

## **The Fitness of Persons in the Landscape:**

### **Isolation, Belonging and Emergent Subjects in Rural Ireland**

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**Abstract:** The concept of isolation has dogged anthropological studies of rural Ireland. This paper re-conceptualises isolation through ethnographic work undertaken on the minibusses run by Rural Transport projects in five counties of Ireland. Instead of seeing isolation as an embedded characteristic of Irish landscapes, histories, or of the ageing body, the paper describes dynamic, shifting expectations of belonging and community. On the Rural Transport busses, characteristic moments of witnessing 'figures in the landscape' during predictable and routinised journeys produce strikingly new negotiations of alterity and sameness among the passengers. The paper argues for the significance of these moments in developing a socialised, inscribed landscape and new senses of generative agency.

Isolation has often been misunderstood, especially in Ireland. Social isolation is a discourse which is often presented as a natural fact, justified by stable constructs of time, space and the body. Yet, instead, it should be understood as a cultural understanding of change with respect to notions of belonging. Work with Irish Rural Transport projects shows how isolation and belonging are articulated in moments when people are visually 'framed' against homes and landscapes, and this paper concerns itself with these moments of 'fitness' in the Irish landscape. Fitness here might be called rightness, the social assertion that a person is in the right place at the right time. In Irish Rural Transport projects, which typically organise weekly minibus services for elderly peo-

ple, the journey is a social 'event' (Kapferer 2010). The theatrical moments when a passenger joins the bus, the 'there she is' moments as I call them, punctuate social rhythms understood as existing in the space of the landscape. The evident fit and fitness of persons in these anticipated moments of meeting reveals a politics of proximity (Fontein 2011) in rural Ireland where people can experience significant moments of belonging, and the mutual thriving of place and person such that material places are active in making social persons.

Descriptions of culture in Ireland have been plagued by the issue of isolation (see Walsh and Ward 2013), and it has become a difficult topic for anthropology. I reject the idea that one can have a culture which necessarily perpetuates isolation, largely because isolation is not necessarily a natural or inevitable phenomenon which arises when people rarely meet. Isolation is cultural, and within rural Ireland it has changed over the generations. Isolation in contemporary Ireland is then a distinctive idea, in dialogue with the changing patterns of rural living. The risk of misrepresenting culture in Ireland as itself isolating has always been opposed by popular viewpoints, that in the face of a mountainous and beautiful landscape culture has always built its social bridges across the distributed communities, and been the remedy for isolation. This is a difficult dialogue, problematised by the over-determination of the idea of 'Irish culture' as a social agent in itself (Wilson and Donnan 2006). I suggest that the problem has also been exacerbated by a binaristic exaggeration of the separation of persons

from the idea of a 'natural' material world. Understandings of isolation are not about the place or people separately, but their mutual engagement in singular social events.

In our work (this paper is based on ethnography conducted with Simon Roberts and Tina Basi at Intel Digital Health Group), isolation was fairly commonly brought up as an ever-present danger. Groups of passengers on the busses run by Rural Transport organisations in Ireland asserted how life in their district carried with it a danger of isolation. Isolation was not simply an alternative state to being sociable, it was as if socialising itself were a part of a battle against the encroaching, present isolation. A woman in Sligo who lives on her own in a hillside house, for example, commented in a conversation I initiated in the active ageing group:

It's nice to have someone to talk to- put on the radio, (but) the radio isn't somebody to say hello to you. I like somebody who's able to say hello to me and chat to me. I'm exhausted up there. No-one to talk to day in day out... Only for the like of these clubs I'd be gone cuckoo.

This kind of representation of an almost-tangible isolation, mutually understood in everyday life, is not only manifested in rural Ireland, but among older people in general, especially in Europe and the USA, and often in the middle of population centres. Work in London with el-

derly Irish men, who moved there decades ago, reveals isolation linked closely with poverty and shame at not having fulfilled personal expectations (Tilki et al 2009, Leavey et al 2007). Much of this kind of work therefore is not about rural areas, nor representations of 'national' cultures, but rather about time passing and ageing (see Philipson et al 2001, Askham et al 2006). By contrast, I approach isolation by tracing how expectations of the potentiality of land, and of what community might or should comprise, have shifted historically (Lovell 1998). This leads to a three-fold history of ideas of isolation and belonging in the areas where the Rural Transport schemes operate.

The Irish Rural Transport organisations deploy improved mobility as a kind of magic bullet to address problems of isolation, and in our work many dimensions of isolation only became explicit in their antithesis, in the moment of their being remedied. The Irish Rural Transport Network currently consists of 35 separate organisations across the country, which have developed differently but operate comparable services. Some see themselves primarily as social projects, others as companies, some organise social events while others mainly bring people to collect pensions once a week. We worked mainly with five of these projects. I continue by setting the scene, describing one Rural Transport journey in County Sligo. I then consider different approaches to isolation in the literature, before presenting an alternative, sociocultural and historical analysis of the development of ideas of isolation and community. I finish by drawing attention to the significance of

those moments, which the Rural Transport busses facilitate, of witnessing 'figures in the landscape' (Munn 1996).

### **On the Sligo Rural Transport to Gleann Active Ageing Club**

The last tea has been squeezed from the pot in the Gleann community centre, and we set off to pick people up from the surrounding hills and bring them in to today's Active Ageing club. The minibus is a new Sprinter, bought less than a year ago and modified with handles and a wheelchair lift for better access. Paul, the driver, stands next to it. 'How's the heifers doing?' someone asks him. Paul is a volunteer driver who also has some land.

The Angelus rings out on the radio as we drive off. A minute of chimes during which the audience are traditionally encouraged to reflect on their lives, the Angelus is broadcast twice a day and forms a part of the daily fabric of life in Ireland, although fewer and fewer people claim to actually reflect in a spiritual way. Paul turns it off as we begin to talk. 'This is Melanie,' says Paul, of a young woman sitting by the bus door, 'she's just looking for a site', as if she was just along to explore the area. In fact she is a student, coming along to help people on and off the bus. I understand that since she is 'looking for a site' [to build a house], she might settle locally and permanently, with all that implies. Paul is framing her own personal life and family through talking

about the bus journey and land. And he is somehow poking fun. The banter has already started.

We come in to Ballintogher for the first pick-up. A man and woman are waiting for us here, in a slightly wider stretch of street. They climb in with cursory greetings and we set off again. After a while, some conversation haltingly starts up when we come to a house in the country, and are joined by the second party, John: 'How're you doing?', 'Lovely day', 'How're you?', 'Not so bad'. 'It's the same people sitting in front of you all the time,' John comments as he takes his seat directly behind me, obscurely but playfully.

The roads are very small. Paul needs neither directions or bookings: people would call in if they are *not* coming, but today is a normal run. Despite the weekly routine, there always seems to be something discovered in the landscape. 'Has that building been there long?' asks Melanie of a house in a field. They talk about a woman who is 103 and has a lot of children. 'Is she still alive?' someone asks.

'Some of those roads aren't very bus-friendly', Paul comments prophetically. Many of the houses are at the culmination of lanes, and even if they are not, the bus has to turn and turn again to return the way it came. At each house, people seem completely prepared for the bus. As we draw up the lane, magically they are outside their door in hat and coat, locking up. 'I've got them trained well,' comments Paul. For each passenger, Melanie descends from the bus, kicks open

a small step, and helps them on. They brace themselves, get a good grip on the handles, then haul themselves up the step.

As we go around the circuit, the way people talk changes. At first, with a couple of passengers on board, there is still just one conversation over the hum of the bus engine. As the group grows to six or seven, the conversation fragments and people are quieter, unwilling to chat to one another in case others are not interested. Paul turns on the radio. RTÉ, the national broadcaster, is playing 1950s tracks which some passengers may remember from childhood. The group continues to swell. In the last stage of the journey, there is a continuous hubbub of rolling sound. Voices cut across and layer against one another over the music as neighbour can chat to neighbour and small groups exchange words across the aisle. Acoustically, the build-up to the Active Ageing club is tangible.

We are well into the journey and have come in a big circle across the catchment area for the club. Paul announces that we are now taking the scenic route – ‘sit back and relax’ he says as the bus engine roars and we climb a hill.

At the next house, we pick up Marian. ‘How are you?’ a lady asks her. ‘Not too bad, thank you,’ she replies, ‘how’re you keeping?’ - ‘how’re you?’, says Paul. ‘Not so bad now. Hello. Hello Seamus.’ ‘How’re you?’, asks Seamas. ‘I’m not too bad,’ she replies, ‘lovely day.’ And so it continues. By the time of the third or fourth ‘not so bad’, I am wondering what is up. Somehow I have the impression the repetitions

show the need for special concern for Marian. On the other hand, it is actually a lovely day, and you can read too much into small details. Certainly the health of the people we are passing by or about to meet is a hot topic. 'We used to have a lady here,' says Paul of a passing house, 'but she's in hospital, very sick. She's not very old, early seventies I'd say.'

In this hilly area, we pass a couple of tiny isolated pubs marked by an old beer sign and the family name on the wall in large letters. The families running these places are now getting on a bit, and their children have moved away. Down a side-road we pass the 'disappearing lake', which disappears and reappears overnight every so often. It disappeared last June, and then reappeared in September. The lady who owns it is on our bus, and is phlegmatic about this wonder of nature. When the lake is there, they don't have to worry about taking water down for the cattle.

Finally, we pull out again on to the main Sligo road, and the community centre reappears ahead. We are approaching it from the south. Pulling into the gravel car park, we open the door and get out the step. The members file into the back door of the centre, preferring to pass down the short corridor and say hello to the people in the office, rather than through the wide front doors of the hall. Many other club members have already arrived, and for a couple of hours there is music, exercises, a meal, and various games. Later on, the bus will re-



peat the same trip in reverse, in a calm, slightly subdued but satisfied atmosphere.

### **Isolation and Emergent Agency**

Journeys similar to this one are happening every week up and down Ireland, with different kinds of groups coalescing and dispersing. In bureaucratic terms, the Rural Transport empowers passengers through enabling them to achieve certain measurable tasks: one can shop, collect a pension, or renew a prescription for medicine. However, underlying the apparent simplicity of function, complex sociocultural and political changes are happening. People come along even when they have nothing they need to do, and we were repeatedly told how the transport first and foremost addresses isolation. The journeys are clearly social events in themselves, more than moments between events, and more than this they are generative events (Kapferer 2010: 3). Relationships and community are manifested, evoked and then expanded through repetitive weekly routines.

These journeys create conditions which give many people a renewed, beneficial sense of self-worth, and can be interpreted as creating a sense of subjective agency, but of a particular kind. This agency does not depend upon a radical dislocation of dominant and oppressive social structures and traditions, but occurs within highly traditional modes of behaviour. The characteristic Irish joking and indirect rhetoric

is not purely self-interested nor self-declarative, but is directed at the group, and frames other people as subjects before oneself.

The theoretical issue here is whether a sense of cultural struggle is a necessity for the emergence of agency, and specifically how isolation features in this process rural Ireland, as a familiar way of being or as a distant ideological bogeyman. According to McNay (2000), theories of agency and of the subject have yet to properly reconcile the problem of a gulf between concepts of individual and society, between bodily action and power. The legacy of Foucault's work on technologies of the self has meant a problematic elision of subjectification with subjection: a tense encounter with dominant power, not escape from it, is necessary for self-awareness and for the development of new meaningful understandings of the social world. To bridge this gap, various theorists have characterised selfhood in more temporal terms, and located social reality more as an experience or understanding within the body as much as external to it (Butler 1993, 1997; Bourdieu 1979). Yet McNay still considers that these varied theories of how subjectification and agency happen do not take enough account of ideas of social difference:

Following a relational theory of meaning, the assertion of the subject's identity is explained through a logic of the disavowal of difference; the subject maintains a sense of self principally through a denial of the alterity of the other. (McNay 2000: 3)

In other words, in many interpretations of agency, on the one hand we have the assertion that temporal routines and bodily experiences are generative of new different kinds of signification which can potentially challenge social norms. But on the other hand the capacity for self development is predicated on human sameness, and perception of others as subjects who are in some way similar to oneself.

Many Rural Transport journeys are infused with the framing of other people as mutual subjects. During the journey through the landscape there are resonances or echoes of persons, such that talking or asking about them is followed by the sight of them, and then their presence. Words are chosen carefully, cleverly, and craftily which do not offend, which are friendly and considerate but not necessarily intimate or close. Possibilities are proffered for difference in coexistence and sameness in separation.

This paper elaborates on how generative agency emerges on the Irish Rural Transport, and how the project of conquering isolation can become prominent in people's own understandings of what they are engaged in. Isolation as an idea is not the prerogative of outside social commentators, it relates to how people narrate their own lives, so in order to understand the sense of generative agency in the Rural Transport, we first need to re-think what we mean by it.

## **The Naturalisation of Isolation**

*'A persistent assumption that mental illness is a cultural attribute of the Irish'* (Wilson & Donnan 2006: 49)

One of the photographs in Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (2001: 44) well-known ethnography of the village she called Ballybran, presents two men sitting in a field, and bears the caption 'two generations - alone together'. Scheper-Hughes' work is explicitly about mental illness. In this image, which can appear dated now, she was trying to communicate particular cultural qualities of the situation through a paradoxical caption. The phrase 'alone together' illustrates how a sense of isolation has been situated as an intrinsic and pervasive cultural quality of life in rural Ireland, such that even in company isolation persists.

Anthropological work in Ireland has a problematic history, and Scheper-Hughes' work in particular has been strongly criticised. Images similar to her photograph can be seen either as illustrating a problem, or as problematising culture in Ireland. Wilson and Donnan (2006) have helped the discipline to turn a corner by devoting a large part of their book to reflecting on how and why so much past anthropological work in Ireland has been controversial, characterised by Peace (1989) as a series of representations of 'anomie'. Informants and communities in Ireland have not recognised themselves in some anthropological representations. Scheper-Hughes herself (2000; see also Wilson and Donnan 2006: 169-171) sets out how in retrospect she would have repre-

sented differently the village where she worked. Many people who read the original 1979 book reacted not by debating how human culture works generally, for better and for worse; but by travelling through the West of Ireland in order to locate the place where the ethnography happened, as a set of specific situated events. Until the 1990s few anthropologists successfully negotiated Ireland's vibrant public sphere, where national social issues are prominently debated, neither accepted by it nor able to transcend it.

When it comes to isolation, I suggest that there has in the past been a tendency to naturalise and legitimise notions of isolation in Ireland. In particular, this can be seen as manifested in a tendency to *locate* causes of isolation in certain places - in the landscape, in the body, in heritage or in social structures. By naturalisation, I mean the tendency to ascribe an inevitability and fixity to a cultural attribute either by fixing it in an observable material object or body which is perceived as enduring.

### *Landscape*

In Scheper-Hughes' photograph, the main star in one sense of the image is neither the father nor the son, but the hedge, which seems to manifest the capacity for loneliness within these farmers' own farmland and landscape. A domestic image would seem very different. His-

torically, certain kinds of landscape - more empty ones - have come historically to be prime aesthetic signifiers of Irishness. Saris comments:

One cannot live long in rural Ireland without being struck by the importance of “place” as a conceptual category... Human action, human memory, and human dialogue constitute place and history. The elementary structure in this system is the relationship between a specific spot on the landscape and a remembered story, mediated by a place-name. (Saris 1996: 542)

How Irish landscapes are envisioned as inhabited is thus important for envisioning what isolation may be. Some have argued that Irish settlement is characterised by a distributed settlement pattern, of homes built on the farmland, more than clustered in villages. This conforms to a pattern of inheritance (Birdwell-Pheasant 1998) which attempts to maintain a consolidated landholding by passing most of it on to one son rather than break it up. Farm buildings and homes may be near to the centre of a property, in a sense oriented to the land rather than the road. It was not uncommon in our work to encounter an elderly person living in a house up a long lane. One interpretation of isolation might be that it is an inevitable result of this kind of landscape. It is possible in this format to have a large number of people living across an area, ‘looking after the land’, as people would say, but rarely meet-

ing. One dimension of isolation would be simply the physical facts of bodies not coming into close proximity.

Yet ideas of a 'typical' kind of Irish landscape have been hotly contested (see McGrath 2013), making ideas of landscape a 'perennial site of struggle' (Peace 2005: 496). The distributed settlement pattern is a stereotype more than an actuality, and more for the touristic landscapes of the West than for the range of geographies found across the Island.

In our work, what matters is the changing experience of the landscape, more than its physical form (Tilley 1994, Bender 1993). Importantly, in recent years rural Ireland has generally speaking not experienced the depopulation characteristic of rural areas across Europe, but often re-population. While the contemporary population of Ireland remains lower than it was in the early nineteenth century, largely due to more than a century of crippling emigration, nonetheless since the 1990s there has overall been immigration. In rural areas near to Dublin, huge population growth has occurred - county Meath grew by 48% between 1996 and 2006 (Source: Central Statistical Office, Ireland). Some describe this as 'counter-urbanisation'.

A local priest in county Sligo recounted to me his experience of what this repopulation feels like. Importantly, through local eyes this does not only mean more or fewer people, or houses, or being closer or further away from neighbours. The landscape is experienced differently, the signs of inhabitation and responsibilities to others change,

and the understanding of the economic rhythms and modes of making a living change. At a given moment, the priest moves from talking about repopulation to talking about how the land itself is different:

When I came here 16 years ago ... nearly every farmer had a few cows and milk for the creamery. There's less than ten in the whole parish supplying milk for the creamery now. That's a whole sea change ... Now another change this area, like, everyone got a little more prosperous. You see a lot more cars than when I came here. The building industry is going very well every town all about. That's the source of the employment, the building, and nearly every young lad when he has a while working as a block layer or a plasterer - he has his own car. That's a huge change ... But what I would like to say - There is no future for farming in this area in the sense of being able to live off the farm itself. You just couldn't. There is no farm round here big enough for a family to live solely off the farm... So the best way would be for jobs to be provided hopefully at Ballymote, Boyle, Sligo, and Knock at the airport or whatever so that people could be looking to live here still and keep their farm and to have their social income from their job.

Building new houses is not purely about development inspired by business, but also a localised response to changing economic circum-



stances. Land is re-conceptualised from 'farmland' to 'site' as one way to maintain inhabitation by families, and avoid sale and consolidation of smallholdings into massive farms. There may be an old farmhouse set back from the road, where once several generations lived, but now just the older people. Alongside the main road meanwhile is a ribbon of houses of younger families, some of them commuting elsewhere. One may belong to a son or daughter, who lives now in a unitary rather than extended family.

If depopulation is happening, it is happening partially, during the daytime, and in the emptier older houses. We can challenge, then, the idea that isolation is necessarily connected to the physical form of certain kinds of Irish landscape and rootedness within it. While we should not disregard landscape entirely, we should talk more about an inequality of mobility than some fact of rootedness. As an elderly man said to me about getting to his local pub (currently being expanded), 'I used to walk it but you couldn't walk it now with the traffic.' For him, the more cars there are, the more difficult it can be to get around.

### *Future Shock*

The second ingredient in the naturalisation of isolation lies in the idea that Ireland is changing in a historical, or structural, way, and that this new era is leaving many people behind because of their experience of their own (ageing) bodies. The notion of 'future shock' (Toffler

1970) is fairly common among design groups in the discussion of the adoption and use of new technologies. In the Irish context, Wulff (2007: 110) insightfully draws on Appadurai's (1996: 3) idea of a 'rupture of modernity'. She describes how at a given media moment in 1994, the 'Riverdance Moment', the Irish TV audience were suddenly presented with the facility to reimagine themselves and Irishness as undeniably, intrinsically modern. Others propose different dates for comparable ruptures (Inglis 2008 talks of 1991 and 1998), but the sense of living with a historical 'before' and an 'after' is clear.

The Irish rhetoric of having entered a 'different era' is evident in the Rural Transport. A story from one of the volunteer drivers shows how older people can be seen as simply less able to cope with a changed world. The background to the story was, as is often the case, the health problems of a man in Sligo, at a time when there was less support for getting to and from the hospital:

I was telling you. I have, um, well a sort of a relation and he- we had him on the Transport. We'd take him over to Boyle on the Friday to collect his pension. But he was staying with Galway hospital ... He was getting a cataract off his eye. He had to get a taxi to take him over to Galway, we'll say today, get the taxi to come back from Boyle and bring him back tomorrow morning. And it was two hundred and forty euro he had to pay. And I met that man on his way back and he was - talk about his blood pressure

being high! The taxi man said he would do it, and in the end it was two hundred and twenty, something like that. ... He had a free travel pass, yes, but he had to pay that. And believe it or not he was got dead kneeling at his bed the week after. I said, 'it must have been the way his blood pressure was'. He was, the poor old devil (laughs).

When I asked if this man might have got public transport, the answer was a clear no:

He wouldn't have been able because he was a man who couldn't go up - you know to be able to get on a bus or something like that. You can't just take some of them out ... even to take them over to Collooney and tell them get on a bus ... A lot of them wouldn't know, when they get off the bus in Galway, where would you go? You wouldn't know where to go. Do you know what I mean? They'd be lost.

For some, Galway may not seem a large town (it has a population of 80,000, the sixth largest city on the island of Ireland), but it has changed in recent years. Along with a new Ireland comes a new Galway, a place which is subjectively represented as having been unchanged for many decades, and which is now 'new'. The experience of these new places - towns, roads, pubs, hospitals, ring roads - is per-

ceived as disorienting and hence isolating for many Rural Transport passengers. It is this discourse of rupture which can be glossed as future shock.

### **A Story of Isolation, Mobility and Belonging in Rural Ireland**

Rejecting these attempts to explain isolation as rooted in space and time, with their associated stereotypes of 'country people' or 'older people', I would instead like to try to understand it as an active cultural concept which has shifted over the years. The ways that Rural Transport passengers report their biographies shows how the meaning of crucial ideas concerning belonging - community, land, home, family - are not fixed, and expectations of social life have changed correspondingly. In a very broad-brush fashion, I outline three key phases in the development of belonging, up to the 1980s, the 1980s, and then the period since 1992.

The Rural Transport passengers who helped our research were largely over 65 years old (depending on the route), often born before 1940. The majority were women. While many had lived their whole lives in the area, perhaps in one property, a significant minority had lived or worked abroad, often in the UK, and then returned to the area.

Prior to the 1950s, in many places there were three key pillars of social life, the church (and church hall), pub, and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). The Irish Countrywoman's Association (ICA) might also

feature, and weekly agricultural 'marts' were places of gathering for farmers, where livestock was traded. In the evenings, walking and rambling house to house to socialise was a common routine.

In the 1950s, when many Rural Transport passengers were teenagers, the rural electrification scheme connected the countryside to the national grid, and radios and televisions arrived in some homes. This significantly reduced evening rambling between homes, and made socialising much more home-centric, involving movement between one's own home (where TV and radio were), and public spaces (such as pub or church). Both at home and in public, community was manifested through a diversity of generations and genders, with many events where everyone might congregate. Church, sports or dances might attract all ages and both genders. There were some exceptions to this diversity (such as the growth of a rock & roll concert circuit for younger people through the 1950s-60s).

Like public spaces, homes were also generationally diverse. The notion of 'retirement' is never common in farming communities, but it was very rare at that time. Farms often came with a farmhouse, where two or three generations might live, and farm ownership passed down the generations between people living under one roof. Broadly-speaking, expectations of social life in later life were basically multi-generational both at home and in public.

The 1980s is a decade which many people identify as a particular period of change. The Pope's visit in 1980 is often identified as the

apogee of certain religious and community feelings, but also the beginning of its decline (Williams 2006). From 1980, emigration accelerated, attendance at church and community events declined, and there was a physical decline in places such as community halls and other buildings. A sense of secularism, often associated with the later 'celtic tiger' years, had earlier roots.

In retrospect, social expectations about what life would be like growing older did not necessarily match experience in the 1980s. Yet by the 1990s some people clearly had different expectations of community and socialising in later life, while others retained the previous vision. In several of our field sites, in the 1990s, low-cost community groups, projects and personal initiatives were being seeded which later (when State money became a possibility) could become the foundation of Rural Transport projects. In Meath, the Summerhill project was established formally in the 1990s, and developed Meath Accessible Transport in 1999. In Kerry, the small 1990s Kerry Flier became Kerry Community Transport in 2001. Kilkenny's Ring a Link was begun in 2001 as a deliberate response to the State's Rural Transport initiative. In Sligo, the meals-on-wheels network was established in 1997, and a range of community services provided by an organisation called CLASP.

In Westmeath, among the heaviest users of the Rural Transport minibusses in the Athlone area were informal social groups of older women, who began meeting together in 1992 and 1994. On the one hand, widowed women living on farms were key catalysers of these

dynamic groups. Equally important were women who had lived abroad, and retired back to Ireland. The Westmeath groups saw themselves as going on trips, to tourist sites or concerts, with a certain dedication to fun, which was a little different from established church and ICA groups (in which they were also involved) - the new groups were very mobile for a start.

Significantly, then, from the 1990s, social initiatives were alive which expressed different expectations of belonging, and a changing sense of sameness and difference in what constitutes community. The new organisations implied the expectation of uni-generational sameness, and were often gendered. In these initiatives, you socialise with people 'like you', meaning not so much sharing place, as similar age, gender, experience, and interests.

These changes in expectations coincided with significant economic changes: not only the extraordinary change in house building, noted above, and relative rise in average wealth, but also a significant decline of the rural marts. Agriculture changed significantly and became more bureaucratic, particularly after the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic, and responding to the EU's common agricultural policy. Very many smaller livestock marts closed down, marking the disappearance of a significant pillar of social life, especially for men.

Over the last 70 years, the people and the physical landscape of rural Ireland may be very similar, but many things have changed around them: the centrality and peripherality of the home in social life;

relations to and through land; church and secularism; work, jobs and income; and the economics of land and region. Relatedness takes place in an intermingling of marriage, land, and social events. By the 1990s, there was the growing perception of a secular sameness based on generation and gender. This contrasted with longer-standing notions of cross-generational relatedness in extended households, and church community groups. What the Rural Transport facilitates is the experience of this new pattern of alterity, not as an abstract structure but in the land and in mobility across it.

### **Figures in a Landscape**

Across the different transport projects, there is a characteristic moment when a passenger appears at their door, and somebody comments 'there she is'. The 'there she is' moment represents a small catharsis in the rhythm of the route, a moment mutually anticipated. Since people prepare early and sit by the window waiting, their appearance is unreal quick. 'I've got them well-trained', as the Sligo driver joked. It is in this moment that isolation and belonging can change. Appearing as a punchline in the conversation on the bus, a person is being contemporaneously and literally framed, within land, home, and personal history. The figure also possesses a trajectory, from the unknown into the known. How we interpret the 'there she is' moment affects how we understand isolation and belonging, either con-



structured as naturalised or through a changing historical narrative, as I have outlined in the two preceding sections.

The first understanding of isolation is as a fixed and definable entity which happens in the particular exercise of power in the areas where the Rural Transport operates. The conceptions of landscape, of history, and of the ageing body unite in an unholy trinity of discourses which serve to discipline and shape senses of self. As somebody emerges from their home, the normative, routine, expected place and time is being asserted in the weekly performance. This corresponds to an understanding of belonging which emphasises place-making, whereby claims of connection to land reinforce groups which we call communities. It is in the disciplined movement from the loneliness of the home to the community of the bus that isolation is remedied.

This understanding would correspond to what McNay (2000) calls 'negative' agency, when subjection and subjectification necessarily elide. In many of the less well-off districts where the Rural Transport operates, such as Sligo, one finds elderly bachelor men, often sitting apparently quite passively on the bus while women around them banter, watching. Such men might illustrate how the transport enables people to present themselves as Foucauldian 'docile bodies', experiencing the world presented to them visually through the glass windows. For some, the embodied experience of landscape is fundamental in shaping selfhood (Bourdieu 1977). For Butler (1997: 2) meanwhile, the passengers may be seen as performatively reasserting social norms, histories

and patterns; and in doing so, perhaps building more confident senses of self capable of challenging those norms. Yet from this point of view, while the journey may remedy loneliness for a short time, the fundamental cultural understandings of social space, of home, landscape and temporality would remain the same.

An alternative interpretation of isolation recognises it as an experience which is produced by shifting historical conditions, which result in dissonance and possibilities for new social meanings. This is an interpretation of isolation which is more about how relatedness and belonging are manifested, different for each generation according to a changing politics of alterity (Fontein 2011: 720). Even as rural populations have increased, expectations of socialising with people 'like oneself' mean connections of mutual belonging may stretch across longer distances. Within this social landscape, the bus routes profoundly change the sense of distance, such that distances can become rhythmic intervals in time. The 'there she is' moments appear as fixed points from which a new kind of social reality is suspended, a landscape which is a re-patterning of relationships. The importance of the 'nodes' in this social existence is illustrated by reports on Rural Transport routes of a couple of unhappy occasions when it was only discovered that somebody had passed away because on the arrival of the bus, they did not appear.

The social of the Irish Rural Transport is perhaps best described not as 'rooted in' the landscape, but closer to an 'inscribed landscape' (to

paraphrase Taylor 1995: 25, 34; see also Strathern and Stewart 2003) comprising of routes more than roots. It defies the traditional idea that transport is about people wanting to move between two social places or events, fixed in space and time. Rather, it is often the significant, generative social event in itself (Kapferer 2010). As a home-help worker observed, the Rural Transport trip is for some a reason to get up and get dressed. It is on the bus that news is exchanged, meetings planned, births and deaths discussed and celebrated, and things exchanged. In order to function in this way, the Rural Transport generally runs on the basis of repetition and presumed predictability, such that on many routes, you do not book a trip, instead you let one of the other passengers know if you are *not* coming. You may not need to communicate with the driver or organisers at all. The generative agency is typified by the women who often come to act as unofficial coordinator for a route, sitting up near the driver and directing them.

The generative agency implicit in this second interpretation articulates well with distinctively Irish modes of interaction, acknowledging and denying alterity as a part of a mutual sense of being subjects. The routes involve a great deal of 'talking around' people, rhetorical acts of care and consideration in anticipation of them. As the journey unfolds, building a social group over time in predictable ways, passengers are producing a textured rhetorical framing of other passengers and their particularity. Rather than arising in subjective experiences of an exterior world, agency here arises when socially meaningful land-

scapes seem folded into persons via a process of encounters with figures whose alterity is negotiated over time. In the 'there she is' moment, the truth of a narration over time and space is demonstrated and brought to a culmination in the singular appearance of the figure.

## **Conclusions**

*'Things and places are active agents of identity rather than pale reflections of pre-existing ideas and socio-political relations' (Tilley 2006: 17)*

In what sense can it be argued that new, progressive senses of self can happen within everyday, repetitive community experience? This is especially difficult when the feeling of immensity of landscape and history in rural Ireland is not to be disrespected, and deserves more extensive treatment. To understand cultures of isolation and belonging in the areas where the Rural Transport operates, we must appreciate the microcosmic capacities of persons when they present themselves as figures who 'fit' the moment and place.

Studies of the movement of 'figures in the landscape' (Munn 1996, Taylor 1995) emphasise a profound alterity (Fontein 2011: 720), evoking ontological questions about the significance of absence. Many Rural Transport journeys evoke, in their anticipations, both the celebration of the bodily existence of persons and also the possibility of their non-existence. Persons, and evocations of persons, are inscribed

into the routes, punctuated by rhythms of persons and bodies, anticipations, portents, presences and passings. The 'there she is' moment indexes and answers questions of how we came to be here. It represents an aesthetic re-enchantment of the body as a justifying phenomenon.

What I describe as the 'fitness' of persons in the Rural Transport refers to the sense of rightness which surrounds the appearance of the passengers. They are the right person in the right place at the right time, and this produces persons as fixed points in the scheme of things. Isolation in rural Ireland then is a form of social fitness, in a situation of disjunctions between expectations of belonging and experience. I here follow Fontein (2011), who asks 'how do the material forms of different past and present practices in the landscape reveal and materialize proximities and coexistences even as they are often articulated in political processes of differentiation?' (Fontein 2011: 707). We witness in rural Irish communities a relatively slow-changing sense of sameness and difference, and periodic deployment of place and mobility to address and manifest these expectations.

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