.* 38 (Accessed July 2021) http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/38/the-right-to-narrate

Black and Irish. ND. Home. (Accessed July 2021) https://www.blackandirish.com/

Black and Irish. 2021. Black and Irish 1 year Anniversary. 3 June 20201. (Accessed July 2021) https://www.facebook.com/BlackandIrish/videos/399587071192209

Black and Irish Podcasts. 2021. Black and Irish Podcast (Accessed July 2021) https://www.rte.ie/radio/podcasts/series/33229-black-irish/

Buckley, Cara. 2021. The Sinking of a Bust Surfaces a Debate over Denmark’s Past. *The New York Times.* 9 February 2021 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/arts/design/frederik-v-bust-denmark.html

Buranyi, Stephen. 2020. How coronavirus has brought together conspiracy theorists and the far right. *The Guardian.* 4 September 2020 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/04/coronavirus-conspiracy-theorists-far-right-protests

Carroll, Rory. 2021. ‘Duine de dhath’: New phrase for ‘person of colour’ added to Irish lexicon. *Irish Times.* 13 July 2021. (Accessed July 2021) https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/duine-de-dhath-new-phrase-for-person-of-colour-added-to-irish-lexicon-1.4619400

Castaño Díaz, Carlos M. 2013. Defining and characterizing the concept of Internet Meme. *Revista CES Psicología* 6(2): 82-104.

Colla, Elliott. 2007. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity.* London: Duke University Press.

Corr, Shauna. 2020. Statue of slavery supporter John Mitchel in Newry should be pulled down, say campaigners. *Belfast Live*. 10 June 2020 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/john-mitchel-statue-newry-should-18392253

Dans Enrique. 2020. The Pandemic Really Has Changed the World Forever. *Forbes*. 26 July 2021 (Accessed July 2021) https://www.forbes.com/sites/enriquedans/2020/07/26/the-pandemic-really-has-changed-the-worldforever/?sh=2d5447b736a6

Deegan, Gordon. 2021. Profits more than double at direct provision firm to EUR1.98m. *The Irish Times*. 20 December 2021. https://www.irishtimes.com/business/profits-more-than-double-at-direct-provision-firm-to-1-98m-1.4760446#:~:text=Accumulated%20profits%20at%20the%20end,%E2%82%AC183%20million%20last%20year.

Doherty, Gabriel. 2020. Claims that Ireland is in disgrace for slave trade is utterly misleading, says historian Gabriel Doherty. *Gript*. 23 June 2020 (Accessed July 2021) https://gript.ie/claiming-that-ireland-shares-in-the-disgrace-of-slavery-is-utterly-misleading-says-historian-gabriel-doherty/

Doward, Jamie. 2020. I've been unfairly targeted, says academic at heart of National Trust 'woke' row. *The Guardian.* 20 December 2020. (Accessed July 2021). https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/dec/20/ive-been-unfairly-targeted-says-academic-at-heart-of-national-trust-woke-row

Fanning, Bryan. 2012. *Racism in Ireland*. Manchester: MUP.

Far Right Observatory. 2020. COVID-19, Conspiracy and Ireland's Far Right. 20 April 2020. https://farrightobservatory.medium.com/covid-19-conspiracy-and-irelands-far-right-3501e07b6756

Friis, Rasmus and Jakob Legarth Sandorff. 2021. Researchers: Political offensive against "pseudoresearch" is prejudiced and dangerous. 22 March 2021. *Uniavisen*. https://uniavisen.dk/en/researchers-political-offensive-against-pseudoresearch-is-prejudiced-and-dangerous/

Gardner, Steve. 2009. Ireland: from racism without "race" to racism without racists. *Radical History Review.* (104): 41-56.

Geesan, Masha. 2019. Ireland's strange, cruel system for asylum seekers. *The New Yorker*. 4 June 2019. https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/irelands-strange-cruel-system-for-asylum-seekers

Gilbert, Keon L, Ruqaiijah Yearby, Amber Johnson and Kira Banks. 2021. For Black Americans, Covid-19 is a reminder of the racism of US Healthcare. *The Guardian.* 22 February 2021. (Accessed July 2021) https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/22/black-americans-covid-19-racism-us-healthcare

Guest, Kate. 2021. Heritage and the Pandemic: an Early Response to the Restriction of COVID-19 by the Heritage Sector in England. *The Historic Environment: Policy and Practice,* 12:1, 4-18.

Harris, Gareth. 2021. Fuelling culture war, UK government forms new 'retain and explain' board for controversial monuments. *The Art Newspaper.* 17 May 2020. (Accessed July 2021). https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/uk-culture-secretary-fuels-culture-war

Heyward, Guilia. 2020. A Dublin Hotel Removed Four Statues and Sparked a Historical Debate. *Atlas Obscura*. 31 August 2020 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/shelbourne-hotel-statues-dublin

Hogan, Liam. 2020. All of my work on the "Irish slaves" meme (2015-2020). (Accessed July 2021). https://limerick1914.medium.com/all-of-my-work-on-the-irish-slaves-meme-2015-16-4965e445802a

Hogan, Liam. 2016. Two years of the 'Irish slaves' myth: racism, reductionism and the tradition of diminishing the transatlantic slave trade. *Open Democracy.* 7 November 2016. (Accessed July 2021) https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/two-years-of-irish-slaves-myth-racism-reductionism-and-tradition-of-diminis/

Hogan, Liam, Laura McAtackney and Matthew C. Reilly. 2016. The Irish in the Anglo-Caribbean: servants of slaves? *History Ireland*. (Accessed July 2021) https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/18th-19th-century-social-perspectives/the-irish-in-the-anglo-caribbean-servants-or-slaves/

ICCROM. 2020. Heritage and Pandemics: Accessing heritage during a pandemic. ICCROM Lecture Series. 12 June 2020. (Accessed July 2021). https://www.iccrom.org/lecture/heritage-and-pandemics-accessing-heritage-during-pandemic

INAR. 2020. Understanding Racism: Defining Racism in an Irish context. (Accessed July 2021). www.inar.ie

Kelly, Brian. 2020. 'Irish Slaves': Debunking the Myth. *Rebel News.* 2 July 2020 (Accessed July 2021). http://www.rebelnews.ie/2020/07/02/irish-slaves-debunking-myth/

Kennedy, Liam. 2020. George Floyd: Race and Protest in Ireland. UCD Clinton Institute (Accessed July 2021) https://www.ucdclinton.ie/commentary-content/raceandprotestinireland

Kennedy Rebecca and Barbara Minguez Garcia. Heritage in crisis: COVID adverse economic impacts. ICCROM. 9 April 2020 (Accessed July 2021) https://www.iccrom.org/heritage-crisis-covid-adverse-economic-impacts

MacNamee, Garreth. 2021. FactCheck: No, George Nkencko was not a convicted criminal out on bail for attaching his girlfriend. *Thejournal.*ie. 4 January 2021 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.thejournal.ie/george-nkencho-32-convictions-factcheck-5315584-Jan2021/

Mistry, Elizabeth. 2021. Mexico's culture crisis: pandemic leads to budget cuts that leave many workers unpaid while vanity projects receive millions. *The Art Newspaper.* 11 March 2021. (Accessed July 2021). https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/cultural-budget-cuts-trigger-existential-crisis-in-mexico

McGreevy, Ronan. 2020. Shelbourne Hotel removes 153-year-old statues of slave girls from its plinth. *Irish Times.* 28 July 2020 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/shelbourne-hotel-removes-153-year-old-statues-of-slave-girls-from-its-plinth

McGreevy, Ronan and Olivia Kelly. 2020. Dublin City Council begins action against Shelbourne Hotel for removing statues. *Irish Times.* 6 August 2020 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/dublin-city-council-begins-action-against-shelbourne-hotel-for-removing-statues-1.4323697

McNeil, Kate. 2020. The Knife's Eduge: Balancing Health and the Economy During Covid-19. University of Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy. 30 July 2020 (Accessed July 2021) https://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/news/article-achieving-wellbeing/

McNulty, Tim. 2020. Editorial: Cromwell and the 'Irish Slave' meme are derailing attempts to combat racism online. *Redaction Report*. 6 July 2020 (Accessed July 2021) https://redactionpolitics.com/2020/07/06/cromwell-irish-slave-meme-blm-racism-attempts-to-combat-racism-online/

Nakhaie, Reza and F.S. Nakhaie. 2021. Black Lives Matter movement finds new urgency and allies because of COVID-19. *The Conversation.* 5 July 2020 (Accessed July 2021). https://theconversation.com/black-lives-matter-movement-finds-new-urgency-and-allies-because-of-covid-19-141500

Ní Chiosáin, Bairbre. 2016. Ireland and its vulnerable 'others': the reception of asylum seekers in Ireland. *Études Irelandaises*. 41 (2): 85-104

Ní Raghallaigh, Muireann and Liam Thornton. 2017. Vulnerable childhood, vulnerable adulthood: Direct provisions as aftercare for aged-out separated children seeking asylum in Ireland. *Critical Social Policy* 37(3): 386-404.

O'Donnell, Dimitri. 2020. Historic statues to be restored to front of Shelbourne Hotel. RTE. 24 September 2020. (Accessed July 2021). https://www.rte.ie/news/dublin/2020/0924/1167307-shelbourne-statues/

Mullally, Una. 2021. Emma Dabiri and Hazel Chu: 'This is a real, important moment in Ireland'. *Irish Times.* 27 March 2021 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/emma-dabiri-and-hazel-chu-this-is-a-real-important-moment-in-ireland-1.4514803

Mullen, Stephen. 2016. The myth of Scottish slaves. *Sceptical Scot*. 4 March 2016 (Accessed July 2021). https://sceptical.scot/2016/03/the-myth-of-scottish-slaves/

Murphy, John A. 2011. The Story of Queen's Victoria's Statue at University College Cork. 20 May 2011 (Accessed July 2021) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnIdp2d7brA

Ohlmeyer, Jane. 2005. A Laboratory for Empire? Early Modern Ireland and English Imperialism. In Kevin Kenny (ed) *Ireland and the British Empire*. Oxford: OUP.

Orzechowski, Marcin, Maximilian Schochow and Florian Steger. 2021. Balancing public health and civil liberties in times of pandemic. *Journal of Public Health Policy.* 42(145-153)

Patel, Leila. 2021. COVID-19: Global South responses have shown up social policy challenges – and strengths. *The Conversation.* 25 May 2021 (Accessed July 2021) https://theconversation.com/covid-19-global-south-responses-have-shown-up-social-policy-challenges-and-strengths-161288

Perry David M. 2018. No, the Irish were not slaves too. *Pacific Standard.* 15 March 2018 (Accessed July 2021). https://psmag.com/social-justice/the-irish-were-not-slaves

Rogers, Kristen. 2021. Life after the 1918 flu has lessons for our post-pandemic world. *CNN.* 28 June 2021. (Accessed July 2021) https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/28/health/changes-after-covid-pandemic-1918-flu-wellness-scn/index.html

RTE, 1967. Queen Turns Green at Royal Hospital. (Accessed July 2021). https://www.rte.ie/archives/2017/0110/843928-queen-victoria-in-kilmainham/

Selvin, Claire. 2021. Toppled Statue of Slave Trader Goes on Vie in Bristol, Generating Controversy. *Art News.* 8 June 2021 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/edward-colston-statue-m-shed-museum-bristol-1234595170/

Shu-Feng, Tsao; Helen Chen, Therese Tisseverasinghe, Yang Yang, Lianghusa Li and Zahid A Butt. 2021. What social media told us in the time of COVID-19: a scoping review. *The Lancet Digital Health* (3): e175-194.

Thornton, Liam. 2020. The abolition of direct provision cannot come quickly enough. *Irish Times.* 9 June 2020 (Accessed July 2021). https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/the-abolition-of-direct-provision-cannot-come-quickly-enough-1.4273758

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2020. Coronavirus vs inequality: how we'll pay vastly different costs for the COVID-19 pandemic (Accessed July 2021) https://feature.undp.org/coronavirus-vs-inequality/

United Nations News. 2020. Culture in crisis: arts fighting to survive COVID-19 impact. 22 December 2020. (Accessed July 2021) https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1080572

Urban Dictionary. 2013. Meme fatigue. 11 August 2013. (Accessed July 2021) https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Meme%20fatigue

Viral Archive. (Accessed July 2021) https://twitter.com/Viral_Archive

Wekker, Gloria. 2016. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Duke University Press.

World Health Organisation (WHO). 2020. WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefly on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020. https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020 (Accessed July 2021)