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## **Art and Contemporary Irish Emigrants: Aesthetics and Networks of Affect in David Monahan's 'Leaving Dublin'**

**Rachel L. Williams**  
Université de Rennes

### **Introduction**

When the financial crisis hit Ireland in 2008, the effect on emigration was immediate. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of emigrants leaving the Republic of Ireland increased by 40% (CSO 2009). For Dublin-based photographer David Monahan, the departure of these migrants was palpable. He recalls driving the streets of Dublin and noting traffic flowing smoothly where traffic jams would normally clog the roads (Monahan 2016, pers. comm. 15 April). Thousands left and thousands more simply had no job to which they needed commute.

As is the case for most any Irishman, it was not the first time Monahan had said goodbye to friends leaving in search of jobs. His siblings—two brothers and a sister—all left during the global recession in the 1980s (Kenny 2011). This wave of migration, however, provoked a markedly different public response and David Monahan's work provides a unique entry point for examining the changing experience of Irish emigration and its representation in the arts.

In January 2010, Monahan reunited with an acquaintance who had returned to Ireland from Australia to attend a wedding. The meeting inspired Monahan to take a portrait of her before she returned to Australia, where she had spent most of her life. As Monahan explained on his personal blog (2010, para. 4), his idea for this initial work was to 'make a portrait in Dublin city centre that celebrated her Irish roots and her Australian sense of fun and adventure'.

The result was a portrait of the acquaintance, Ciara, sitting on bales of turf along the quay of the Liffey river in the center of Dublin. Ciara is seated in the bottom right corner of the photograph, on a bale of turf,

brightly lit and looking into the distance left of the frame. Behind her, the night-lights and empty city streets separate her from the background.

This portrait became the inspiration for several series of photographs (known collectively as *On Leaving*) and a book of photographs and essays (also entitled *On Leaving*) created by Monahan to examine and, to use his words, ‘commemorate’ the Irish experience of emigration (Monahan 2010 para. 6). This paper will focus on the first series entitled *Leaving Dublin*. This series includes 84 portraits of 100 subjects, the majority of whom planned to leave Dublin to move abroad between 2010 and 2013 while a few subjects had already moved abroad and returned home for a visit during this period.

*Leaving Dublin* serves as a lens for examining the roles played by networks of affect and aesthetics in the contemporary Irish experience of migration. I will explore the series from the perspective of Actor-Network Theory. As described by sociologist John Law, actor-network theory considers ‘everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located’ (Law 2009, p. 141). I will consider how the Internet has changed both experiences of migration and the creation and distribution of art by altering networks of affect. I will also discuss the role contemporary art plays in these networks, serving as a nexus between personal and public experiences of migration.

### **The Historical Context: A Brief History of Irish Migration**

Ireland’s history over the last two centuries is one of nearly continuous emigration. The most consequential period of emigration occurred during the mid-19th century when the population fell by 2 million due to both death and migration during the potato famine (Munck 1985). Prior to the famine, however, a further one million had already left Ireland during the early 19th century. Emigration continued at significant levels after the famine years with the population falling to 4.4 million in 1911—slightly more than half of the pre-famine population peak of 8.4 million (Hatton & Williamson 1993).

The first major wave of emigration in the 20th century occurred during the 1950s when over 400,000 men and women—nearly 15% of the population—left a stagnating economy and conservative Irish culture to move abroad (Glynn, Kelly & MacÉinrí 2013).

Over the years, emigrants were referred to by a number of terms such as ‘Wild Geese’, ‘the Irish Abroad’, ‘The Emigrants’, or ‘Ireland in exile’ (Sullivan cited in Fitzgerald & Lambkin 2008, p. 277). There are also instances of those who left being seen as traitors, such as those who left the Republic of Ireland during the Irish Civil War (Redmond 2016).

In the decades following independence, emigration provided an economic benefit to the government, but it was also a source of

embarrassment as it highlighted the government's failure to live up to the ideals of Irish revolutionaries who argued that an independent Ireland would be self-sufficient (Fitzgerald & Lambkin 2008). To avoid highlighting this failure, emigration was not addressed in official discourse in the first half of the 20th century.

The latter half of the 20th century set the stage for the economic challenges and migratory flows Ireland faces today. Increased public spending—including major investments in education combined with Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973 and low corporate tax rates to attract foreign investment and spur a period of economic growth during the early 1970s. For the first time, Ireland experienced a period of net immigration.

The growth, however, was fragile with increasing public debt and reliance on foreign investment. The economic depression of the 1980s brought a new wave of mass migration with a further 200,000 people leaving (Glynn, Kelly & MacÉinrí 2013).

The state's relationship to the diaspora also began to change in the latter half of the century with the Irish government establishing for the first time committees to provide aid to Irish emigrants in the UK beginning in the 1970s (Glynn, Kelly & MacÉinrí 2015). When emigration increased rapidly in the 1980s, rather than ignore the phenomena as in previous decades, the government instead portrayed emigrants quite optimistically as 'individuals seeking the best return on the sale of their labour in the global marketplace' (Hayward & Howard 2006, p. 47). Although the media covered emigration, the stories were limited to the difficulties faced by emigrants, the perceived 'brain drain' of educated youth moving abroad, and the narrative that emigrants would help modernise Ireland and open it more to the world (Conlon 2009). Although these reports often did not reflect the realities experienced by individuals, they helped set the stage for a generally positive view of emigrants themselves.

During the 1990s, the Irish economy again turned to attracting foreign investment with even greater success. The Irish economy not only recovered from the recession of the 1980s, it transformed into the 'Celtic Tiger', growing at an unprecedented rate. To fill labour demands, the government funded programs such as the Jobs Ireland campaign to recruit Irish emigrants to return. Returning migrants along with asylum seekers and immigrants from other EU countries contributed to a second period of net immigration beginning in 1996 and continuing through 2009 (Glynn, Kelly & MacÉinrí 2013).

Although the state's relationship with Irish emigrants also continued to evolve, the government was not yet ready to embrace responsibility for the Irish abroad. In a 1995 speech to the Oireachtas, Mary Robinson called for a new policy of 'Cherishing the Irish Diaspora'; a call that was ridiculed by other politicians at the time and failed to translate into significant policy changes (Fitzgerald & Lambkin 2008).

Net emigration returned when the 2008 financial crisis hit Ireland particularly hard, resulting in a dramatic collapse of the construction sector. Emigration continued to increase through 2013 showing only a slight decline beginning in 2014. Between 2008 and 2014, nearly a quarter of a million Irish citizens moved abroad. Taking into account migration into Ireland, the net population loss, including non-Irish nationals, due to migration was 143,800 for the period of April 2009 to April 2014 (CSO 2015).

However, this wave of migration differed from previous generations in a number of aspects. Prior to the financial crash, Ireland's economy had enjoyed an unprecedented boom. The GDP grew from 63% of the EU average to 97% between 1987 and 1996. Employment grew by 26% over the same period (Breathnach 1998). This growth and the accompanying rise in standards of living and job opportunities encouraged many to believe that emigration might never again be an economic imperative, making the fact that the number of people leaving the country tripled in just 3 years a bitter pill to swallow.

In this context of disillusion and disappointment, a new dialogue on emigration emerged bringing experiences out of personal memory and into the public discourse. The next section will describe how *Leaving Dublin* provided a visual centerpiece for this dialogue and how its creation and reception illustrate the factors that contributed to the cultural shift that brought emigration into the spotlight.

### **Communication Technology and the Networked Migrant Experience**

Actor-network theory is particularly relevant for analysing the experience of migration, which is, by definition, a change in 'webs of relations'. These networks include not only people—migrants and their communities of origin and reception—but also the physical places and material objects with which they interact. The experience of migration is co-created through interaction and the affects generated by these encounters.

Past generations of emigrants maintained their relations with their homeland through the various means available to each generation: letters, telegraph, telephone, visits home. Each of these means of communication allows for not merely an exchange of information, but also of affect.

Geographer and affect theorist Ben Anderson describes affect as 'a transpersonal capacity which a body has to be affected (through an affection) and to affect (as the result of modifications)' (Anderson 2006, p. 735). However, 'a body' is not limited to the physical presence of a person and objects can mediate affective experiences.

Encounters, whether in person or mediated by objects, generate affect which creates and maintains networks. Affect flows between actors in

a network and may even be shared as an affective atmosphere across several actors in a network. Yet, affect is neither entirely contained by the body of an actor in the network nor is it external to the actors in a network. It is not, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed argues, an autonomous object that can be measured and studied. Instead, affect can be looked at as 'how we are touched by what we are near' (Ahmed 2010, p. 30).

The Internet facilitates, of course, the practical aspects of migration: searching for jobs and housing, researching destinations, and arranging travel. But it also alters the affective experience of migration by altering the boundaries of our material environment. 'What we are near' is no longer neatly defined by physical presence in our immediate space but rather extends to include what we encounter in cyberspace.

In 1998 only 5% of households in the Republic of Ireland were connected to the Internet. By 2000 this number had already quadrupled to 20.5% (CSO 2005) and as of 2013, 82% of households in the Republic had Internet access (CSO 2013). This increased access to the Internet coupled with the widespread use of social media, video calls, and mobile use have altered the relationship between Irish emigrants and those they leave behind. A survey of emigrants who left Ireland between 2008 and 2016 found that 94% use social media to stay in touch with people in Ireland (Kenny & O'Donoghue 2016, para. 41). Following a survey of communication technology use amongst immigrants in Ireland, Lee Komito described social media as providing an 'ambient presence' or 'background awareness' of the migrant's home community in his everyday life abroad (Komito 2011).

Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti described the human body as 'a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others' (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p. 34). Although the physical body of a migrant is separated from his place and community of origin, the Internet allows for a near instantaneous interaction between distant bodies.

Technology such as Skype, WhatsApp and social media has created an effect of 'space-time compression' (Harvey 1989 cited by MacInnes & Díaz 2009, p. 445) by digitally bringing distant relationships into the physical presence of our everyday lives. This digital presence allows for stronger maintenance and creation of social ties not only through the sharing of information, but also through the continuation or creation of social rituals. For example, Irish emigrants recount using Skype to allow grandparents to read to their grandchildren or to say good night every evening before bed (Edwards 2016, para. 9). Digital presence can, however, also serve to underscore the physical absence, particularly in difficult times, as illustrated by an Irish grandmother who noted, 'you can't hug skype' (Kenny 2016, para. 3).

The Internet has not only changed the affective experience of migration for individual migrants, but has also created new means of collectively sharing experiences and challenging official narratives. In 2011 the

Irish Times began publishing a blog of emigration news, first-person accounts, destination guides, and advice on returning to Ireland entitled Generation Emigration. Reflecting on the blog's debut in an article titled 'Five years of emigration: 1,000+ stories from the Irish abroad', editor Ciara Kenny recalled:

We had no idea what the reaction would be when we put the call out for emigrant stories to share on the new blog. Would anyone respond? Was there any desire to talk back to Ireland once these people left? We thought the section could run for a few months at most, provided there was enough interest, but as the emails from readers offering to write or be interviewed first trickled, then poured in, it became increasingly clear we had hit upon a topic that there was an insatiable appetite to discuss. (Kenny 2016, para. 12)

The 2013 Household Survey found that 61.9% of people have seen a friend emigrate since 2006 while 31.9% of adults have seen an immediate family member leave and 43.5% have said goodbye to an extended family member (Glynn, Kelly & MacÉinrí 2013). It is no surprise, given the ubiquity of the experience of emigration, that the public was eager to seize the opportunity to share their personal experiences. Generation Emigration has been such a success that it was recently re-designed and expanded. It is now known as The Irish Times Abroad.

The first-person accounts featured in the Times have afforded emigrants an unprecedented opportunity to bring their experiences and points of view into the public discourse. Monahan credits the blog with shining a new light on the experience of emigration. 'It's like they turned over a rock', he said, 'that can never be put back in place' (Monahan 2016, pers. comm. 15 April). The effects of this increased engagement with the diaspora are evident in current debates about giving emigrants the right to vote as well as a number of government initiatives to connect with the Irish abroad.

Communication technology is disrupting traditional networks in all aspects of our lives, including in the arts. Just as the Internet allows migrants to stay in touch across borders, it also facilitates connections between artists, institutions, and the public. In an online survey of 1,244 arts institutions in the United States, most organisations reported that the Internet allowed them to reach a wider audience and improved audience engagement. Ninety-two percent agreed that communication technology such as social media has 'made art a more participatory experience' (Purcell, Thomson and Rainie 2013, para. 1). And, as we will see with the case of *Leaving Dublin*, the Internet allows artists to bypass traditional institutions to engage directly with the public in both the creation and distribution of their works. Images circulated widely before the Internet through galleries, magazines, postcards, and personal print photographs. However, modern technology allows for images to spread globally in an instant at a low cost creating an unprecedented opportunity for exposing works to new audiences.

### **The Beginnings of *Leaving Dublin***

When Monahan took that first portrait on the quay of the Liffey, he had not yet imagined creating a series of photographs on the subject. Both the origin of the idea for the project and the means through which it was created illustrate the roles of affective networks in both the creation of works of art and the contemporary experience of Irish emigration.

*Leaving Dublin* grew not only out of Monahan's personal experience of emigration, but out of an encounter which allowed Monahan and his sitter to share their affective experiences of emigration—the sense of loss at seeing friends leave, pride in the sitter's blending of Irish heritage and Australian culture. An encounter made possible by the sitter's maintenance of strong affective ties to her network in Ireland, as she returned to attend a wedding, an important social ritual for maintaining and blending affective networks.

Although born in Ireland, his first sitter lived most of her life in Australia and at the time had only returned for a short visit. After taking her portrait, Monahan learned that her sister would soon be *Leaving Dublin* with her boyfriend. Both were unemployed and felt compelled by the crisis to look for work abroad.

The couple were unavailable for a sitting, but Monahan had two friends stand in for a portrait inspired by their story. The scene recreates much of the ambiance of the first portrait. The photograph was again taken at night and the background is mostly dark, with only a soft light illuminating the front of a café that closed after being sold to property speculators. In the foreground, a man stands, brightly lit and with only half of his profile visible on the left-hand side of the frame and his gaze directed forward towards the viewer. On the right mid-ground of the frame, a young woman sits in a brighter light looking into the distance left of the frame. She sits on a well-worn, old-fashioned leather suitcase. The suitcase replaces the barrels of turf used in the first portrait. The suitcase serves as a clear visual sign of the impending emigration and symbolises a link to past generations of Irish migrants (whose portrayal will be discussed further below). It recalls that emigration is part of their cultural heritage: these are only the most recent of millions who have left.

Monahan continued to use the suitcase and the lighting style throughout the series. Both the staging and the lighting contribute to the affective experience of the portraits. The strong contrast between sitters and the darkness separating them from the background creates a sense of separation and solitude. The empty stillness of the scenes creates a dramatic tension between the staged moment of contemplation and the movement implied by migration.

The lighting recalls the chiaroscuro technique popular in Baroque painting in which a strong light was placed on the subjects to create dramatic contrasts and emphasise depth. This serves Monahan's

desire to 'commemorate' the subjects by distinguishing the portraits from personal photographs typically shared on social media and instead creating an aesthetic relationship between the sitters and the dramatic, heroic scenes of the Baroque period.

After these first sittings, the Internet facilitated further encounters in which the first portraits moved others to share their experiences. In February of 2010, Monahan posted the second portrait on his blog in a post entitled, 'A CRY FOR HELP!!' along with a request for more sitters:

It is my wish to photograph people (of all nationalities), who have made the decision to move from Ireland for economic reasons, in and around the city, juxtaposed with landscapes that are significant to their pasts. If that sound like you, or, you know of somebody who is about to move, please bring my proposal to their attention. I want to make these works monumental, to show those depicted in a true heroic spirit. For after all they are making a huge jump into the void of uncertainty and this needs to be commemorated perhaps like never before!! (Monahan 2010, para. 5)

Sharing the blog post through Facebook, word began to spread through Monahan's social network. On the same platforms the sitters would use to maintain contact with their community from abroad, they were invited to share their experience with the public. Six days after the post, another sitter volunteered to participate by commenting on the blog post (while also promising to share it with her social network), and by the time that portrait was posted to the blog three weeks later Monahan already had two more shoots scheduled.

Shoots continued regularly throughout the summer. Each one took a week to a week and a half to plan, as Monahan worked with the sitter to choose and prepare a location for the shoot. Each sitter chose his or her setting. Most chose public places such as bridges, street corners, or parks in areas of the city that held personal importance.

For example, one sitter, Ago Soraya, chose Heuston railway station that was the site of her first job when she arrived in Ireland from Germany two years prior (Monahan 2010, para. 1). A couple chose to have their portrait made at the site of their first kiss next to the Spire on O'Connell Street in the heart of the city center (Kenny 2011, para. 1). Another sitter, Conor McMahan, chose the garden of his home. He described the importance of the site and the memories it held for him saying:

The house is my home and the store of all my effort this last few years. A place to get together with the lads to work on the tunes, or other times where I might draw, conceive new ideas for my next exhibition. It is also my home in this cul-de-sac neighbourhood where I have found myself very much part of the extended neighbourhood family that I became part of 7 years ago now. (Monahan 2010, para. 3)

The variety and personal choice of location enhances the affective impact of the images. These differing backdrops highlight the variety and individuality of those leaving. At the same time, the backgrounds themselves are actors in the affective network of the viewer. With the exception of McMahon's portrait in his garden, the photographs all depict public places. For viewers from the Dublin area, many of them will be recognisable as places they have visited creating a shared experience between the subject and the viewer. Knowing that the setting holds a special meaning for the subject also invites the viewer to feel the subject's attachment to the place and consider what spaces hold importance in his or her own life experiences. Many works depicting Irish emigration in the 19th or 20th centuries focused on the act of leaving and the point of departure, depicting emigrants at docks and train stations. By placing his subjects alone in various sites around the city, Monahan emphasises not the act of leaving, but its effect: the impending absence of the emigrant in the places he or she inhabited and the physical separation from his or her community.

Although the Internet played an important role in the creation of the project by facilitating encounters with participants, the project could certainly have come to fruition through more traditional means such as advertising for volunteers in print media. However, the Internet allowed the project to rapidly reach a wider audience than would have been possible through more traditional channels.

### **Public Reception of *Leaving Dublin***

In September of 2010, seven months after his initial call for volunteers, Monahan wrote on this blog, 'Today I had one hundred referrals out of nowhere after someone from RTE tweeted this url' (Monahan 2010, para. 1). In September Monahan was also interviewed by the Wall Street Journal online who became aware of his work through an article on globalirish.ie, a website which publishes news and advice relating to emigration and the Irish diaspora. In the months following the Wall Street Journal interview, *Leaving Dublin* featured in other reports around the world. By December of 2011, over 40,000 visitors had visited Monahan's site (Kenny 2011, para. 9).

Sarah Ahmed argues that 'to experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to 'whatever' is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival' (Ahmed 2010, p. 33). Although the government faced widespread criticism over the increase in emigration, the increased visibility of individual emigrant stories contributed to an atmosphere of openness and often pride in discussing the emigrants themselves.

To consider the reception of *Leaving Dublin*, we can look to what is behind the object. Firstly, Monahan brought his own experience to his work. Although he never emigrated himself, he remained in Dublin as three of his siblings left. He decided to make the works 'to immortalise

what is being lost to our country' (Bowden 2010, para. 3). Monahan felt that emigration was a loss for Ireland—a common narrative in recent years and an opinion widely shared in Ireland. One survey in 2013 found that 77.8 percent of people thought emigration was having a negative or very negative impact on the country while 65.5% described emigration since 2006 as having a negative or very negative impact on their community (Glynn, Kelly & MacÉinrí 2013). Although he considered emigration a loss for the country, Monahan did not want his work to portray emigrants as victims of circumstance, but instead wished to show them in a 'heroic light'.

To evaluate whether Monahan's work was perceived as he intended—as flattering to the emigrants—we can look to the perspective of the project's participations. With the exception of the first sitter, those who chose to participate had already seen at least one of the previously produced works in the series. The previous works moved these 80-plus other subjects to share and commemorate their own experiences. They were able to see something of their own experience in the works and were willing to attach their own decision to leave to a wider collective narrative. Receiving information about the project through social media may have contributed to the willingness to participate. For some subjects, participating was seen as an opportunity for a personal memento. Several report displaying their portrait in their home.

'We're delighted with the portrait we have now on our wall,' a couple now living in Rotterdam told the Irish Times (Kenny 2011, para. 16). 'The photo is a reminder of what we did in order to take care of our family'.

A 25-year-old emigrant living in Perth reported, 'My parents have a print of the photo hanging on the wall at home. It means a lot to them' (Kenny 2011, para. 23).

As participant Sarah Griffin noted, 'Handing over aspects of your emigration narrative to an artist is a risky thing', but she continues 'it was a privilege to have a camera pointed at me in this context. ... It gave me perspective' (Griffin 2016, para. 10).

According to Monahan, this was a common remark from sitters who felt that the shoot created a rare opportunity to reflect on their experience (Monahan 2016, pers. comm. 15 April). Once the decision to leave is made, planning, preparation and goodbyes can leave little time for further self-reflection. Sharing this moment together allowed Monahan to develop relationships with a number of the subjects who kept in touch after their departure, leading Monahan to create his follow-up series of portraits of emigrants abroad.

Following the reports in the Wall Street Journal and other Irish and international media, *Leaving Dublin* was shown in the 2012 Photolreland festival. After the Photolreland festival the works were

sent to Australia for the series' first solo show at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia.

The first showing, in the Photolreland festival and *On Leaving*, a book of photos from *Leaving Dublin* and Monahan's follow-up project combined with essays on emigration, were funded through on-line crowd-sourcing. Both fundraisers were organised through the Irish website Fundit. Technology has changed both how art is made and how the arts are supported, allowing individuals with limited means to contribute to the exhibition of a work they feel moved by. Both traditional media and social media helped publicise the fundraiser; the Irish Times article on the need for donations was shared 141 times on Facebook (Kenny 2012). Seventy-five different donors gave a total of 5,360.00 euros to finance thirty 1x1.3 meter prints for the Photolreland festival (Fundit 2012). In 2014, 113 donors raised 8,775.00 euros to fund the printing of *On Leaving* (Fundit 2014).

As Ahmed noted, the 'conditions of arrival' are a key aspect to the affective experience of an object. Encountering the works online may enhance the affective experience of identifying with the subjects. The images enter into the viewer's physical space through a medium that we use on a daily basis to connect and share with others. When he sees the photographs, the viewer knows a member of his network chose to share them on social media. It enters his consciousness as a recommendation from an acquaintance, as something shared.

Displaying the works in a festival, museum or gallery provides a different set of 'conditions of arrival'. It is inherently less intimate, as the works are viewed in a public space, often with other people physically present, rather than on a personal electronic device. However, displaying works in a public culture site elevates the subject matter by defining it as a subject worthy of public space and contemplation. Although the conditions are less intimate, a viewer in a gallery arrives with a certain orientation towards the objects. While a work may appear on a viewer's social media without his express intention of seeing it, the viewer must decide to visit a gallery and act on this decision. The viewer decides to visit the gallery seeking to experience what is displayed inside and expecting it to be interesting or engaging and worthy of his time. This expectation creates a certain openness to sensation, thought and judgment that one might not have while scrolling through one's news feed on a mobile phone.

### **Situating *Leaving Dublin* in the Aesthetics of Migration**

#### **Irish Art and Emigration**

Although a number of Irish artists have engaged with the theme of emigration following the financial crash, *Leaving Dublin* stands apart from others in its use of portraits. Much of the artwork produced on the theme of emigration since the financial crash instead turns to the symbolism of the Irish landscape or country cottages.

In 2012 artist David Creedon published *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed*, a collection of highly saturated photographs of abandoned country homes. Various personal items remain left behind in the crumbling interiors and appear to have been left largely untouched since the mid-20th century.

Painter Eoin Mac Lochlainn took the same theme and created a series of paintings called *Diaspora* (2015) depicting the fireplaces of abandoned homes and empty skies. He explains on the Olivier Cornet Gallery website that the inspiration for the works came to him while reading Cathal Ó Searcaigh's poem 'Na Bailte Bánaithe':

I was reminded of how central the fireplace was to the home, how people used to keep the fire going throughout the night and throughout the year, and how it really was the 'hearth' of the home. If people were moving home, they would take a lighting sod of turf with them from the old house to begin the fire in the new house, so as not to break the cycle. Seeing these abandoned fireplaces, each with its own distinctive personality, was quite distressing and I undertook the series of paintings as a sort of requiem for those who had gone, a commemoration of the diaspora. (Olivier Cornet Gallery 2015 para. 2)

In her series *Cottages of Quigley's Point* (2014), artist Jill Quigley chose to disrupt the melancholy atmosphere portrayed by Creedon and Mac Lochlainn by painting the interiors of abandoned homes with fluorescent colors before photographing them. She explained on the *lensculture* website:

My motive with this project is to disrupt rather than oppose traditional imagery of the Irish cottage, avoiding the dichotomy of the romanticized and the real. Rather, by interrupting the static interiors of these buildings, I add an active and particular dimension to this element of the rural landscape, pursuing a personal means of negotiating past and present in my local community. (Quigley 2014 para. 3)

Those works that do use portraits to depict emigration look to recall emigrants of past generations now considered forgotten. For example, Cian McLoughlen created a series of sketches of homeless emigrants in London in 2008. The paintings, which depict 5 men and one woman, were sold to benefit The Aisling Project, an organisation that assists long-term migrants experiencing isolation (Molesworth Gallery 2008, para. 1).

### **Irish Art and Immigration**

Portraits are, however, frequently used in works on the theme of immigration in Ireland and across the globe. These works are typically part of initiatives to encourage integration of immigrants and seek to humanise the frequently de-humanising public discourse surrounding immigration. They offer intimate portraits of individual faces—typically close or medium shots—often paired with a personal textual narrative

of migration. These works seek to contrast the statistics and images of crowds, which are the mainstay of traditional media reports on migration and aim to displace fear of immigrants with an affective experience that encourages identification and empathy.

For example, *The Belonging Project* (2013) photographed over 140 immigrants living in Northern Ireland. The subjects posed with a personal object of their choice, often something from their home country. The subjects also recorded an audio interview that could be listened to alongside their photograph. The project website explained their mission on their website:

Migrant peoples are not a cohesive group; they are individuals with distinct identities regardless of their country of origin, their skin colour, or the religion they practice. We hope to encourage the general public to identify with migrants on a human-to-human level rather than through a “them and us” mentality after engaging with the Belonging project. (*The Belonging Project*, para. 1)

In some ways, the use of portraiture in *Leaving Dublin* serves a similar purpose. Although these portraits are full-length shots of the subject in which the environment, rather than the subject, fills the majority of the frame, the lighting emphasises the intimate emotions of the emigrant’s hope, fear, excitement or sadness. Some subjects smile, others look nervous or determined. While the dark, empty backgrounds emphasise the impact emigration has on entire communities, the bodies of the emigrants themselves show that emigrating is also an individual decision made for myriad reasons. A survey conducted by The Irish Times of emigrants who left from 2008 to 2012 found that only 34% felt forced to leave, and the main reasons cited for leaving included not only job opportunities, but a better quality of life or the opportunity to see a new country. This figure was higher among the 18% who were unemployed when they left Ireland (Kenny & O’Donoghue 2016, para. 8).

Emigrants are not homogenous. Indeed, the only requirement for participating in the project was that the subject had to be *Leaving Dublin* and several of the sitters were not Irish nationals. Monahan felt it was important to include anyone who was leaving as he felt those who came to Dublin from abroad enriched the city (Monahan 2016, pers. comm. 15 April). The loss of these non-nationals is rarely mentioned in public discourse that laments the departure of Irish citizens from their home. However, non-Irish nationals accounted for between 61 and 79 percent of migration from Ireland each year from 2008-2012 (Gilmartin 2012).

Although the use of a portrait emphasises the individual aspects of emigration, *Leaving Dublin* avoids placing emphasis on the identity of the individuals photographed. A list of the names of the subjects is available at each exhibition, but the images are not labeled and the order is changed at each exhibition so as to avoid giving any subjects preference over others. The lack of an accompanying textual narrative, such as those usually found in works depicting immigration, invites the

viewer to contemplate the subjects based on his or her own experience. Indeed, the 'conditions of arrival' that determine the affective experience of an object include not only the conditions of the display and creation of the object, but also the conditions of the viewer. Any affective experience is an interaction between two or more bodies, and the viewer brings to the encounter their current circumstances, personal history, and cultural memory.

Participant Sarah Griffin was photographed by Monahan four times: once for *Leaving Dublin* and three times for follow-up projects in which Monahan continued to photograph emigrants after their departure. Considering her own portrait, Griffin remarks, 'The figure could be anyone. Any wide-eyed kid leaving Ireland with hopes of a better life' (Griffin 2016, para. 11).

Although they did not supply an accompanying textual narrative, sitters for the *Leaving Dublin* project were, as previously mentioned, active participants in the creation of their portraits. Monahan asked his subjects to choose locations in the city that held personal meaning for them. Despite the differences in shooting locations, the *mise-en-scène* with the dark backgrounds and presence of the suitcase creates a sense of continuity between the portraits. This repetition situates the sitters into the wider context of emigration, a reminder that these individuals are only some of the thousands leaving Ireland each year. It also serves as a reference to past generations of emigrants, often depicted in etchings or paintings setting off with their suitcase.

One example of such works is a pen and ink drawing by Jack B. Yeats dating from around 1905. Yeats, who 'has often been described as Ireland's 'national painter"' (Cusack 2003, p. 201), drew a man waiting at a train station holding a suitcase with another parcel on the floor beside him. On the walls of the station, posters advertising cheap tickets for harvestmen and steamships to America make it clear he is leaving the country and imply the decision is required to find work. The cheeky title: *Possible Remedies—the Emigrant*, positions the work more clearly as a critique of Ireland's economic and political problems at the start of the 20th century.

Another better-known work by Scottish-born painter Erskine Nicol even more closely resembles the *mise-en-scène* of the *Leaving Dublin* portraits. The 1864 painting of Irish emigrants entitled, simply, *The Emigrants* depicts Irish emigrants at a train station. A man leans against a post while a woman sits beside him with two suitcases between them. Like the subjects in *Leaving Dublin*, both figures stare out into the distance. Unlike Monahan's work, however, Erskine Nicol's works brought a distinctly Victorian gaze to his Irish subjects who were often portrayed as caricatures of the Victorian stereotype of the 'primitive' Irishman (Dochy 2014, para. 20).

## Art and Migration Beyond Ireland

While many countries—in Europe and elsewhere—have seen an increasing number of works on immigration, often with the explicit goal of supporting integration as with *the Belonging Project*, works representing contemporary emigration of non-refugees are less frequent. Ireland is not the only European country to experience multiple waves of emigration; Spain, Italy, and Portugal all saw significant periods of migration in the 20th century as well as an increase in migration following the global financial crisis.

However, multiple factors come into play in establishing a country's relationship with its emigrants. The histories of these countries differ significantly from the history of Ireland; notably all three are former colonial empires. In contrast, Ireland's experience with colonisation and the famine provided for a sympathetic view of emigrants as forced to go abroad.

In Spain and Italy, immigration has been a more prominent topic in visual arts in these Mediterranean countries that are on the front lines of the refugee crisis. Street artists in both countries have used the walls of border towns to highlight the suffering of refugees and interrogate the borders themselves (Al-Mousawi 2015, para. 3).

Representations that have focused on emigration tend to highlight past waves of migration. A 2008 exhibition entitled 'De la España que emigra a la España que acoge' ('Emigrating Spain, Welcome Spain') contrasted the influx of immigrants beginning in the late 1990s with the waves of emigration in the late 19th/early 20th century and during the 1950s-1970s. The exhibition was shown in Valencia and Madrid as well as online and flyers for the event highlighted the photography of Manuel Ferrol. Ferrol documented the departure of Galician emigrants in the 1950s. His images show a raw emotion of emigration rarely depicted, such as the tearful faces of a father in son, cast in shadows, in 'Despedida de emigrantes. Puerto marítimo de A Coruña' (La Fundación Francisco Largo Caballero, 2008).

Ireland's previously mentioned narratives surrounding emigration also differ from other countries, such as Portugal, where emigrants have been stigmatised as poor and uneducated, accused of being flashy, or looked upon with suspicion (Pereira 2017 para. 11, 22).

## Conclusion

*Leaving Dublin* came together at a unique moment in Ireland's history and its existence depends not only on the artist who created it, but also on a number of factors and actors in a wider network.

It is a result of Ireland's long history of emigration. The cultural memory of past generations of emigrants and the established networks of the Irish diaspora allowed this generation of emigrants to view the decision

to leave as part of their cultural identity. The narratives of emigrants as seeking opportunity and even contributing to the development of Ireland developed by the government and media since the 1980s discouraged shame and stigma. At the same time, this cultural memory increased the anger and sadness of those like Monahan who had already felt the loss of past waves of emigration. Monahan also assured it reflected Ireland's more recent history of immigration by including portraits of non-Irish nationals.

*Leaving Dublin* also reflects the unique position of this generation of emigrants who were more highly educated and skilled than previous groups of leavers. This put them in a better position to find work abroad and is reflected in the high number of emigrants who report they left Ireland not simply to find a job, but to benefit from greater career opportunities. This hope and optimism of a better future abroad resonates through the choice of lighting and the expressions of many of the subjects in *Leaving Dublin*.

Lastly, communication technology played a key role in *Leaving Dublin* in several ways. Firstly, it altered the relationship between emigrants and their home communities by creating opportunities for daily communication and increased visual communication (video calls, photographs). This reinforced the strength of social ties while also highlighting their physical absence. Secondly, it offered a means for sharing the experience of migration across the country and the world via websites and blogs such as Generation Emigration, creating a new discourse that represented both the variety and commonalities of emigration experiences. Finally, the Internet provided new platforms for connecting people to art. It allowed for *Leaving Dublin* to be created, funded, and distributed through a wider network of participants and viewers than previously possible.

The photographs reflect the affective experiences that led to their creation including the sadness, frustration, and pride of the photographer and the hopes and fears of the subjects. In turn, the photographs became actors themselves as they came into contact with viewers across the globe. These encounters provoked their own affective response and the images spread around the globe through news reports, social media, and exhibitions. The response to the portraits was strong enough to encourage Monahan to continue his work with follow-up series documenting emigrants in their new homes abroad and upon their return to Ireland that was recently displayed in the National Photographic Archive in Dublin.

**Rachel Williams is completing her PhD research on migration and contemporary Irish art at the Université Rennes 2—Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique.**

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